



# Birds as lines: The production of alternative regimes of environmental management in the aftermath of a toxic disaster



Israel Rodríguez-Giralt

Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), Rambla de Poblenou, 156, 08018 Barcelona, Spain

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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyses how in the aftermath of one of the worst environmental disasters ever to occur in Spain – the Aznalcóllar Disaster – various environmentalist and conservationist groups mobilised migratory birds to bring new insights and the need for new precautions to the controversy elicited by the spill. The case study, thus, revolves around how environmentalists established a “hybrid collective action” to draw attention to unconsidered risks and impacts of the disaster and thereby make the case for open debate. Building upon this, I engage with two different, though interrelated, theoretical debates that contribute to a rethinking of environmental management (EM) as a social and materially situated practice. Drawing on the idea of “tactic” (De Certeau, 1984), I draw attention to the devices, actions and procedures that environmentalists carried out to resist attempts to minimise the spill and to undermine administrations’ assumptions of control, coherence and singularity associated the idea of management. Drawing on Tim Ingold’s latest work (2007, 2008, 2011), I analyse environmentalists’ most successful tactic: the enactment of migratory birds as “lines”. Together with other authors in this special issue, I will use this notion to make an argument against some of the assumptions of the “hybrid ontology”. In contrast to more essentialists and static notions of non-human agency and politics, the idea of line is particularly useful as a way of understanding how nature(s) can be effectuated differently and how this leads to the imagining of new regimes of cohabitation, human and non-human management and intervention.

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## 1. Introduction

It is said that the Romans would not make important decisions without consulting the *augur*, a priest who could divine the will of the gods by interpreting the flight of birds; by ‘taking the auspices’. The case I present in this paper in a way re-enacts this indicative capacity of birds, particularly as signs or *sentinel devices* warning of potential risks, damages or catastrophes (Keck and Lakoff, 2013). Specifically, I analyse how, in the aftermath of one of the worst environmental disasters ever to occur in Spain – the Aznalcóllar Disaster – various environmentalist and conservationist groups mobilised migratory birds to bring new insights and the need for new precautions to the controversy elicited by the spill. These birds were mobilised to such an extent they refashioned the geography of the pollution and the account of the disaster’s environmental impact.

I will begin by retelling the circumstances of the disaster, the uncertainties and controversies it triggered and how, in this context, migratory birds nesting in the National Park of Doñana, a well-known protected area close to the mine that caused the spill, increasingly became protagonists in the drama. Drawing on

primary and secondary sources,<sup>1</sup> I will illustrate how this spill transformed an entire region into a huge ecotoxicological “experiment” (Rojas, 2015). This paper narrates the frantic, frequently improvised and hugely controversial work carried out in attempts to control and monitor the toxic spill, and how, in this context, scientists, environmentalists and technicians enlisted technologies, plants and animals to understand the elusive and hidden destructive power of pollution. Mostly, however, with this paper I relate the story of how, in a context of vigilance and monitoring, environmentalist groups active in the area *managed* to transform the spill into a public issue, a matter of concern (Latour, 2004).

My focus in this paper, therefore, is what these improvised managers “did” to reconfigure the socio-natural space of Doñana after the spill. Building upon this, I engage with two different, though interrelated, theoretical debates that contribute to a rethinking of environmental management (EM) as a social and materially situated

<sup>1</sup> This paper draws upon fieldwork and documentary analysis conducted (2008). I was not the only researcher carrying out this work, and I wish to thank Alexis Caussa, Francisco Tirado and Miquel Domènech for collecting relevant data in different periods of the long controversy triggered by the spill. Later on, some of the activists involved granted me follow-up interviews, for which I am also thankful.

E-mail address: [irodriguezgir@uoc.edu](mailto:irodriguezgir@uoc.edu)

practice. Firstly, as Tironi and Farías also explore in this issue, this case features EM in a situation of material disruption and radical uncertainty: a toxic spill as a “cosmopolitical event” (Schillmeier, 2011) where it is difficult to differentiate between the natural and the social, the interior and the exterior of the disaster, and between experts and non-experts. I discuss the performativity of EM in such a context. This shows us the net-work (Latour, 2011) involved in articulating logics of (un)containment, (dis)protection and conservation: how different actors constantly configured and reconfigured (Krause, 2015) arrangements between human activities, animals, ecosystems and threatening pollutants, as well as how precarious and controversial these configurations were. Rephrasing Callon and Rabeharisoa (2003), we can say that this episode illustrates a situation of “management in the wild” (wilderness is here related to the “excessiveness” of disasters rather than to a pristine and untouched nature). In this context, I consider it important to reflect upon how environmentalists managed to open new ways of imagining the Park, of socialising humans and non-humans and, ultimately, of introducing new affective ethical and political attachments to the management of the disaster and of Doñana. Now rephrasing De Certeau (1984), I will argue that environmentalist action must be read in “tactical” terms rather than as a counter-production. By coining the idea of tactic, De Certeau wants to draw our attention to those devices, actions, and procedures people use on the micro level to subvert, temporarily, the disciplining powers. In the aftermath of the spill, I use this notion of tactic to refer to those actions and procedures that environmentalists carried out to “poach”, “divert” and/or “borrow” (not take over or destroy) the space of the other (mainly the authorities and “official” scientists). From this point of view, this case study illustrates the significance of small, improvised and situated practices in resisting attempts to minimise the spill and in increasing understanding of the disaster and management of the Park. It also speaks of how these “cracks” and “surprises” helped to undermine assumptions of control, coherence and singularity traditionally associated to the idea of management (replacing them with images of partiality, interdependency and coexistence).

Secondly, as has been discussed elsewhere, these “tactics” of protest hardly fit within the cognitive and consumerist assumptions of a deliberative and market-based democracy (Bingham and Hinchliffe, 2008). On the contrary, most of these kind of struggles take place in an ontological terrain (Callon and Rabeharisoa, 2008). From this point of view, this is an example of how the production of certain natures is specific to the matters of concern with which each actor is engaged (Lippert, 2015). Specifically, the case enables me to analyse how environmentalists mobilised birds as non-human indicators (a quite unusual type of indicator, as I will discuss) to make visible some of the hidden damages and dimensions of the contamination, and how this conferred on them a particular political force (Marres, 2012). Drawing on Tim Ingold’s latest work (2007, 2011), I will argue that this political significance of birds was caused by the enactment of these animals (most notably) as lines. That is, as ever-extending trajectories enmeshing with, and potentially threatening, distant species and ecosystems. Engaging critically with Ingold’s proposal, I will use the idea of line more empirically; as a way of understanding how environmentalists transformed migratory birds into a powerful and *boundless* mediator (Latour, 1997), a liminal, elusive and ambivalent figure through which to uncover hidden and untold dimensions of the disaster, and enrol distant actors initially reluctant to enter into the dispute.

## 2. Aznalcóllar’s toxic spill

On April 25, 1998, the downstream dam of a tailings lagoon owned by the Boliden–Apirsa mining company collapsed. The rupture led to 5.5 Mm<sup>3</sup> of acid and metal-rich water cascading into the

Guadiamar river, together with a thick sludge of toxic tailings (estimated to be between 1.3 and 1.9 Mton). The spill – the equivalent of 500 Exxon-Valdez tankers – flooded the riverbanks along the Agrio and Guadiamar rivers down to the Entremuros marshes, 40 km south of the mine, at the border of the Doñana National Park (see Fig. 1).

According to the Regional Government of Andalusia, approximately 4600 hectares of agricultural and wild land were immediately affected by the toxic flood. The spill also affected inhabited zones (10 municipalities, 46,000 inhabitants), killed river flora and fauna and destroyed crops, fields and pastures (Junta de Andalucía, 1999b).

By any criteria, the spill was a major disaster (Simón et al., 1999), but this was especially the case due to the proximity of Doñana National Park.<sup>2</sup> Being home to some of the region’s most protected species, such as the lynx and the imperial eagle, the Park was considered a “pearl” of European nature conservation.<sup>3</sup> On top of this, the Park played an important role in the region’s economy,<sup>4</sup> with both agriculture and tourism strongly dependent on the proximity of the Park.

From the very onset of the disaster, thus, the protection of the Park was a major concern for most of the actors involved: this was so for the Spanish Authorities; for the media, which extensively covered the episode (see Fernández Reyes, 2001); for several environmentalist and conservation groups, most historically active in the area; and for the scientific community, particularly those working and researching within the Park.

In the following sections I tell the story of how this consensus around protection of the Park was created, and how this gave birth to an unprecedented dispositive of contention, cleaning-up and monitoring of the contamination, particularly by the Spanish authorities and the scientists of CSIC (the Spanish National Research Council). I will also present an account of how, alongside these activities, environmentalist movements operating in the area managed to politicise the event.

### 2.1. Containing/uncontaining the spill

In the first hours after the damn burst, attempts were made to contain the spread of sludge, the main concern being that toxic water would enter the Guadiamar River, a fundamental part of Doñana’s hydrological system: if polluted water entered the Park it would be a catastrophe of untold magnitude. To coordinate a response, the Central and Regional administrations, together with the Park managers, agreed to send heavy machinery (mainly excavators) to Entremuros, a hydraulic barrier running along the Park border, and build improvised containment walls to prevent the toxic wave entering the Park (Junta de Andalucía, 1998).

The water was dammed a few hours later, prompting the then Minister for the Environment, Isabel Tocino, to publicly announce “the heart of Doñana was safe” (Elías, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> The Doñana National Park is the largest wetland reserve in Southern Europe. The Park is subject to two types of protection: the National Park (54,250 ha), which embraces the heart of the wetlands is owned and managed by the Spanish Central Government, while the Natural Park of Doñana (50,720 ha), a more peripheral land, is managed by the Andalusian Regional Government. Together they are commonly referred to as the Doñana Park, or simply Doñana, the terminology I use in this paper.

<sup>3</sup> The ecological value of this environment has been widely recognised by a number of international organisations. Doñana is a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, a Ramsar site for waterfowl protection (1980), and a UN World Heritage Site (1994). It is also part of the Natura 2000 network and was given Protected Area status by the Council of Europe (see De Lucio, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> The region where Doñana is located is one of the poorest regions in both Spain and Europe, with a strong dependence on the primary sector and tourism. The unemployment rate is one of the highest across Europe. This may explain the traditionally conflicting relationship between development and environmental conservation (see Sauri et al., 2003).

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