

Abstract

The Curonian Spit, sitting in the Baltic Sea on the western shores of Lithuania and the Kaliningrad region, is a small piece of land with rich history, culture and nature that is divided by an international border. Due to the unique multifaceted dynamics between culture and nature in this area, it has long been attracting scientists, researchers, artists, and tourists. This chapter in the form of a visual essay is a reflection on the multifarious dimensions of the border-nature nexus, originating from researcher-produced images and autoethnographic fieldwork experiences. The loosely structured narrative style integrates considerations of the cohabitation and movement of various agents at the Spit: sand dunes, vegetation, animals, and humans. This reflection is anchored to core questions of liminality among these different biodiversity realms and to borders and their role in a multiplex environment.

Keywords: Visual essay, Curonian Spit, borders, liminality

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Stepping off the wooden path

A Visual Essay

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The Curonian Spit – a small piece of land widely surrounded by water and only barely holding on to the mainland – is a fascinating multifaceted place. It has wonderful nature and a multi-layered political and cultural history. Furthermore, it stretches just short of 100 kilometres, it is divided in half by a political border between Lithuania and the Kaliningrad region (Russia).

These features have placed this geographically peripheral land at the centre of a multidisciplinary inquiry. It has been a hub for different scientists, such as biologists (especially ornithologists and botanical scientists), coastal researchers, geographers, tourism researchers, spatial planners and architects, cultural and natural heritage scholars, and social scientists. Due to the unique merging of culture and nature on the Spit, it has also attracted artists, writers, and thinkers throughout the years for shorter or longer inspirational stays and for creative and collaborative practices. The town of Nida (German: Nidden) has grown into a so-called “artist’s colony” since the 19th century and has hosted many famous figures, including Thomas Mann, Walther Heymann and Lovis Corinth. The inspirational value of the Curonian landscape was later noted by such visitors as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Sigmund Freud, and numerous contemporary practitioners and students working and dwelling in the Thomas Mann Cultural Centre and the Nida Art Colony. This chapter is an appreciation of the Curonian Spit’s richness and a reflection on one of the many intriguing aspects of the well-admired merging of its nature and culture: the nature-border nexus.

Within the scope of this nexus, this chapter touches upon a collage of subject matters as complex as the context in which it is situated. It is rooted in my fieldwork experiences and

observations, which for a long time, stayed visually captured but not systematically verbalised. In time, it has weaved into meaningful discourses and created new patterns; it resembles a loosely connected assemblage rather than a logical network. The less rigid format of a visual essay facilitates the articulation of these thoughts and prompts a reflection on my own images, accompanying non-captured experiences and their extended interpretations. My chosen visual essay design has a strong narrative component, allowing me to both visualise and voice my observations. The reflexive story, which goes back and forth among spatiotemporally detached places, moments, and ideas, ultimately follows the plot, or the sequence of events, of one specific episode of my fieldwork, conducted in 2019.

The episode in focus is a guided group tour to the Grobštas Nature Reserve on the Lithuanian side of the Curonian Spit. Different from the rest of my structured fieldwork in the region, during this tour, I allowed myself to follow and to be guided, to opportunistically observe and capture, and to take in everything that unravelled before me. Reaching the border zone, which is located in this reserve, was an expectation but not a promise. For a couple of hours, I abandoned my vigorous attitude as a systematic and provident researcher and became a hopeful open-minded tourist-participant, equipped only with an autoethnographic mindset and a camera.

In another study based on this fieldwork, I described and analysed how the border at the Curonian Spit manifests itself in the semiotic landscape and how it impacts dwellers of the area (Kudžmaitė, 2022). I spoke about “silent borders” and “border silencing” as a strategy and a practice to maintain a specific attitude of *disinterest* in the border and in what lies behind it. By documenting and examining the signage in the Spit’s semiotic landscape (advertisements, billboards, written announcements, and publicly displayed visuals), engaging in unstructured short conversations with locals and analysing official websites and documents related to the Spit’s management, I got an impression that the everyday life on each borderland mainly runs without thinking about the geopolitical division of the area. The border and the other side behind it appear to be *concealed* to varying degrees in the landscape, in local lives and in most of the official rhetoric. Different cross-border community and governmental collaborations often

remain unfulfilled, even when this collaboration is officially required by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). Since 2000, the Curonian Spit has been a UNESCO-accredited cultural landscape, representing the “combined works of nature and of man” and embracing “a diversity of manifestations of the interaction between humankind and its natural environment” (UNESCO, 1994, pp. 13–14). Lithuania and Russia are the two State Parties jointly maintaining this cultural landscape in addition to separately managing their own protected national parks of Kurshskaya Kosa (in Russia) and Kuršių Nerija (in Lithuania). Different attitudes towards the shared pasts in the region (Baltic/Curonian – Prussian – German – Lithuanian – Soviet Russian/Soviet Lithuanian – Russian/Lithuanian, in this order) and the relatively recent formation of the current political model of neighbourhood and bordering in the 1990s fuel recurrent miscommunication. Previous collaborations have stalled further or ceased entirely since the onset of Russia's war in Ukraine in 2022.

My approach in the previous study was anthropocentric. I was interested in people and in the cultural landscape they inhabit. I also approached the border from the geopolitical and sociocultural perspectives and asked how it functions for nation-states opting to maintain channels for collaboration. However, having observed the immense impact of the natural environment on many aspects of life in/at the Spit, I knew that this border(ing) case undoubtedly deserves a discussion within the nexus between borders and nature. With the recent movement towards broadening and opening (critical) border studies to new multidisciplinary theories and methods (see, for instance, Brambilla, 2015; Brunet-Jailly, 2005; Paasi et al., 2022; Peña, 2023), researchers have suggested to revive the lens of “posthuman” or “more-than-human” when considering border politics (a Special Issue titled “More Than Human Borders” was recently dedicated to this topic in *Geopolitics*; see, for example, its introductory paper by Ozguc & Burrige, 2023). The underlying aim of this approach is to deconstruct the prioritised “human” position in order to problematise the violent binaries between “human” and “non-human”, which are inherently linked to other types of hierarchical and colonial thinking, such as “othering” (Ozguc & Burrige, 2023; see also Sundberg, 2014). The border at the Curonian Spit is perfect

material for such a transformative reflection, as it hosts a variety of non-human agents that influence and form border(ing) practices.

Looking from the Lithuanian side of the Spit, most of the border zone (an already inaccessible area stretching before the border) is in the national Grobštis Nature Reserve. The reserve cannot be officially visited without an accompanying tour guide. The guide is authorized to lead tours as far as the border zone. The Lithuanian border zone ends with the international border, which is followed by the border zone on the Kaliningrad side and continues further in the Kurshskaya Kosa National Park. Next to the nature reserve, there are two other ways to reach the border zone on the Lithuanian side: first, by walking by the sea towards Kaliningrad up to the border zone and second, by taking the only car road leading directly to the official border crossing point at Nida-Morskoye.

Before taking the exclusive route – the one that is accessed with a tour to the reserve – I visit an openly accessible dune area not far from urban village settings. While observing the surroundings (Figure 15.1), I am astonished by the excessiveness of human footprints in the sand, and I witness how those multiply because of two strollers walking in the dunes. Dune reinforcements are often creatively used by visitors as support for sitting, but deeper dunes also seem to be equally vulnerable to human activity. Trespassers are discouraged from freely walking across the dunes (particularly on protected dune ridges) by occasional warning signs (which are easily destroyed by those resisting restrictions or by nature itself), patrolling officers, intended fines and “common sense” education tactics. Standing on a wooden path – the only “authorised” way of moving around the dunes – and looking into the distance unexpectedly evokes dormant feelings of inner approval of my own “accepted” behaviour. At the same time, I am being lulled by a non-consequentialist feeling nurtured by peer influence, and the majestic, spectacular landscape feels so inviting. No material barrier is stopping me. And yet, I stay on the path, leaving no footprints.



Figure 15.1 Innumerable visible footprints in sand dunes and two hikers in the distance. Usually, trespassing beyond specially built dedicated wooden paths and observation viewpoints is not allowed and could in principle be fined.

Source: Photograph by the author.

This experience provokes thinking about the duality of protection and restriction – the first extended connection to border discourses. Protection is accompanied by restriction in many facets of society. The object of protection can be the same as or different from the object of restriction (an example of the former is the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions meant to protect all individuals, including those who they restrict; an example of the latter is restricting some aspects of human behaviour to protect natural or cultural sites). All restrictions are met with resistance in some way, and the sites of the Curonian dunes are no exception – people keep sliding down the majestic sand hills notwithstanding the precautions that this is dangerous to them (the same

object of protection-restriction) and to others and that it destroys the dunes (different object of protection and restriction).

The duality of protection and restriction especially resonates with border contexts through the “humanitarian border” (Kallio et al., 2019; Walters, 2010) concept. The humanitarian border happens when one is protected or helped and restricted at the same time. Humanitarianism and borders seem to be intuitively contradictory, but they work as two sides of the same coin. The target of protection and the target of restriction of the humanitarian border are most often not the same, but due to common generalizing and simplifying strategies to manage migration, they are often presented as such (e.g., all deserving migrants get protection). The humanitarian border generally protects migrants by restricting and managing their movement, but selectivity is also part of this process – some migrants are restricted and refused entry in order to protect and allow the “authorised” crossing of other migrants (usually a much smaller selected group). In addition, the humanitarian border, as any other border, also protects national and supranational actors.

The reasoning and strategies of heritage site protection undoubtedly substantially differ from the principals of border protection. However, some parallels emerge between the protection of the dunes and protection of the border when concurrently thinking about them and the aspect of restriction. The ultimate object of protection is not the person whose actions are restricted but the idea of safeguarding that which might be destroyed by the acts of this person, that is, the (integral) “nation” (also including those who are “legal” within it) and the “heritage site”, respectively. Humanitarianism focuses on a person in both cases to some extent (e.g., at the border, basic human rights should in principle always be respected), but a person often emerges as a secondary target of protection. One might argue that dune protection involves more straightforward physical and scientific evidence of direct destructive consequences of human behaviour at natural sites, although this can be negotiable due to context- and time-specific understandings and definitions of cultural and natural heritage, its value and protection standards (see, for example, a discussion on heritage from the European perspective in a volume edited by

Ashworth and Larkham (1994)). The rigid protection of the border and the nation-state against selected border crossers relies on even more deeply rooted politico-ideological, largely discursive and artificially manufactured narratives, such as the irreversible equivalency between nation-state and land occupancy, lawful control of human movement, extensive social differentiation, and others.

Joining an official tour gives me the illusion that I am acting in the best possible and the least invasive way when entering the protected area. In the case of meeting an official patrolling at the reserve, the presence of an accredited tour guide also serves as a shortcut to justifying my behaviour as socially acceptable according to the social agreement. That is, I enter the nature reserve “legally”.

The tour includes interesting factual and practical information about the area. I learn that the inhabitants of the Curonian Spit have been in a constant dynamic with the surrounding dunes. First, they massively cut the forests occupying the Spit, causing uncontrollable movement of bare sand, which resulted in multiple buried villages. This prompted experimenting with innovative, systematic ways to control, stabilise and reinforce the dunes in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, including reforestation (see Bučas, 2007; Tutkunkardes, 2008). However, when the people opted to control the dunes more, they became stagnant more quickly. The Curonian Spit dunes are currently differentiated according to the vegetation growing on them. Certain plants gradually stop sand from moving, consequently creating the grey “dead” dunes. The white “living” dunes, which are now threatened and thus protected, travel and shapeshift with the help of the wind and other natural forces. These are the sparse remaining unplanted dune landscapes that convey **esthetical** value and educate the public about the consequences of unregulated deforestation (see Armaitienė et al., 2007; Bučas, 2007). The scenery captured in Figure 15.1 communicates a whole array of unique and ever-changing dune aspects, which usually come together as one complete experience of the observer: moving from the closest towards more distant landscape, we see traces of dune fortifications, sandy white dunes, overgrown grey dunes,

the Curonian Lagoon (significantly polluted and mostly used for various shipping purposes), and when looking very attentively, the mainland shore.

The further and longer we walk, the more dimensions of life in/of the dunes unravel in front of us. One of the more impressive elements evidently flourishing farther away from human activity are animals. I observe numerous footprints of different species (Figure 15.2). Birds openly flock to our proximity, and smaller insects, such as butterflies, grasshoppers and various bugs, thrive in bushes and tufts of grass.



Figure 15.2 Footprints of several different species in a sand dune. The moose footprints are the most prominent.

Source: Photograph by the author.

The footprints of a moose interest me the most. The trail stretches from the north to the south, towards the direction of the border. Heading east, we step over the footprint and leave it behind (Figure 15.3).



Figure 15.3 The continuation of the moose footprints towards the direction of the border and vague human shoeprints moving to the left and away from the moose trail.

Source: Photograph by the author.

Being exposed to the evident presence of animals in the dunes so close to the border encourages me to question how wild animals prevail around human borders. How does the border, which orders the lives and movement of humans, impact the trajectories and well-being of local moose? In many cases, political borders do not influence wild animal migration itself, but they complicate its monitoring and information sharing across these borders. Existing research on wildlife crossing borders suggests to minimize the reliance on jurisdictional

boundaries when tracking wild animals (Bischof et al., 2016). In the context of the Curonian Spit, scholars have emphasized an overall demand for the better transboundary integration of methods on and data of environmental management (Gasiūnaitė et al., 2008). Such reports place humans and potentials to organize their knowledge (which also can undoubtedly benefit animals) at the core of the issue. In other cases, physical border manifestations and exposure to humans have a great impact on wildlife (see McCallum et al., 2014). Some borders have an overwhelming effect on animals, for instance, disrupting original migration routes, which potentially leads to poorer diet and mating possibilities. Physical border manifestations, such as border fences, also threaten the lives of wild animals more severely and instantly if they get stuck and entangled in or electrocuted by them. More heavily guarded borders in different places and times could also cause the destruction of any living crosser, human or animal.

However, even though potentially disarranging, borders undoubtedly do not attach a whole array of social meanings to wild animals in the ways that they do to humans (this does not apply to domesticated animals when it comes to crossing borders, as strict rules are imposed on them and on their handlers, including documentation, passports, obligatory vaccinations, etc.). The consequences of and at the border for wild animals are caused not by the border specifically but rather by *humans* generally, especially by the tendency to prioritize geopolitics over biopolitics. Geopolitical borders do not usually intrinsically intend to harm trespassing wild animals because they are generally not meant for them. The local Curonian moose most likely will continue its journey undisturbed. Due to the special locality of this border, there are very few physical border obstructions in this landscape, leaving the path open for the lone wild traveller.

The tour guide explains that even the few present physical border markers are not easily visible in this setting. In fact, they are so scarce that multiple unintentional border violations (by humans) have been reported throughout the years. Tourists without guidance or those who wander across the beach simply miss the border signs. Trespassers are detained by the officers on either side of the border and fined for illegally crossing it. Nature also plays a role in such

unintentional border violations. The constantly changing protected natural environment is the main reason behind the scarcity of border signage at this otherwise highly guarded borderland. Border demarcations in the Spit are intentionally sparse but taller – some border markings are standalone three-meter-high poles (Kumetaitis, 2020, p. 119). The sand lives through spatiotemporal movement, and it threatens and changes the border, compelling humans to find alternative ways to maintain it. This reminds us that borders sit in *place*, not only phenomenological, anthropological and sociocultural place but also biogeographical place occupied and operated by non-human agents. These actors of nature use and change this place intentionally or reactively (as a reaction to external forces) in ways that often are no less impactful than human behaviour on local and extended environments. All of these agents cause borders to fluctuate to various degrees, thereby challenging the idea of border fixity.

Walking along the animal footprints, we slowly approach the furthest point of our tour – the border zone. A warning sign announces the beginning of the restricted area in three languages (Lithuanian, English and Russian) (Figure 15.4). The excitement is apparent among us tourists. Everyone wants to take a picture with the sign. The border reveals its innate potential to elevate human emotions, for better or for worse. Country borders are not an everyday matter in many people's lives. As such, they retain their promise of something out of the ordinary. Their inherent liminal character, challenging to transition and (quite ironically) “liberation from the regimes of normative practices and performance codes of mundane life” (Shields, 1991, p. 84), fascinates and worries at the same time. For many, crossing borders fundamentally means leaving home, entering a new place and a new community and coming back changed.

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Figure 15.4 A “stop” sign listing the following information: “State border protection zone. Enter only upon authorization by state border guard service” (in Lithuanian above English, followed by Russian below). One border pole is somewhat visible on the horizon to the right.

Source: Photograph by the author.

Amid our joint excitement, we see an approaching four-wheeler (Figure 15.5). Soon, a border guard welcomes us with a warning that we crossed into the border zone while taking pictures with the sign. The tour guide has the required permissions to only be in the reserve stretching before the border zone and receives a reminder not to come so close to the border next time. When the guard turns back to leave, the excitement in the group is replaced by adrenaline-provoked nervous laughter. Being confronted by an officer of the regime is an exceptional event, bringing feelings of fear, guilt and eventually relief for many. Following the officer’s trail, I notice thin observation towers peaking from behind the sand hills on the horizon. We were being watched the whole time.



Figure 15.5 A border guard on a four-wheeler leaving wheel trails in the sand.

Source: Photograph by the author.

It is time to turn back, away from the border and the nature reserve. I no longer notice the landscape and instead think about the experiences near the border. We were warned – not because we caused any observable damage to the surroundings (some level of impact on the dunes due to our presence was inevitable), but because of our embodied human presence near the border. The four-wheeler did not come to chase the moose wandering about the border, but it did come to warn us about our minor misdemeanour in the eyes of the border regime. In its view, our presence (potentially) threatens the border more significantly than it impacts the nature. Borders are primarily human, by human, and for human. Still, we must continue to rigorously think about how they affect everything and everyone in the biosphere, where human is connected to every other, post-, non- and more than- human.

By way of ending this chapter, I invite the reader to look back at the images as interconnected parts of one narrative, one place, one habitat. At the Curonian Spit, we find sand and dunes, vegetation, animals, and people, all together, enclosed by water. These intersecting realms characterize the Curonian Spit as a liminal landscape, which, following Turner (1969), is “neither here nor there” but rather “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial” (p. 95). It is a place of continuous meeting and learning to live in these encounters. The different realms have their own familiar paths and ways of walking them. When these paths cross, we witness people stepping off their wooden paths to slide down the sand dunes as a sign of non-conformity to imposed rules, and we have moose crossing borders without passports. These trope-like (but real-life) examples invite us to adhere to the multifacetedness and dynamism as fundamental elements of our realities and to remember that the border is one of these paths among others, no less, no more.

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