



The reintroduction of the white-tailed sea eagle to Ireland: People and wildlife



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ABSTRACT

Human-wildlife conflict is a rapidly developing topic in biodiversity and conservation management. Restoration ecology and species reintroductions have increased contact between people and wildlife which in turn has led to increased conflict. This paper explores the conflict surrounding the reintroduction of the white-tailed sea eagle to Ireland. It provides a summary of how the diverse stakeholders – conservationists, farmers, tourist lobby and general public – interpret the eagle's homecoming after an absence from the landscape of over a hundred years. Species reintroduction projects tend to be dominated by natural scientists, who emphasise the impartiality of science and often ignore or down play the socio-economic aspects of species reintroductions. The conflict surrounding the reintroduction of the sea eagles to Ireland reinforce the truism that behind all human-wildlife conflict, lies human-human conflict. The paper argues that the human dimension of species reintroductions need to be taken seriously if the project management aims are to be achieved, and that legislation and law enforcement on its own will not solve human-wildlife conflict issues. The conflict between the 'raptor and the lamb' described in this paper highlights the need for the early involvement of all key stakeholders, and the importance of establishing effective dialogue and communications among the different parties. It should also be recognised that the reintroduction of a species may not always be the right option to pursue.

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Introduction

Species reintroduction is defined by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature – IUCN (1998: 6), as “an attempt to establish a species in an area which was once part of its historical range, but from which it has been extirpated or become extinct”. Reintroductions are increasingly seen as an important conservation tool that enhances biodiversity, aids in ecosystem restoration and can play a pivotal role in the rewilding of landscapes (Wilson, 2004; Manning et al., 2009; Foreman, 2004; Taylor, 2005). It also carries the ethical justification of restoring the ‘errors of the past’, and is often seen to have local economic benefits in the area of eco-tourism and recreation. As argued by Arts et al. (2012) the rhetoric of reintroduction biology is increasingly presented in terms of the ‘win-win’ logic of ecological modernism. The restoration of wildlife populations worldwide has led to increased contact between people and wildlife, which in turn has led to increased conflict (Thirgood and Redpath, 2008; Woodroffe et al., 2005). Conflicts arise when one party is perceived to take action at the expense of another party's interests (White et al., 2009). Behind the conflict often lie differences in fundamental values,

attitudes, goals, historical wounds and power imbalances among the various stakeholders. Conflict between people and wildlife that involve predators is often the most controversial, with our innate predisposition being one of deep enmity (Kruuk, 2002; Quammen, 2003; Hayward and Somers, 2009). McGowen (1997: 7) reminds us that, “*We have a fatal attraction for predators, possibly because we often fell prey to their attentions during more remote periods in our history. We also have a morbid curiosity for the fate of the quarry – how the last desperate moments of their lives played out.*” Human safety and livestock predation are globally the most common sources of human-wildlife conflict (Thirgood et al., 2005; Manning et al., 2009; O'Rourke, 2000). The case study described in this paper relates to the reintroduction of a raptor, the white-tailed sea eagle, to Ireland and its perceived threat to new born lambs and consequently to the livelihoods of hill sheep farmers.

Modern positive attitudes to wildlife and conservation have increased tolerance for conservation and the reintroduction of potentially damaging wildlife, especially if it is among the charismatic species that attract humans, such as large mammals and birds. Wilson (2004) found that attitudes to reintroductions and carnivores generally tend to be favourable amongst the general public, but negative amongst those most likely to be adversely affected. Research in Sweden found that over 70% of the general public were in favour of saving the wolf, whereas over 70% of reindeer owners were against it (Björvall, 1983). Those who fear they

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will be the ones to suffer losses are still likely to oppose reintroductions, as is the case in the study described in this paper. Fears rooted in cultural or traditional views could be just as important as scientifically proven evidence based ones (Wilson, 2004). Human–wildlife conflicts are typically characterised by inadequate information exchange, poor communications and power imbalances, often resulting in high levels of distrust between stakeholders (Madden, 2004; Woodroffe et al., 2005). Research in human–wildlife conflict has been accused of being an immature and fragmented field with most studies adopting a case study approach with poorly developed theoretical underpinnings (White et al., 2009; Madden, 2004). However, this research area will always have to balance global insights and generic guiding principles with local variability and specificity. The cultural, political and practical barriers to species reintroductions cannot be underestimated (Manning et al., 2009; Macdonald, 2009; Thirgood and Redpath, 2008; Wilson, 2004; Nilsen et al., 2007).

Human–wildlife conflict management has traditionally been conducted by ecologists and biologists, who tend to emphasise the impartiality of science and often ignore the social and economic aspects of the conflict. However, it is increasingly evident that, as Madden (2004: 250) put it, 'biology is part of the solution, but it is not sufficient in itself'. Human–wildlife conflict involves people and knowledge of the human dimension, including the values and attitudes of stakeholders in a conflict situation is "arguable as important as an understanding of the underlying ecology" (Thirgood and Redpath, 2008: 1552; Sarewitz, 2004). This is reflected in IUCN reintroduction guidelines that address not only technical issues, such as habitat suitability, but also the need for support from local communities and possible provision for compensation (IUCN, 1998; Wilson, 2004). Given that humans have been at the root of most species extinctions, central to successful reintroduction projects and conflict mitigation is an "understanding of what is – and conversely what is not – acceptable to stakeholders" (Thirgood and Redpath, 2008: 1553).

The case study described in this paper relates to the reintroduction of the white-tailed sea eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) to Killarney National Park, Co., Kerry, SW Ireland. It commenced with the arrival of fifteen sea eagle chicks from Norway in June 2007. In the course of the subsequent five years (2007–2012) one hundred chicks were introduced. The reintroduction of the sea eagles is part of a larger project undertaken by the Golden Eagle Trust (GET) to reintroduce raptors to Ireland; with the golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) being reintroduced to Glenveagh National Park in County Donegal (commenced in 2001), the red kite (*Milvus milvus*) to County Wicklow, and the buzzard (*Buteo buteo*) has naturally started to re-colonise the island. The Golden Eagle Trust is a registered charity dedicated to the conservation and restoration of Ireland's native birds and habitats. The Trust works in close collaboration with the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. For example, 70% of the initial cost of reintroducing the sea eagles to Killarney was born by the Department of the Environment. Attempts to reintroduce the white-tailed sea eagle to northern Scotland, in particular the islands of Mull and Rhum, commenced in the late 1970s, and to date about 250 chicks have been introduced there from Norway (RSPB, 2008; Love, 1983). The donor population of sea eagle chicks for the Irish project also came from Norway. Norway is believed to have about 3000 pairs of sea eagles, equivalent to about a quarter of the world's population. The sea eagle is not on the IUCN Red List of endangered species, but it is a species of conservation concern and is on the priority Annex 1 list of the EU Birds Directive. It is one of the world's largest birds of prey, with a wingspan of over 2.4 m, it can live for 30–40 years and mature females weigh around 6.5 kg. The sea eagle was driven to extinction in Ireland in the late nineteenth century, with the last sighting recorded in county Kerry in 1898 (D'Arcy,

1999; Ussher and Warren, 1900). Manning et al. (2009) argued that the long term absence of any organism or ecosystem from a region can be a major barrier to restoration, because over time not only do the ecological conditions change, but also human memory of the presence of a particular organism diminishes.

Methodology

The case study research presented in this paper draws from a wider project on biodiversity change in the Iveragh uplands, County Kerry (cf. O'Rourke et al., 2012; O'Rourke and Kramm, 2009; Kramm et al., 2010). It was while undertaking this ecological and farming systems research on the upland hill farms that the sea eagle, a powerful symbol of biodiversity, 'arrived' on the Iveragh peninsula. In the course of the initial research a detailed farm management survey was administered to over eighty hill sheep farmers. One of the questions on the survey, along with a frequent topic of conversation, was attitudes to the sea eagle. The biodiversity centred project (2006–2010) provided us with a good understanding of the area, its ecology, its people and access to key contacts in both the farming and conservation world. It foregrounded the subsequent work on the sea eagle reintroduction project. Research solely concentrating on the sea eagle project involved a series of thirty in-depth interviews conducted with the main actors, including farmers and farmer representative organisations (Irish Farmers Association (IFA) along with the Hill Sheep Farmers branch of the IFA), conservationists from the Golden Eagle Trust and Killarney National Park, and tourist and recreation interests from Killarney town, on the edge of the national park. The interviews provided an understanding of how the different actors perceived both the eagles and the reintroduction process. Most of the interviews were undertaken in the summer of 2011 and the remaining in 2012. The second arm of the research involved a close scrutiny of how the eagle reintroduction story was presented in the media, on TV and in local and national newspapers from 2007 to 2012, and in the project's web site and technical reports. This paper is essentially a narrative woven from the fieldwork, project literature and the media. It is theoretically informed by issues in human–wildlife conflict and conflict resolution. What started out as an apparently straight forward biodiversity enhancing, species reintroduction project quickly turned into a highly politicised conflict that pitted stakeholders against each other. What follows is a summary of the diverse stakeholders' interpretation and representation of the homecoming of the white-tailed sea eagle to SW Ireland.

The conservationists version

In both interviews and in project documentation the conservationists refer to the white-tailed sea eagle first and foremost as a 'native', as opposed to an 'alien', species that is so to speak 'returning home' to occupy its rightful place in the ecosystem.¹ Frequent reference was made to local folklore and place names containing the Gaelic word for eagle, 'Iolar', such as 'Sliabh an Iolar, Carraig an Iolar'. The fact that the sea eagle appeared in the crest of some historically well known local families, such as O'Donoghue and O'Rafferty, was also mentioned. It was implied that the eagle held pride of place in both the cultural and natural heritage of Ireland for centuries. Given that it was driven to extinction by humans over a hundred years ago, the ethical justification of restoring the errors of the past was inferred in the project literature. As a top predator it is expected that the sea eagle will help bring a balance to the ecosystem by controlling species such as the hooded crow (*Corvus cornix*) and

¹ Killarney National Park spends considerable time and resources trying to remove the invasive Rhododendron which is seen as a destructive 'alien' species.

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