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Beyond the Human: Rethinking Loneliness through Ecological Connectedness and Disconnectedness in Later Life

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Abstract

Dominant discourses on ageing often emphasise the significance of social networks and the risks of social isolation, reinforcing an anthropocentric view that prioritises human relationships. While social relations are undoubtedly important, this article argues that the ecological dimensions of ageing deserve greater attention. Existing literature on ageing, largely frames more-than-human beings in therapeutic or assistive roles, inadvertently reinforcing narratives of older adults as dependent and vulnerable. Introducing the concepts of *ecological connectedness* and *disconnectedness*, this article broadens the understanding of how identity, autonomy and well-being are shaped in later life. Drawing on ethnographic research with older adults in rural Sweden, the study examines how interactions with forests, gardens and animals, influence experiences and the process of ageing. It highlights how ecological relationships, disruptions and adaptations can be as significant – if not more so – than merely human ones. Through the lived experiences of older adults in rural Sweden, whose deep connections with the more-than-human world both sustain and challenge their sense of self, this article foregrounds the often-overlooked role of the ecological environment in shaping later life. Ultimately, it calls for a shift in how we conceptualise ageing – moving beyond human-centered frameworks to acknowledge the dynamic and evolving relationships between humans and the more-than-human world across the life course.

Keywords: *Ageing; More-than-human; Anthropocentrism; Loneliness; Well-being; Rural Sweden*

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Introduction

Along the floor in 82-year-old Irene's living-room, several framed photographs are stacked behind one another. She takes them out, one by one, and shows me. A bird in flight, a lake shrouded in morning mist, cattails reaching out of the still water. "This one was taken very early in the morning," she says, pointing to a swimming loon. The photographs are sharp and the light soft, invoking a sense of stillness and quiet anticipation, capturing the world as it begins to wake. "That light doesn't last long," she adds.

Photography is Irene's biggest passion, especially when it comes to animals and the forests of western Sweden. She drives out into the woods, pitches her small tent, and spends the night there, waking up before sunrise. With her camera ready, she waits for those first rays of light that she says brings everything to light. "It's quiet then. And the animals don't seem to mind me being there. These are among the best moments in life."

Just as Irene captures fleeting moments of life in the forest with her camera, this article seeks to capture moments in which older adults' lives are entangled with the more-than-human world.[1] Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in areas labelled as depopulated in rural Sweden, I examine how everyday encounters, or the absence of encounters with the more-than-human world shape experiences of ageing and affect identity, autonomy, and well-being in later life.

In recent decades, questions around how to support well-being in later life have become increasingly prominent, especially in rural regions facing depopulation, industrial decline, and ageing populations. In response, scholars and policymakers have developed concepts such as "age-friendly" and "socially sustainable communities" to address the needs of older adults (Buffel, Handler, and Phillipson 2018; Scharlach and Lehning 2013). Since the early 2000s, the World Health Organisation (WHO 2002, 2018) has launched global action plans to encourage the development of environments that promote ageing in place, equitable access to services and social inclusion.

The idea of age-friendliness has since gained widespread traction in rural planning and ageing policy, even though no single definition exists. It typically includes aspects such as inter- and intragenerational equity, gender equality, local participation, economic security, access to housing and healthcare, and adequate public transport (e.g. Boström 2012; Meeks 2022). Researchers from rural contexts such as Sweden (Abrahamsson and Hagberg 2018), the United States (Matysiak 2025), Canada (Menec et al. 2015) and Ireland and Northern Ireland (Walsh et al. 2014) have shown that the structural conditions of rural ageing, such as long distances between neighbours, and to services and towns, declining service provisions and youth outmigration, can lead to increased social isolation and, as a result, reduced well-being. Across this literature, a strong emphasis is placed on the importance of human social

relationships and informal support systems in mitigating loneliness and, as such, enabling a better quality of life. Yet what is often missing from both research and public discussions on age-friendly rural communities is consideration of how relationships with the more-than-human world shape the ageing process.

While human social relations are undoubtedly significant, for some older adults, relationships with the more-than-human world can be equally or more important. In the case of Irene, for instance, being with the forest and alongside more-than-human life is a central aspect of her identity and vitality. Yet, across both policy and scholarship, the assumption persists that human social contact is the primary, or even sole, pathway to well-being in later life. Although work that emphasizes the importance of ecological perspectives remains at the margins of mainstream ageing research (see Douglas and Whitehouse 2024 and Lupton 2024 for a similar critique), and often emerges from fields outside of old-age studies, these contributions nevertheless show that human well-being is shaped by relations that extend beyond the human (e.g. Brown and Nading 2019; Kirk 2024; Munro 2022). Daniela Calvo's (2025) recent article makes this point explicitly, showing how health is constituted through multiple multispecies entanglements in Candomblé. Drawing on Sarah Elton's (2021) work on plant-human relations and her notion of "relational health", Calvo argues that wellbeing emerges through dynamic processes of connection with plants, animals, minerals and spiritual beings, rather than being produced solely through human-to-human interaction.

My analysis aligns with Calvo's (2025) claim that well-being and identity emerges through "events, encounters and processes" with the more-than-human world as well as through the absence or disruption of such relations. In this article, I therefore seek to expand anthropocentric conversations of ageing by showing how more-than-human relations are integral to later life. It challenges the common framing of the more-than-human in ageing studies as simply therapeutic or supportive, reframing these relations instead as co-constitutive of identity and well-being. This argument is developed through the introduction of the concepts "ecological connectedness" and "ecological disconnectedness", analytical lenses developed inductively from the fieldwork. Ecological connectedness refers to the sensory, emotional and practical interconnections between humans and the more-than-human world, such as tending a garden, walking in the forest, or observing wildlife. Ecological disconnectedness, by contrast, denotes experiences of separation or detachment from the more-than-human world due to ageing bodies, institutional restrictions, environmental change or death.

This article begins by situating the centrality of social participation in ageing policy and research, before turning to scholarship on ageing and the more-than-human. I then present the methods and empirical material from rural Sweden, organized in three thematic sections: ageing *with* place, interspecies companionship and ecological grief. Lastly, I reflect on the broader implications for ageing studies and policy.

The Centrality of Social Participation in Ageing Policy and Research

Before developing my argument about the role of the more-than-human on ageing, it seems appropriate to take, as a starting point, the centrality of human relationships presented in both scholarly literature and public health policy. Social participation has become a cornerstone concept in discussions of ageing well. Participation is commonly defined as involvement in activities that provide interaction with others in society (WHO 2002, 2021), and is widely regarded as essential for maintaining cognitive function, well-being and life satisfaction in later life. This focus is reflected most clearly in the influential model of "successful ageing" developed by Rowe and Kahn (1997), which positioned the maintenance of social, physical and mental activity as key to avoiding decline, disease and dependency in older age. Their model emphasizes personal responsibility, active lifestyles and ongoing engagement with other

humans as ideal markers of ageing well. This framing has had significant impact on ageing research and practice, shaping how ageing individuals are assessed, supported and encouraged to live. While highly influential, the successful ageing model has also generated substantial critique for reinforcing narrow, normative and morally loaded expectations of later life – an issue that I return to below.

Nonetheless, numerous studies across national and cultural contexts have since reinforced the idea that frequent social contact, with family, friends, neighbours and communities, contributes positively to older adults' well-being and helps prevent involuntary loneliness and isolation (e.g. Nyqvist et al. 2013; Moreno-Tamayo et al. 2020; Chung and Kim 2022). Social networks are also seen as critical buffers against the health impacts of reduced mobility, widowhood and retirement (Beridze et al. 2020). According to Terkelsen et al., "Being able to engage in social relations and having access to social contacts is critical for mitigating loneliness and maintaining healthy aging" (2025, 1). This kind of research has underpinned widespread public health campaigns and local interventions focused on maintaining or rebuilding social ties in later life. In Sweden, for instance, older adults are encouraged to participate in organised activities at senior centres or through the Swedish Church, as well as digital initiatives such as municipal apps designed to reduce loneliness. Although these initiatives reflect genuine concern, they also underscore the extent to which well-being in later life continues to be approached primarily through the lens of human social interaction.

In rural areas, achieving the ideals of social participation often presents structural challenges. Depopulation, limited public transport, and the closure of local services contribute to the physical and social fragmentation of older people's lives (Abrahamsson and Hagberg 2018; Menec et al. 2015; Naskali et al. 2019; Walsh et al. 2014). These challenges have only intensified with the gradual withdrawal of welfare infrastructures in many European contexts, leaving older adults increasingly reliant on informal networks or volunteer-based initiatives. As a result, older rural adults are often portrayed in both policy and public discourse as "at risk" of isolation, and efforts to support them often focus on building community ties or restoring lost human social contact.

The underlying assumption in many of these interventions is that human-to-human interaction is the primary, or even exclusive, route to well-being in later life. A good example is Mikkelsen's (2016) ethnographic work on ageing in rural Denmark, where socially isolated older men have become a key concern for the state. Within health care and social work, loneliness is frequently treated as a pathological condition that needs to be "solved". One psychotherapist interviewed by Mikkelsen (2016, 458) even suggested that older adults sometimes need to be "tricked" into becoming socially active, while others expressed the view that it is the individual's personal responsibility to break the cycle of solitude. Overall, Danish interventions that aim to "activate" older adults privilege human-to-human contact and exclude other relational potentials, such as solitude or ecological belonging (Mikkelsen 2020).

Even those scholars who are critical of the concept successful ageing, for its normative assumptions and narrow view of what constitutes a good life, tend to retain a strong emphasis on human sociality (e.g. Katz and Calasanti 2015; Martinson and Berridge 2015). For instance, Lamb's (2017) ethnographic work in India challenges ideals of independence and self-reliance promoted in many ageing frameworks in the Global North, by foregrounding older adults' acceptance of interdependence and caregiving within extended families. Lamb shows how many older Bengalis speak positively of becoming more dependent on children or kin in later life, viewing these ties as part of a meaningful life cycle and ethical order of care. Even though dependency is revalued to not be considered a failure, it is still situated within a fundamentally human-centric model, where relationships with others are the primary reference point for identity and well-being. A different example is Klinenberg (2012) in his study of the rise of single-person households, which similarly challenges the assumption that living alone

necessarily entails social failure or deprivation. He shows that single living can be a meaningful and chosen way of life. Yet even here, the emphasis remains on expanding possibilities for human interaction, whether through networks of friends or digital connections, rather than also acknowledging more-than-human forms of connection.

This is my central critique: even when dominant ideals such as "successful ageing" are problematized, the presumption that well-being rests primarily on human social contact remains deeply entrenched. This article instead joins research that underscores human relations with the more-than-human world and argues that these perspectives must be brought from the margins to a more central position in how later life is conceptualised.

Ageing and the More-Than-Human

At the start of 2024, Netflix released an adaptation of the Swedish writer Astrid Lindgren's *Ronja the Robber's daughter*, a coming-of-age story wherein Ronja undergoes profound psychological and moral growth through her interactions with the more-than-human world. By getting lost in the forest and facing challenges like wild rivers, harsh winters and steep cliffs, Ronja develops her independence, resilience and courage. Through rites of passage in the more-than-human world, she discovers and develops who she is. She starts questioning her family's robber lifestyle and the values of her upbringing, and seeks a life in alignment with her newfound ethical understanding of coexistence. While this is a story of youth, it highlights how identity and transformation can emerge through ecological encounters.

Stories about how older adults coexist with the more-than-human world are rarer, even though it is widely acknowledged that later life, much like adolescence, involves a renegotiation of identity, purpose and relationships in response to shifting bodily, material and social realities (e.g. Bateson 2011; Clark and Anderson 1967; Danely 2014; Kaufman 1986; Lamb 2000, 2017; Loe 2011; Luborsky 1994; Myerhoff 1978). Nevertheless, exceptions exist. In the Icelandic film *Children of Nature* (1991), two older adults escape the confines of institutional care and re-encounter freedom and meaning through the landscapes of their youth. Luis Sepúlveda's (1995) *The Old Man Who Read Love Stories* portrays an ageing man, Antonio José Bolívar, in the Amazon whose fraught relationship with a jaguar reveals both intimacy and conflict in human-animal co-existence. And in Tove Jansson's (2003) *The Summer Book*, an older woman lives her final summer closely attuned with sea, rocks and birds. These works remind us that later life can be shaped, altered and sustained through profound connections with more-than-humans. John Berger's writings too insist on the ethical and existential stakes of these relations. In his essay "Why Look at Animals?" (1980) and in his fictional portraits of peasant life in *Pig Earth* (1979), animals and landscapes are not background, but co-actors in human becoming, including older age.

These accounts resonate with ethnographic studies that foreground how older adults sustain meaning, belonging and well-being through seasonal, sensory and place-based engagements with the more-than-human world. For example, studies from Greenland, Canadian Inuit communities, and migrant ageing contexts in Canada highlight how land-based practices, interspecies relations and multisensory attachments are central to autonomy, dignity and identity in later life (Collings 2001; Dupuis 2024; Jackson 2011; Schlütter and Jensen 2023). These studies support my argument that ecological connectedness is not only symbolic but lived through daily practices and more-than-human relations.

Research has, however, only begun to explore the various ways and depths in which humans age alongside other species, including animals, plants and even artificial entities such as robots (Douglas and Whitehouse 2024; Lupton 2024), and these insights have yet to be meaningfully incorporated into ageing policy. Much of this emerging scholarship focuses on the ways in which animals and plants

provide emotional support and therapeutic benefits in elder care settings (Savishinsky 1991; Schwennesen and López Gómez 2024) and how robotic companions like PARO, MARIO and Zora, can be used to assist, support or entertain older adults (Robertson 2017; Wright 2023). While this body of work highlights the importance of interconnections between humans and more-than-humans in the ageing process, it often frames more-than-human beings primarily in therapeutic terms when it comes to later life. This tends to reinforce a narrative of ageing individuals as dependent and vulnerable (Gustafsson 2023; Lupton 2024; Sandberg 2013). It also risks overlooking other forms of interrelationships that older adults have with the more-than-human world or treat it as merely "support for or context of *human ageing*" (Douglas and Whitehouse 2024, 3). Notably, it is not typical to speak of humans in such narrowly instrumental way, as the stories of Ronja or Antonio José Bolívar's interrelationship with the jaguar illustrate. More-than-human beings may shape the well-being of humans through their coexistence and presence – just as other humans do – rather than through any explicitly therapeutic function.

Drawing on ethnographic research on ageing in rural Sweden, this article seeks to challenge these prevailing narratives by foregrounding intricate and dynamic webs of what I call ecological relationships in later life. By moving beyond the dominant social scientific paradigms that conceptualise ageing primarily in terms of biological, psychological, material, and social factors, I argue for a more holistic framework – one that situates human ageing also within a broader ecological context, including more-than-humans (Andrew and Read 2024).

In this paper, I wish to see what happens when examining ageing as a process shaped by "ecological connectedness" and "disconnectedness". As already mentioned in the introduction, ecological connectedness points to the interconnections between humans and the more-than-human world. Irene's story, at the beginning of this paper, is one such example. Her early morning photography trips are not only about taking pictures or achieving certain therapeutical benefits, but about maintaining an intimate, embodied relationship with the forest, light, and wildlife. She describes these outings as moments where she feels that she is part of something bigger, reflecting a strong sense of ecological embeddedness. Her connection is not simply recreational or therapeutic but foundational to how she understands herself and her place in the world.

As is demonstrated in this paper's empirical contents, meaningful connections are not solely reliant on human relationships but can also be deeply rooted with the more-than-human world. Such interconnections are emphasised in the growing body of multispecies studies (e.g. Govindrajan 2018; Haraway 2003, 2016; Kohn 2013; Tsing 2015). Nevertheless, what has been less highlighted in this scholarship is how these interrelationships can take different shapes across the life course and their significance in older age. Furthermore, it tends to overlook aspects of "ecological disconnectedness". As Candea et al. (2015) argue, engagement or relationality have been dominant over disconnection and non-interactive relationships in academic tropes. In contrast to ecological connectedness, ecological disconnectedness provides a different perspective, referring to the separation or detachment from the more-than-human world that can occur. This disconnectedness can contribute to feelings of loss, disorientation and a revaluation of the self, especially for those who previously found meaning in such relationships. Thus, opposite to Haraway's (2008) focus on "being with" other species or Latimer's (2013) "being alongside" and Katz's (2024) "ageing together with", I argue that we also need to look closely at experiences of "being without" these relationships. Ecological disconnectedness introduces this lacking perspective; it refers to the state of being disconnected or physically separated from more-than-humans, leading to potential emotional or psychological effects, and a change of self.

Methods

In this paper, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in autumn 2022 and autumn 2024 with older adults living in rural Sweden, primarily in the counties of Värmland and southern Lapland. Notably, the ethnographic material presented here was not initially collected to explore the relationship between older adults and the more-than-human world. Instead, this focus emerged organically from the material gathered during two separate projects, funded by Formas, a Swedish government research council for sustainable development.

The first project, which I have been working on since 2022, examines the lives of women living on pensions below the poverty line (Gustafsson 2024). Through their life stories, I seek to understand their current economic situations and broader living conditions in older age. The second project involved curating a photography exhibition titled *What would you bring to the future?* in collaboration with Irene Karlsson, a photographer and retired nurse whom I met during fieldwork in Värmland; it is this particular Irene that is mentioned at the beginning of this article. As part of this exhibition, we invited pensioners in rural Värmland to reflect on which three items they would choose to bring if they were to wake up 100 years from now (Gustafsson 2025).

Although neither project was explicitly designed to investigate the relationship between humans and the more-than-human world, this theme surfaced repeatedly in conversations and field encounters. As I reviewed interview transcripts, fieldnotes and personal reflections, I realized that many participants had spoken at length about their deep connections and disconnections to animals, forests, and gardens. While this points to the importance of the more-than-human world in the lives of the participants, it also highlights the importance of ethnographic methods, which allow for the emergence of unexpected themes. This prompted me to revisit my data and analyse it again with new questions: How did participants describe their relationships with the more-than-human world? How did the more-than-human world affect their ageing process, sense of self and well-being?

For this paper, I have analysed interview transcripts, fieldnotes, personal reflections and the work Irene and I did with regards to the photography exhibition. Interviews were made with fifteen adults, born between 1932 and 1960. This generational position is significant. Participants came of age in the years after the Second World War, during a time of rapid social transformation, welfare state expansion, and shifting rural economies. Their articulations of ecological connectedness and disconnectedness often reflected both lifelong embeddedness in local landscapes and awareness of their erosion over time. These reflections also reveal an understanding that humans are part of something larger than themselves and that well-being, identity, and life itself are entwined with the ongoing rhythms of the more-than-human world.

All interviews were conducted in Swedish, made in the participants' homes and typically lasted a few hours or longer.[2] We often sat together at the kitchen table, sharing coffee and conversation, moved around the house, and the garden. This approach allowed me to experience participants' daily lives firsthand and observe their ecological relationships, or the ways these connections were absent.

While the analysis draws on all fifteen interviews, I present six participants in more detail: Irene, Katarina, Rut, Elin, Bertil, and Solveig, in order to illustrate the thematic focus of the article. Among these six, five were women and one was a man, all of whom lived alone. Some lived in remote forest locations, while others had neighbours or small communities nearby. All had children, and several also had grandchildren, with whom they maintained regular contact, even if physical meetings were infrequent for most.

Participants gave informed consent, and discussions of solitude, grief, and disconnection were raised by participants themselves. Ethical approval was obtained from The Swedish Ethical Review Authority. To protect the anonymity of the research participants, all names, except Irene's, are pseudonyms. I have also excluded specific place names and made small contextual amendments where necessary to safeguard participants' privacy. These modifications are limited in scope and do not affect the empirical interpretation or the overarching argument of the paper.

Ageing *with* Place

In much of the literature in ageing studies, including work in gerontology, sociology, and urban planning, "ageing in place" is widely recognized as a central goal for supporting well-being in older age (Wiles et al. 2012). It typically refers to the ability to remain in one's own home and community safely, independently and comfortably, regardless of age or ability. This body of work typically focuses on the built environment, such as housing design, access to services, walkability and safety (Wahl et al. 2012) or on social factors like community participation and care networks (Lewis and Buffel 2020). While the ecological environment is sometimes acknowledged, it is often treated as a backdrop, a resource, or in terms of aesthetics, a setting that supports or hinders ageing, rather than a relational space where identity is produced. Here, I wish to highlight what it means to take the more-than-human world seriously in later life, not only as a context for ageing, but as an active participant in it; to age *with* rather than *in* place.

In Autumn 2024, Irene and I went to visit Katarina in northern Värmland for our photography project. Before moving there, Katarina had lived in another part of Sweden with a man she described as deeply self-absorbed. Over time, she felt emotionally drained, struggling with her mental well-being. Therapy helped her regain clarity, and she separated and sought a fresh start. In the small red cottage, she discovered peace and strength: "Here, I have calm and tranquility. I'm no longer afraid of the things that used to scare me."

Despite living remotely without a car and with no nearby neighbours, Katarina does not feel lonely. At times she takes a taxi to the nearest town, but most of her days are spent together with her dog and the animals around her cottage. A pair of ravens frequently fly over, and she has developed her own form of communication with them: "They have different calls and I usually respond to them. I see their black shadows in the sky, hear them answer me, and then they're gone again." In these moments, Katarina is not merely surrounded by nature, but is embedded in a web of more-than-human relations, a sensibility explored in the multispecies literature, where life is understood as entangled across human and nonhuman worlds (e.g. Haraway 2008; Tsing 2015).

The same was true for Rut, a woman whom at nearly 90 years of age, lived alone in the house she has called home for a large part of her adult life. She lived with an amputated leg, chronic back pain, no car, no access to public transport and no nearby neighbours. When we met, she told me that she is always at home and alone nowadays. "Have you ever thought about moving to one of the nearby villages?", I asked, perhaps too directly, and with the underlying assumption that she might want to be closer to other people. "Never!" Rut exclaimed, "I live so freely here. The only way I'll move is if I lose my mind. Otherwise, they'll have to carry me out in a wooden coffin!" She smiled and added, "I usually say that I live in the Garden of Eden".

Figure 1. The road to Rut's house. Taken by author.

Physical limitations had, however, begun to take a toll. The garden, once a source of pride, had become overgrown. Rut felt sad looking at it. Gardening and clearing heavy snow have become a struggle, and the long hours she once spent picking blueberries in the forest are now beyond her reach. However, with the help of her walker, she still waters a few plants close to the house. Almost every day she sits on the porch, looking out at the garden and the lake across the road, feeling part of the forest surrounding her home. "No one judges me out here," she said. "I can do what I want, and no one has an opinion about it."

Although socially isolated in conventional terms, Rut's well-being was not threatened by loneliness but by a creeping ecological disconnectedness: the inability to garden, walk in the forest and manage snow. Katarina voiced similar concerns. Increasing pain in her knees made walking in the forest difficult. As part of our photography project, she chose to bring a wooden walking stick in the future, a birch she had cut from her yard and carved by hand. For her, the stick was both practical support and a symbolic artefact, linking body, mobility and identity to the forest. "It means a lot to me that the birch comes from this place that has given me a new and better sense of self."

These narratives complicate conventional notions of ageing *in* place. For Katarina and Rut, autonomy does not mean independence in the sense promoted by "successful ageing" frameworks (Rowe and Kahn 1997), nor does it align neatly with the policy-driven model of "age-friendly communities" (WHO 2002, 2018). Instead, their sense of autonomy emerges through ecological connectedness, by living with and through forests, gardens, animals and weather. Autonomy here is not freedom *from* dependency, but freedom *through* particular relations, including solitude and ecological embeddedness. Arguably, their well-being is sustained not by regular social participation, but by relational continuity with the more-than-human world.

This perspective resonates with studies showing that place-based attachments and more-than-human entanglements, as well as the loss of such connections, can shape and unsettle identity and well-being in later life (e.g. Gill, Ismail and Schlütter 2021; Jackson 2011). Schlütter and Jensen's (2023) ethnographic

work in Greenland, for instance, describes how Lars, who lives in Uummannaq, relied on sea ice to fish. This was an activity that grounded him to the land, provided purpose and also allowed him to earn money and meet people who came to buy cod or fish next to him (Schlütter & Jensen 2023: 26-28). In Canadian Inuit contexts, Collings (2001) has similarly demonstrated that land-based practices, such as hunting and fishing, are not marginal, but vital to autonomy and dignity in older age. Focusing on an older Italian-born woman living in Canada, Dupuis (2024) likewise shows how intergenerational and interspecies relationships and care were manifested in her garden, and were integral to the woman's well-being, identity and ageing process. Taken together with my own findings, these examples challenge the dominant emphasis on social participation as the primary measure of well-being (cf. Mikkelsen 2020). As Storr (in Mikkelsen 2016, 460) observes, "the justification for the individual's existence is the existence of others." Yet, for Rut and Katarina, meaning and freedom were conferred not by human sociality, but through solitude and ecological embeddedness. Recognising ecological connectedness and the threat of ecological disconnectedness allow us to rethink ageing *in* place as ageing *with* place, subsequently placing more attention on the everyday practices and situatedness of older adults within well-being discourse and offering alternative understandings of loneliness.

Interspecies Companionship

Like Katarina, many of the older adults whom I met during fieldwork did not live alone, but with dogs and cats. These animals were not merely present, but part of the fabric of care through shaping routines and offering companionship. Much like the forest in Rut's life, these animals were entangled in the making of home and identity and affected participants' well-being. Attending to these interspecies intimacies allows us to conceptualise them through ecological connectedness and disconnectedness, and to reconsider how the formation of the self unfolds beyond human-to-human relationships in later life.

Indeed, companion animals are perhaps the most widely recognised form of more-than-human relations in ageing studies and recognising their significance foregrounds how everyday interdependence with nonhuman partners shapes experiences of ageing, place and care. Many of these studies focus on the role of animals in old-age homes (Bernstein et al. 2000; Cole and MacLeod 2024; Schwennesen and López Gómez 2024) and in relation to illness, such as during the pandemic (Clements et al. 2021) or in dementia care (Douglas 2024; Jenkins et al. 2021). While this body of work makes important contributions, far less attention has been paid to the role of animals in older people's ageing processes and identity formation outside illness-centered narratives. Much of this literature also relies on loneliness narratives, often presuming that older adults keep animals to compensate for a lack of human contact. This framing positions loneliness as a deficit of human relations that animals are meant to remedy, reducing interspecies relations to a response to human absence and overlooking the fuller relational worlds in which older adults live. To give one example of this framing, Cole and MacLeod write, "It is not surprising, given the void left by dwindling social and professional networks, loss of family and friends, and less time spent outside the home, that older adults with dogs often refer to them as their 'best friend' and 'one true companion'" (2024, 56). It is easy to slip into such interpretations, and I have found myself doing so as well. In my field encounters, however, animals did not fill a gap left by missing people, rather, they were valued as companions and partners in their own right. Crucially, participants often described loneliness not in relation to a lack of human contact, but in moments when relationships with their animals were disrupted or lost, highlighting that these bonds were central to their social and emotional worlds, rather than merely substitutes for human companionship.

Elin lived on a farm in northern Värmland that she and her late husband Sixten had taken over from his parents. The farm, once full of animals and children, was now quiet. Elin's closest companion was her cat, Missan. Originally, Missan lived with the neighbours, who were struggling with addiction and had

neglected her. Eventually, Missan walked away and chose to live with Elin and Sixten instead. At the time, the cat was in poor condition, but after being rescued and cared for, Missan bonded tightly with them.

When Sixten was admitted to the hospital for a pacemaker procedure, he unexpectedly deteriorated. On her last visit to see him, Elin recalled how, despite his own failing health, Sixten was most concerned about Missan. It was minus 20 degrees Celsius and windy that day, and he asked where the cat was, whether she was safe in the cold. Elin reassured him that Missan was home, warm and comfortable. Only then did he seem to find peace, taking his last breath shortly afterward. Reflecting on this moment, Elin became emotional. "My husband was ill, but all he thought about was whether the cat was well. I think, in the moment of death, he wasn't thinking about me or our children. He was thinking about her." In Sixten's final moments, it was this familiar and deep relationship that surfaced, one that cannot be reduced to a substitute for human ties but formed an important part of the relational fabric through which he lived his life.

After Sixten's passing, Missan became Elin's closest constant companion. Her face lit up when she spoke about the cat. Every evening, Missan waited for Elin to go to bed, then curled up in the crook of her arm or nestled at her feet. "It's wonderful," Elin said, "I don't need anyone else".

As I was preparing to leave after a long afternoon with Elin, she insisted that I could not go without meeting Missan. We stepped outside and Elin called for her. From behind the woodshed, the orange cat appeared, meowing loudly at Elin but eyeing me with caution. "It takes time for her to trust people," Considering Missan's life story, Elin explained. "She remembers being neglected." As Missan stood watching us, Elin smiled proudly, "But now you two have met," she said.

The story of Missan exemplifies ecological connectedness. She was a relational partner who sustained Elin's sense of identity, continuity and belonging. Although Elin maintained contact with neighbours and family, her well-being and daily rhythms were shaped as much, if not more, by this interspecies companionship as by human sociality. Importantly, Missan had also been central to Sixten, whose final concern in life was for the cat's safety.

This bond was not exceptional. For many older adults, animals like Missan were companions with their own biographies, personalities and claims to belonging. Their presence reorganised the affective landscape of home and affected the experience of ageing. In Missan, love, grief and continuity converged, and her presence offered a kind of temporal tether between the past, present and future.

Yet these relationships are not without complexity. The depth of interspecies attachment also entails the eventual pain of separation, or disconnectedness. Bertil, who lived alone by a lake, spoke at length not about his partner, who now resided in a dementia care home, nor his children, but about Charlie, his last Labrador, who had passed away three years earlier. The grief he expressed was palpable. "All of a sudden," he said, "he couldn't move his back legs. He just lay there, whining." Bertil had noticed some stiffness in the days before but had not imagined it would escalate so quickly and unfortunately.

An x-ray revealed serious damage to the vertebrae. The veterinarian explained that surgery was possible but came with no guarantees and a long recovery process. "I wouldn't have managed to carry him in and out all the time," Bertil said quietly. "And I always said, a dog shouldn't have to suffer." The decision was made to euthanize Charlie. Bertil stayed with him, stroking him until the very end, but stepped outside when the final injection was given. His son stayed in the room. "I couldn't do it," Bertil said, tears falling.

Even years later, the absence of Charlie haunted the rhythms of Bertil's everyday life. "I felt better when I had him," he said. "He made me get up in the morning. We went for walks. I could let him off the leash in the forest, and he would follow me. He never ran away." Dogs have a particular kind of relationship with humans, as they require regular walks, unlike cats, rabbits, guinea pigs, birds, and fish. Without Charlie, Bertil no longer found the same joy and motivation to go out in the forest, especially when he felt tired or stiff. Whereas before he had no choice, now he did. Consequently, he also experienced ecological disconnectedness from the forest, which had once been a central part of him and his daily life.

In other words, the severing of Bertil's relationship with Charlie did not just bring emotional pain but disrupted his routines, his embodied engagement with the wider ecological world, and his sense of identity; his way of being and dwelling in the world, if you will (Ingold 1995). The same was true for Shirley, a woman with dementia whom Douglas (2024) met during fieldwork in the United Kingdom. Now living in a care home without her dogs, Shirley remembers them and the way that they tied "together the humans, animals, places, and ways of being and living that made Shirley's world and who she is" (2024, 99). Similarly, Cole (2019) argues that older adults strongly attached to their dogs regard them as family, not as animals valued primarily for the benefits that they provide.

Together these stories highlight a blind spot in policy frameworks. While "age-friendly" agendas prioritise human social contact, they rarely acknowledge that more-than-human companionship sustains daily routines, identity and well-being *in the same way* as human relations can. This aligns with Haraway's (2003, 2008) notion of "companion species": beings who co-shape ways of living and dying together. As she argues, animals are part of making us who we are, and when they disappear from our lives, the sense of who we are inevitably shifts as well. In other words, if, as Haraway argues, we become *with* our companion species, then Elin and Sixten's bond with Missan and Bertil's grief for Charlie, demonstrate how ageing itself becomes a more-than-human event. Bertil's loss marks a process of *becoming without*, a form of later-life transformation shaped not by relations with more-than-humans, but by their absence. Their stories suggest that later life cannot be understood solely in human terms, but must be seen as unfolding through ecological connectedness and disconnectedness.

Ecological Grief

Bertil's grief over his dog was not an isolated case. Several participants described how alterations or losses in their more-than-human relationships had a noticeable impact on their sense of self and well-being. Solveig was 90 years old when we met, and she was grieving. Not for a person, but for the forest. After separating from her husband, she had left their house nestled among the trees and moved into a rental flat in a village in southern Lapland. Though she never expressed regret about the divorce, she spoken often and bitterly of the move. She missed the forest, she said, and the freedom it had once given her. Unlike Katarina, whose separation resulted in greater ecological connection, an unwelcome consequence of Solveig's divorce was ecological disconnectedness. She missed walking in the woods, picking blueberries, raking leaves in the garden. "Just to be outside," she said, "just to be there, that was everything".

Now her days were marked by a chronic heart condition, severe back pain and the creeping sense of futility that these brought with them. "It's a one-way path," she told me. "You can't go back." The forest, once a source of energy, identity and daily rhythm, had become unattainable, not only geographically, but corporeally. In her memories, the forest shimmered as a place of movement, health and possibility. Its loss represented more than the end of a chapter; it was a rupture in the continuity of her life.

Solveig's mourning can be understood as ecological grief (Cunsolo and Ellis 2018), a profound sense of loss tied not only to place but to the self she once was in that place. This grief marks a rupture in ecological connectedness, where the forest had anchored her identity and rhythms of life. Her story illuminates the many layers of grief that can accompany ageing; grief that extends beyond the loss of social relationships to encompass landscapes, animals, and ways of being with non-humans (cf. Jackson 2011). It again challenges conventional framings of loss in later life as primarily social or biomedical, highlighting instead the significance of ecological connectedness in shaping identity and well-being.

In the past, when Irene went camping in the forest, she would sometimes bring her dog. Now, she went alone. She missed having a dog, she said, but had decided not to get another one. "It wouldn't be fair to the dog," she explained. "What if I get ill? What if the dog outlives me and has to be rehomed?"

Irene's decision exemplifies another form of ecological disconnectedness. It is not the involuntary loss that Solveig experienced, but a deliberate, anticipatory withdrawal. It was shaped by an awareness of temporal finitude and the moral weight of care she might no longer be able to fulfil. Unlike in her younger years, when dogs were chosen as extensions of her own desires and needs, Irene now adopts the dog's perspective. She imagines its possible future, its dependence, its potential abandonment. In this sense, her refusal is an anticipation of how a future relationship between herself and a dog might unfold (cf. Cole 2019). Irene's choice recognises the dog as a relational partner whose future well-being must also be considered (cf. Dupuis 2024; Haraway 2008). The possibility of connection is shadowed by the risk of disconnection through illness, incapacity or death. It is an ethical choice that emerges from the entangled temporalities of human and more-than-human lives, where the horizon of responsibility is no longer open-ended, but carefully measured.

The contrast between Bertil, Solveig and Irene is telling. Bertil's and Solveig's grief reflect an involuntary ecological disconnectedness, whereas Irene's withdrawal illustrates a chosen form of disconnectedness, rooted in ethical imagination and responsibility. Theories of ageing often prioritise resilience, activity, and independence. But here, we see something more ambiguous: an ethic of limitation, of letting go and of care expressed through refusal. Both highlight how ageing involves negotiating not only social and bodily change but also evolving relations with the more-than-human.

This demonstrates how temporal finitude is a crucial dimension of ecological connectedness and disconnectedness. Irene's choice reminds us that later life may involve negotiating connectedness and disconnectedness through limitation. Yet this temporal and ethical negotiation within interspecies relations is rarely analysed in detail. More research is needed to understand how older adults navigate responsibility, vulnerability, and the possibility of future separation within a more-than-human world.

Beyond Human-Centered Ageing: Ecological Connectedness and Disconnectedness

This article has explored how ageing is experienced and narrated through connections and disconnections with the more-than-human world. Rather than centering on any one species, place or ecological element, it traces a tapestry of ecological relationships – sensory, affective, and temporal – that shape subjective experiences of ageing. In doing so, it offers a critical departure from dominant anthropocentric models of later life, foregrounding the ecological entanglements through which ageing unfolds.

Rut, Solveig, Katarina, Elin, Bertil, and Irene illustrate different ways in which ageing interconnects with the more-than-human world, whether through preserving continuity, negotiating change, or seeking reinvention. In these ethnographic examples, the ecological environment shapes, sustains, and

sometimes disturbs experiences of ageing and later life. Importantly, the more-than-human environment is not simply a backdrop or source of support for human life, but an active force shaping well-being, identities, and the future. These stories therefore show that well-being and identity in later life are shaped equally by human and ecological relations, and are fluctuating as connections to the more-than-human world are gained or lost.

This aligns with Andrew and Read's (2024) call for an 'all world ageing' approach, which sees people as ageing within entangled webs of human and more-than-human relations. Building on this, the perspective developed here has implications for policy. Current "age-friendly" and "successful ageing" frameworks as well as loneliness-narratives privilege infrastructure, healthcare, and human social participation. While these remain vital, they risk overlooking the ways in which more-than-human relations provide continuity, meaning, and well-being in later life. Thinking with ecological connectedness expands the remit of policy beyond enabling older people to age *in place*, toward understanding well-being *with* place, and *across human and more-than-human relations*. Policy interventions should therefore recognise and support ecological connectedness. This can be achieved by, for example, recognising the co-constitutive relationship between the ageing person and more-than-humans, rather than viewing these relations merely through a therapeutic lens. The absence of judgment in the forest, as Rut described it, also offers a moral and existential affordance rarely recognized in conventional policy and ageing studies and discussions of loneliness. Equally, the risk of ecological disconnectedness, whether through bodily decline, institutional restrictions, or environmental loss, must be addressed as central to experiences of loneliness and the ageing self.

Ecological connectedness and ecological disconnectedness form the conceptual core of this article. Ecological connectedness captures how older adults' well-being, identity and everyday practices are sustained through interrelationships with more-than-humans. Ecological disconnectedness, by contrast, highlights how the loss of these relations can unsettle embodied routines, diminish purpose and disrupt one's sense of self. These two concepts together offer a dynamic account of ageing as a process marked by shifting forms of (dis)connections across species and environments.

In sum, the ideas in this article contribute to ageing theory in three key ways. First, it challenges the persistent human exceptionalism in scholarship and policy-making by showing that sociality, meaning, and identity formation are not exclusively human domains. Second, it reconceptualizes autonomy not as individual independence or active participation in human social worlds, but as the capacity to remain connected and ethically engaged with the more-than-human world. Third, it foregrounds ecological disconnectedness, not merely as environmental loss, but as an existential rupture that can reconfigure older adult's sense of themselves and the future. These contributions together call for a reframing of the interrelationship between ageing, identity and well-being: not merely dependent of individual capacities or human social engagements, but also sustained through relations with the more-than-human world. This perspective resonates with feminist posthumanist and multispecies scholarship (Latimer and Sánchez Criado 2017; Haraway 2008; Tsing 2015), which understands life not as bounded or species-specific, but as emergent in relation.

Crucially, these narratives compel us to rethink the moral and conceptual architecture of ageing policy and scholarship, particularly the emphasis on human social participation as the primary marker of well-being. If we take seriously the claim that forests and animals co-produce the conditions of ageing, then we must also take seriously the political and ethical implications for how we design communities, allocate care and define what it means to age well. Ageing, ultimately, is also an ecological process, shaped by the presence and absence of more-than-human relations. Recognizing this allows us to move beyond the human, treating ecological relations as equally constitutive of life and ageing.

Figure 2: Katarina and her walking stick. Taken by Irene Karlsson, used with permission.

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Notes

1. A variety of terms are used to describe relational frameworks that extend beyond the human, including multispecies, non-human, other-than-human and posthuman. In this article, I adopt the term more-than-human, as it captures the broad spectrum of relationships that exceed human-to-human interaction. While it still departs from the human in some respects, and in that sense differs from terms such as multispecies, I argue that it serves the central aim of this paper: to show how sociality in later life moves beyond the human, which is often taken as the primary focus in ageing scholarship and policy. As such, I believe the term makes a central point despite its conceptual shortcomings. This choice aligns with the article's aim to move beyond anthropocentric assumptions in ageing research and to foreground that there are *more than* human beings involved in the ageing process. As Price and Chao (2023) discuss, the term more-than-human offers a capacious and inclusive way of recognizing the diverse actors entangled in human life.

2. All interviews were recorded, and transcribed using Amberscript. Following each interview, I wrote fieldnotes to capture contextual details and reflections. Data analyses were carried out manually. The empirical material was coded thematically and integrative memos were used to develop and refine my analytical ideas (Emerson et al. 1995). Translation into English was carried out only after the analysis, during the writing of the results section, to ensure that meaning was not lost in the analytical process.

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