



Relating to the wild: Key actors' values and concerns about lynx reintroduction



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ABSTRACT

Iberian Lynx reintroduction started in southern Portugal in 2015. As part of this project we have been following local key actors' positions towards the process, including their perceptions about this threatened species and other predators. Using an ethnographic approach and conducting interviews we explored local discourses about nature, environmentalism, predators and reasons for positions towards reintroduction of a wild species.

We categorized the content of 94 interviews in terms of value orientations towards wildlife. We found that as well as dominion and utilitarian dispositions, other ways of relating to the wild could be found including 'affection', 'attraction', 'environmental concerns' and 'symbolism'. In fact categories are not exclusive and there is a diversity of values towards wildlife in rural key actors. Environmental discourse is integrated in a local culture where being dominant over wildlife and nature is the main way of relating to it in particular with respect to those related to hunting activities. However that was not a hindrance to being positive about reintroduction. Furthermore local memory about the historical presence of the lynx was significantly associated with the category 'environmental concerns'.

Single-fixed categories are reductionist and limited for describing relationships with nature. Content analysis of spontaneous discourse and having knowledge about human practices proves to be important for an ethnoecological characterization of the coexistence of humans and lynx.

Appropriations of the lynx as a local theme by social groups are described and a reflection about wildlife ownership, human-predator competition and wildness meanings as well as ontologies is presented. Local perspectives have implications for conservation projects and must be incorporated into management decision-making.

1. Introduction

Attitudes towards wildlife have been continuously studied for some decades now (e.g. Bath, 1989) and social factors are nowadays recognized as determinant for the success of conservation projects or management of protected species and areas (e.g. Jiménez Pérez, 2005). Several studies have demonstrated that attitudes as well as perceptions about wildlife vary between geographical areas, different times and contexts, not always depending on the same factors (e.g. Bath et al., 2008; Zimmermann, 2015; Reddy and Yosef, 2016). Intolerance towards wild predators has been a finding of some studies, and education campaigns are often recommended as an outcome (e.g. Gusset et al., 2008). Motivations behind negative attitudes are not yet well known and reason for certain behaviours remain unclear. Reasons for positions towards certain species might be embedded with other issues such as values towards wildlife and nature in general.

Biophilia was introduced by Wilson (1984) and is presently defined as a "complex process encompassing an array of values and qualities that constitute a broader affiliation with nature" (Kellert, 2012). Based on this concept some research has explored fundamental understanding of belief patterns that influence attitudes and resultant behaviour towards wildlife (e.g. Jacobs, 2007; Raadik and Cottrell, 2007; Teel et al., 2007). The *Biophilia* hypothesis has been criticized for assuming a universal human need to relate to nature (or animals), a disposition with a genetic basis and evolutionary significance (e.g. Bulbeck, 2005; Joye and De Block, 2011). However, the engagement of humans with the natural world has gained more attention among conservationists since this concept was advanced and several case studies became known. In these, wildlife value orientations of certain stakeholders have been examined but an approach to specific key actors in a reintroduction context has not yet been taken, despite the difference that such individuals make for local conservation success (Smith et al.,

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2009).

Anthropology has long studied human relationships with animals and with nature (e.g. Mullin, 1999) but more recently Environmental Anthropology and Ethnoecology have specialized in research on global conservation management and local groups' positions (Brosius et al., 1986; Bellon, 1990; Kottak, 1999; Toledo, 2002; Alves and Souto, 2010). Values have been treated, in anthropology, as cultural phenomena, mostly learnt and culturally constructed (Bernard, 2006), so research into value orientations towards wildlife can be part of understanding a context and characterizing a social group. On the other hand, anthropologists also think of values constituted by cognitive and emotional elements (Nuckolls 1998 in Milton, 2002). Under that perspective general environmental values have been analyzed (Strang, 1997) and questions about what makes people care about the environment have been raised (Milton, 2002). Nevertheless, case studies utilizing an anthropological approach, about the ways humans attach meaning to the natural world (as Kellert, 2012 also mentions) are still uncommon, particularly in Western rural contexts. In the same way local discourses triggered by wildlife reintroductions have scarcely been explored (O'Rourke, 2014).

The Iberian Lynx disappeared from most of its former range due to wild rabbit decline, habitat transformation and mortality induced by humans (Ferrerias et al., 1992; Rodriguez and Delibes, 2004). In Portugal, lynxes were shot and trapped until there were no resident populations (Ceia et al., 1998; Queiroz et al., 2005). Reintroduction has been taking place in Iberia through a transnational conservation project (LIFE + Iberlince) and in Portugal lynxes started to be released in the southern Guadiana area in 2015. Although the lynx nowadays is a conservation emblem it can also be seen as 'vermin' (Lopes-Fernandes and Frazão-Moreira, 2016) and cause conflict through damage in livestock and poultry (Garrote et al., 2013). The lynx reintroduction area of Guadiana valley is characterized by low population occupancy and multi-agro exploitation of cereals, livestock, cork oak forest and pine afforestation. Agriculture has been modernized but it has mainly an extensive character and hunting is practiced throughout the territory. The Natural Park of Guadiana was created in 1993 and tourism has been increasing due to the scenic and archaeological relevance of the site and also the presence of rare species for bird-watching.

We designed an analysis of contents for interviews with key actors starting from the anthropological concept that meanings, beliefs and also emotions are part of the ways humans connect with the environment (Milton, 2002), and we followed an ethnographic approach considering that practices in daily life strongly influence values. Building a reasonable understanding of the key actors' context was therefore pertinent.

The main aim of the present study was to explore local discourses and reasons for positions held about the lynx as a wild predator and its reintroduction as a conservation process. We also examine the case study of relationships between humans and nature in rural Portuguese areas selected for lynx reintroduction because that is a factor determining the success of local conservation actions. This research yielded information for a transnational LIFE + project (Iberlince) and was therefore an opportunity for anthropology to highlight the perspectives of local actors. We also wanted to know what characterizes the human-environment social context in which humans and lynx are to coexist so we chose to focus on local key actors with different profiles. We departed from the following research questions: How is reintroduction imagined by key actors? What are the local public discourses about reintroduction? Which value orientations towards wildlife predominate among different types of key actors?

The research was conducted under an anthropological framework and "gaze". In this case, the focus was upon the meanings that non-human entities (including 'nature' itself and the experience of natural physical elements) could have for humans which are necessarily engaged with them (e.g. Ingold and Palsson, 2013). As Biophilia theory

had produced several categories to characterize orientation values of humans towards wildlife and nature ('animal orientations' in Kellert, 1984, 'wildlife belief dimensions' in Manfredo et al., 2003 and 'biophilic values' in Kellert, 2012), we used similar categories and adapted them according to our discourse analysis as Bulbeck (2005) did ('nature dispositions'). We do not intend to prove or discuss the *Biophilia* theory and its implications at an evolutionary level in this paper (e.g. Joye and De Block, 2011).

2. Methods

We conducted interviews as part of a broader ethnographic work during 2012–2014 in two adjacent protected areas in the south of Portugal – the historical lynx occurrence area of Moura-Barrancos Nature 2000 site (MB) ($n = 52$) and the reintroduction site of the Natural Park of Guadiana (G) ($n = 42$). The interviews, with duration of around 1 h, included open-ended questions to evaluate key actors' opinions and perceptions about Iberian Lynx reintroduction, but also addressed aspects such as knowledge, memory and practices with predators and land management. Card images were used to assess knowledge and interviewee familiarity with wild carnivore species. Key actors were chosen for their specific interests and decision capacity in lynx areas, and included: land owners ($n = 18$), hunting and land managers ($n = 14$), hunting guards ($n = 11$), technicians (administration and NGO) ($n = 13$), nature activity users and promoters ($n = 13$) and council representatives ($n = 16$). Lynx observers, individuals who contacted directly with the species from the time lynx was present were also included (MB, $n = 9$). For comparative reasons we divided all interviewees into hunters ($n = 45$) and non-hunters ($n = 49$).

We transcribed all interviews and analyzed the contents by using open coding. Observation notes from informal conversations, public positions about reintroduction were also analyzed, as well as participation in some local practices, such as hunts, hunting management, olive harvesting and livestock management. Triangulation of information was performed. Reintroduction of the lynx in Guadiana was announced in 2014 during the research period, which may have influenced reactive opinions.

Considering each interview as a whole, we did a content analysis and associated to each of the informants one or more categories according to his/her narrative, including the perceptions which characterized value orientations in their relationship with the natural world. Some of our categories had similar denominations to other studies, namely Dayer et al. (2007), but were adapted to encompass the variation we found in actors' discourses (Table 1). Chi-square tests for exploring significance in associations between categories and other variables were performed using SPSS (version 20).

3. Results

3.1. Key actors' values and orientations

Portuguese key actors in lynx areas encompass all the diversity of categories for wildlife value orientation. In qualitative terms there are very many nature dispositions in the rural community studied making it heterogeneous and complex. Fig. 1 show results quantified in terms of frequency of occurrence of orientation values in the sample of interviewees. With the exception of 'spirituality', the least common category, and 'environmental concerns', the only category present in nearly 50 interviewees, most other categories were equivalently represented with an occurrence of around 30. Together, 'environmental concerns' and 'attraction' surpassed utilitarian and dominion values (see also numeric results in Table 1). In fact 'environmental concerns' was the orientation with the highest score and was often coded in specific opinions about the lynx. For instance, key actors mention that an advantage of reintroduction is saving the species globally and also that this predator will bring ecological balance to the ecosystem, both

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