



Original research article

# Environmentalism in the crosshairs: Perspectives on migratory bird hunting and poaching conflicts in Italy

Benjamin Barca<sup>a</sup>, Adrien Lindon<sup>b</sup>, Meredith Root-Bernstein<sup>c,d,\*</sup><sup>a</sup> WCS Cambodia, 21 Street, Phnom Penh, Cambodia<sup>b</sup> ERM France, Paris, France<sup>c</sup> Department of Bioscience, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark<sup>d</sup> Institute for Ecology and Biodiversity, Santiago, Chile

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## ABSTRACT

Migratory bird hunting has a long tradition in the Mediterranean, but remains a highly controversial issue. Here we examine the Mediterranean migratory bird hunting controversies through the case of Italy. We interviewed key informants and carried out participant observation on both legal and illegal migratory bird hunting and migratory bird protection, in four key migratory bird hunting sites in Italy. In many cases, both migratory bird hunters and bird protection activists consider themselves as the stewards of nature. Environmentalists accuse hunters of illegal practices, while hunters believe anti-poaching activists aim to threaten the existence of hunting itself. Yet surprisingly, the legality of specific hunting practices emerges as peripheral to the concerns of both groups. The lack of dialogue and increasingly polarized positions on both sides make it difficult to assure compliance with EU and national migratory bird hunting laws, and hinders finding shared solutions that consider differing values in a rapidly changing society.

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## 1. Introduction

Migratory bird hunting in the Mediterranean continues to attract public domestic and foreign attention (Anonymous, 2013; BirdLife International, 2015; D'Amico, 2014; Franzen, 2014, 2013; Packham, 2014). The high energetic cost of migration and the lack of flexibility in migration routes make migratory birds especially vulnerable to hunting since they are spatially constrained and physically weak, providing a compelling public narrative for why they should be protected from hunting. Hunting is a source of mortality for migratory bird populations, although for most species the loss and degradation of breeding, staging and wintering habitats, along with climate change, are considered to be the greatest current threats (Dalby et al., 2013; Fasola et al., 2010; Jiguet et al., 2012; Menz and Arlettaz, 2011; Pöysä et al., 2013; Runge et al., 2015; Sanderson et al., 2006; Schäffer et al., 2006; Vickery et al., 2014). However, data on the level of take throughout migratory species ranges are often missing, incomplete, or have not been applied to determining population dynamics (Aebischer et al., 1999; Barbosa, 2001; Dalby et al., 2013; Duriez et al., 2005; Elmberg et al., 2006; Hahn et al., 2009; Koleček et al., 2014). Illegal hunting of migratory birds, including indiscriminate trapping and shooting practices, is an area of particular legal, ethical and conservation concern (Kirby et al., 2008; Murgui, 2014). At the EU level, the Birds Directive has required member

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Bioscience, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark.  
E-mail address: [mrootbernstein@gmail.com](mailto:mrootbernstein@gmail.com) (M. Root-Bernstein).

states to protect migratory bird species since 1979 via designation of Special Protection Areas and hunting regulations (see Wils, 1994; <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/legislation/birdsdirective.htm>, accessed July 2014). According to the official website (*ibid*), the Directive “recognises hunting as a legitimate activity and provides a comprehensive system for the management of hunting...to ensure that this practice is sustainable” (see also European Commission, 2008). Nonetheless, hunting is not well-integrated with conservation policy at all governance levels, often lacking strong national and regional policies and/or implementation especially in relation to conservation (FACE, 0000). Compared to North America for example, European hunting associations engage only weakly with conservation practice and science (Knevic, 2009; Tori et al., 2002).

Migratory bird hunting for food and sport has ancient roots in Europe, including the Mediterranean Basin (Falzon, 2008; Mondain-Monval, 2011). Hunting techniques and hunted migratory bird species have significant regional variations due to socioeconomic, cultural and biophysical variation and the composition and seasonality of species along the migration routes. In zones such as the mountain passes in the Pyrenees and Alps (e.g., Brescia passes), Mediterranean islands (e.g., Sardinia, Malta, Cyprus), coastal wetlands (e.g., Po Delta, coastal Albania) or narrow sea straits (e.g., Gibraltar, Messina Strait), many species are channeled into migratory bottlenecks during spring and autumn migrations (Hynes, 2007). Traditional hunting techniques in the Mediterranean Basin include trapping using glue or nets, hunting with spears, arrows, other projectiles, and guns, with the use of aides such as dogs, decoys and whistles (Mondain-Monval, 2011). While some species, such as European robins in Italy, were traditionally taboo as hunting quarry, others such as song thrushes or raptors have been highly prized for eating or taxidermy respectively. Local norms and traditions regulating hunting have been superseded by legal regulation in accordance with the Birds Directive. The Birds Directive prohibits hunting of species (such as endangered species) listed in the Directive Annexes, hunting during the spring migration, and trapping techniques considered cruel and indiscriminate.

We focus on Italy as a case study to understand the persistence, controversy and potential outcomes of illegal Mediterranean migratory bird hunting. We investigate migratory bird hunting, anti-hunting, poaching, and anti-poaching activities in the Italian sport hunting context. Although hunting in Italy was once strongly rooted in rural traditions, Italian hunters have decreased by more than 50% since 1980 and now represent about 1%, 2% of the Italian population with approximately 750,000 hunters (ISTAT, 2007). Following the implementation of more stringent hunting regulations over the last decades (e.g. the 698/1977 and 157/1992 Italian national laws), Italy has been accused of very high rates of migratory bird poaching, with an estimated several million birds killed illegally every year over an unspecified time period, second only to the estimation for Egypt (BirdLife International, 2015). Like all EU countries, Italy's national legislation is consistent with the Birds Directive. Derogations (waivers applied at the national level and reported to the European Commission) make specific actions legal within specific administrative regions that would otherwise be illegal. Derogations are proposed before the beginning of the hunting season by members of regional councils; these can then be accepted and ratified by regional councils without national level approval. However recently there have been European Commission motions against certain forms of derogation, especially for traditional forms of hunting, followed by hefty fines, convincing regional councils that such “derogation games” are not worth the votes. Most derogations in Italy as of 2014 (see <http://cdr.eionet.europa.eu>), were listed as for the purposes of teaching and research, crop and aquaculture protection, and the live trapping and keeping of decoys (known as live calls or *richiami vivi*, mainly *Turdus* spp., e.g. *tordo sassello* (redwing), *cesena* (fieldfare), *tordo bottaccio* (song thrush), and *merlo* (blackbird)). Prior to 2011, a number of songbirds in various regions of Italy were also given derogations with the reported reason being “to permit, under strictly supervised conditions and on a selective basis, the hunting of protected species” (see <http://cdr.eionet.europa.eu>). Thus, we define poaching as actions that are, at the time of those actions, illegal under the Birds Directive and any regional derogations.

Our focus is on sport hunters, not on organized or large-scale crime. We define sport hunting as legal hunting practices performed non-professionally with a variety of cultural and personal motivations (discussed in the Results), which may include eating the birds hunted, but does not include selling the hunted meat, which is illegal. This focus has two reasons. First, the media outreach of Mediterranean migratory bird protection NGOs and allies focuses on sport hunters as poachers (e.g. [www.leavingisliving.org](http://www.leavingisliving.org), BirdLife International, 2015, Franzen, 2014, 2013, Gray, 1992 and Kass and Kass, 2013) while rarely discussing organized or large-scale criminal activity, and we thus chose this framing as the scope of our research in order to respond to and investigate issues surrounding the dominant discourse on migratory bird poaching. Second, large-scale organized crime may have different practices and drivers and require different policing and control measures compared to other forms of poaching (Challender and MacMillan, 2014; Muth and Bowe, 1998). This would require a different research approach, both methodologically and in terms of theoretical framing, and we thus considered it outside the scope of this project.

We examine the evolution of hunting and poaching practices and the movements opposing them from the point of view of contested meanings and enactments of environmental values. Environmental values refer to any valuation of the environment, e.g. emotional, rational, aesthetic, etc., but can also be used to refer to a normative set of values as espoused by conservationists (e.g. Lindon and Root-Bernstein, 2015). Here, we use the term “normative environmental values” when we wish to specify the normative values espoused by one group or another. In this paper we will consider how environmental values are incorporated into and give meaning to identities and motivations, drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1977, 1979). Values can be enacted in practices, that is, we do one action rather than another, or in a particular way, because we interpret it as consistent with our values. Values can also be learned, or inferred, through actions. Motivations refer to the proximate reasons for practice, which are usually positively valued by practitioners. Identity, as we will discuss it here, is a construction of personal meaning around a set of professed values, practiced actions, and motivations for continuing those practices. A

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