

Max Planck researchers co-operate with partners in more than 120 countries. Here they write about their personal experiences and impressions. Marwa Kavelaars from the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin travelled to wintry Scandinavia for three weeks. She investigates human decision-making behavior and talks about her work with Finnish ice fishers.

PHOTO: PETRI NIEMELÄ



Waiting for the big catch: ice fishing requires warm clothing, but also patience – and the willingness to try your luck in more than just one spot.

Ever since I was a child, I have loved being outdoors. Even though I grew up in the city, I was often observing animals, whether this was little insects at the playground or birds in the park. This curiosity led me to study the foraging behavior of seabirds during my doctoral research, for which I used small GPS trackers to record their movement patterns. In my postdoc project, I'm following a similar approach, only this time it's about human foraging, specifically ice fishing.

Ice fishing is a popular outdoor activity in Finland, combining relaxation, socializing, and enjoying nature – often with a competitive element. For a few years now, our team, led by Ralf Kurvers, together with Raine Kortet from the University of Eastern Finland, has also been organizing competitions to collect research data. We only

had to tweak the original competition setting a little bit to turn it into a very controlled experiment that happens in a natural setting. And that's the most exciting thing about it: this allows us to study human behavior in the real world, rather than in the lab or online. In our competitions, ice fishers can move freely in their natural surroundings, while we are able to follow every movement in detail via GPS smartwatches and head cameras. This allows us to track where they are going and what they are doing throughout the event.

Ultimately, we would like to understand how they combine different pieces of information for decision-making. First of all, they have to decide where to drill a hole in the ice and cast their

line. This is hard work with the hand drill they use, as the ice is up to a meter thick. Once they have done this, they need patience, but at the same time, they mustn't waste too much time in an unproductive spot. So, the second decision is about how long to stay in a single place. Additionally, we are interested in their social information use, so we sent people out alone or in teams to see if decisions were made differently depending on the social context.

The field team from the Max Planck Institute for Human Development is very international, with researchers from the Netherlands, France, and Germany. The four of us stayed in a small cabin on one of the lakesides in the Joensuu area, in the far east of



POST FROM



JOENSUU, FINNLAND

Finland. Surrounded by forests, the cabin was in the middle of a marvelous winter landscape. Every day, we travelled to a different lake for the competitions, where we met the participants early in the morning and equipped them with smartwatches and head cameras. Then off they went.

The atmosphere during the competitions was very relaxed. In the afternoon, there was usually a stand on the lakeshore with hot dogs, coffee, and hot chocolate. At temperatures of minus 10 degrees Celsius, this was very welcome. Many of the ice fishers have known each other for decades, and I enjoyed accompanying this close-knit community for a while. Although we don't speak the same language, we gradually developed a feeling of familiarity. In the

beginning they perhaps thought it was strange that we came all the way from Berlin to organize these competitions, but they enjoy the events and keep coming back every year.

When the ice fishers returned from the lake in the afternoon, we weighed their catch. After announcing the winners, who received prize money, we made our way back to the cabin. There, we first had to upload all the data from the smartwatches and cameras to the computer. Thanks to the amount of data, this took hours. While we prepared everything for the next day, one of us cooked and after dinner, someone fetched wood from the garage to light a fire in the sauna right next to our cabin. That meant we could really warm up after a long day in the cold and relax with the smell of spruce needles.



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PHOTO: PERSONAL

Marwa Kavelaars (35)

is a biologist from the Netherlands. She has been a postdoc in the Center for Adaptive Rationality since 2023. She is passionate about science communication, hoping to spark people's curiosity about nature, while also encouraging more girls to get into science. In her free time, she enjoys birdwatching and hiking.