Fighting talk: Organisational discourses of the conflict over raptors and grouse moor management in Scotland

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ABSTRACT

Conflict is currently one of the greatest challenges facing wildlife conservation. Whilst conflicts may first appear to concern wildlife, they are often embedded within wider debates surrounding land use, land ownership, and the governance of natural resources. Disputes over the impacts or management of a species therefore become symbols for conflicts that are fundamentally between the divergent interests and values of the people involved. NGOs representing the interests of local stakeholders can become actors within the conflict, often utilising publicly available platforms such as websites and social media in an attempt to influence over others and gain a dominant foothold in the debate.

Here, we examined discourses of organisations in relation to a contentious and high-profile case of conflict in Scotland, that occurs between interests of raptor conservation and grouse moor management. News articles sourced from the websites of six organisations – identified as key voices in the debate – were subjected to discourse analysis. 36 storylines were drawn from common phrases and statements within the text. Storylines demonstrated a clear divide in the discourse; organisations differed not only in their portrayal of central issues, but also in their representation of other actors. Discourses were strategic; organisations interpreted the situation in ways that either supported their own interests and agendas, or damaged the image of opposing parties. We argue that discursive contestation at this level could be damaging to mitigation efforts – widening barriers between stakeholders and risking already fragile relationships. This in turn reduces the likelihood of consensus and impacts on successful decision-making and policy implementation. We conclude that conflict managers should be aware of the contestation between high-profile actors, and the ramifications this may have for conflict mitigation processes. An understanding of what constitutes these discourses should therefore be used as a foundation to improve dialogue and collaborative management.

1. Introduction

Conflict poses one of the most significant challenges to wildlife management across the globe (Redpath et al., 2015). The actual root causes of conflicts in conservation are often latent and so are difficult to define and address (Engel and Korf, 2005; Mathevet et al., 2015). It may seem that conflicts arise due to the impacts of wildlife on people – livestock loss caused by predation for example – or the impacts of people upon wildlife (Treves and Karanth, 2003; Dickman et al., 2014). Equally, a form of land use may appear to threaten conservation initiatives, or land managers may be affected by environmental policy (Yusran et al., 2017; Mason et al., 2018). However, these disputes are often manifestations of deeper-rooted social conflicts, stemming from asymmetries in power, political preferences, values, beliefs and cultures (Skogen, 2003; Miall et al., 2004; Skogen et al., 2008; Young et al., 2016a). With each further dispute, these schisms are brought repeatedly to the forefront and become embedded, sometimes developing into an integral part of group identity (Madden and McQuinn, 2014). Certain social norms – such as the willingness to illegally kill predators – become associated with particular groups of people, and conflicts become heavily value-laden with different normative perceptions of what or who is 'acceptable' (Skogen et al., 2008; 2009; Crowley et al., 2018). It is now widely recognised that the relationship dynamics between stakeholders are more problematic than the economic or ecological issues that are so often given more attention by conflict managers (Marshall et al., 2007; Redpath et al., 2013; Lüchtrath and Schraml, 2015). As a result of underlying social conflicts, stakeholders become unable – or unwilling – to engage with alternative views, making

collaborative processes aimed at finding solutions for integrated land use challenging and ultimately, unsuccessful (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Stenseke, 2009; Lute et al., 2018). Understanding the social dimensions that hinder effective dialogue can improve these processes, and lead to policy decisions that are better aligned and received (Madden, 2004; Stenseke, 2009; Fox and Murphy, 2012).

An added complexity to such conflicts is that they often involve many different actors, and take place in a variety of settings (Gerique et al., 2017). 'Place-based' actors are typically local stakeholders, who directly effect, or are affected by, natural resources - such as farmers, land managers, and local researchers (Sterling et al., 2017). However, local stakeholders are often represented by national and international organisations, who are typically invited to represent different interests at deliberative and decision-making processes (Jasanoff, 1997; Eden et al., 2006). Such organisations can therefore become actors within the debate, coming into disagreement if they feel their objectives, or the interests and values they embody, are threatened. These actors may enter into conflict discursively; using publicly available sources of information, such as web articles and social media, to contest with one another (Buijs, 2009; Lester and Hutchins, 2012). Such resources can have substantial outreach, and therefore provide the ideal platform for organisations to drive forwards their own agendas by engaging the public and/or authoritative bodies with their campaign (Entman, 2003; Carragee and Roefs, 2004; Gamson, 2005; Buijs, 2009; Díaz et al., 2015; Smith and Watson, 2015). Using these outputs, groups may express their understanding of the situation, their preferred outcome, and their perceptions of the views and actions of others (Eder, 1996; Buijs et al., 2011; Buchanan, 2013).

In this paper, we delve deeper into these discourses to tease out the factors driving underlying conflicts between non-place based actors. Environmental issues such as land use conflicts are often described as "socially constructed" – in essence, situations that are built and sustained by discourse (Castree, 2001). 'Discourses' may be understood as a form of social interaction, occurring in the form of speech or text (Hajer, 1995; Hajer and Laws, 2006). On the one hand, they shape how an individual perceives the world, and provide a lens through which that individual may make sense of a complex issue or debate (Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002; Benjaminsen and Svarstad, 2010). On the other, perceptions may also influence discourses; certain discourses may occur in response to the rhetoric of another, or in reaction to a personal experience (Shotter, 1993; Cunliffe, 2002; Bartesaghi and Castor, 2008). For example, the discourse of one actor prompts another to alter their own in response (Gray, 2003; Buijs et al., 2011; Schwedes et al., 2013). This process is described as 'Schismogenesis' by Brox (2000), who developed the concept as a way of explaining the social interactions between actors in an escalating case of conflict in Norway, which exists over the placement of predators such as brown bear *Ursos arctos* and grey wolf *Canis lupis*. Here, schisms between actors where established through discourse, through their divergent portrayals of the situation. These differences were then exacerbated through the interaction between them; an argument made by one group spurred another to respond, in a 'vicious cycle' where one attempted to out-do the other (Bateson, 1935; Brox, 2000). Discourses and social interaction therefore have an important role in how land use conflicts are framed and interpreted, as well as how they are shaped (McNamee and Gergen, 1999; Brox, 2000; Idrissou et al., 2011).

Gaining an understanding of the discursive contestation between organisational actors is of great importance to conflict management. Firstly, if the process of schismogenesis remains unchanged, conflicts will grow in intensity, making them harder to alleviate (Brox, 2000; Madden and McQuinn, 2014). As these organisations are frequently present in decision-making processes, their adversarial positioning may hinder the development of sustainable, collaborative solutions to land management issues (Buijs et al., 2011; Fox and Murphy, 2012). By choosing to advance their own position, some actors may succeed in getting a specific interpretation reflected by policy (Carragee and Roefs,

2004; Buijs et al., 2014; von Essen and Allen, 2017). Whilst this is neither right or wrong *per se*, it may exacerbate tensions between local stakeholders, who feel their concerns have been neglected (Richardson, 2011; Linell and Marková, 2014). It is therefore imperative to investigate what is constituted in the discourses of organisations involved in conflict, unpicking the social mechanisms that may drive such contestation – such as important relationship dynamics (e.g. O'Donnell and Stokowski, 2016) - so that they may be addressed. Furthermore, such exploration can shed light on not only potential areas of conflict, but also shared concerns and values. We argue this knowledge could then be used to inform policy and management strategies, by highlighting areas of potential consensus that could be used as a starting point for new dialogue.

The use of discursive strategies by stakeholders has been studied extensively in the literature related to ecosystem management, ecosystem services, species reintroduction and climate change (Arts et al., 2012; Ferranti et al., 2014; Waylen and Young, 2014; Carmen et al., 2016; Crate and Nuttall, 2016). However, the use of discourse by high profile organisations within conflict is still poorly understood, raising questions about the implications for these situations. This paper aims to understand the use of discourse by six key organisations associated with the conflict between the interests of raptor conservation and grouse moor management in Scotland – a contentious and deep-rooted conflict, with an extensive history. We use discourse analysis to ascertain 1) how these organisations publicly interpret the conflict and its related issues, such as illegal killing; 2) how they represent the roles and motives of other actors within the conflict; and 3) the implications of using these discursive strategies to support their own objectives and agendas. Finally, we make suggestions as to how this improved understanding of their use of discourse can be used to move towards a successful mitigation strategy for conflict.

1.1. Raptor conflict in Scotland: a case study

In Scotland, raptors have been a focus of controversy for decades. Whilst conservation conflicts exist between raptor management and other land-uses, such as farming and pheasant shooting, clashes between conservation and grouse shooting industries are well-documented and thus are the focus of this paper (Whitfield et al., 2003; Thompson et al., 2009, 2016; Redpath et al., 2010, 2013). A history of hunting, habitat loss and pesticide use has contributed to the decline of many raptor species, some to the point of local extinction (Smart et al., 2010; Balmer et al., 2013; RSPB, 2014). Primarily a change in legislation - it was declared illegal to intentionally kill, harm or disturb a bird of prey or its nest in Britain in 1954 – alongside extensive conservation efforts has seen the return and expansion of several of these species. Yet, this has led to concerns amongst some members of the shooting sector over the impact of increasing raptor populations on gamebirds. Hen harrier *Circus cyaenus* are a particular focus of such apprehensions, and have been shown to be a potential limiting factor on populations of red grouse *Lagopus lagopus scotius* (Thirgood et al., 2000). It is estimated that up to 1.7 million of Scotland's landscapes are managed to support the recreational sport of driven grouse shooting (Grant et al., 2012). The sport provides revenue to Scotland's economy, supporting rural communities, and holds important cultural value (Thirgood and Redpath, 2008; Sotherton et al., 2009). However, there is evidence to suggest that the illegal killing and disturbance of birds of prey is ongoing and associated with land managed for driven grouse shooting; between 1994 and 2014, 779 cases of illegal killing were recorded, with gamekeepers on shooting estates confirmed or suspected as the culprits for 86% of these incidents (RSPB, 2014). It is argued that this has negatively impacted populations of hen harrier (Redpath et al., 2002), golden eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* (Whitfield et al., 2003) and red kite *Milvus milvus* (Smart et al., 2010). Similarly, common buzzard *Buteo buteo* are an emerging conflict, becoming the source of debate over whether licences should be administered for their control following