

# The Songs of Lost Trees: Musical Approaches to Climate Communication and Environmental Storytelling in Iceland

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**Keywords:** Music, Trees, Glaciers

Before roadways carved the land, before people arrived by ships, before meltwater lakes formed and before the outlet glaciers descended from Vatnajökull, a forest covered the outwash plain of Breiðamerkursandur in southeast Iceland. Miles of native birch trees that once filled the landscape were eventually destroyed during the time of settlement and the advancement of Breiðamerkurjökull (outlet glacier) in the Little Ice Age. Today, as the glacier melts away, fragments of this ancient forest that were previously frozen in the ice are now returning to the area.

Miles away, in the small town of Laugarvatn, there rests another birch forest. So too were these trees devastated during settlement, which impacted the surrounding landscape for centuries. Reforestation projects from the mid-20th century have now yielded a hybrid forest, in which the non-native *Skógarfura* has adapted to local ecologies. The lost birch trees of Breiðamerkursandur and Laugarvatn share a story—not simply between a shared birch species, but between the impacts of a changing climate, the necessity of ecological adaptation, and the environmental violences wrought by anthropogenic influence.

This paper discusses the story of these forests through two art-science projects curated by the author. The first project is the construction of a site-specific musical instrument out of a nonnative lodgepole pine in collaboration with the Iceland Forestry Service (Land og Skógur). Biologists and conservationists speak about tree anatomy, conservation methods, and reforestation initiatives alongside the concept and performance of the musical instrument. The second project centers on the data sonification (and musical adaptation) of glacial data in collaboration with researchers at the Hornafjörður Research Center in southeast Iceland. Based on the downwasting trends of Breiðamerkurjökull from the past ten years, glaciologists have compiled speculative data that informs the glacier's projected change over the next one hundred years. The data sets are rendered sonically and then adapted into a musical work that speaks to both the environmental past and future of the Breiðamerkursander area.

This paper addresses how these projects build positive narratives through a musical process of creativity and play that resist doomism and eco-anxiety. In our world today, when trees are so often pigeonholed solely as carbon capture tools or wildfire fuel, music can help us reframe our relationship to forests that are built from complex histories and with future stewardship in mind. Moreover, this paper draws up the periodic ethnographic research that the author has conducted in Iceland for almost a decade, which focuses on the role between music and conceptions of nature. Academic scholarship, musical practice, and art-science collaboration share a tripartite balance within this presentation, and serve as crucial forms for climate communication and environmental storytelling. They highlight real-life issues and events related to environmental change. They give voice to our rapidly changing landscapes. And they help us listen with the songs of lost trees.