



(De)legitimising hunting – Discourses over the morality of hunting in Europe and eastern Africa

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ABSTRACT

Hunting is an activity that appears to provoke – often immediate and strongly pronounced – moral assessments, i.e., judgments of what is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. A large body of literature explores these moral arguments, often from a philosophical or normative perspective, focusing on specific types of hunting. However, studies that ground such explorations in empirical, systematically analysed, yet contextualised data seem to be missing. We argue that such an approach is essential to understand conflicts over hunting and wildlife management, and present data from focus group discussions and interviews with hunters, non-hunters and hunting critics across six countries in Europe and eastern Africa.

Our findings suggest that moral arguments play an extremely important role in the legitimisation and delegitimisation of hunting practices through discourse. In particular, study participants referred to the *motives* of hunters as a factor that, in their eyes, determined the acceptability of hunting practices. Moral argumentations exhibited patterns that were common across study sites, such as a perceived moral superiority of the ‘moderate’ and ‘measured’, and a lack of legitimacy of the ‘excessive’. Implicit orders of hunting motives were used to legitimise types of hunting that were suspected to be contested.

On the basis of these findings, we discuss how the moral elements of hunting discourses relate to broader discourses on environmental management, and how these are used to establish (or dispute) the legitimacy of hunting. Our analysis also suggests that there might be more overlap between moral arguments of hunters, non-hunters and hunting critics than popularly assumed, which, where required, could be used as a starting point for conflict management.

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Introduction

The morality of hunting

Hunting is an activity that appears to provoke – often immediate and strongly pronounced – moral assessments, i.e., judgments of what is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, ‘good’ or ‘bad’, and such moral arguments are often powerful ingredients in disputes over hunting and wildlife management, whether in political, public or academic realms. Numerous philosophical articles explicitly address the morality of hunting (List, 1997; Veatch Moriarty and Woods, 1997; Peterson,

2004; Bergman, 2005; Cahoone, 2009; Vitali, 2010). Some of these focus on a specific approach to hunting, often taking a normative perspective in defence of a certain hunting type, such as trophy or sport hunting (Curnutt, 1996; Gunn, 2001; Van de Pitte, 2003; List, 2004; Dickson, 2009; Kretz, 2010). Other, often historical analyses address morality questions in a more implicit fashion (MacKenzie, 1987; Steinhart, 1989; Adams, 2009). However, only a handful of empirical – e.g., psychological, sociological or anthropological – studies exist that elucidate contemporary understandings of the legitimacy and morality of hunting.

Among these, Dahles (1993) and Marvin (2000) present hunters’ views and argumentation related to the legitimacy of their practices as part of their anthropological analyses of hunting in the Netherlands and England, respectively. And, based on a wide variety of textual data, Minnis (1996) develops a “comprehensive and exhaustive” (Minnis, 1996, p. 349) list of arguments raised against hunting, and contends that debates over hunting should not be

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simplified as a dispute between hunters and ‘anti-hunters’, as acceptability of hunting is context-specific, dependent on hunting methods, motives, the species hunted, places and participants. Heberlein and Willebrand (1998) replicate Kellert’s (1979) survey and canvass attitudes of the general public in the USA and Sweden towards three types of hunting, namely (a) traditional native subsistence hunting, (b) hunting for meat and recreation and (c) hunting for sport and recreation. Compared to Kellert’s findings 20 years earlier, attitudes had not significantly changed: native subsistence hunting was supported by a large majority in both countries, followed by hunting for meat and recreation, whereas majorities in both countries were opposed to hunting for sport and recreation. While Heberlein and Willebrand’s (1998) findings underscore Minnis’ (1996) statement that views on the legitimacy of hunting tend to differentiate between different types of hunting (rather than to support or condemn all hunting per se) and that perceptions of hunting *motives* play an important role in shaping these views, their study also highlights the limitations of very concise questionnaire items in eliciting people’s perceptions and attitudes towards moral aspects of hunting. For example, their findings provide little insight into the question how their respondents disentangled complex notions like “traditional native subsistence hunting” or “hunting for recreation *and* meat”. However, in-depth qualitative research that includes the views of both hunting and non-hunting individuals and groups on moral issues related to a range of types of hunting seems to be missing. As such insights are essential to understand conflicts over hunting and wildlife management, our study sets out to address this gap.

The moralities of land management

Previous research has explored the moralities associated to land management, such as farming, in the context of moral geographies, i.e., the question how “assumptions about the relationship between people and their environments may reflect and produce moral judgements, and how the conduct of particular groups or individuals in particular spaces may be judged appropriate or inappropriate” (Matless, 2000, p. 522). While moral arguments have to be understood in relation to their histories and geographies (Setten, 2004), the appreciation of their contextuality does not preclude us from investigating similarities and patterns of moralities *across* contexts (Smith, 2000). The four ‘axes’ of moral arguments identified by Brown (2007a,b) in her study on crofting (i.e., small-scale agriculture including the management of common property) in northwest Scotland could potentially provide a framework to organise enquiry into such patterns, also in relation to land management issues other than crofting: Brown (2007a,b) distinguishes between (i) identity-based (who counts as a proper crofter?), (ii) practice-based (what counts as proper crofting?), (iii) objective-based (what purposes ought crofting to serve?) and (iv) place-based (where is crofting seen as appropriate?) arguments. These four axes resonate with the types of arguments that Minnis (1996, see above) mentions in passing as underpinning the acceptance of hunting in the U.S.

Morality, legitimacy and discourse – the present study

Our study aims to provide a better understanding of what is seen as morally acceptable hunting across a wide range of cultural and environmental contexts. In this sense, it provides insights into the ‘moral geographies’ (see section ‘The moralities of land management’) of hunting. Unlike many other studies that address hunting from a normative perspective (see section ‘The morality of hunting’), we are interested in the empirical diversity of moral arguments, exploring the discourse of a wide range of people, including both hunters and non-hunters.

Three concepts form the backbone of our analysis: morality, legitimacy and discourse. We refer here to moral views as evaluations of hunting that present a certain activity as right or just – or as wrong and unjust. Strictly speaking, we investigate implicit ethics, i.e., theoretical aspects or conscious reflections of morality (Smith, 2000, p. 10), as expressed in people’s conversations about hunting. However, the boundaries between such implicit ethics and enacted morality, i.e., “what people actually believe and do, or the rules they follow” (Smith, 2000) are fluid.

We analyse how moral views are used to legitimise (or delegitimise) hunting in general or specific types of hunting in particular. Legitimacy can be understood as the perception that something (an act, person or institution) is “in accord with the norms, values, beliefs, practices, and procedures accepted by a group” (Zelditch, 2001 p. 33) – and legitimation, as a process, helps to stabilise social structures, while delegitimation can serve to challenge and destabilise such structures (Zelditch, 2001). The concept of legitimacy is thus closely related to morality in that it refers to what is seen as ‘right’, but unlike morality, can help to explain social processes of conflict and consensus building.

We interpret moral views and (de)legitimations brought forward in talk here as parts of discourses over hunting. Discourses, i.e., shared “ensembles of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena” (Hajer, 2006, p. 67), often have very strong moral components that reflect ideas of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. Surprisingly, however, such normative components are usually not explicitly considered in discourse analyses (Doulton and Brown, 2009; see e.g., Dryzek’s, 2005 analysis of environmental discourses). By contrast, we focus here on the normative elements of discourses over hunting.

In addition, we argue that these normative components should not be treated as isolated arguments, but explored against the backdrop of wider discourses on human–nature interactions. Like Haste and Abrahams (2008, p. 381), we examine “how moral accounts are constructed, normalised and drawn upon in discourse” and at the same time, how these moral accounts fit into their culturally embedded discursive contexts. We thus consider normative notions as both contributing to and influenced by discourses.

Here, we apply these concepts to provide insights into the ways how moral arguments work as part of discourses. To do so, we take a grounded approach, analysing talk (here: interviews and group discussions) about hunting from sites across six countries, each with their own cultural and ecological peculiarities. However, we do not attempt a comparative analysis, as strict comparisons would not be meaningful, given the qualitative and grounded approach we chose.

Methods

Study sites and sampling

We conducted focus group discussions and in-depth interviews in four European and two eastern African countries. Within each of these countries, we selected study sites that together cover a wide variety of ecological and social contexts in which hunting takes place (Table 1), ranging from agro-pastoralism at the margin of the market economy in Tanzania and Ethiopia (see Lowassa et al., 2013), trophy hunting in both Europe and Africa, hunting clubs in Croatia to sporting estates in Scotland or Spain (Arroyo et al., 2012; Díaz-Fernández et al., 2012).

In each of the study areas, we targeted three broad groups: (i) people who hunted, aiming to include hunters with a variety of interests and backgrounds, (ii) people who did not hunt and (iii) organised hunting critics who engaged in animal welfare, animal rights or anti-poaching activities. Focus group discussions

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