Metal Detecting and Archaeology in Finland: An Overview of the Hobby and its Consequences

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Abstract

Metal detecting seems to affect Finnish archaeology in many ways at present and gives rise to new issues. Every year, ordinary people locate plenty of finds and find spots with their metal detectors and report them to archaeologists. This results in new knowledge of the past, and sometimes the detector find may be of great significance. However, there are also discoveries that people never report. Furthermore, metal detector users sometimes damage archaeological sites and monuments protected under law. This causes the loss of important information about archaeological sites and finds. In general, metal detecting as a hobby has increased significantly during the 2010s in Finland. I am therefore compiling an overview of the hobby using data available from an online survey and other statistics of the National Board of Antiquities. In addition, I aim to figure out the impacts of the hobby especially from the viewpoint of archaeology and archaeologists. As one conclusion, I present that interaction and cooperation between archaeologists and detectorists seems to lead the way to more responsible metal detecting and a greater understanding concerning archaeological heritage.

1 Introduction

In recent years, general interest towards metal detecting has increased in Finland. This means that both archaeologists and ordinary citizens discuss the subject more often. There are many views concerning the topic, not all of which agree. The hobby itself is not a new phenomenon, as there have been detectorists in Finland at least since the 1970s. Since that time, archaeologists have discussed the subject, partly debating the same issues as today. (cf. Halinen 1997; Immonen & Kinnunen 2014: 108; Maaranen 2015a: 7, 18, 89; Moilanen 2015: 2; Tuovinen 1992). The increasing public interest in and ongoing discussion about metal detecting and archaeology are also an international topic (e.g. Almansa Sánchez 2013; Thomas 2009; 2014; Ulst 2012). There are many reasons for this, which are related to uncovering precious artefacts and significant sites, illicit metal detector users, and looting, for example.

In my opinion, the Internet plays an important role in the practice and discussion of metal detecting. Detectorists meet each other online, often without the presence of professional archaeologists, which affects opinions and ideas concerning matters related to metal detecting. The Internet provides a global system for obtaining information and allows easy access to knowledge that promotes the hobby (cf. Heinonen 2008: 11–12; Maaranen 2015b). News released of treasures and other finds are fascinating and spread quickly in digital media and on message boards. Downloaded videos of raids and digging by detectorists provide exciting experiences. It seems that advanced metal detector technology combined with the reduction of prices makes the hobby more attractive also in Finland (Siivola 2014: 42).

To conclude, the subject itself has been familiar in archaeology for decades, but there are new perspectives and consequences that deserve to be taken into account. Therefore, my next goal is to figure out what metal detecting means in Finland in general and how it can be considered in relation to archaeology. My main body of data comes from an online survey that the National Board of Antiquities made during 2014. Metal detectorists, amateur archaeologists, professional archaeologists, and other people interested in the subject could provide their opinions in the survey. In addition, I use data gathered in the course of my daily work at the National Board of Antiquities.

2 The Finnish Antiquities Act and other legislation

In every country, the legislation sets a frame for the activities of the citizens, and therefore I think it is important to take a brief look at Finnish laws concerning metal detecting. In Finland, the use of a metal detector is usually allowed without a separate permit. However, the use of a metal detector is regulated by various laws and acts. Laws that especially need to be observed include the Antiquities Act (295/1963), the Lost Property Act (778/1988), the Criminal Code (1889/39), the Nature Conservation Act (1096/1996), and everyman's right (Ministry of Environment 2013).

From the point of view of archaeology, the Antiquities Act (295/1963) is the most important of these. According to the Act (1963: 1 §), it is prohibited to dig, cover, alter, damage, remove, or in any way disturb an ancient monument without a permission granted in accordance with the Act. An area essential for protection around the ancient monument is called the protected area, and the law also applies to this area (The Antiquities Act 1963: 4–5 §). According to the Act (1963: 10 §), the National Board of Antiquities may permit, upon conditions laid down by itself, other parties to investigate an ancient monument. Consequently the National Board of Antiquities grants research permits requiring a detailed research plan and a qualified archaeologist to be responsible for the archaeological fieldwork (National Board of Antiquities 2014a: 9, 12).

The Antiquities Act also defines movable objects and procedures related to them. According to the Act (1963: 16 §), the finder of the coin, weapon, ornament, vessel or the like, of which the owner is not known and which can be expected to be at least one hundred years old, shall immediately submit the object in question to the National Board of Antiquities in the condition in which it was found and with detailed information on the place of discovery and attendant circumstances (Fig. 1). If the object was discovered in a bog or deep in the ground, or if the location in question indicates the existence of an ancient monument, no further works shall be undertaken at the site until the National Board of Antiquities has issued instructions concerning the matter.

The ownership of movable objects is also resolved by the Antiquities Act. The Act (1963: 17 §) points out that the National Board of Antiquities is entitled to redeem objects for the collections of the National Museum of Finland or to transfer its right of redemption to another public museum or institution. If the item is not redeemed, it shall be returned to the finder, who may keep it. If an object is redeemed, a reasonable compensation shall be paid to the finder. This compensation depends of the nature and material of the item. The nature is estimated from a historical perspective, and if the object is of precious metal, the compensation shall at least be equal to its metal value plus twenty-five per cent. In this connection, it is important to note that movable objects of which the owner is not known and which are younger than one hundred years are dealt with in the Lost Property Act (778/1988). The Lost Property Act requires the lost property to be reported to the owner or delivered to the police (Police of Finland 2015).

To conclude, in Finland the legislation makes clear how ancient monuments are protected and how detectorists, as well as other citizens, should act when they find movable objects or lost property. Further, the Antiquities

Figure 1. A selection of movable objects from the Iron Age and the Middle Ages submitted to the National Board of Antiquities according to the Antiquities Act. Photo: P. Maaranen, National Board of Antiquities.

Act (1963: 14) determines that should a hitherto unknown ancient monument be discovered in the removal of earth or in other works, such works shall immediately be suspended and those responsible for the said works shall inform the National Board of Antiquities thereof without delay. Therefore, in my opinion, the legislation both secures ancient sites in many ways and sets legal procedures for redeeming movable objects (cf. Haapala 2014).

3 The survey of metal detecting

Several years ago archaeologists from the National Board of Antiquities and regional museums began to discuss the increasing number of contacts by detectorists. These contacts were mainly related to reporting different kinds of prehistoric and historical archaeological finds. In addition, detectorists needed knowledge concerning the archaeological cultural heritage and legislation. To support archaeologists and citizens, the National Board of Antiquities launched a web page dedicated to metal detecting with a guide to detectorists and opened the service e-mail address in 2012 (National Board of Antiquities 2015).

The contacts taken through the service e-mail address provided general information on metal detecting and detectorists. However, more accurate and detailed knowledge was soon needed. Therefore the National Board of Antiquities executed an online survey of metal detecting in 2014 (Maaranen 2015a: 4, 91–119). It was open to everybody interested in the subject and was distributed via both web pages and Facebook pages of the National Board of Antiquities (National Board of Antiquities 2014b). The results of the survey appeared to provide rather good data related to metal detecting and attitudes towards it.

During the same year, two other surveys had also been made on the same subject. One was carried out by the Espoo City Museum and

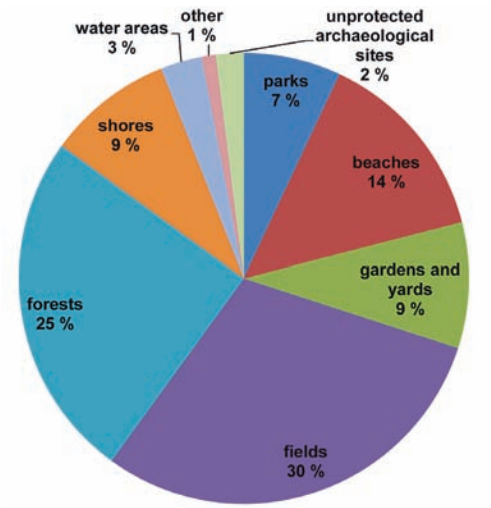


Figure 2. Places in which the detectorists most often use their metal detectors.

the other by researchers of the University of Turku. The survey of the Espoo City Museum was aimed at detectorists (Siltainsuu & Wessman 2014). Researchers of the University of Turku carried out a semi-open survey for detectorists and archaeologists (Immonen & Kinnunen 2014). These two other surveys were taken into consideration when the survey of the National Board of Antiquities was planned. In this way, the results of all these surveys could support each other.

3.1 General results

Altogether 221 respondents participated in the online survey, including 125 detectorists, 21 amateur archaeologists, 42 archaeologists, and 33 other respondents. The main groups of respondents were thus detectorists (57%) and archaeologists (19%). The number of amateur archaeologists was only 9%, smaller than I expected in advance. The number of other respondents was 15%, more than expected. There is no further data related to the group of other respondents, but according to responses given to open-ended questions, they seem to be students, ordinary citizens, and researchers in different fields interested in the subject.

According to the results, detectorists are mostly men, because only 6% of the respondents of this group were women. Most detectorists are adults, and 94% of them are from twenty to sixty years old. Half of the respondents use their metal detectors alone and a quarter with a friend. Almost a fifth uses the metal detector with their family. The most popular places for detecting metal are fields, forests, and beaches, although other shores and gardens are also quite popular (Fig. 2).

In my opinion, these results seem to indicate that metal detecting is usually the hobby of adult men who spend their free time walking in nature mostly alone or with a friend. Forests and fields are potential locations for finding ancient sites and movable objects. Only 8% of the respondents had begun to use a metal detector during the 1990s or earlier. A total of 11% of the respondents had begun the hobby during the 2000s and over 81% during the 2010s. Thus, the number of detectorists has increased significantly during the 2010s. In my opinion, all this explains the increasing number of finds and find spots pinpointed by detectorists in recent years. It also explains the increasing number of contacts with archaeologists.

Detectorists are seldom members of organised metal detector societies or clubs, as only 26% of the respondents reported such a membership. There are some clubs in Finland, but detectorists mainly seem to communicate with each other in other ways. Most appear to use different kinds of online discussion forums, for example. A popular online discussion forum of Finnish detectorists announced its membership count as 3290 in February 2015 and 3670 in August 2015 (aarremaanalla.com 2015: Front page). Therefore, it seems to me that the Internet enables detectorists to discuss and make friends (Wessman 2015).[1] Apparently the Internet is preferred for making contact more than traditional ways (cf. Heinonen 2008: 11, 17–19; Maaranen 2015b).

The results also provide detailed knowledge of subjects that detectorists are interested in and opinions they have. For instance, the most popular reasons for using metal detec-

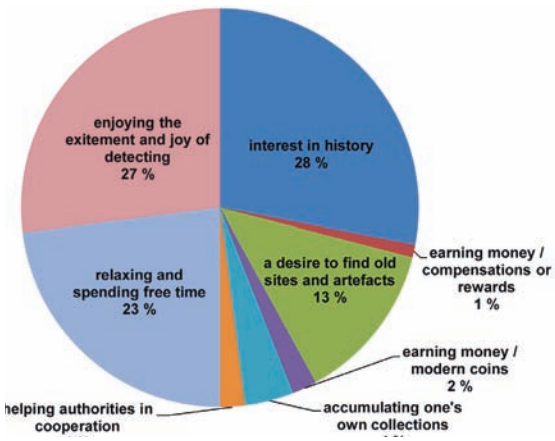


Figure 3. Motivations for the hobby according to the detectorists.

tors were to find old coins, old artefacts, or lost property. Very often the motive for using a metal detector was a general interest in history and sometimes a desire to find old sites and ancient monuments. However, the importance of personal experiences was clear. Therefore, motives were mostly connected to spending free time, relaxing, and enjoying the excitement of detecting (Fig. 3). These answers give me the idea that metal detecting appeals both to the rational and emotional sides, which may in part explain its popularity.

The opinions of detectorists and archaeologists differ to some extent concerning the impacts of metal detecting (Fig. 4). Detectorists think that metal detecting helps archaeological research. In addition, they assume that metal detecting increases the desire to preserve cultural heritage. Many detectorists also think that their finds have changed the image of the past. On the contrary, archaeologists as respondents think that problems concerning the preservation of archaeological cultural heritage have increased. Further, they assume metal detecting is more like treasure hunting. To some extent, archaeologists also estimate that metal detecting helps archaeological research.

Due to these views, I would point out that detectorists and archaeologists do not agree on very many issues. One reason for this could be a different understanding concerning the past and knowledge about it. Also their experiences concerning metal detecting are different, because detectorists use metal detectors and archaeologists usually deal with finds and find spots located by detectorists. Fortunately, detectorists and archaeologists also agree on a number of points. According to the results, both seem to think that knowledge of laws and other instructions should increase among detectorists. Further, they consider that the co-

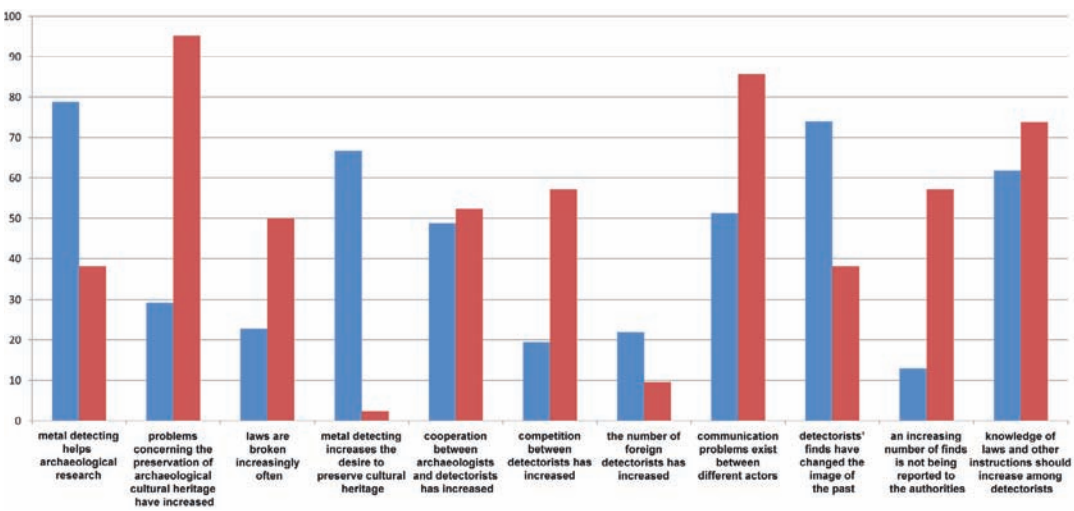


Figure 4. Opinions of detectorists (blue columns) and archaeologists (red columns) concerning the hobby.

operation between archaeologists and detectorists has increased.

The survey does not provide much information concerning so-called nighthawking, heritage crimes, or looting (cf. Almansa Sánchez 2013; Campbell & Thomas 2013; Dobat 2013). Only a few detectorists point out that among the most important reasons for using a metal detector would be earning money. Also gathering artefacts for one's own collections is rarely a motive (see Fig. 3). A moderate number of detectorists pointed out that problems concerning the preservation of protected sites have increased and laws are broken increasingly often. Archaeologists also pointed out the latter phenomenon, but more significantly. In addition, archaeologists thought that an increasing number of finds was not being reported to the authorities (see Fig 4).

On the basis of these last views, I briefly conclude that looting occurs in Finland to some extent, but not enough reliable knowledge on the subject is available. Between 2012 and 2014, illicit metal detector users have damaged some protected ancient monuments. There have also been some reports of detectorists trying to sell movable objects. However, compared to many neighbouring countries, the situation in Finland tends to be rather bearable (cf. Hellqvist & Östergren 2011: 3–4; Ulst 2012: 14, 30; Yakemenko 2013). This may be due to many reasons and have at least something to do with history and society. In general, citizens mainly comply with the laws and respect landowners and private property. Many detectorists are highly educated, which may also have some impact (Immonen & Kinnunen 2014: 111). The legislation sets legal procedures and makes responsibilities clear between citizens and authorities. Efficient heritage management and cooperation between authorities may also prevent looting. In addition, Finland's geographical location and history mean that there are no hoards or artefacts of gold and silver comparable to those found in many other countries. Therefore the chances of finding treasure with a high monetary value are very small.

3.2 Comparative statistics

In addition to the survey, there are comparative statistics that also provide information on metal detecting (Maaranen 2015a: Appendices 5–7). The statistics are based on the service e-mail address of the National Board of Antiquities. They include different kinds of calculations based on contacts taken with the address over the period 2012–2014. During that time, a total of 241 detectorists contacted the service e-mail address. Most of them reported finds and find spots. Some of them asked for guidance and some applied for research permits. In addition to detectorists, a moderate number of archaeologists and museum employees also used the contact e-mail address.

The number of cases handled via the service e-mail address has increased every year and actually tripled during the examined period (Fig. 5). The numbers of received and sent messages have also increased, because there are more finds and more complicated cases to work with. In my experience, it is important to identify the reported finds or the majority of them when a detectorist takes contact. It is also important to carry out a preliminary evaluation concerning a find spot as soon as possible. Additionally, it should be explained clearly to the detectorist making the report what the finds indicate and what the detectorist should do next. General information concerning prehistory and historical times is crucial for detectorists to know because it helps to understand contexts and their importance.

The numbers of reported finds and find spots have increased starting from 2012, and the majority date back to historical times (Fig. 6). About a quarter of the finds belong to artefact types that the finder may keep immediately. The finder is given a digital document verifying this. Documents with photographs of the find and maps identifying the find spot are printed and stored in the archives of the National Board of Antiquities for research purposes. In these cases, I usually also carry out a thorough preliminary estimation of find spots with the help of historical maps and aerial pho-

Figure 5. Cases handled by the service e-mail address of the National Board of Antiquities in 2012–2014.

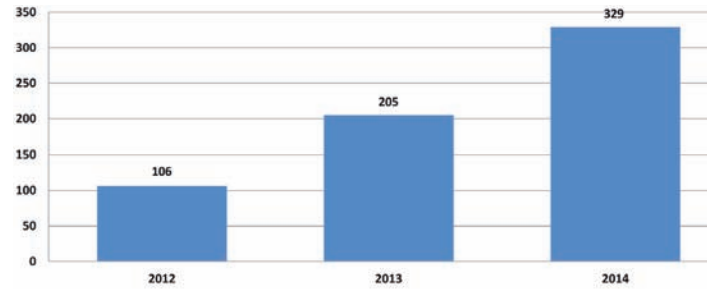


Figure 6. Numbers of finds reported to the service e-mail address of the National Board of Antiquities in 2012–2014.

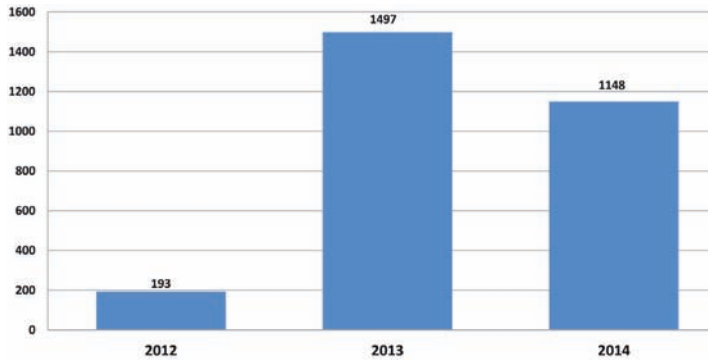
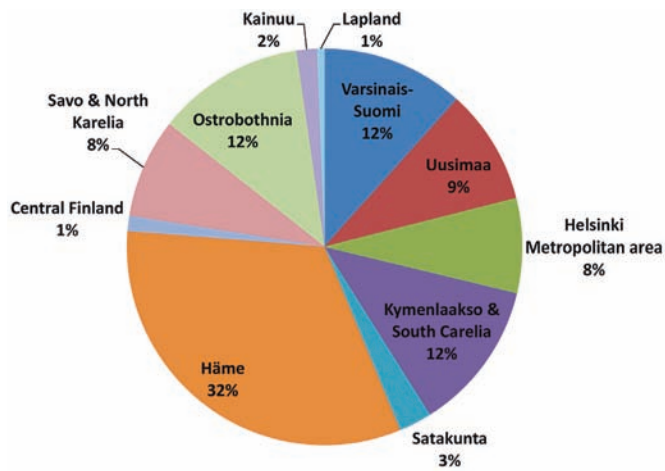


Figure 7. Regions of Finland from where the finds reported to the service e-mail address of the National Board of Antiquities originate in 2012–2014.



tographs.

According to the statistics, detectorists seem to be most active in the Häme and Uusimaa regions, including the Helsinki Metropolitan area (Fig. 7). However, the statistics of the service e-mail address may give a slightly incorrect picture of metal detecting activity in Finland. Many detectorists are in steady contact with regional museums instead of the service e-mail address. There are also detectorists who have existing contacts with archaeologists of the National Board of Antiquities and therefore do not need to approach the NBA via the service e-mail address.

In my opinion, contacts taken via the service e-mail address are just the tip of the iceberg, providing a general view of metal detecting activity. There are more detectorists, finds, and find spots than the statistics indicate. To date, there are no centralised systems for re-

porting finds, which means that detectorists are in contact with many different parties. Amongst these parties are the National Board of Antiquities, provincial and local museums, universities, and even independent researchers. Because of this diversity, it is slightly difficult to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the situation.

3.3 Critical remarks

The results of the online survey and the statistics of the service e-mail address represent random samples. Not all detectorists participate in surveys, and apparently detectorists are more often directly in contact with regional museums than the National Board of Antiquities. There are also detectorists who avoid contacts with archaeologists or ask their friends to report finds and find spots. Further, there are detectorists who are not at all interested in archaeological finds and find spots, but use their metal detectors to find other artefacts like modern coins and lost property and thus have contacts with other authorities and organisations. As a result, there are difficulties in estimating the representativeness and reliability of the survey results and the statistics in general.

If the number of detectorists responding to the survey (125) is compared to the number of detectorists taking contact via the service e-mail address (241), it seems that approximately 51.8% of potential detectorists participated in the survey. This is a rather good result, I think, because typically the response rates for surveys are rather low (e.g. Borg 2010). When the number of detectorists responding to the survey is compared to the number of online discussion forum members of aaremaanalla.com in February 2015 (3290), it can be seen that only 3.7% of potential detectorists took part in the survey (aarremaanalla.com 2015: Front page). From this point of view, the response rate was extremely low and the results of the survey are very unreliable. In general, it is possible that the survey attracted primarily those detectorists who are interested in historical finds and archaeology. Because many detectorists appear to be more interested in other subjects, they might have ignored the survey. Naturally there are detectorists who are not at all interested in taking part in surveys or interviews.

The comparison to the other surveys made in Finland in 2014 is also informative. The survey carried out by the Espoo City Museum had 60 detectorists as respondents, and the survey of the University of Turku had 212 (Immonen & Kinnunen 2014: 108; Siltainsuu & Wessman 2014: 36). From this point of view, the survey of the National Board of Antiquities had a response rate better than the museum but worse than the university. In my opinion, the results of all the surveys generally tend to be very similar. Thus all the surveys appear to give same kind of picture of metal detecting in Finland. I assume that these parallel results could be mostly explained in two ways. Either the respondents are mainly the same people in all surveys or the results of the surveys provide rather good information on metal detecting during 2014. In general, survey results are tied to a particular moment in time and change when time goes by.

To conclude, it seems to me that the results of the online survey of the National Board of Antiquities and my experiences in managing the service e-mail address support each other. The results of the surveys carried out by the Espoo City Museum and the University of Turku provide the same information. From this point of view, I argue briefly that a bigger proportion of detectorists in Finland is interested in ancient objects, local history, and archaeology than earlier. Many of these detectorists seek to better understand the past and to make contact with professional archaeologists. They do not always understand legislation or heritage management in detail, but are mainly open to knowledge and have a positive attitude towards cooperation. Further, there is a small percentage of detectorists who want to gather their own collections or make money with their finds. There are also detectorists who deliberately damage ancient sites and apparently avoid contacts with archaeologists and authorities.

4 Metal detecting and archaeology

The increase in detectorists affects Finnish archaeology in many ways. There are more finds and find spots than archaeologists have expected. Archaeology receives increasingly more publicity and citizens contact authorities and professional archaeologists more frequently than earlier. However, there are also illicit metal detectorists and damage to archaeological sites and monuments. All of this affects attitudes towards metal detecting. It also means more work for archaeologists.

In general, metal detecting has many consequences, which I can roughly sort into three groups. The first group includes observations concerning detectorists in general. The second group consists of issues related to archaeology. The third group consists of observations concerning archaeologists. All these notes are more or less assumptions. They are based on the online survey results and my own experiences. Furthermore, my observations are not unique, but very similar to those that other researchers have also pointed out (Immonen & Kinnunen 2014: 107, 110, 112–113; Siltainsuu & Wessman 2014: 39).

I would estimate that many detectorists seem to have begun their hobby in recent years and are therefore beginners to some extent. They do not have a very long experience of metal detecting and matters related to it. They may even have different attitudes towards laws, authorities, or professional archaeologists than earlier generations of detectorists. It also seems that there are more detectorists who are interested in ancient sites and monuments than there were in previous decades.

Further, there are digital communities of detectorists who have lively and even worldwide connections with each other. They share their knowledge without delay in words, photographs, and videos. In these connections, they may consider other detectorists as better experts than archaeologists. They can also compete with each other. Some of the detectorists are skilled at using the same techniques as archaeologists, such as Lidar, historical maps, and contour maps, when they plan metal detecting. As a whole, there are detectorists who go for responsible metal detecting, but there are also detectorists who do not care for responsibility at all. In brief, I think that Finnish detectorists are very similar to detectorists in many other countries.

Concerning archaeology in general, I want to point out that metal detecting has revealed both a greater number of archaeological sites and new types of sites compared to those that archaeologists knew of earlier (Fig. 8). This is especially relevant in connection with sites dated to historical times, although detectorists discover new prehistoric sites too. Detectorists have also found new types of artefacts. It appears that detectorists are seeking and finding artefacts in areas that are neglected by archaeologists. Therefore, one consequence of metal detecting is increased knowledge of the material culture and the Finnish past. Some of the artefacts and archaeological sites discovered in recent years would have remained unidentified without a metal detector. This shows that the hobby has improved general understanding of past human activity.

On the other hand, metal detecting is associated to some extent with looting that damages protected sites and monuments. There are also sites that are unprotected, which seem to be at the greatest risk. These may be sites that archaeologists have not recognised yet or sites that are waiting to be registered. They may also be sites that have general cultural value but are not protected by law. For these reasons, archaeological information is lost in many ways. Unfortunately there is no comprehensive understanding of the impacts of looting or other damage to ancient sites, and therefore these phenomena should be studied more closely.

As for archaeologists, I would point out that it is challenging to deal with the issue of metal detecting because of the many demands related to it. Archaeologists would need to take part in public discussions, as well as in conversations among digital communities. In addition, many detectorists hope to join in research projects and archaeological fieldwork with archaeolo-

Figure 8. With the help of a metal detector, many new archaeological sites have been found in Finland, like this extensive complex of iron furnaces, stone settings, and graves from the Pyhtää region. Photo: P. Maaranen, National Board of Antiquities.

gists. In the meantime, finds must be identified and intensive surveys carried out at find spots without delay. Reporting and registration of find spots should also be done immediately after discovery. Decisions of whether or not to redeem movable objects cannot wait either. Damaged archaeological sites need special attention and attempts to prevent looting require intensive cooperation between authorities and citizens.

All these tasks for archaeologists usually require a rather good knowledge of material studies, know-how of archaeological survey methods, and understanding of the processes that archaeological heritage management demands. The number of archaeologists involved in these tasks in the National Board of Antiquities and in regional museums is not sufficient. This is sometimes frustrating for both archaeologists and detectorists. It also seems to me that there room for improvement in the ways in which archaeologists are used to doing things. Improvements could be made especially in digital reporting systems for finds and find spots in which all partners could produce, share, and store knowledge. This is also a question of community archaeology and its role in heritage protection.

5 Concluding remarks

The relationship between metal detecting and archaeology has been fairly complicated in recent years. However, it seems that the situation is improving in many ways in Finland. Research is already available that helps to understand and explain various phenomena connected to the hobby. More guidance and services are available that hopefully increase

responsible metal detecting. Various parties have begun to discuss matters, resulting in increasingly shared understanding. In my opinion, open and ongoing discussion in which people think, listen, and speak leads the way to better interaction and advances mutual understanding (Maaranen 2013: 12–13).

In general, it will take a few years of learning to establish best practices and methods of cooperation for all parties involved in metal detecting. It seems that archaeologists have to adopt new ways of meeting and educating people and directing their activities in desirable directions. On the other hand, detectorists have to learn to understand archaeology and the work of archaeologists better in order to really advance a common understanding of the past in responsible ways. Detector societies and clubs that advance responsible metal detecting may also improve the hobby in many ways (cf. Hunt 2011). According to the results of the online survey, there is plenty of goodwill and desire for cooperation. Thus, there seem to be many options for advancing good practices concerning the hobby (cf. Ulst 2012: 4–5, 66–87).

As a final remark, I would like to point out that metal detecting somehow reminds me of very old ways of doing archaeology. It basically involves finding and identifying objects, as well as arranging and valuing them. It is almost reminiscent of the speculative phase of archaeology (Renfrew & Bahn 2000: 20–21). In Finland, many detectorists appear to share their experiences and want to discuss them to obtain more information and a better understanding. They may even write reports and consider themselves as researchers. However, there are also people who hunt for treasure and loot sites or just want to have fun. Metal detecting as a hobby is a mixture of many kinds of ideas, people, and aims.

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Note

1 Anna Wessman wrote in her e-mail about detectorists and online discussion forums. According to her, detectorists make friends on online forums and meet each other regularly in real life, too.

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