



Significance of affect and ethics in applying conservation standards: The practices of flying squirrel surveyors

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 October 2011

Received in revised form 26 November 2012

Available online 12 February 2013

Keywords:

Affect
Ecological knowledge
Ethics
Land use planning
Nature conservation
Standard

ABSTRACT

We examine human–animal encounters as the generative source of affective knowing and learning to study the role of affect in the implementation of nature conservation. The study is based on an ethnographic approach following the embodied practices of biological field surveyors working with Siberian flying squirrels (*Pteromys volans*) in land use planning in Finland. The case is characterized by radical uncertainties due to the elusive life of flying squirrels, the strict conservation standard of the EU, and the pressure of urban development. The surveyors can use only indirect clues to detect these nocturnal animals, but are required to produce accurate and unambiguous ecological knowledge to planners. We found that affective learning enables knowing and increases the reliability of knowledge in such conditions. Affective learning results from alternation between constant encountering of clues and changing intensities that produce feeling states and a sense of the forest where the animals live. Ethical consideration and personal differences are important in affective learning and shape the surveyors as participants in standard development. Finally we discuss the possible implications of affective learning for standard design in nature conservation.

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1. Introduction

Global concern over biodiversity has led to a growing need to apply standards in conservation. Derived from red data lists, legislation and scientific knowledge, standards are a trademark of modern conservation; they specify what has to be conserved and how (Adams, 2004; Haila, 2012). In our present case study, conservation of “breeding sites and resting places” is a standard that is being applied through the Habitats Directive in Europe over a very wide range of animals listed in the annex of strictly protected species, from wolves, flying squirrels and loggerhead sea turtles to species of spiders and molluscs (European Council, 1992; Environment DG, 2007).

While conservation standards are expected to offer efficient solutions in policy implementation, they are in constant contradiction with local particularities. This basic dilemma of conservation is frequently faced by biological surveyors who are responsible for collecting accurate field data on endangered animals. First of all, they face epistemic uncertainties when defining sites and boundaries for conservation. As animals move and hide, conclusions on presence and absence must be made on the basis of fragmentary and often indirect data (Bear and Eden, 2011; Eden and Bear, 2011; Ellis and Waterton, 2004, 2005; Hinchliffe et al.,

2005; J. Lorimer, 2006, 2008; Nutch, 2006; Roth and Bowen, 1999, 2001). To make standards work, the field surveyors have to adjust and improvise – only in an ideal world do standardized processes invariably work in the same way (Bowker and Star, 2000, pp. 157–158). On the whole, the field surveyors have intimate knowledge of uncertainties that are well-known in social and political studies of standardization (Bowker and Star, 2000; Gerst et al., 2005; Williams and Edge, 1996) but often neglected in the conservation discourse (Regan et al., 2002). The context of standard implementation is totally different from negotiations on standard development conducted in arenas of policy-making.

In this paper we analyse the dilemma between standards and local uncertainties in nature conservation by examining an extreme case, the work of flying squirrel surveyors in Finland. The surveyors are key actors in implementing the conservation standard of this endangered animal species, the Siberian flying squirrel (*Pteromys volans*) (hereafter flying squirrel; Fig. 1). In particular, we use an ethnographic approach to follow their working practices in the forest. Evidence and unambiguity are required of the surveyors even if there are only fragmentary and indirect data available (Fig. 2). The surveyors work in areas where flying squirrels have given rise to severe conflicts in land use planning and forest management. In addition, the following characteristics of our case make it particularly fruitful for analysing epistemic problems related to standard implementation and affect in highly uncertain circumstances: (1) the flying squirrel is exceptionally elusive and very

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Fig. 1. Siberian flying squirrel getting out from its nest in aspen at sunset.

seldom sighted in the wild while surveying; (2) the pressing need for accurate and unambiguous information of the whereabouts of flying squirrels is caused by the context of land use planning constrained by a strict conservation standard; and (3) the very survival of the flying squirrels is at stake in every survey case – conservation decisions are based directly on the observations of the field surveyors. Focusing on their expertise and practices of knowing we ask: what is the role of affect in making conservation standards work under high uncertainties?

J. Lorimer (2008) studied affective relationships between humans and animals in field studies but conservation standards are not the primary focus of his study, and in general the relationship between affect, standards and uncertainties is underexplored in research. Often standards are taken as given facts, forgetting that keeping them in operation needs constant work and adjustment. All standards are socially constructed, as they are outcomes of negotiations and shaped by social, political and economic interests. The ecological relevance of conservation standards varies (on conflicts, see e.g. Cardoso, 2012; Larson, 2007). In local implementation, mere technical, legal or economic rationalities do not work, because a standard has its own context, depending on the actors involved, the organizational culture and many other factors (see Alphandéry and Fortier, 2010). The role of affect becomes particularly interesting in cases with political pressure and radical uncertainties. Surveyors draw on affectual capacities in order to produce standard compliant evidence from uncertain sightings of an elusive species.

In the next section we build our conceptual framework on the basis of affect research. After that, in the empirical part of the paper, we present a detailed analysis of knowledge practices of the flying squirrel surveyors, and we also recognize personal differences and the ethical dimension of affective knowing. We conclude with notions on affect and ethics, how they become critical factors when applying conservation standards in highly uncertain circumstances, and how the role of field surveyors as biodiversity experts should be understood in such circumstances.



Fig. 2. Flying squirrel surveyor using binoculars, trying to spot a nesting hole in an aspen tree.

In addition to affect research, our study is informed by science and technology studies. In this field, there is much research on standards and uncertainties (e.g., Bowker and Star, 2000; Latour, 2005). Concerning the development of standards, mutual shaping between technology (nature conservation) and its environment is an important standpoint. In this view, technology can be understood as a social product, patterned by the conditions of its creation and use (Williams and Edge, 1996). Obviously then, there is a range of choices possible at every stage of the standardization process, implementation included (Gerst et al., 2005). In our case, the choices are influenced by affective encounters between field surveyors and flying squirrels, making conservation a sociomaterial process.

2. Affective encounters

Since the affective turn in social science studies, the concept of affect has recently been applied in many disciplines. Affect arises from a relation; it is a force of encounter, an effect of that relation. It arises from in-between, from the indeterminacy and ambiguities that are typically present in encounters, and serves as a force that puts us into movement (e.g., Anderson, 2006; Pile, 2010; Seigworth and Gregg, 2010).

Although there is no single theory of affect, different orientations within affect research lay emphasis on force relations and capacities to act. This focus of research originates from Spinoza thinking, taking the view that affect is a “transpersonal *capacity* which a body has to be affected (through an affection) and to affect (as the result of modifications)” (Anderson, 2006, p. 735, emphasis original). Affective encounters involve “the transfer of power from the affecting body to the affected body and so invest that body with joy and an increase in its power of acting” (Duff, 2010, p. 885, following Deleuze). Note, however, that there is no guarantee of affect leading to a positive result, negative outcomes are also possible. The core idea is that the more power we have to be affected, the more power we have to act, and transpersonal capacity arises from body-to-body relations. However, the body does not need to be human-to-human but can include both human and

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