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Emotional conflicts in rational forestry: Towards a research agenda for understanding emotions in environmental conflicts ☆

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ABSTRACT

When looking at social conflicts around forests, both foresters and researchers tend to frame conflicts as rational differences related to diverging knowledge, values, and interests. In past centuries, and in areas where the forests are of immediate livelihood importance, this has been a powerful approach to explaining disputes. However for many stakeholders, including local communities, environmental campaigners and foresters themselves, feelings and emotions are also relevant components of a conflict. In this paper we argue that an overall tendency to 'rationalise' nature and forests has pushed emotion out of sight, and delegitimised it. Using examples from our own research in The Netherlands and the UK, we argue that feelings need to be visible and legitimate, in order to address the underlying causes of conflict. We begin the paper by examining how conflicts have been framed as rational, by researchers, managers and politicians. We seek explanations for both the 'hidden' nature of emotions and their labelling as 'irrational' in the rationalisation of forest science and management as a result of wider modernisation processes. We propose bringing emotions back in, to show how conflict is not merely based in diverging views, but is in fact a dimension of engagement. We suggest four aspects of forest conflicts in which emotions should be incorporated in research, all connected to literature from outside forestry: emotional sources of diverging views on forest management, emotional influences on the processing of information, the motivating power of emotions for social movements and the role of emotions in the escalation of protests.

1. Introduction

Conflicts about forests are not new. Since the Middle Ages, special laws have applied to forests to protect them as resources for elite use, forcing those with livelihood-based needs into illegal activities. Utilitarian needs have also played a role in more recent conflicts, such as those between loggers and ecotourism or between biodiversity conservationists and leisure (Niemelä et al., 2005). Especially in the more densely populated and industrialised regions of the North, these conflicts have increasingly moved beyond the utilitarian, and beyond simplistic differences in stakeholder values. Here conflict is perhaps more surprising and the causes more elusive: the forests are largely artificial, livelihoods rarely depend on them, and they lack the iconic status of the Amazon rainforest or the giant redwoods of California. The scale of forest-related protest and dispute has sometimes caught the authorities unawares. As the heavily defended tree camps used in protests against new road schemes in England in the 1990s (North, 1998) illustrate, such conflicts have been fuelled by something stronger than 'interest'.

Emotions play a strong role in such conflicts but professionals are often at a loss as to how to engage with emotion, and how to take account of it in participatory decision-making processes. For example, a study from the USA highlights the mass of letters objecting to public forest management plans in Indiana State, and the scarcity of resources for analysing or assimilating the values and emotions expressed there (Vining and Tyler, 1999). In the course of our own research, we are often struck by emotional accounts of people's attachment to forests and their anger about new forest management policies or plans. But we are struck even more by the lack of reference to such emotional accounts in many analyses of forest conflicts, which tend to focus on diverging interests, values or goals (Kaltenborn and Williams, 2002).

A quick survey of the literature using a common bibliographic search engine, Scopus, highlights the issue. A search on 'forest* AND conflict*' produces 2817 references, while a search on 'forest* AND conflict* AND emotion*' produces only 13. On inspection, only five of those are relevant. Two of these refer to the emotional component of local people's place attachment (Creighton et al., 2008; Flint, 2006); one refers to recreational users' place attachment (Mann and Schraml, 2006); one

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refers to the emotions that forest managers bring to their work (Kennedy and Vining, 2007); and one concludes that emotions characterise all sides in a conflict (Natori, 1997).

This paper is a reflection on this situation, and a call for a new research agenda. It is based on a discussion and analysis by two researchers with experience of a range of social science disciplines, and social forestry practice. Through this discussion, we question:

- why emotions are overlooked
- what other literatures (other than the brief search mentioned above) can add to our understanding of emotions in forest conflict
- how we might bring emotions back in, both to research and to practice.

In doing so we draw on our combined experience of a range of social sciences and participatory practices, to revisit a wider literature and to reinterpret some of our own data. In doing so we draw on some quotes that are derived from analysis of more recent research by the authors or their colleagues. For more information on these studies, including the methodologies see Buijs et al. (2011), de Groot et al. (2012), Lawrence (2010) and Lawrence and Turnhout (2010).

Our paper is structured as follows. Section 2 is a very brief examination of definitions of emotions and how they are addressed by social sciences. Section 3 focuses on the tendency to delegitimise emotions in forestry. Section 4 reviews ways in which the 'rationalisation of nature' has been addressed by anthropologists and geographers, and discusses its particular relevance to forests. We then examine in Section 5 how 'difference' or 'conflict' has been framed by researchers, managers and politicians, and seek explanations for both the 'hidden' nature of emotions and their labelling as 'irrational'. We then turn to theories outside environmental sciences, most notably psychology, sociology and political sciences, to explore how emotions can be understood constructively.

2. What are emotions? The contribution of social science

In order to discuss the role of emotions, we need to define and differentiate the types of emotions relevant to the understanding of forest conflicts. In psychology, emotions are seen as often automatic and partly somatic reactions that occur when individuals encounter significant relationships with others or with their environment (Frijda, 1986). Often a distinction is made between affect, mood and emotion (Forgas et al., 2004). Affect is the generic label combining moods and emotions. Moods are described as "low-intensity, diffuse and relatively enduring affective states without a salient antecedent cause" (e.g. feeling good). Emotions are "more intense, short lived and usually have a definite cause" (e.g. anger) (Ibid, p. 4). Because we focus on forests and forest management as an antecedent cause for emotional responses, we focus in this paper on emotions, not on moods or affect in general.

In his appraisal theory of emotion, Lazarus (1991) relates emotions to values. He defines emotion as a reaction on the appraisal of an unwanted situation. Emotions then are a way of coping with such threats. People typically feel angry when they appraise an event as personally relevant, inconsistent with their goals, and when the event is caused intentionally (Tangney et al., 2007). Especially when moral standards are violated by the behaviour of other people or institutions, righteous anger is a common response.

In addition to negative emotions of anger, grief and disgust, positive emotions also need to be mentioned in relation to forests and forestry. Indeed, for the general public current meanings of forests and nature are primarily based on a love for and aesthetic appreciation of nature, and are thus highly emotionally charged. Especially the emotions of connectedness and attachment to living beings and relevant places are important emotions in this respect (Jacobs, 2012; Manzo, 2003). In psychology these emotions are often subsumed under the heading "moral emotions" (Tangney et al., 2007). Moral emotions include empathy and sympathy for other living beings and are closely related to feelings of concern for distressed others (including e.g. trees and animals). Such empathic concern often initiates "righteous" anger as well as helping behaviour. The energising power of such feelings of anger has led collective action researchers to describe emotions as the conceptual bridge between cognitive appraisals of a situation and the tendency to organise and stand up against such behaviour (Van Zomeren et al., 2008).

Forests and nature often refer to our deepest emotions of identity, spirituality and feelings of social and historical belonging. A range of traditions in psychotherapy theory show us that (especially in Western cultures) we often do not know what we feel, or if we do, we do not know why (von Franz and Hillman, 1986; Yalom, 2001). Consequently, it is likely that forests become the theatre of deeply held (and often unconscious) anxieties about the modern world, its uncertainties and the loss of nature. However, there is still a wide gap between social science and psychotherapy (Svasek, 2005), which leaves these points as speculative.

To fully understand the power of emotions it is useful to complement psychological insights with those from the sociology of emotions (Hopkins et al., 2009). Also sociological thought explicitly links emotions to both values and cognitions. Emotions are interpreted as "intelligent responses to perceptions of value and, as such, part of the system of ethical reasoning" (Nussbaum, 2001). However, in sociology much more focus is put on the social origin and functions of emotions. Emotions are seen as culturally defined and constructed. In childhood, but also during professional education we learn whether it is appropriate to express feelings in certain social settings, what feelings are appropriate, and how feelings should be expressed. Sociology also discusses the discursive power of emotions (Burkitt, 2005). In this approach, emotions are not just individual outcomes of a process, or input for decision making, but are (re)constructed in discourses. Whether emotional arguments are seen as appropriate and taken into consideration in decision making is then part of the power relations between the actors. For example, the dominant discourse on governance suggests that valid decisions are based on rational rather than emotional arguments (Hopkins et al., 2009).

3. Emotion delegitimised

In adjacent fields, particularly in the field of biodiversity conservation, scientists have contributed to an active debate about the value- and emotion-laden nature of decisions (Mayer, 2006; Takacs, 1996; Trudgill, 2001). In contrast, emotions are neglected in forestry-related research. One detailed example published in 1999 focused on 'values, emotions and desired outcomes reflected in public responses to forest management plans' (Vining and Tyler, 1999). Of the thirteen papers citing this study however, none indicates incorporation of emotion into the decision-making process. One of them indicates that the dichotomy between emotion and information is still there, ten years on:

> *"[Decisions were] delayed by assumptions on the part of managers that the public simply lacked the right information, when the real problem was a lack of trust in the management team" (Wilson, 2008, p. 1453).*

In her analysis of emotional agency in conflict between environmental protesters and loggers in old-growth forests of Oregon, Satterfield (1997) concludes that loggers feel very uncomfortable with emotional accounts of the protesters. In turn, the protesters use these emotional accounts very strategically to make their claims about the forest. Other accounts more typically miss out the emotional dimension. A detailed study of one of the most passionate conflicts in recent English forest policy, around the perceived threat to sell the Forest of Dean, mentions no negative emotions, but emphasises the positive attachment to the Forest:

> *Children love the Forest, it's a really big resource for playing … children come out in the rain, the sun, the snow and the dark and they absolutely love playing in the dark. [quoted in Jarman (2011)]*