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Recommendation of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK 2026

TUTKIMUSEETTINEN NEUVOTTELUKUNTA

FORSKNINGSETISKA DELEGATIONEN

FINNISH NATIONAL BOARD ON RESEARCH INTEGRITY TENK

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1 contributed to the editing of an early unpublished draft

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1. Introduction

The recommendation *Ethical principles for research involving nature and the environment and a proposal for organising ethical review in Finland* (hereafter the NERE recommendation; in Finnish, the acronym LYTE is used) forms part of the research community's co-regulatory framework on research ethics and integrity in Finland. This recommendation was drawn up as part of the LYTE project carried out by TENK between 2023 and 2026.[2]

The aim of the NERE recommendation is to support researchers in identifying and analysing ethical questions related to nature and the environment. Ethical principles help minimise the potential harms of the proposed research, and they protect nature, the environment and local communities from the adverse impacts of research. The aim of this recommendation is also to safeguard the possibilities of researchers to conduct research on nature and the environment in an ethical manner in the future.

The first part of the NERE recommendation presents the ethical principles for research involving nature and the environment. These general-level national principles highlight the respectful treatment of the research subject. They support ethical reflection in all research involving nature and the environment also when the research design does not require ethical review.

The second part of the NERE recommendation presents TENK's proposal for establishing a system of ethical review of research involving nature and the environment in Finland. Ethical review helps researchers ensure that research is conducted in accordance with ethical principles. The NERE recommendation also supports the work of ethics committees in weighing benefits and harms and minimising ethical risks.

The organisations where research involving nature and the environment is conducted and where a need for ethical review has been identified can establish an ethics committee, either on their own or jointly with other organisations. Individual research fields and organisations can develop their own complementary ethical recommendations or guidelines.

TENK's model for ethical review of research involving human participants has been in place since 2009. The research community in Finland has widely committed to TENK's guidelines *Ethical principles of research with human participants and ethical review in the human sciences in Finland* (ERHS guidelines; in Finnish, IEEA).[3]

2 For more information about the project *Ethical guidelines and ethical review for research on nature and the environment (LYTE)* funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture, see TENK's website (*www.tenk.fi*).

3 *Ethical principles of research with human participants and ethical review in the human sciences in Finland.* Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK guidelines 2019: *www.tenk.fi*

2. Scope of the recommendation

Research activities involving nature and the environment are regulated by several laws. All researchers involved in conducting the research[4] are responsible for identifying and complying with these laws. The NERE recommendation is to be read as a set of ethical principles that complement legal regulation and guide the identification and consideration of ethical questions and the minimisation of ethical risks in research. This recommendation should not be used as guidance on the application of legislation.

In Finland, all research activities are conducted in accordance with TENK's research integrity guidelines (the RI guidelines).[5] Research-performing organisations ensure that researchers in their research community are familiar with the guidelines and recommendations on research ethics, research integrity and ethical review. Organisations also promote adherence to these guidelines and recommendations.

The NERE recommendation is applied in all research activities that in a broad sense concern nature or the environment and the actions of which have a direct or indirect impact on nature or the environment, during or after the research lifecycle.

To the extent possible, the NERE recommendation is to be applied in international collaborative projects also outside Finland and in national and international research collaboration with companies and other actors. Researchers follow the ethical principles outlined in this recommendation and apply them also in teaching and theses supervision activities.

Insofar as the research involves human participants, TENK's guidelines *Ethical principles of research with human participants and ethical review in the human sciences in Finland* is to be applied. If research involves the use of AI, TENK's recommendation on the ethical use of AI should be taken into account.[6]

In research involving the Sámi people, Sámi society or Sámi communities, TENK recommends that the ethical guidelines for research involving the Sámi people in Finland[7] are followed and the collective right of Indigenous Peoples to self-determination is taken into account.[8] If the research is conducted with an identifiable Sámi community or other Indigenous community or in the homeland of these communities, TENK recommends seeking community consent for the research.[9]

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4 Including scientific and artistic research, research, development and innovation activities (RDI) and other possible research activities. In the NERE recommendation, this is referred to as research activities and those carrying out these activities as researchers.

5 *The Finnish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity and Procedures for Handling Alleged Violations of Research Integrity in Finland.* Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK 2023: *www.tenk.fi*

6 *Artificial Intelligence in Research: Research Integrity and Ethical Principles.* Recommendation of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity 2026: *www.tenk.fi*

7 Ethical guidelines for research involving the Sámi people in Finland, 2024: *https://oulurepo.oulu.fi/handle/10024/50115*

8 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2017. *https://www.ykliitto.fi/sites/ykliitto.fi/files/apk-oikeuksien_julistus.pdf*

9 The Sámi Parliament has a procedure for seeking community consent for research concerning Sámi cultural heritage and traditional knowledge. Procedure guidelines: *https://samediggi.fi*

3. Valuation of nature and the environment

Nature and the environment can be valued using a three-part framework[10]. This framework helps researchers and ethics committees identify multiple starting points for the assessment of potential risks and harms of research involving nature and the environment.

Nature and its individual components, such as organisms, can be understood to have **intrinsic value**. They can be considered valuable in themselves, irrespective of any benefits they provide or other values assigned by humans.

Nature can also be seen as having **instrumental value** for humans. In this line of thinking, nature is valued based on its usefulness and practical value, for example as a source of services, materials or food. Ethical questions related to this instrumental perspective concern for example land ownership and land rights, the ownership of animals, the habitats and living environments of humans and animals and the health impacts of nature.

Values related to meaningful human–nature relationships refer to the range of ecological, cultural and social values that emerge through interaction with nature. These include, for example, aesthetic and landscape values, intangible and tangible cultural environments, and questions of identity and relationship to nature and place. These meanings may be connected to both intrinsic and instrumental value.

The starting point for responsible research involving nature and the environment is that researchers respect the research subject's intrinsic value, instrumental value, and values related to meaningful relationships with nature. Respect for instrumental value may, for example, entail recognising nature and the environment as essential to human well-being and livelihoods. Respecting the values related to meaningful human-nature relationships requires that the researcher seeks to understand the historical and local interconnections between nature and people, and to position themselves in relation to their research subject.

The different values related to nature and the environment should be reflected alongside one other, and they may contradict with each other. Open documentation and communication reveal the value choices made in research and how they are justified. This strengthens trust in science and enables broader societal discussion about the impacts of research on nature and the environment.

10 For example, IPBES 2022: The assessment report on the diverse values and valuation of nature. *https://www.ipbes.net/the-values-assessment*

4. Ethical principles for research involving nature and the environment

4.1 General ethical principles for research

These ethical principles have been drafted to support research involving nature and the environment. Their aim is to protect nature and the environment from direct and indirect adverse impacts of research, and to safeguard human possibilities to conduct research involving nature and the environment while living and acting as part of human society and nature. Deviation from these principles is permitted only for a compelling reason that must be justified in the research plan.

Section 20 of the Constitution of Finland mandates that the responsibility for nature and its biodiversity, the environment and cultural heritage belongs to everyone. Section 16 safeguards the freedom of science and research.[11] This freedom must be exercised responsibly, and respect for the research subject is always the starting point of ethical research.

The researcher weighs the benefits of the research in relation to the potential harms it may cause. Research may cause harm for example to nature, environments, animals participating in the research, other animals or species or their populations, ecosystems, people connected to the research or their living environments or livelihoods, other people, the humanity, or space.

> The research is conducted so that its benefits outweigh the harms it may cause. In the NERE recommendation, significant harm refers to adverse consequences of research that are difficult to manage, long-lasting, wide-ranging or irreversible or that affect a large number of individuals relative to population size. Significance of harm must be assessed on a case-by-case basis and considered for example in relation to the degree of endangerment.

4.1.1 Safeguarding the biodiversity, ecological functioning and resilience of nature

The researcher respects nature and the environment and the intrinsic value of their existence. Safeguarding the biodiversity, ecological functioning and resilience of nature is the starting point of ethical research involving nature and the environment.

The researcher ensures that the research does not cause significant harm, damage or risks to nature and the environment.[12] Particular care must be taken to avoid harm to threatened

11 Constitution of Finland 731/1999.

12 Nature Conservation Act 9/2023.

habitat types and populations of threatened species as well as their ecological communities and habitats.[13]

To avoid causing risks, damage or harm to nature and the environment, the researcher familiarises themselves at the planning stage with the characteristics, processes, species and threat status classifications of the nature and environment of the research site. The researcher identifies and assesses the uncertainties and gaps in the environmental knowledge used, as well as the significance of these aspects regarding the ethical risks of the research.

When selecting research sites, the researcher avoids valuable environments, threatened habitat types[14] and sites that may be especially sensitive to the impacts of data collection. If the research questions can only be addressed by conducting the study in such environments, the research must be designed and conducted so as to minimise any adverse impacts.

The research is conducted in a way that does not cause pollution of the soil, bedrock, water bodies or atmosphere, or create a risk of more than minor emissions. The research must also avoid generating harmful waste in space or causing disturbance to space environments.[15]

4.1.2 Considering the impacts on human activities, cultures and living environments

When planning the research design, the researcher considers the potential impacts of the research on people, livelihoods, cultures and built environments. The researcher must always familiarise themselves with the past and present use of the area and its historical[16] and cultural values. This is particularly important in research conducted in the traditional homelands and land-use areas of Indigenous Peoples.

The research must not cause immediate significant harm to the well-being or activities of people, local naturecultures or environments that form part of cultural heritage.

The researcher takes into account the ecological, cultural, social, aesthetic and landscape values related to people's relationships with nature.

4.2 Specified ethical principles for research

4.2.1 Respectful treatment of animals and safeguarding their welfare

In the NERE recommendation, the term 'animals' refers to all vertebrate and invertebrate animals.

Every animal has intrinsic value independent of the use it may have to humans. Animals act in their environment according to their species-specific needs. They have neither chosen the

13 Suomen lajien uhanalaisuus: Punainen kirja (2019). Hyvärinen et al. (eds.). *https://helda.helsinki.fi/items/2ec69a48-d943-488c-927f-19bbf9f92cb5*. The Web Service of the Red List of Finnish Species: *https://punainenkirja.laji.fi/en*

14 Research activities conducted in protected areas generally require a research permit. Permit decisions fall within the statutory duties of Metsähallitus: *www.metsa.fi/en/permits*

15 See the Finnish Space Activities Act (63/2018). In addition, research conducted in space is governed by several international treaties.

16 The Finnish Antiquities Act (295/1963) and the Act on the Protection of the Built Heritage (498/2010).

research setting imposed on them by humans nor understand the human meanings attached to it. The researcher applies the following principles, taking into account both direct and indirect impacts of the research:

a) The researcher avoids causing pain, suffering, severe stress or other significant harm to animals.[17] Research designs in which the handling of animals or other activities result in injury, permanent harm or death of animals are avoided. Where non-lethal research methods are not available, the capture and killing of animals and any resulting suffering to animals is minimised.

b) The researcher engages with animals participating in the research in ways that respect their agency and support the fulfilment of their species-specific behavioural needs and individual well-being.[18]

In research involving companion animals or production animals, the researcher recognises and minimises the impacts on animals as well as the potential impacts on people and their professional activities, livelihoods or recreational activities.

4.2.2 Deliberate collection and responsible management of research data

New data are collected from nature or the environment only if information cannot otherwise be obtained with sufficient accuracy. At the planning stage, the researcher determines whether similar or sufficient data already exist.

Research data are made available to the scientific community as extensively as possible in order to avoid unnecessary repetition of data collection and to minimise the potential harm caused by data collection.[19] Unexpected research results are also reported. Research data are produced and stored in standardised and interoperable formats to ensure that they are findable, accessible and reusable.[20]

If multiple studies involve or have previously involved data collection in the same area, the researcher ensures that the cumulative effects of repeated data collection do not cause significant harm to the area in question.

At the research design stage, the researcher assesses the need for data protection and security from the perspectives of the individual,[21] society and nature.

17 All research that involves animals or has indirect effects on animals must comply with the Animal Welfare Act (693/2023) and the Act on the Protection of Animals Used for Scientific or Educational Purposes (497/2013).

18 Particular attention must be paid to animal welfare in research settings that do not exceed the threshold for procedures defined in the Act on the Protection of Animals Used for Scientific or Educational Purposes (497/2013).

19 Declaration for open science and research 2025–2030 (Avoimen tieteen ja tutkimuksen julistus 2025-2030): *https://edition.fi/tsv/catalog/book/1356*

20 FAIR principles (findable, accessible, interoperable, re-usable): *https://www.go-fair.org/fair-principles/*

21 The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). *https://eur-lex.europa.eu/FI/legal-content/summary/general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr.html*.

5. A proposal for establishing a system of ethical review of research involving nature and the environment

5.1. Starting points for ethical review

This proposal for ethical review of research involving nature and the environment (in short, NERE ethical review) concerns research settings that are not specifically mandated by legislation to undergo ethical review. Ethical review helps researchers ensure that the proposed research adheres to ethical principles.

In the NERE ethical review , it is assesses whether the research adheres to the ethical principles outlined above. In addition, the harms and risks that the research may pose to nature, the environment, organisms and ecological communities are weighed against the potential knowledge value and anticipated significance of the research findings.

Possible ethical review must be carried out before data collection begins. An ethical review statement is not issued retrospectively for research that has already been conducted. If the research design changes significantly[22] during the research, the researcher may request, at a later stage of the research, an ethical review statement for activities that have not yet been carried out.

Regardless of whether ethical review is carried out, researchers are encouraged to include a section in their research plan where they describe the ethical risks involved and weigh them against the expected knowledge value of the study. The research plan should provide sufficient justification for potential harms and include a strategy for minimising them.

22 For more detailed criteria on when a new request for an ethical review statement should be made, see section 5.5 Requesting an Ethical Review Statement.

5.2 Research designs subject to ethical review

The researcher is encouraged to request an ethical review[23] if the research involves any of the following:

a) The research may cause significant harm or pose a threat to geological, biological or genetic diversity of nature.

b) The research may adversely affect the status of threatened species or habitat types.

c) The research may significantly degrade or pose a significant risk to the state of soil, bedrock or water bodies.

d) The research may cause significant harm to the functioning or recovery capacity of nature.

e) The research may cause significant harm to valuable urban or cultural environments or conflict significantly with perspectives of local naturecultures.

f) The research may cause pain, suffering or stress to animals, impair their health or welfare or cause their death.[24] In the case of invertebrate animals, only studies that use methods deviating from established research methods are subject to ethical review.

g) The research may significantly disturb space environments or generate harmful waste in space.

In addition, TENK's ERHS guidelines are applied in the ethical review if the research includes any of the research settings described in these guidelines.[25]

If a research project is required by law to have a project permit for animal experimentation[26] or another official permit, a separate ethical review statement is not required.

In the NERE recommendation, **significant harm** refers to those adverse consequences of research that are difficult to manage, long-lasting, wide-ranging or irreversible, or that affect a large number of individual organisms relative to population size. The significance of harm is assessed on a case-by-case basis and weighed against, for example, the level of endangerment.

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23 Including technologies used or developed in the research.

24 In research settings for which no project authorisation is required under the Act on the Protection of Animals Used for Scientific or Educational Purposes. If project authorisation is required, separate ethical review is not needed.

25 In TENK's guidelines on ethical review in human sciences, the following research settings require ethical review:
a) The research deviates from the principle of informed consent.
b) The research involves interference with the physical integrity of research participants.
c) The research involves participants under the age of 15 without separate consent from or notification of their guardian that would allow the guardian to prevent participation in the research.
d) The research exposes participants to exceptionally strong stimuli.
e) The research involves a risk of causing psychological harm to participants or their family members or others close to them that exceeds the limits of normal daily life.
f) Conducting the research may pose a safety risk to participants, researchers, or their family members or others close to them.

26 Act on the Protection of Animals Used for Scientific or Educational Purposes (497/2013).

5.3 Proposal for establishing a system of ethical review

TENK recommends that ethics committees for research involving nature and the environment be established primarily on a regional basis or, alternatively, through cooperation between universities, universities of applied sciences and research institutes. Organisation-specific committees should be established only for a valid reason. TENK also recommends that these committees be named *ethics committees for research involving nature and the environment (NERE ethics committees*) to distinguish them from regional medical research ethics committees and ethics committees in the human sciences.

When appointing committee members, substance expertise in different fi elds an d th e range of methodological competence is ensured as comprehensively as possible. The NERE recommendation can also be applied by ethics committees in the human sciences when the organisation does not have a dedicated NERE ethics committee and when at least one criterion for ethical review in the NERE recommendation has been identified in the research design under review. If the committee's own expertise is insufficient to assess whether the research design may entail significant harm, the committee may consult an expert in a field relevant to the review request.

The work of a NERE ethics committee requires time and resources. Adequate resources should be ensured, for example, by providing the committee with at least a part-time secretary.

5.4 Responsibilities in the ethical review process

The researcher is always responsible for the ethical integrity of their research. Possible ethical review does not transfer responsibility for the ethical decisions in the research to a NERE ethics committee.

Research-performing organisations provide research ethics and integrity training for their staff and students, thereby strengthening their capacity to adhere to ethical principles for research. Organisations that have established an ethics committee are also responsible for ensuring that it has adequate resources.

At the researcher's request, the NERE ethics committee assesses the ethical acceptability of a research plan prior to its implementation and issues a statement on whether the proposed research adheres to the ethical principles outlined in the NERE recommendation.

If the research has undergone ethical review and the researcher fails to comply with the issued ethical review statement, this may at its most serious constitute a violation of research integrity. An alleged violation of research integrity may, if necessary, be investigated in the RI process.[27]

27 *The Finnish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity and Procedures for Handling Alleged Violations of Research Integrity in Finland*. Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK 2023: *www.tenk.fi*

5.5 Requesting an ethical review statement

In order to obtain an ethical review statement, the researcher submits a statement request to a NERE ethics committee. The choice of committee is determined on the basis of the researcher's employer or research organisation. Committees may, if they so choose, also review research projects that have no affiliation to the organisations which the committee represents.

At a minimum, the following documents are submitted with the request for an ethical review statement:

- Contact details of the person responsible for the research
- Grounds for requesting the ethical review statement
- Research plan and summary
- Description of the ethical questions identified in the research design and how they will be addressed
- Possible participant information sheet and other materials intended for research participants when the research also affects people (for example, owners of animals or landowners)
- Data management plan

Ethical reflection should be an ongoing process throughout the research, and the need for ethical review may have to be reassessed. A new statement should be requested if the research design changes in a way that may increase the risks, harms or adverse effects associated with the research. A new statement should also be requested if the research plan is amended to include a research setting, sub-study or dataset that was not included in the original plan and that may have implications for the ethical assessment of the research.

Committees may, if they so choose, instruct applicants in more detail regarding the required appendices and the statement process. Further information about the ethical review process can be provided by the secretary of the ethics committee.

5.6. Ethical review statement

An ethical review statement can be issued either as favourable, favourable subject to conditions (revisions required), or as unfavourable (revisions required).

If the NERE ethics committee finds that the research plan in question is lacking in ways which prevent the committee from issuing a statement without additional information or revisions, the committee may ask the researcher to supplement their request for ethical review or its appendices before issuing a statement.

As a rule, the statements are issued free of charge. However, the committee may choose to charge a fee if it agrees to review, for example, a study that is not affiliated with its own background organisations.

5.7 Statement request from TENK

If the researcher who has requested an ethical review statement is dissatisfied with the committee's decision or the revision requirements in the statement, they may request a statement on the matter from TENK. A justified statement request with the required attachments must be submitted to TENK within two months of the ethics committee's decision. When ethical review is conducted in accordance with the NERE recommendation, the ethics committee's statement must include this information on the possibility of requesting a statement from TENK. Further information: *www.tenk.fi*.

Appendix 1. Preparation of the NERE recommendation

The NERE recommendation was drawn up in the project *Ethical Principles and Ethical Review Cooperation in Nature and Environmental Research* (LYTE), coordinated by TENK and funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The recommendation was drafted by a working group appointed by TENK together with members of TENK's secretariat, and a steering group supported the implementation of the work.

Working group:

- Sirpa Thessler (Chair), Director, Natural Resources Institute Finland (Luke), Vice Chair of TENK until 31.1.2025
- Teppo Hujala (Vice Chair), Professor, University of Eastern Finland
- Juha Helenius, Professor Emeritus, University of Helsinki
- Emilia Jääskeläinen, Doctoral Researcher, University of Oulu (until 30 September 2025)
- Elina Kaarlejärvi, Academy Research Fellow, University of Helsinki
- Hermanni Kaartokallio, Group Manager, Finnish Environment Institute
- Karoliina Koho, Head of Research Services, Geological Survey of Finland (GTK)
- Simo Kyllönen, University Lecturer, University of Helsinki and TENK
- Essi Laitinen, Research Scientist, VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland Ltd. (until 31 August 2025)
- Susanna Näreaho, Senior Advisor, Metropolia; Vice Chair of TENK from 1.2.2025 onward
- Eva Ruusuvuori, University Lecturer, University of Helsinki
- Riitta Salmelin, Distinguished Professor, Aalto University
- Anu Valtonen, Professor, University of Lapland
- Indrė Žliobaitė, Professor, University of Helsinki (spring 2025)

Members of TENK's secretariat:

- Veera Launis, Adviser
- Oona Myllyntaus, Adviser (substitute position 23 September 2024–31 August 2025)
- Petra Falin, Leading Senior Adviser (from 15 August 2024 onward)
- Eero Kaila, Adviser
- Iina Kohonen, Senior Adviser (until 30 August 2024)

Steering group:

- Riitta Keiski (Chair), Professor Emerita, University of Oulu, Chair of TENK until 31.1.2025
- Laura Höijer, Director of Research, Ministry of the Environment
- Minttu Jaakkola, Executive Director of Puistokatu 4, Association of Finnish Foundations and Funds
- Emilia Kilpua, Professor, University of Helsinki, Council of Finnish Academies
- Elina Nikkola, Ministerial Adviser, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
- Maaria Nordman, Professor, Aalto University, Universities Finland UNIFI
- Riikka Paloniemi, Director of the Societal Change Unit (Finnish Environment Institute), Tulanet – Network of Finnish Research Institutes
- Minna Räisänen, Science Adviser, Research Council of Finland
- Janne Salminen, Principal Research Scientist and Principal Lecturer (HAMK Häme University of Applied Sciences), Arene – Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences
- Sanna-Kaisa Spoof, Secretary General, Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK
- Laura Taajamaa, Ministerial Adviser, Ministry of Education and Culture (until 31 August 2025)

In April 2026, TENK requested feedback of the recommendation draft from all universities, universities of applied sciences, research institutes, other organisations committed to the RI guidelines and the ERHS (IEEA) guidelines, as well as other key stakeholders.

The NERE recommendation was approved at the board meeting of TENK on 26 May 2026. It was published in June 2026.

Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK

The Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK is an expert body established in 1991 by the Ministry of Education and Culture. TENK promotes research ethics and research integrity and addresses ethical issues related to scientific research in Finland. TENK prevents research misconduct, issues national guidelines and recommendations for all disciplines, promotes training and education and coordinates ethical review in the human sciences. In addition, TENK monitors violations of research integrity, issues statements on the investigation processes and provides guidance on ethical questions in research. TENK operates actively in both national and international networks. The Ministry of Education and Culture appoints the members of TENK's board for three-year terms on the basis of proposals from the research community.

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