

## Understanding perpetuated conflicts over animals

Report from a workshop on long-term environmental conflicts in Chemindessus, Switzerland, 20-23 October 2015

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### Introduction

Human-wildlife conflicts and conflicts over conservation and protected areas are commonplace all over the world, and considerable effort has been put into understanding these conflicts in both natural and social sciences. Knowing the underlying causes and characteristics of these conflicts, however, has not provided sufficient answers to the question over why some conflicts reach a stalemate, sometimes lasting decades. We also know little about how such long-term conflicts can be managed.

A workshop supported by Koneen Säätiö and organised by the University of Eastern Finland, Université Grenoble Alpes – Irstea, the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, Aberdeen University and the Finnish Environment Institute, brought together international scholars and artists working on long-term environmental

conflicts. In this article, we summarize the presentations from this workshop, half of which were directly related to animals, while the rest targeted other types of environmental conflicts or provided insights on potential tools and methodologies. From this overview we draw some lessons for the future management opportunities.

### Stalemates and 'moderately serious conflicts'

Steve Redpath has been working on the conflict between conservationists and managers of red grouse populations in the UK. Grouse managers manage the land to maximise the number of grouse and in so doing some of them illegally kill hen harriers and other birds of prey. Conservationists are angry that these rare birds are killed to such an extent that



they are virtually absent from intensively managed grouse moors. Research over 40 years has highlighted that harriers can have a large impact on grouse and in certain conditions can make intensive forms of grouse shooting (often called driven shooting) unviable. Arguments now focus on how to manage the problem. A variety of technical solutions have been proposed to reduce the impact of harriers on grouse numbers, but increasingly the arguments are between those who seek to enforce the legislation and those who seek shared solutions through dialogue. Despite all the research, the long-term dialogue and the involvement of policy makers, this conflict remains at a stalemate.

Similar to the grouse conflict in Scotland, the conflict over marmots in some mowed meadows of two French alpine national parks has been on-going for decades. Isabelle Arpin illustrated the specificity and importance of this conflict as a *moderately serious environmental conflict*. Such a conflict is serious enough to complicate activities, create weariness and bitterness among all social groups involved, and impact negatively on the relationships between park managers and farmers. Yet, it generates only short-lived mobilizations and experimentations, and potential solutions to the problem are never fully and collectively explored. Several decades after the creation of the national parks, this apparently minor

conflict has influenced more visible and serious conflicts, notably regarding wolf conservation. More generally, it has contributed to a perception among the local communities of the environmental domain being fraught with inextricable and endless problems and conflicts.

Trying to understand another “moderately serious” but far-reaching conflict — the one between humans, wolves and dogs in Finland — Taru Peltola focused on *affective, micro-level interspecies interactions*, and in particular, the intensities, energies and impulses that enable humans to anticipate danger and avoid conflict. By analyzing the conflict from this perspective she addressed the role of affective impulses in making the conflict persistent and entangled with broader questions of wolf policy. Dog owners tend to blame the wolf, demanding wolf numbers to be reduced, even though wolf damage to dogs is the outcome of reciprocal interactions between humans, dogs and wolves. In many cases, the lack of human *response-ability* to potentially dangerous situations leads to the death or injury of dogs. The conflict is further maintained by the Finnish wolf policy through its “antiseptic” approach, focusing on wolf numbers rather than the capacity to deal with the presence of wolves (Peltola & Heikkilä 2015).

## Memory, shared narratives and conflict dynamics

Lessons from environmental conflicts can inform conservation conflicts. Maria Åkerman's presentation about the evolving and changing nature of mire conflicts in Finland highlighted the strong presence of different *cultural narratives and shared memories* in shaping rational argumentation. There are clear links, for example, to the historical and symbolic narratives about wolves (Ratamäki & Lähdesmäki 2015), and Åkerman pointed out the need to explore how various memory practices shape long-term environmental conflicts and create lock-ins — or open up new paths to solve the problems.

The *historical dynamics* of hydropower conflicts in Finland, and the case of the Iijoki River, presented by Lasse Peltonen, further highlighted complex conflict dynamics. First, the present escalation of hydropower conflicts is driven by past experiences: the traumatic history of hydropower conflict explains the contentiousness of new hydropower proposals. Second, new policy regimes highlight new aspects of old technologies. In this case, climate policy has created a new demand for clean electricity and hydropower. Third, the evolution of longer cycles of environmental and post-material values is at play, placing new value on, e.g. restoration of migratory fish species and the importance of recreational fishing.

Fourth, the dynamics of resurfacing conflict seems to be linked to 'political opportunities', affected by election cycles. Finally, the long-term history of the Iijoki case can be understood in the context of long-term extractive use of northern and peripheral natural resources, which goes far beyond World War II. Understanding and analysing such conflict dynamics can bring light to various different conflicts, including those focused primarily on animals.

## Hidden, slowly escalating conflicts

One aspect of conflict dynamics is the sometimes hidden nature of the conflicts, and tendency to escalate over time, evident in the documentary film by Tanya Stadelmann. Her research centers around environmental justice issues, and explores theories across disciplines such as sociology, cultural anthropology, eco criticism, documentary film and sound studies. She presented "This Creek", an experimental documentary (work-in-progress) about a community living near a Superfund site (abandoned toxic waste site) in Lockport, a small industrial town in Western New York. She discussed eco-critical ideas such as *slow violence* (Rob Nixon), *trans-corporeality* (Stacy Alaimo), and *testimonial narratives* (Mei Mei Evans) as a tool for environmental justice that inspired some of her formal strategies in editing the film. As a sonic motif to rep-

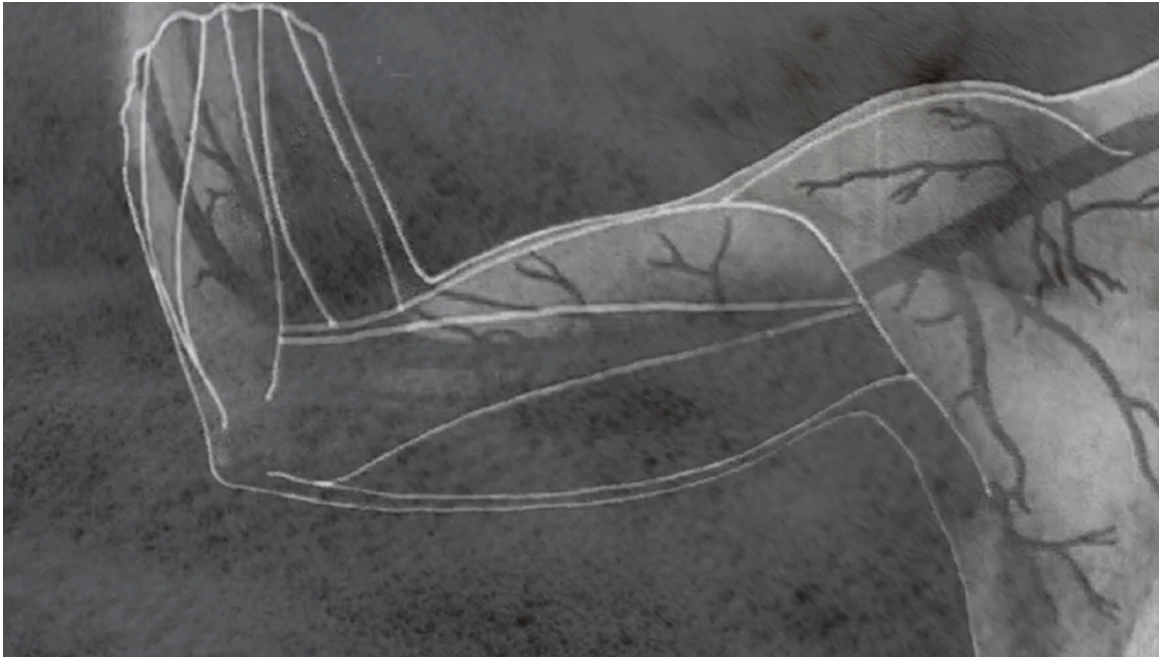


Fig 1. A film still from "This Creek".

resent the timelessness of slow-working chemical contamination, she incorporated electronic drone music by British composer Paul Bradley. Archival educational films of human bodies from the 1950s were super-imposed onto contemporary footage of the region to visually represent the diseased trans-corporeal body enmeshed with the landscape (Fig 1).

Tanya also shared some of her research comparing the long-term conflicts that occurred at the historical environmental disaster Love Canal (Niagara Falls, 20 miles east) in 1980 and Lockport in 2013. Conflicts between the residents, state and federal agencies are still rife despite the federal and state Superfund clean-up laws and new communication technologies. This comparative study led her to examine the topic of what initiates

environmental activism. In both cases, there would never have been a clean-up or attempt to resolve any conflict without the political grass roots efforts of activists.

The slow temporality of conflicts was also a theme in Teemu Palosaari's presentation that addressed the conflict potential of climate change in the Arctic. He discussed the local dilemma between traditional means of livelihood and modern hydrocarbon and mining industry, and the global environmental impacts of melting ice. As a symbol of the slow transformations in the Arctic he introduced the image of the "grolar bear" — the polar bear and grizzly hybrid.

## Towards conflict management

In addition to stalemates, and the conditions leading to the slow, persistent and serious outcomes of conflicts, the workshop participants also described successful cases of conflict management. Nina Nygren discussed a *more-than-human* view to environmental conflicts, and illustrated a case of a temporary and localized resolution – or perhaps prevention of a conflict – between land use planning and Siberian flying squirrels (*Pteromys volans*). The conflict has plagued land use planning in and around growing cities in Southern Finland since the 2000s (Haila et al 2007). The species is listed in the EU Habitats Directive annex IV of strictly protected species in 1995. A planned metro line project in 2014, together with experience of previous conflicts in other cities, finally convinced Espoo, the neighbouring city to Helsinki, to rethink the conservation of the flying squirrel. They made the most ambitious flying squirrel conservation plan in Finland for the southern part of the city, including moving corridors and habitats, to ensure the conservation despite the urban densification projects along the new metro line. Previous conflicts were necessary to put pressure on doing conservation in a different, more comprehensive way – to learn how to live with flying squirrels. The result has been less conflicts over planning – ecological outcomes remain to be seen.

In her contribution, Juliette Young broadened the discussion on *conditions for conflict resolution*. Her study about the long-term conflict between seal conservation and fisheries in North-East Scotland outlined a number of challenges with increased participation in conflict management. She identified four key conditions that were crucial to the successful participatory management of this biodiversity conflict: a local champion, the emergence of a crisis point (compared to the moderately serious conflicts), the involvement of decision-makers, and long-term financial and institutional support. Three of the four conditions point to the role of direct government involvement, highlighting the risk of devolving all responsibility for biodiversity conflict management to local communities. Without an informed debate and top-down support to local communities, the move towards bottom-up approaches could pose a danger to hard-won policy gains in relation to public participation, biodiversity conservation and conflict management.

Nils Bunnefeld discussed the potential for building a framework for conflict resolution based on ecological and social research on long term conflicts. Environmental conflicts are often damaging to long term sustainability, biodiversity and human livelihoods but we are currently missing a framework that is interdisciplinary and theory driven to tackle the complex ecological and social

systems and landscapes in which conflicts take place. These landscapes and systems are also dynamic and the problem is exacerbated by increasing levels of uncertainty due to current climate, land use and demographic change. Building on existing theories in social sciences, economics and ecology/fisheries, Bunnefeld argued for the need to develop a new interdisciplinary and dynamic framework for conflict resolution that embraces *uncertainties as an integral part of dynamic social-ecological systems*.

### **Engaging parties of conflict**

*Upstream engagement of relevant stakeholders* in both research projects and policy implementation processes was emphasized by Estelle Balian as a means to potentially avoid or at least mitigate local conflicts as trust and common understanding can be slowly but surely developed throughout the research stages. Researchers in conservation projects are more and more aware of the need to work with local actors and apply a range of participative methods so their research results and possible management recommendations are better understood and implemented. The role of the researchers is evolving in these transdisciplinary projects and so is their responsibility. Participation of actors cannot simply be tokenistic, and if stakeholders are asked to contribute, their contribution must be

taken into consideration or this might increase the risk for conflicting situations and stalemates.

Scottish musician, composer and performer Inge Thomson, who has been involved in an ongoing environmental conflict about obtaining the marine protected status for her native island of Fair Isle for some years, highlighted the role of artists in engaging positively in a conflict situation. Meaningful contact between artists and affected parties may help bring personal, cultural, and emotional aspects into the heart of the discussion. Artists can be employed to help foster empathy and empowerment, to spark hope and positive memories, and to access a public platform and a different media strain. Art has benefits compared to science: it keeps language simple, so as not to alienate different parties of the conflict.

### **Conclusions**

The workshop introduced diverse streams of thinking and working on conflicts, enabling the participants to look for unconventional approaches to conflicts. The possibility to rethink concepts and theories arose from the opportunity to test their applicability in the context of different types of conflicts ranging from global environmental problems to local conflicts. Sharing not only research findings but also hands-on experiences

in conflict resolution and mediation was considered key to achieving change. In particular, the workshop participants were keen on identifying ways to involve groups of people that are otherwise sidelined. This can take place by involving artists. Combining approaches generally presented as antagonist, such as evi-

dence-based approaches, modelling and more affective and qualitative approaches can help to find positive approaches to conflicts. Furthermore, the workshop encouraged reflection on the respective and potentially complementary roles of different types of scientists and artists.

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