



Common sensing: Human-black bear cohabitation practices in Colorado



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ABSTRACT

Current wildlife management practices in western societies must increasingly deal with human-wildlife conflicts. In their attempt to spatially regulate humans and wild animals, the common focus is on containment, endeavouring to facilitate the removal and exclusion of wild animals. Recently, however, ideas of cohabitation have emerged in wildlife management practices, suggesting that humans and wild animals share the same space. We argue that aiming at cohabitation requires that wildlife management be approached as an interactive and dynamic endeavour involving humans, wild animals and landscape. Accordingly, wildlife management should no longer focus on the sole agency of humans; it must also examine the agency of animals and the influence of the landscape in which the interactions takes place. To understand these interactions and dynamics we introduce the concept of multi-sensory writing and reading and apply this to an in-depth study of black bear management on the Colorado Front Range, U.S.A. We analyse our results focussing on the spatial interactions between human, black bear and landscape. We conclude suggesting that cohabitation as a goal of wildlife management requires a radical decentralization and spatialization where humans, wild animals, and the landscape shape interactions co-creatively.

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1. Introduction

As human populations continue to expand and wildlife habitats continue to shrink, conflicts between humans and wild¹ animals are multiplying worldwide (Carter et al., 2012; Knight, 2000; WWF, 2006; Yeo and Neo, 2010). Humans and wild animals increasingly invade each other's spaces in their search for – limited – resources (e.g. food and shelter). This can result in dangerous and harmful situations in which wild animals come (too) close to humans thereby posing a threat or causing damage, or, vice versa, in which humans come (too) close to wild animals, thereby destroying habitats and threatening species survival. To overcome human-wildlife conflicts, conservation practices have to anticipate and address these situations. Until recently, the main focus has been on excluding wild animals from human environments in so far as possible (Wolch and Emel, 1998). Related to this need to spatially

separate humans and wild animals, a dichotomous (human versus wild animal) and anthropocentric approach to conservation has become dominant (Ingold, 1994; Jepson et al., 2011; Knight, 2000; Robbins and Moore, 2013).

The concept of cohabitation, or coexistence by humans and wild animals, has been proposed as a critique of and alternative to this dichotomous and anthropocentric approach. The central idea of cohabitation is that humans and wild animals should (peacefully) share the same space (Hinchliffe, 2007). Wild animals are then accepted as 'fellow inhabitants' that actively co-shape the space in which humans and wild animals can dwell, rather than being relegated to the role of 'other entities' to be acted upon by humans. From this perspective, resolving human-wildlife conflicts implies mutual adjustment by both humans and wild animals as they learn to live together. Such thinking in terms of mutual adjustment has resulted in a focus on relationships between humans and animals and the acknowledgment of animal agency in these.

Neo and Ngiam (2014), for example, touch upon animal agency in their debate on in situ or ex situ conservation of dolphins. In the dolphins' relations with human trainers, they both invent new behaviours and learn behaviours cued by the trainer. These behaviours, the researchers argue, are not entirely the result of the will of the humans, nor entirely of the will of the dolphins. Rather, humans and dolphins learn to accommodate each other. They

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¹ We use the term wild to make a clear distinction between wild versus domesticated animals, since our focus is mainly applicable to non-domesticated (excluding husbandry and pets). By using the terms humans versus animals, we do not imply that humans are not animals, but we reserve the term animal for nonhuman animals.

argue that dolphins can be seen as active participants (agents) based on their ‘dolphin-ness’. Similarly, Keul (2013) examined human-alligator relationships in tourism in the swamps of Louisiana and states that embodied encounters between humans and alligators create learning opportunities for both. Keul shows how the alligators are more than just bodies; they are ‘sentient negotiators of space’, in the sense that they may or may not show up at a tour or perform as expected by humans.

Traces of a relational approach are already visible in conservation practices dealing with human-wildlife conflicts, for example in education programs that focus on the human acceptance of the presence of wild animals and try to teach humans what they can do to prevent wild animals entering human properties (Baruch-Mordo et al., 2009, 2011; Yeo and Neo, 2010; Thompson, 2002). Such approaches argue that wildlife managers need to ‘think like’ the ‘problem animal’ in order to successfully track the animal and subsequently apply appropriate strategies to ease the conflict (Hurn, 2012). Nonetheless, such programs are scarce and exist alongside traditional forms of management, including, for example, the removal of animals from human populated areas. Yeo and Neo (2010) express their dissatisfaction with these kinds of wildlife practices arguing that in human-monkey conflicts in urban Singapore “solutions remain highly arbitrary [...] as human interests still overshadow animal welfare” (p. 697). While Keul (2013) argues that a recognition of human-animal relationships and animal agency is required to further cohabitation, these papers suggest that a dichotomous and anthropocentric approach still dominates conservation practices (Barua, 2014a,b; Jepson et al., 2011; Lorimer, 2010a,b). Cohabitation as the result of humans and wild animals merely living alongside each other doesn’t acknowledge the idea of *co-shaping* or *co-producing* the space in which both dwell, and the question of how to give (wild) animals a more prominent role with respect to cohabitation has not yet been resolved (Buller, 2014; Urbanik, 2012).

Existing studies in what has been dubbed as ‘the animal turn’ in social science research have addressed this question (see e.g. Bear and Eden, 2011; Buller, 2014; Hinchliffe et al., 2005; Hobson, 2007; Lorimer, 2006; Lulka, 2004, 2009). Their work suggests to us that one way of moving towards the *co-production* of landscapes and understanding and resolving human-wildlife conflicts require the exploration of the spatial *interactions* between humans and animals by zooming in both on the attribution of agency to wild animals, and examining the consequences of doing so for conservation practices. As a result, grounded and in-depth explorations of the manifold human–non-human relations are necessary (Urbanik, 2012). Gooch (2008), for example, describes the shared world of the Van Gujjars and their buffalos on their yearly walk through the Himalayas and shows how the Van Gujjars’ pastoral practices are constantly adapted to the needs of the buffalo. Bear and Eden (2011) conclude in their article on angling practices that encounters between anglers and fish differ according to the various (aggregations of and individual) fish engaged. Hinchliffe et al. (2005) discuss the dynamics of tracing water voles and illustrates how the humans, water voles and sites under investigation coevolve in this process.

In this article, we contribute to the above described in-depth explorations of human-wild animal-landscape interactions by examining both direct and indirect encounters between (individual) humans and (individual) wild animals in human-wildlife conflicts regarding black bears in Colorado. The wildlife management practices that we describe involve black bears, wildlife managers, policy makers, local residents, wildlife researchers, and the spatial interactions between these actors. Importantly, we do not merely focus on humans following animals or humans understanding wild animals (e.g. Bear and Eden, 2011; Hinchliffe et al., 2005; Lorimer, 2006). Rather, it is our intention to emphasise the role of the wild

animal as a co-constitutive participant in cohabitation practices and to highlight the spatiality of the interactions between humans and wild animals by exploring how these (ongoing, back and forth) interactions shape the landscape in which they are situated.

To explore the meanings and practices of cohabitation from a decentralized and symmetrical perspective and to replace the prevalent dualistic-anthropocentric approach to wildlife management with a more nuanced appreciation of the joint nature of cohabitation,² we introduce a lens of *multi-sensory writing and reading by both human and wild animal*. In doing so, we draw on and extend Hinchliffe et al.’s notion of ‘watervole writing’ (Hinchliffe et al., 2005). They use this notion to refer to the traces that animals leave and the way humans use those traces to investigate these animals’ dwellings and movements. In our analysis, we focus on similar processes of writing (leaving marks using a variety of signs), but we complement this with a focus on reading (tracing and interpreting the writing through all senses). Also, we add symmetry by investigating writing and reading processes as they are being done by both human and wild animal and consider how these – interactive and dynamic – processes contribute to our understanding of the *co-production* of landscapes with respect to cohabitation. The methodological originality of this article lies in its focus on the multi-sensory aspects of human-wild animal interactions, in terms of their materiality, their function as a guide to behaviour, and their general impact on the life worlds of both human and wild animal. In other words, human-wild animal interactions are a matter of ‘common sensing’ where both humans and animals leave their traces and interpret them through their senses. This methodology bears a resemblance to what others have termed ‘bio-geo-graphies’ (Barua, 2014a; Lorimer, 2010a), trans- or multi-species ethnologies (Hurn, 2012), and ethnoelephantology (Locke, 2013), combining ethnographic with ecological/ethnological records (Bear, 2011; Hodgetts and Lorimer, 2015).

Before presenting our findings, we first discuss the animal turn in sociology, zooming in on the idea of cohabitation. We proceed by outlining our perspective of multi-sensory writing and reading and detailing our methodological and analytical strategy. We then describe our findings concerning black bear management on the Colorado Front Range of the Rocky Mountains and discuss them in light of recent literature on human-wildlife interactions and their management. We conclude our article by suggesting that cohabitation requires the radical decentralization and spatialization of wildlife management in which the interactions between humans and animals, and the landscapes that shape these interactions, become the primary focus of management interventions. To facilitate cohabitation, common sensing – humans and animals communicating through their reciprocal use of multiple senses – should become common practice in wildlife management.

2. Cohabitation and the animal turn

The special issue ‘Bringing the animal back in’ (Wolch and Emel, 1995) (re-) opened scientific debate to re-animate³ social theory (Emel and Wolch, 1998; Feinberg et al., 2013; Ingold, 2005; Philo and Wilbert, 2000; Wolch and Emel, 1995). Since then, various scholars have contributed to this debate, resulting in the generation of a variety of conceptions and ideas such as zoöpolis (Donaldson and Kymlicka, 2011; Wolch, 1998), multi-species networks (Latour, 2004), dwelling geographies (Ingold, 2005; Johnston, 2008), lively

² We don’t claim an ‘equal’ cohabitation here, meaning humans are equal to animals. We acknowledge differences, such as intelligence. We are not advocating civil rights for animals in this article.

³ By using the term *animate* we refer to the debate to give animals a more prominent place in social theory. We don’t refer to or elaborate on linguistic debates concerning grammatical distinctions between animate and inanimate.

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