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Clarifying standpoints in the gray wolf recovery conflict: Procuring management and policy forethought

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ABSTRACT

Top-order predator recovery and conservation is notoriously contentious and often leads to research efforts to understand stakeholder attitudes. Where unfavorable attitudes are identified, efforts have focused on changing those attitudes instead of resolving the underlying conflicts that those attitudes manifest. But, in order to effectively resolve these conflicts, we must first understand and clarify the structure of contending perspectives. We used Q methodology to enable stakeholders to systematically structure their standpoints in the conflict about gray wolf recovery in Washington State. Stakeholders prioritized issues, outlined areas of consensus and disagreement, revealed latent agendas fueling the conflict, and enabled better understanding of stakeholders. Analysis of 32 Q sorts from five stakeholder groups revealed three standpoints: ecological standpoint, emphasizing higher numbers of breeding pairs and improved wolf habitat conditions; incompatibility standpoint, rejecting claims of the urgency for wolf recovery, expressing concerns about the impacts of wolves on prey populations and hunters; and precautionary standpoint, focusing on the extent to which wolves should be recovered. Stakeholders found some level of unanimous agreement on 14 of 56 issues involved in the sorting exercise, including procedures for determining delisting decisions, and collaboration between formal institutions and Native American tribes. Conversely, only five issues were contentious, including whether wolves are needed for biodiversity conservation, and acceptable number of breeding pairs. Results also revealed latent agendas and stakeholder inflexibilities that may render the conflict to appear more contentious than it actually is. Our findings emphasize the importance of systematically structuring stakeholder standpoints in contentious predator recovery and conservation issues. Systematic structures of stakeholder standpoints minimize ambiguity thereby facilitating conflict management and consequent achievement of conservation goals.

1. Introduction

The recovery and conservation of top-order predators is essentially a notoriously contentious human endeavor (Clark and Brunner, 2002). These conflicts, habitually characterized by differences about what constitutes biological recovery and what is best for people, often embody strong emotions and competing values (Nie, 2002). Polarizing differences among stakeholders undermine, among other things, trust and effective partnerships necessary for successful recovery and conservation (Cork et al., 2000). Considerable human dimensions research focusing on human attitudes towards predators have resulted from these conflicts; where negative attitudes are identified, the tendency has been to change those attitudes to more positive ones (Bath, 1998; Majić and Bath, 2010). Rather than attempting to directly change negative attitudes, recovery and conservation efforts would benefit from focusing more on managing the underlying conflict manifested through attitudes (Majić and Bath, 2010). In order to effectively manage the conflict, it is important that we first understand the structure of the conflict—what issues and stakeholders are at the core, how various stakeholders prioritize their preferences, and on what issues, if any, do stakeholders find consensus. Understanding the structure of the conflict is fundamental to the success of recovery and conservation (Hayward and Somers, 2009).

The concept of standpoint or perspective taking (Clark and Wallace, 1999) is an important and underused means for understanding conflicts about species recovery and conservation. According to Bardwell (1991), some conflicts resist resolution when disputants' views are not clearly understood because their standpoints are not well organized and articulated. The concept and process of establishing standpoints is rooted in cognitive psychology (Bartlett, 1932) where standpoints are defined as cognitive structures in human memory, retrieved to help organize and interpret new experiences. Standpoints, in this context, refer to how stakeholders view

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the recovery process and the roles of various stakeholders in that process. In environmental conflict analysis, standpoints are a way of organizing information about a conflict to facilitate understanding and clarification of disputants' stance with respect to a conflict (Taylor, 2000). Standpoints reveal disputants' views of how they and others are implicated in and by a conflict. Because standpoints clarify disputants' perspectives about a conflict, they orient efforts towards identifying and addressing outstanding problems (Gray, 2004). Therefore, conflicts can be more effectively and efficiently managed when the content and structure of stakeholder standpoints are more self-evident.

Often, natural resource management issues appear more controversial than they actually are because disputants and disputing parties unknowingly hold multiple and sometimes conflicting or contradictory standpoints about the issue (Benford, 1997; Brugnach et al., 2011). Thus, it is important to have explicit understandings of one's own standpoint as well as those of other stakeholders, to minimize antagonism in recovery and conservation debates. Therefore, effectively managing conflicts about top-order predator recovery requires clear and coherent structures of stakeholders' standpoints. In addition to enabling deep understanding of stakeholders' own standpoints and those of others, coherent structures illuminate existing intra-stakeholder contradictions, thereby minimizing ambiguity and resultant conflict intensity—important preconditions for recovery and conservation success (Cork et al., 2000; Hovardas and Stamou, 2006).

Using the debate about gray wolf recovery and conservation in Washington State (WA) as a case study, we enabled stakeholders to systematically structure their standpoints. We show how systematic structuring facilitates delineation of areas of consensus and disagreement, identification and characterization of conflicting parties, illumination of existing intra-stakeholder contradictions and latent agendas tied to the conflict, and trade-offs among competing preferences. These understandings, especially the context of disagreements, facilitate stakeholder engagement in conservation initiatives (Shine and Doody, 2011). Our approach minimizes ambiguity and facilitates better understanding of stakeholder attitudes and preferences. We point to ways in which management and policy could benefit from systematic structures of stakeholder standpoints to mobilize prudence and facilitate successful recovery of a viable wolf population in Washington State and other contentious recovery and conservation initiatives.

1.1. Human dimensions research in wolf conservation

Considerable research on human attitudes towards wolves has been conducted since the 1970s (see Williams et al., 2002 for a review). Research on the human dimensions of wolf conservation has contributed immensely to our understanding of public attitudes and support for restoration, especially in areas experiencing increases in wolf populations and ranges (e.g., Ericsson and Heberlein, 2003; Meadow et al., 2005; Bruskotter et al., 2007; Karlsson and Sjöström, 2007; Stronen et al., 2007; Wilson and Bruskotter, 2009; Majić and Bath, 2010). These studies present evidence that wildlife conservation and management efforts are strengthened by examining and addressing stakeholder perspectives and attitudes (Bandara and Tisdell, 2003; Lindsey et al., 2005; Liu et al., 2011; Majić et al., 2011). Human dimensions research provides knowledge that helps promote more constructive debates, and thereby reduce conflict (Karanth et al., 2008), enhance the predictive capacities of outcomes and stakeholder approval under alternative management practices (Treves and Karanth, 2003; Fischer and van der Wal, 2007; Fleishman et al., 2011), and facilitate adaptability and improve opportunities for success (Majić and Bath, 2010).

While human dimensions research contributes enormously to understanding preferences and attitudes toward wolf recovery and management, such research, with few exceptions (e.g., Byrd, 2002; Mattson et al., 2006) and based on survey questionnaires, often use R methodology. The response options in R methodology often prompt respondents to state their preferences and attitudes independently of other pertinent preferences included in the questionnaire. Respondents' expression of a preference is not constrained by other relevant perspectives. Thus, survey questionnaires, based on typical R methodology approaches, may not fully reveal the likely tradeoffs that stakeholders are able to make in their preferences of recovery and conservation strategies. It is important to understand these tradeoffs in conservation practice, because resource constraints impose the prioritization of issues—practically impossible to address every issue. It is important to enable stakeholders to systematically structure their perspectives to facilitate prioritization of competing preferences—tradeoffs.

Q methodology is an empirical approach for studying human subjectivity and behavior, developed by William Stephenson (1953). The methodology is well suited for exploring contentious issues (Eden et al., 2005) because it enables systematic structuring of stakeholders' standpoints (Stephenson, 1953), according to some, in a more democratic and open fashion than other approaches (Dryzek, 1990). This is especially the case when the statements used in a Q study are derived directly from stakeholders and their verbatim statements are taken back to them for sorting (Brown, 2002). This allows stakeholders to "speak for themselves," making Q methodology an interactive, stakeholder-driven process (Dryzek and Berejikian, 1993). Q methodology is additionally advantageous for its ability to facilitate the emergence of latent belief structures, rather than imposing a framework or taxonomy by the researcher. Thus, systematic structure of stakeholders' standpoints, using Q methodology, informs management and policy options that are more politically, socially and culturally acceptable across diverse stakeholder groups (Asah et al., 2012a,b). Q methodology facilitates consensus-building opportunities (Brown, 2002). Using a case study of a conflict among county visitors, convention bureau members, citizens, and policy-makers, Q methodology outperformed the Nominal Group Technique voting in finding consensus among these disputants (Maxwell, 2000). Areas of consensus, while essential to prudent management and decision-making regarding predator recovery, are often otherwise masked by the intense rhetoric and emotions that typify the conflict about recovery and conservation of top-order predators (Gargan and Brown, 1993; Focht and Lawler, 2000). Furthermore, the necessity of public acceptance of recovery and conservation aims makes more democratic and open efforts to understand and potentially resolve outstanding differences among key stakeholders essential.

1.2. Wolf restoration in Washington

In the Northern Rocky Mountains (NRM), the gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) has been at the forefront of initiatives to restore decimated predator populations. Wolf recovery efforts and habitat connectivity with Montana, Idaho, Oregon and British Columbia facilitated the dispersal of gray wolves into Washington. The species was extirpated from Washington in the 1930s, largely due to farmland and ranch expansions. Despite sightings of individual wolves since then, it was not until 2008 that breeding pairs with surviving pups were documented (Wiles et al., 2011). The population continues to grow—evidenced by documentation of at least 51 wolves in nine packs (Becker et al., 2013). Under state law, wolves are classified as endangered species throughout WA. The species has been removed from federal listing in the eastern third of the state, but is endangered in the western two-thirds of Washington (Wiles et al., 2011).