



# Representing the Greater Flamingo in Southern France: A semantic analysis of newspaper articles showing change over time



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 10 May 2016

Received in revised form

7 September 2016

Accepted 26 September 2016

### Keywords:

Camargue

Content analysis

Iconic species

Newspaper coverage

Semantic mapping

## ABSTRACT

Conservation planning is increasingly dependent on communications strategies to promote and support changes in practice and land-use. Identifying the way the news media represent issues results in better focus and more effective communications for conservation science. News media reporting plays a dual role in public debates providing a forum for public discourse and integrating discussion occurring in other forums. Semantic mapping of the textual content of 108 newspaper articles shows change in representation of the Greater Flamingos in Southern France over a seven year period. This form of automated content analysis results in replicable and valid inferences that link media representation to social and environmental context. The changes in the way events were reported over time provided knowledge and insights into the representation of flamingos shifting from locally important values to emphasize regional and national values over time. This type of analysis is valuable to focus conservation planning and management providing a means to anticipate journalist representation of local issues at different socio-geographic scales. Clear identification of representation contributes to more effective communication promoting coastal conservation management.

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## 1. Introduction

Understanding the way the media represents conservation issues may help conservation scientists and managers perform more effective outreach in support of management activities (Jacobson et al., 2012). Mass-media coverage can influence public understanding, perception, and, potentially, action (Boykoff et al., 2007). The positive or negative framing of media coverage can effect public understanding and influence policies, legislation and associated social marketing promoting conservation (Dann, 2010; van Vuuren et al., 2014). In contemporary democratic societies, media galvanizes issues with significant influence on public and policy agenda-setting. The media sector provides information, frames issues and can reduce the profile of other issues (Lyytimäki, 2014). Media coverage serves first, as a direct forum for public discourse (through editorials, letters to the editor, etc.) and second, to report on discussions occurring in other forums such as public meetings and hearings, legislatures, the courts, demonstrations and protests

(Bengston et al., 2004). Written media influences parameters for public discourse and the way in which people think and talk about a subject (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Despite the plethora of information sources currently available, newspapers continue to play an important role as a source of information about environmental management issues (Voyer et al., 2013) with research demonstrating the importance of positive media coverage in efforts to conserve or protect species (Gusset et al., 2008). Newspapers influence agenda-setting for public policy issues (Lyytimäki and Tapio, 2009; McCombs and Shaw, 1972), indicating a relationship between the relative emphasis given by the media to issues and the degree of salience these topics have for the general public. Thus, analysis of the way issues are represented in newspapers is not mere “media analysis” – it is a window into the broader social debate (Bengston et al., 2004).

Planning and management aimed at achieving sustainable outcomes in the coastal zone often extends across different sectors and includes catchment areas further inland from the coast. Consequently, in the coastal catchment landscape there is significant potential for conflict among resource users which can impede sustainability efforts. The attribution of blame or the framing of the

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situation by newspapers can heighten conflict and influence management strategies and actions (Rockloff and Lockie, 2004).

The diversity of coastal and marine ecosystems in the Mediterranean region supports a rich fauna and flora characterized as an area of exceptional biodiversity value and placed in the 25 top global biodiversity hotspots (UNEP/MAP-Plan Bleu, 2016). The Greater Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus roseus*, hereafter flamingos) is one iconic species represented in the Mediterranean region with a special association through breeding in the Camargue (Rhône Delta) in Southern France. The flamingo population migrates across the Mediterranean region and had been breeding successfully in the Camargue for over six centuries, but breeding failed in the 1960s (Johnson and Cézilly, 2007). The failure in local breeding raised concerns for broader issues impacting this iconic species. In the early 1970's, a conservation partnership between the Tour du Valat Mediterranean Wetlands Research Institute (TdV) and Salt Group, a local salt production company was established to reduce the threats to the breeding colony and successfully created suitable breeding conditions. The construction of an artificial breeding island in the Fangassier Lagoon (Fig. 1) in the Camargue in 1974 has resulted in over 150,000 fledged flamingos between 1974 and 2006 (Béchet et al., 2009). This partnership made a significant contribution to stabilizing the flamingo population in southern France and of the broader Mediterranean population.

The flamingo is used as a symbol to promote regional products and attract tourists. Tourism is the most important economic activity in the Camargue, with over 500,000 tourists visiting annually and involving 20% of the local work force (Parc Naturel Régional de Camargue, 2009). The Fangassier Lagoon flamingo breeding island in the salt pans of Salin-de-Giraud was one of the primary motives for acquiring coastal land by the Conservatoire du Littoral (CdL), the French government department with responsibility for restoring coastal conservation sites. The acquisition of the site by the CdL pioneered the implementation of the largest ecological coastal restoration project in the Mediterranean basin. Management objectives for 6500 ha of landscape changed from salt production to coastal wetland restoration and conservation (<http://www.pole->

[lagunes.org/ftp/web/2015/NoticegestionEMSC2013-2016.pdf](http://www.pole-lagunes.org/ftp/web/2015/NoticegestionEMSC2013-2016.pdf)). This acquisition was driven by the first failure of the breeding colony (2007) in southern France in over thirty years. The breeding failure resulted from increased predation due to insufficient protection from water surrounding the breeding island. The low water levels resulted as a consequence of insufficient water pumped into the site due to a Salt Group employee strike against company economic restructuring (Béchet et al., 2012). This land vested in CdL, including the flamingo breeding island, is now co-managed by three local institutions - the TdV, the Natural Regional Park of the Camargue (PNRC) and the Camargue National Reserve - in collaboration with the Salt Group, exemplifying a public-private partnership.

Local and national press often express the positive aspects of flamingo breeding in the Camargue and the success story of this iconic species (example: Pignol, 2014). Despite the socio-economic contribution of the flamingos in the Camargue and the success of the conservation program for the Mediterranean basin, flamingos are also seen as a threat to agriculture and recreational activities in the Camargue (example: Lemierre, 2014). Flamingos foraging in rice fields have been shown to have implications for local agricultural production (Ernoul et al., 2012, 2013), causing the flamingos to be portrayed negatively in the local press. The changes in land use and access to the site have also stirred local and national controversy as the beaches in Camargue were the last to cease vehicle access and wild camping directly on the beach.

We analyzed seven years of newspaper coverage of flamingos in the Camargue to understand how flamingos are represented and disseminated by newspapers to the public through these research questions:

- (1) What stories about flamingos did the main French newspapers report between 2008 and 2014?
- (2) How did representation of flamingos vary over the time period?
- (3) Who was interviewed and what voices were given priority over the time period?

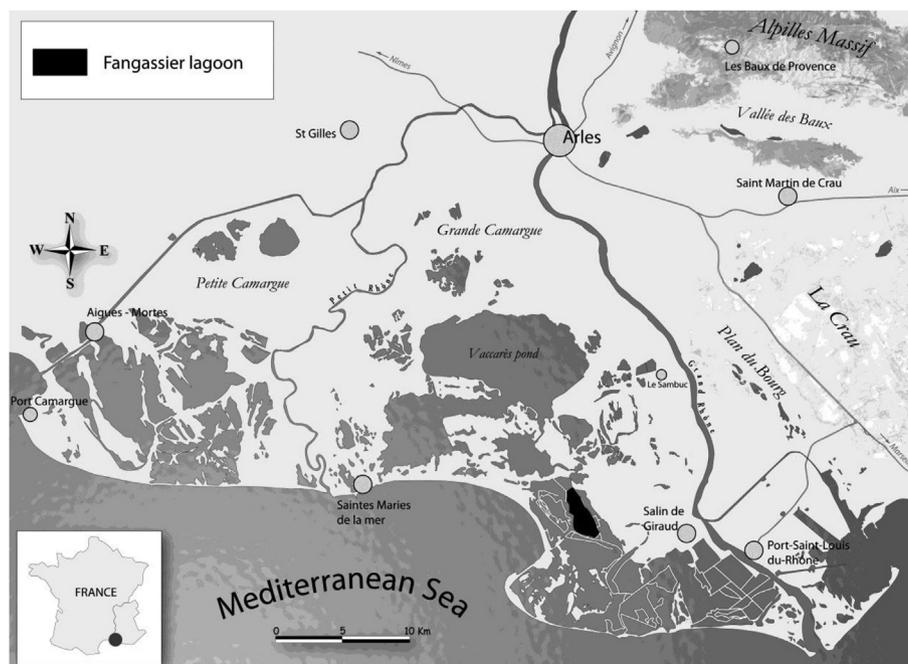


Fig. 1. Localisation of the flamingo breeding island in the Fangassier lagoon (Camargue, France).

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