

Asymmetric Wildlife in the Goričko Nature Park: Protecting (from) Species

Received: March 1, 2020 • Accepted: April 24, 2020

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Abstract: This paper presents an asymmetry of meanings and values that different human agents who occupy the same geographical space ascribe to distinct wildlife species. This asymmetry is the result of these agents' roles in the area and their contrasting epistemologies. The agents in question comprise the Goričko Nature Park as a conservation institution and inhabitants of the park, especially farmers. In most parks, the relationship between professionals and inhabitants is crucial to the park's sustainability. Therefore, the aim of the paper is to point at a selected neuralgic point which divides the two. At stake is that both agents ascribe importance to wildlife species, but to different ones and for different reasons. While the park focuses on protected species, inhabitants are occupied with non-protected ones. Whereas the park projects positive values on species of its concern, inhabitants ascribe negative characteristics to species of their concern. The paper illustrates these disparate attitudes to wildlife and calls for a less biased park agenda which could benefit the park's conservation project, yet it also acknowledges the lack of resources which hinders the park in properly fulfilling its role in the local web of relationships.

Keywords: multispecies ethnography; species; nature conservation; protected area; farming; Goričko Nature Park (Slovenia)

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary anthropology understands animals as part of beyond-the-human or multispecies collectives (GUILLE-ESCURET 1998; HARAWAY 2008; INGOLD 1990, 1994; KIRKSEY – HELMREICH 2010; KNIGHT 2005; LESTEL et al. 2006; LOCKE 2018). Often, the focus is on *relationships* between specific (groups of) human and animal *subjects* or *agents* (CANDEA 2010; FUENTES 2010; HARAWAY 2003; INGOLD 2013; KOHN 2007, 2013; METCALF 2008; WILLERSLEV 2007). This paper, by contrast, pushes forward an inquiry about humans *attributing character* and/or *values* to animal *species*, which constitutes another field of possibilities for engagement with animals in modern-day anthropology (DESCOLA 2013; HOWELL 1996; KIRKSEY 2015; MATHUR 2015; MULTISPECIES EDITING COLLECTIVE 2017; PODJED 2011; VIVEIROS DE CASTRO 1998). Endeavors to analytically grasp nonhuman species — albeit less in terms of humanly attributed character (what

nonhuman entities actually are), but concerned with the value of species in their own right — have proliferated conservation discourse (CITES 1973–2020; TIEFENBACHER 2012; TÓTH et al. 2019; cf. KOPNINA 2016). However, conservation sometimes stands on a detached assessment of the state of species in the world (cf. van DOOREN 2018), overlooking how practical human-animal relationships in specific ecological circumstances contribute to the human valuing of species (cf. BENSON et al. 2016; KOHN 2013; MATHUR 2015; METCALF 2008; WILLERSLEV 2007). This paper calls for more attention in conservation practice to people's encounters with animals and the consequent attribution of character and value to perhaps a different collection of species than conservation policy dictates, but which could nonetheless engender positive conservation effects.

More specifically, this paper presents the asymmetry of meanings and values that different human agents who occupy the same geographical area ascribe to distinct wildlife species as the result of contrasting dispositions for experiencing wildlife, i.e. contrasting epistemologies. The agents in question are the Goričko Nature Park as a conservation institution and inhabitants of the park, particularly farmers. This selection of agents, of course, does not fulfil the complex reality of the park, where other agents — local hunting associations, national hunting ground, forest service, NGOs, tourism providers, municipalities and the state — also play more or less important roles in regard to cohabitation with non-domestic animals. Nonetheless, in most parks — and particularly in this one, the major objective of which is to preserve local farming and agricultural landscape — the relationship between park professionals and inhabitants is crucial to the park's sustainability, yet also liable to be marked with tensions (cf. ISPÁN et al. 2018; MÉSZÁROS 2019). In this light, the aim of this paper is to outline a selected neuralgic point for inhabitants.

At stake is that the agents in question ascribe importance to wildlife species, but to different ones and for different reasons (cf. BROCKINGTON 2002; IGOE 2004; INFELD – NAMARA 2001). While the park focuses on *protecting species* of butterflies, birds, bats, frogs and some others, inhabitants are busy *protecting* their fields *from* large herbivores. The park projects positive values on selected animal species, including herbivores, whereas inhabitants seem to be more interested in the negative characteristics of these animals. This phenomenon is rooted in different priorities and ways of encountering species. As I will suggest at the end, however, the lack of means in the park to nourish sensitivity for recognizing inhabitants' priorities in the domain of human-animal relationships is also a crucial issue.

This paper, therefore, juxtaposes selected “top-down” and “bottom-up” priorities in the park (FIKFAK – MÉSZÁROS 2019). Such a juxtaposition of a conservation institution and park inhabitants is not original, and an anthropological engagement with conservation risks being biased in privileging the “bottom-up”, i.e. the inhabitants (KOPNINA 2012). I am aware of such a bias in this paper. Nonetheless, I aim to point out what troubles inhabitants because I believe that the park could engage this issue more seriously and could even turn it into an advocacy of local interests (SIMONIČ 2006; VRANJEŠ 2008).

The perspective on wildlife presented below exhibits to varying degrees in different villages and among different people in the area. What I present is not a detailed ethnography of human-animal relationships in various areas and domains of the park based on a long-term participant observation in a manifold of local practices. It is more an abstract of a disproportion of meanings and values of wildlife grasped in conversations

with the park professionals and inhabitants. Moreover, I do not mean to suggest that the park professionals are not aware of the inhabitants' perspective on wildlife as I will present here. Even so, as my ethnography indicates, this is something neuralgic, which is why I find it worth exposing in the framework of this publication as the result of the research project *Protected Areas along the Slovenian-Hungarian Border: Challenges of Cooperation and Sustainable Development*.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, I provide an overview of anthropological takes on species. Then I present my research methods. I continue with an explanation of the Goričko Nature Park's understanding of species and its role in the locality, followed by an overview of farmers' narratives about wildlife. I conclude with a comment on the asymmetry between the two locally engaged agents and point at an issue where the park shows itself to be particularly weak.

HUMANS AND ANIMALS: AN OUTLINE OF AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF SPECIES

In this section, I present a variety of human relationships with, attitudes to and evaluations of nonhuman animal species as recognized anthropologically. Speaking of species is already in itself an evaluation of life as distributed into types. Humans are eager classifiers (LÉVI-STRAUSS 1966). Everywhere they have been recognizing differences between animated beings, naming them, and putting them in relations to one another. However, in different societies, the grouping of animate and inanimate entities does not follow one and the same criteria for identifying commonalities and differences between them (HOWELL 1996), and in certain "ontologies" such diverse entities as certain humans, animals, plants, objects, landscapes, spirits, etc. form a type. According to Philippe Descola, if I may simplify his comprehensive study, people socialized into different ontologies identify specific nonhuman entities as: 1. humans of a different kind — animism; 2. beings of the same kind as specific kinds of humans — totemism; 3. beings that echo certain human traits — analogism; 4. beings whose biological aspect is the same as human, yet whose reason is inferior — naturalism (DESCOLA 2013). The latter is the background of modern biology.

The classification of beings is therefore ontologically and culturally manifold (cf. FOUCAULT 1970: xv). Besides, taxonomies have been historically transforming. In the discipline of biology, which is relevant to this inquiry, Carl Linnaeus' nested categories — kingdom, class, order, genus, species — presented in *System naturae* (1758) are "considered the starting point for animal taxonomy and nomenclature" (RITVO 2018:384). The usual biological definition presents species as "groups of organisms that can produce fertile offspring" (RITVO 2018:386), although it has never been a simple task to define where particular species begin/end or to apply these abstract categories to living beings. In anthropology, this modern (and very influential) classification of life was observed with suspicion because biology created a very particular platform for human relating with other living beings (INGOLD 2013:19). Nonetheless, anthropologist Eben Kirksey, who worked ethnographically with taxonomists and defined species as existing on the intersection between a reality of life and human recognition of that reality, maintains that "species" remains a valuable sense-making tool (KIRKSEY 2015).

In addition to the sheer recognition and categorization of similarities and differences between forms of life, certain cultures narrate species as metaphors for human society and behavior. For example, many European folktales, myths, and fables employ animals to represent humans and/or the human “Other”. Attribution of human virtues to animal species — e.g. fox the trickster — is well documented in folklore studies (GOLEŽ KAUČIČ 2013; KROPEJ TELBAN 2007; SAX 2001; ŠMITEK 2019). This is known as “anthropomorphism”, which, however, “as Kay Milton has pointed out, is almost invariably used as a label for a *mistaken* attribution of human characteristics to animals” (CANDEA 2010:252).

Returning to species with whom humans share a tangible world (in contrast to narrated or metaphorical species): primary school biology teaches us to distinguish between wild and domesticated species. The latter are considered an integral part of human society. However, this is not a universal distinction, but rather an invention of recent European history (DESCOLA 2013). The conventional idea that humans domesticated animals so as to protect them from the perils of “natural forces” (in the sense that these forces are not humanly ruled), took mastery over their breeding, predominantly in order to gain economic benefits, in anthropology “coexisted alongside other competing notions of relationships between humans and the environment, which emphasize mutuality, fallibility, and chance.” Gradually, however, “the unidirectional, progressive history of increasingly exploitative relationships with the environment” was replaced “with a more halting and incomplete version” of human-nonhuman relationships (CASSIDY 2007:5–6). The coevolution of species is not caged within the simple dichotomy of wild vs. domesticated and exists in various forms, e.g. cohabitation, commensality, coadaptation and companionship (CASSIDY 2007:10–20) as well as shared ecological niches (FUENTES 2010).

The obsolete understanding of domesticated animals as historically transferred from “nature” to “culture” comprised an idea that humans would cultivate animals mostly for specific gains (CASSIDY 2007:5). In this perception, domestic animals have value as food, labor-power, sources of various materials, means of protection, providers of joy, etc. They are judged by their usefulness. This criterion remains integral to mass-producing and mass-consuming societies, where species should have a certain function that proves useful according to human needs. The criterion of usefulness, however, is neither historically new nor culturally specific to modern societies. Hunters and gatherers also distinguish between edible and nonedible species. What is particular to modern societies, however, is calculation of the benefits of nonhuman species to humans as the supreme criterion for human relations with them (SHOREMAN-OUIMET – KOPNINA 2016:25–33).

Yet another matter are species regarded as the opposite of useful. Human attitudes towards such species are in certain cases confrontational (KNIGHT 2000). This is also the case with so-called “pest animals”, which harm people’s property and which are addressed in this paper. Besides, humans also categorize “dangerous animals” which may harm their life or that of other species. Another (recently cultivated) category of species that humans want to keep at a distance are so-called “non-native species”, whose status is attributed on the basis of their geographical distribution. In modern states, calls for biosecurity (SMART – SMART 2016) — protection against undesired species — have become frequent, leading to various forms of “animal bio-politics” (HODGETTS – LORIMER 2018:13–14).

Human violence against animals, either for the aforementioned reasons or as part of their treatment in the food industry, research experiments and entertainment, has given voice to animal rights movements. The term animal rights has gained two meanings: it either refers to “forms of advocacy for the better treatment of animals” or “is used in a much narrower sense to refer to the idea that animals are the bearers of inviolable moral rights that prohibit them from being harmed or sacrificed for the benefit of humans” (KYMLICKA – DONALDSON 2018:320). Moreover, as many people in modern-day societies nourish the supposition of their superiority in the animal kingdom and give priority to their own interests, neglecting those of nonhuman animals, human acts are defined by some theorists as “speciesism”. The latter — at least in its more radical version (e.g. DUNAYER 2009) — condemns any human act that fails to treat any kind of nonhuman species on equal grounds with humans.

Colonialism, urbanization processes, the growth of industrial agriculture, etc. — all involving violent acts of land appropriation — have given rise to other concerns about the human mistreatment of nonhuman life. In this case, evidence of extinct species — which Georges Cuvier already warned about two hundred years ago (van DOOREN 2018:169) — and humanly disturbed ecosystems, already observed by Alexander von Humboldt in 1800, paved the way for the emergence of conservation movements. The creation of protected areas where rare nonhuman species could peacefully procreate and the specific treatment of selected animals were the common methods in this field. Moreover, public concern about the scarcity of particular species, searching for methods to protect them and collecting sources to sustain biodiversity around the world, have become a distinguishing feature of modern-day societies as well as part of popular culture. In order to attract public attention, “iconic” or “charismatic” species are being popularized, for example animals that are large, fierce, funny, cute, etc. — which can serve as the TV stars of animal documentaries and reality shows (CANDEA 2010).

Humans often value individual animals, like their pets, but they also value animals as species. Even so, in the latter case, their valuing may be less or more abstract, depending on their ways of relating with these species. It is worth remembering that before it became a biological order, “the term ‘species’ meant a kind of quality, appearance, or characteristic [...] which classifies human and other-than-human collectives in a fluid and context-dependent manner” (BENSON et al. 2016:5). The distinction between the distant and context-dependent evaluation of species is crucial to this case study.

Whether park professionals or inhabitants, the people I worked with are, ontologically speaking, “naturalists” (DESCOLA 2013). They have all learned biology in schools and pay respect to distinctions between humans and animals as well as between wild and domesticated species. Most of the older inhabitants in the park have also had the experience of keeping livestock at one stage of their lives, and so the division between domestic and wild is tangible for them. In everyday life, however, inhabitants also observe that non-domestic animals and humans cohabitate, especially when agricultural labor benefits animals or when hunters breed them. For various reasons, they also narrate species, appending them anthropomorphic characteristics. Moreover, both professionals and inhabitants use various categories to describe them: “rare”, “indigenous”, “charismatic”, “pest”. On the other hand, these categories are not equally distributed among speakers. While the park primarily focuses on the category of “rare”, inhabitants complain about “pests”. This is, as I will illustrate below, an important asymmetry which affects both conservation and farming.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is the result of ethnographic fieldwork in the Goričko Nature Park, especially the north-eastern part. I initiated fieldwork in November 2017 and since then have made numerous, repetitive, short-term visits (usually one week long) to the area. The ethnography that I use here comprises two scopes of fieldwork activity: one carried out with local farmers and other inhabitants, the other with the park employees, also involving observations of the park itself.¹

At first, my research question was a loose one: I aimed to investigate the conditions for maintaining family farming in Goričko. Hence, wildlife was not initially part of my research interest at all. It became so when I discovered how omnipresent certain herbivores are for the people I met. Moreover, at the start, I also visited the park headquarters without knowing that my research would include wildlife. Later on, however, I documented two presentations of the park program to my students, which proved important for this interpretation. I also conducted unstructured interviews with the park director and one employee. In addition, I have found informative materials on the park's website, which is quite rich in data about its programs, goals, and working methods. My main interlocutors were farmers, but I have also worked with other inhabitants. Most people I have spoken to at some point mentioned wildlife as a local problem.

In this paper, I rely on the narratives of people who were born in (or nearby) the villages where they still live. The narratives of fourteen farmers literally quoted in this paper correspond to the opinions of other interlocutors. When interlocutors are mentioned in the text below, I also mention their year of birth (in brackets). Students who I also involved in fieldwork conducted an extensive number of interviews with a wide range of people, all of which have proven informative for understanding the issue presented in this text. Below, I quote some of the students' interviews and mention student ethnographers' names in footnotes (students were working in pairs). I express gratitude to all students who participated in fieldwork research in Goričko between 2017 and 2019.

NATURE CONSERVATION IN THE GORIČKO NATURE PARK

The Goričko Nature Park was established in 2003. It covers 462 square kilometers of Slovenia's northeast borderland region that was "purportedly 'forgotten' by progress — on the margins — but [is] now considered an idyllic landscape with a rich cultural history and a high level of biodiversity" (FIKFAK – MÉSZÁROS 2019:8). The park focuses on protecting "nature" in terms of *biodiversity*, while it constantly and clearly emphasizes that a great number of the so-called "natural" features of the area are the result of

¹ The project *Protected Areas along the Slovenian-Hungarian Border: Challenges of Cooperation and Sustainable Development* (J6-8254) receives financial support from the Slovenian Research Agency.

agricultural labor (cf. PILGRIM – PRETTY 2010).² For this reason, one of the core concepts the park deploys is the concept of “*cultural landscape*” as an anthropogenic landscape with a high rate of human-nonhuman relationality. Moreover, the founder and long-term director of the park is a landscape architect, who repeatedly emphasizes that the value of the area in terms of conservation derives from farming rather than from an “unspoilt wilderness”. On my visit, the park biologist and nature conservationist also stressed that as much as 98% of the park’s landscape is an outcome of historically contingent human practices and that its contemporary biodiversity is the result of extensive farming on small family farms. The park’s website reads thus:

“The high level of biodiversity in Goričko is the result of the different number of habitats in the mosaic-like cultural landscape. Over many centuries, this landscape was caringly maintained by the humble farming people of Goričko. [While other areas] became more and more uniform and faced the loss of plant and animal species, the Goričko landscape has remained diverse and enriched with a high level of biodiversity until today. This diverse landscape and high level of biodiversity were the main reasons for establishing a protected area of nature [...]. Because of the presence of many rare species and habitats, Goričko also came to be listed among protected natural areas in Europe – Natura 2000.” (GORIČKO NATURE PARK 2020)³

The roles of the park are manifold and include, among others, care for cultural heritage, the development of sustainable tourism and the management of a castle in the village of Grad. Its high priorities also include the protection of selected *species*, defined by Natura 2000 and other conventions, as well as cultural landscapes as *habitats* for the procreation of these species. Such a priority is also evident in the composition of the park employees, since — in addition to the landscape architect who leads the team of around 10 professionals — biologists and nature conservationists prevail. The director repeated several times during our meetings that while the park has a strong expertise in nonhuman species, it is weak in regard to communication and co-working with inhabitants, who are nevertheless crucial for maintaining the cultural and biodiversity-rich landscapes. She also frequently mentioned anthropology as a suitable profession for performing this task, but which the park cannot afford due to a lack of financial resources.

When I visited the park with my students, a biologist and nature conservationist started his presentation of the park’s conservation activities with an observation of the world in crisis, where nonhuman species are becoming extinct or endangered because of human activity. We learned that although the extinction of species is a natural process, humans have accelerated it tremendously. I would like to stress this point because it tangibly describes the park’s basic epistemology for engagement with nonhuman species. This epistemology ascribes value and priority to those animals which are rare in the world, locally indigenous and present, defined as important by certain measures,

² In the founding act from October 9, 2003 (DECREE 2003), the Slovenian government stated that the park aims to “protect natural values, preserving biodiversity and landscape diversity”, but also to expand opportunities for sustainable development in the region. In the latter context, small-scale agriculture harmonized with nature-oriented goals is deemed important.

³ The EU’s network of protected areas, Natura 2000, whose aim is creating a haven for selected species and habitats, was implemented in Slovenia on its accession to the EU, on May 1, 2004.

like Natura 2000. On its website and in public communication (such as on my visits), the park exposes orders of species and individual species that meet such criteria and form the reason for conservation activities. These include species of birds, amphibians, lizards, crayfish, and insects, particularly butterflies. Among mammals, several species of bats and otter stand out among park objectives.

The narratives and activities of the park represent quite a contrast from what local inhabitants deem important in the domain of wildlife. In the eyes of locals, broadly speaking, the animals that deserve attention are large herbivores: red deer, wild boar, and roe deer. Such animals, however, are a rather minor matter from the park's perspective. These species are not endangered and as such do not classify as a priority within the park's scope. Nonetheless, red deer appear on the park's website, likely because they figure as a charismatic species among the general Slovenian public. The park's website provides attractive information indicating that visitors can even see red deer during daytime, since historical isolation of the area has contributed to the preservation and expansion of its regional population. It also mentions that red deer are mostly present in north-east Goričko, where they migrate across the border (cf. KOZOROG 2019). Moreover, the website informs viewers that wildlife has attracted foreign hunters for a long period of time. In addition to the website, on the park's roads, one can see signs featuring silhouettes of roe deer, warning drivers to pay attention to big herbivores that might jump on the road. Nevertheless, sizable herbivores are not among the park's priorities, also because they are of concern to other agents, especially hunters and foresters.

The park considers informing people about wildlife an important task. As explained in the presentation to my students, one reason is that people nourish prejudices about certain species. Such, for example, is the case with the dragonfly, the protection of which contradicts human fear of this species. Consequently, providing information is complementary to measures and activities implemented by the park in order to safeguard wildlife. Pro-conservation activities, i.e. activities beyond lawful prohibitions, in many cases exceed mere information giving. The park has introduced several operations adjusted to specific behaviors or needs of species, which help animals of these species to survive. For example, when a species of frog migrates from one point to another in a certain period of the year, which involves crossing a road, park employees carry frogs across the road with the help of volunteers and thus protect them from becoming roadkill. In the village of Kančevci, the park placed an abandoned school that hosts a colony of bats under safeguard and created an educational program about bats there while an autonomous institution called Aqualutra, dedicated to monitoring the Goričko otter population, operates in the village of Križevci. On one occasion, I attended the presentation about bats in Kančevci, where, after describing the project, another park biologist expressed concern over local inhabitants having not accepted park activities such as this one open-heartedly.

However, rather than concentrating on the isolated needs of a given species, the park focuses on habitats with a complexity that fosters the survival of particular species. In this perspective, the most important conservation unit becomes *landscape* as a composition of habitats where certain species find a variety of resources for living. As the park biologist stressed, the major cause of species' endangerment are cuts that humans create in the chain of life, in which species and habitats are interconnected, so that in many cases the disappearance of one species is followed by the disappearance of others. This is why

the preservation of whole habitats and landscapes is crucial. The park stresses that the major value of its territory is the so-called “mosaic landscape”, a landscape composed of patches of fields, meadows, hedges, dry and wet grasslands, high-trunk orchards, solitary trees, vineyards and forests, forming a complex composition of ecological niches. The park biologist compared it to a Roman mosaic, the individual parts of which are worthless if the totality is lost. For this reason, the park invests great efforts to safeguard landscapes in their totality while at the same time focusing especially on those parts of the mosaic that are particularly important for the survival of specific species. Moreover, its focal landscapes are those habitat-carrying areas which have been neglected in recent decades because people have given up certain activities, namely farming, or which have been transformed by new human activities. Such are, for example, dry and wet grasslands: the first being in the valleys and the second on slopes. The first were uncultivated before the mechanization of farming because the soil was too heavy for tillage while the second were previously cultivated but with the introduction of machinery abandoned. Thus, with new technologies, grasslands have changed their role in farming and began to transform or disappear (cf. TÓTH et al. 2019). However, since these are habitats for many species of butterflies, the park began purchasing land where these grasslands were still preserved.⁴ Moreover, among farmers, the park began to promote cutting grass in periods of the year suited for insects. By offering them advantages, it also encouraged farmers to cultivate land as designed by the park, which meant adjusting farming activities to the needs of protected species. Farmers were thus attributed the role of safeguards and have thus gained a prominent role in conservation activities within the local environment.

In the park’s scope, however, one landscape appears to be less important, yet this is precisely the landscape that farmers find crucial with regards to problematic behavior among large herbivores. These are forests, which are a minor issue for the park because — as explained in an interview with a biologist — not many conservation-relevant species live there, except one beetle, which is among the park’s priorities in the future. By contrast, forests are crucial to farmers in the area because herbivores find shelter there. Therefore, while the red deer is a charismatic creature for the park, yet unimportant in terms of conservation, in the eyes of inhabitants the species is a pest animal and — along with its habitat — is thus a highly important matter. Consequently, according to some farmers, park authorities should devote far more attention to forests, especially the overgrown ones, because it is there that problematic wildlife finds haven.

There is a great deal of misunderstanding with regards to the park’s activities (or non-activities) among inhabitants, yet there are also domains where people miss a larger level of engagement by the park. This combination of a lack of knowledge, (mis) interpretation of the park, and missing action by the park in certain matters sometimes leads to unjustified judgements about the park, such as in the following comment: “They [the park] strive for more overgrowing so that more wild boars come, and red deer, and such fuck ups.” (b. 1984).⁵

⁴ The park staff observes that subsistence farming is decreasing locally, which led the park to start farming on its own and even registered as a farm.

⁵ The interview and transcription are the work of students Katja Čakić and Maja Apat.

FARMING (ON THE FOREST EDGE)

Robustly put, from the park's perspective, when it comes to wildlife, people living in the park could be engaged in two kinds of unevenly desired roles: they either represent a potential danger for species due to prejudices and a lack of knowledge, or they are crucial agents of nature protection, especially when properly instructed. The park has nourished the latter role among inhabitants, especially by promoting agricultural work as important to the maintenance of the landscape and habitats. Thus, for example, measures were introduced for the management of grasslands and orchards, which benefit animal species, e.g. butterflies and birds, and farmers were financially stimulated to implement them. One interlocutor (b. 1970),⁶ a small-holder (and she was not the only one with such an opinion), praised the park's activities, saying that the park has saved many landscape features which benefit both the survival of nonhuman beings and human well-being. She admired the peace in her surroundings: "In the summertime, you hear nothing but bird song." She recalled with approval how the park employees came to her village to keep a record on trees of exceptional thickness in the local orchards and installed hatcheries for hoopoes. Many people in Goričko, like this interlocutor, are even proud that this bird — the hoopoe (*Upupa epops*), the local name for which is *upkač*, nests in their surroundings. She explained enthusiastically:

"[The park professionals] came and asked if they could install [a hatchery for hoopoes on my property]. And I told them that I had seen upkač, and so they interviewed me, asking where I saw it. And really, last year, one whole family was there, three offspring and two parents. I saw them around here. [Later she adds:] I'm now attentive to upkač. For some time, they were not around, they were extinct, but now they've settled here again. And I see and hear them very near to my home, too. [I asked: Did you become attentive after the park's employees visited you?] Exactly! [...] They asked me where I saw them and I told them where."

According to this lady, birds deserve even greater protection than they have now. She gives an example of how forestry pays no attention to birds' nesting and intervenes in their habitats with heavy machinery, regardless of their nesting time. In her opinion, the park should expand its area of activities from grasslands and orchards into forests in order to protect birds there as well.

Still, although many people in Goričko mention the hoopoe as an iconic species which they take pride in having around and which is procreating thanks to their cultivation of the environment, not many espouse the virtues of nature protection as a locally desired activity, in contrast to this particular interlocutor. In addition, people associate (overgrown) forests with different animals, i.e. large herbivores as opposed to birds. Large herbivores are discussed enthusiastically and dramatically, and in such narratives, these animals figure as pests (cf. KNIGHT 2000; NAUGHTON-TREVES 1997).

⁶ This younger interlocutor mentioned that generational difference is a factor in how inhabitants understand the park and that younger people value it more positively than older ones. Nonetheless, when it comes to judging large herbivores, I have not noticed any substantial generational or gender difference.

According to observations by inhabitants, the structure of wildlife in the eastern area of Goričko has changed dramatically in the last half a century. In previous decades, mainly small game was present, e.g. wild rabbit, various birds and roe deer; gradually, the population of wild boar arose; and recently, red deer have become widespread.

“In the 1950s, there was very little big game, maybe a roe deer here and there, but many rabbits and only a few pheasants.” (b. 1950a)

“Partridge were here [...] and wild rabbit. Here and there a few roe deer, but red deer... perhaps two pairs in the whole district.” (b. 1961)

“In the fields, we didn’t have [wildlife]. We had rabbits, rabbits and... If we saw a roe deer, oh, that was big. [You found it outstanding?] Yes, yes, yes.” (b. 1949)

Among different herbivores, today red deer has the status of the biggest troublemaker, whereas in earlier decades (i.e. 1970s) people mentioned wild boar as the farmer’s major problem, because red deer were still scarce at the time. People explain that red deer are a majestic species and thus particularly problematic because the protection of fields against them is difficult. Some even argue that it is impossible because the weight and size of the animal enables it to destroy fencing and that sometimes even electric-wire fences are ineffective.

“You can’t [fence fields]. [Maybe] someone who can afford it, but are you going to fence everything? It’s such an investment that it’s better not to have it, right? And it breaks [a wire]. [...] If a three-hundred-kilo deer hurls into a fence, it takes everything in front with it. It’s an incredible strength, how powerful he [sic] is. [...] [In a village near the border] they have electric wire, but he doesn’t care, jumps over and it’s done, or breaks and goes freely. One breaks, others go [into the field].” (b. ca. 1950)⁷

Nonetheless, in certain (but not all) villages, one can notice a landscape crisscrossed with fences and wires. As one farmer (b. 1950) told me, he has eight fields and decided to make eight electric-wire fences, one for each field, because otherwise red deer and wild boar would feast on his crops. Even the field next to his house is fenced because animals are not afraid of people anymore, he explained. Fencing helps, but not sufficiently: “I’ve recorded. I had a field, half a hectare — they demolished it to the ground, and I had a fence. Wild boar are not afraid of electric wire, they have those bristles and just go through.” Moreover, regardless of the fencing, in the last season, wildlife destroyed his entire production of corn. He mentioned that if a field is destroyed or crops are eaten, he gets retributions from a hunting institution. Yet that is not the point of farming, because a farmer is not farming for retributions but to harvest: “It breaks your heart when you see it [the animal-made damage].”

Locally, there are diverse accounts and explanations about when and why the structure of species has changed. Most people, however, link the changes to animal

⁷ The interview and transcription are the work of students Aleksandra Kansky and Zala Prebil.

mobility (cf. HODGETTS – LORIMER 2018) as, for example, in the following explanation, which claimed that during major construction activities when building a railway through Goričko (launched in 2001) the noise held animals back, yet when the work was complete, animals acclimated to trains and learned to cross the railway, which opened a new territory for migration. The most often recited account, however, is that wild boar and red deer have populated the area from the east, i.e. across the Slovenian-Hungarian border due to the border regime change after the fall of communism in Hungary, which also opened a new corridor for animal migration (KOZOROG 2019). Ethnologist Fanči Šarf, who ethnographically investigated the area in late 1970 and the early 1980s, also reported that at the time red deer and wild boar had become increasingly present along Yugoslavian-Hungarian border because animals “came from the nearby Hungarian forests” (ŠARF 1985:74). Today people explain that when there was a strict, heavily guarded and militarized border between inimical Yugoslavia and Hungary (1948–1989; cf. MUNDA HIRNÖK – SLAVEC GRADIŠNIK 2019), few animals crossed it, whereas this has changed profoundly with the “softening of the border”, i.e. with the removal of obstacles and the disappearance of border guards.

The fact that wildlife migrates from Hungary is explained by pointing out an ecological difference between Goričko and the area behind the border. This difference is an outcome of the varying border and farming policies of neighboring socialist states. While part of socialist Yugoslavia (1945–1991), Goričko preserved the character of an agricultural area with many cultivated fields (SIMONIČ 2019), whereas Hungarian borderlands were either abandoned and allowed to overgrow or the socialist state collectivized the land and established large farming estates there. The latter were privatized in democratic Hungary. In this constellation, wildlife could find shelter in the overgrown parts of the Hungarian borderlands yet could not feed on cultivated land there because new private owners protected their large fields with efficient fences. On the other hand, food was available in the unprotected and fragmented Goričko estates.

Under socialism in Goričko, the land was privately owned, but people could own only up to 10 hectares of arable land. Besides, following the custom of partible land inheritance, even the smallest plots were equally distributed among heirs, which resulted in highly fragmented land ownership. Although land was redistributed in some villages during the 1990s so as to create larger plots (SIMONIČ 2019:145–147), many areas remain fragmented. Thus, many farmers claim that it is economically unreasonable to fence land that is characteristic of the mosaic Goričko landscape. One even found it to be unacceptable because it would turn the existing picturesque terrain into a landscape crisscrossed with wires.

For animals, the ecological difference between Slovenia and Hungary functions as an affordance (INGOLD 1994:14) since they can hide in the overgrown forests and feed on the unprotected fields. As the common local saying goes, they feed “in Slovenian fields and find shelter in the extensive forests on the Hungarian side” (SIMONIČ 2019:158; for an analysis see: KOZOROG 2019).

“In that time [socialism], over there in Hungary they planted a forest [on an area close to the border that had been cultivated land before], and that forest then overgrew, and now they [animals] have shelter there.” (b. 1949)

“[There are now more animals than in the past] because they procreate. Here around us is Hungary, where there are huge forests, impassable forests, and he [red deer] quietly lives there. It comes, grazes, goes back and quietly lives in that forest.” (b. ca. 1950)⁸

“I think it’s a disadvantage to live next to the border; there are no shops here, nothing... certainly a disadvantage. And because of wildlife, Jesus, how much wildlife we have. We’ve got fields here, whereas in Hungary they’ve abandoned everything. They couldn’t [were] work there [in the fields close to the border] anymore, so there’s already a whole forest over there. Therein are wildlife species, which come to feed here, and there they lie.” (b. 1954)⁹

People observe that red deer move from the east and occupy newer and newer territories. Indeed, according to my ethnographic evidence from various parts of Goričko, villages in the north-east of Goričko have the highest levels of wildlife-caused damage. In western Goričko, by contrast, farmers did not even mention red deer as a local problem. In North-East Goričko, however, they not only mention overgrown Hungarian forests as the source of their problem, but also a local forest. There, a professional hunting ground called Kompas has been operating since the 1960s. Some people equate the establishment of Kompas with the rejection of agriculture, when the abandonment of parts of historically cultivated land ushered in the search for new profitable activities (cf. ŠARF 1985:74). Kompas is still a successful provider of trophy hunts for red deer, wild boar, roe deer and other wildlife species that many inhabitants now associate with damaged fields. Today, therefore, Kompas does not have the status of a profitable replacement for agricultural decline (as in the past), but is, on the contrary, perceived as the reason for a further decline in farming in the area.

“In the 1970s, all young people mostly were racing to the city and only older people remained here with their agriculture. It slowly declined, I mean, it wasn’t anymore, gradually it became less profitable, and so on. Then they made a huge hunting ground here, Kompas, which was breeding various wildlife, so it became a kind of hunting center, and even Italians came [to hunt], and so on. And now this wildlife procreated here and has caused such huge damage here that it’s difficult to farm. Practically, those more delicate cultures, you have to protect everything, like corn, and so many people gave up because wildlife destroyed everything and from this point on, agriculture became considerably fruitless.” (older farmer)¹⁰

The abandonment of land and overgrowth is what troubles people the most. They have been experiencing this process for decades. The decline of neighbors, the end of households, giving up farming, etc. are events that people experience emotionally and painfully. In North-East Goričko, wildlife is constitutive for explaining such events and expressing accompanying feelings. With a simple calculation, people explain what follows when a neighbor abandons arable land: wildlife pressure on their own property increases because the area of cultivated territory has become smaller.

⁸ The interview and transcription are the work of students Aleksandra Kansky and Zala Prebil.

⁹ The interview and transcription are the work of students Lenart Bricman and Žiga Korbar.

¹⁰ The interview and transcription are the work of students Kim Strupar and Nina Sovič.

“[Landscape] has overgrown so much. I remember where they were still ploughing with cows. And they were harvesting cereal. I remember it being so lively. Because now, no more, the end. [Bushes?] Bushes [with a sad voice]. [...] The state should take care of this. That everything [landscape] is cleaned. Now, you know, we still work a bit, but again wildlife attacks. Red deer come, roe deer come, wild boar come, and grass, if it’s not cultivated... If I don’t work, it won’t do anything [any harm] to me. But it can go over to the neighbor. When everything was cultivated, he [wild animal – sic] went in your field, a bit in the second field, then in the third field, and it [damage] didn’t show. Now, if it comes only in one field, it [damage] shows.” (b. 1951)¹¹

This is why a farmer (b. 1946) enthusiastically explained to me how happy he is that a foreigner will start to cultivate some abandoned fields in his village because he expected that the pressure of wildlife would disperse and thus his own fields would gradually be in better condition.

People also narrate more dramatic scenarios about the future of the area. According to such scenarios, the wild animal has the role of an omnipotent creature that will force humans to stop farming and leave the place (KOZOROG 2019:204–205). In such a narration, it is not the case that red deer and wild boar populate the area because people have abandoned the land and overgrowth is increasing (as in the past), but rather the opposite: animals now dictate the future process, because by feeding on the remaining fields they are forcing people to abandon these as well. Many said that because of wildlife’s pressure they are afraid that people will leave the borderland villages forever.

Let me now summarize the local view regarding wildlife. Large herbivores are omnipresent in everyday life because their feeding habits and behavior in the local environment negatively affect local farming. Thus, people often speak about them, describe their doings, and this knowledge has accumulated in more structured local narratives about them, which function as local truths. Species of herbivores thus represent a part of wildlife that inhabitants consider relevant, which, however, contrasts heavily with the park’s view of wildlife.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Over the last two decades, the multifunctional nature of farming, i.e. its effects beyond food production, has been stressed in European agricultural and conservation policies, which has also been reflected anthropologically (for the Slovenian context: see KNEŽEVIĆ HOČEVAR – ČERNIČ ISTENIČ 2010:16–24). The Goričko Nature Park also emphasizes that farming is important, not merely as an occupation in food production, but also in regard to preservation of landscape, habitats, and biodiversity. Even so, being aware of this particular role in the park, farmers also feel marginalized both within the park and on the periphery of the state, observing the decline of their occupation and feeling that their voice is not being heard by various authorities. One narrated this feeling of improper treatment with a juxtaposition of allegedly simultaneous local

¹¹ The interview and transcription are the work of students Tjaša Lahne and Liza Tavčar.

processes involving the collapse of farming and the creation of the park: “If they [the (past) farming policies] wouldn’t destroy the peasant, no park would be needed” (b. 1948) because strong family farming would preserve the environment anyway. A sense of indifference about their troubles is especially strong when they complain about troublesome herbivores, which are (at least in certain parts of the park) a major problem (cf. NAUGHTON-TREVES 1997). Recitation that animals endanger farming, and — in the most dramatic scenario — that wildlife will chase farmers away from their land, is a strong expression of vulnerability and despair.

In such conditions, farmers judge other human agents, who they hold responsible for what they are going through. Indeed, as other studies of people-wildlife conflicts have demonstrated, such conflicts are in many cases people-people conflicts (KNIGHT 2000). One of the invoked agents are hunters (especially Kompas), who in their view profit from the present situation because of abundant red deer and wild boar in the area, whose meat and trophy hunt they sell. In this paper, however, I am not analyzing the roles of each and every relevant agent, but rather a very particular relationship between inhabitants and the park, which could be ideally imagined as companionship. In the case of wildlife, although the park is not in the position to regulate the number of herbivores because this is the role of hunters, it could nevertheless act as an interlocutor for inhabitants and advocate for their concerns. On the other hand, according to inhabitants, although the park professionals are familiar with the problem they have with wildlife, the park is not performing an active role in this matter.

The perspectives of the park conservationists and farmers presented above suggest that they have different priorities in regard to wildlife as well as in terms of how they encounter animals. The aim of the park is the preservation of species and habitats on the basis of an objective assessment of their state on the planet and locally described as “rare” or “endangered”. This is also an important platform for the park’s current projects, i.e. for its current financing. This shapes its priorities and makes nature conservation an important part of the park’s task. For many farmers, however, this appears somehow problematic because in their view amphibians, insects, birds, bats, etc. are marginal in comparison to the species they tangibly sense as pests.

These parallel perspectives on and engagements with wildlife do not exist in separate bubbles. The park and inhabitants are rather aware of and to a certain degree (mis) informed about each other’s concerns and doings. Nevertheless, although information circulates, theirs are still divided engagements with the park area, which functions as an obstacle in the relationships between them. Still, the park has implemented programs to inform inhabitants about its projects, methods and the species of its concern. By contrast, its engagement with inhabitants’ worldviews has not been particularly strong, otherwise certain non-domestic species would likely have a less dramatic appearance in local life as they have now. The park director (above) admits this shortcoming, mentioning the park’s biased expertise, which is strong in regard to biology and conservation, but lacks professionals for collaboration with inhabitants. Unfortunately, her diagnosis of the bias seems impassable in the current state of under-resourced and underfinanced Slovenian parks (cf. BAJUK SENČAR 2013). There is consequently a tangible gap between the imagined role of the Goričko Nature Park and its actual capabilities. In other words, the lack of resources hinders the park from stepping up properly, and thus it occupies a position that it cannot properly fulfil in the local web of relationships.

Recognition of natural-social complexities rather than biased agendas is fruitful ground for the quality management of protected areas (ISPÁN et al. 2018; REMIS – HARDIN 2008). The park alone certainly cannot solve the problems that people have with wildlife. The fact that a complex solution is needed in this regard is also known to Goričko farmers. As one individual — a farmer, tourist worker and hunter — commented, simple solutions are always partial because if, for example, farmers fence all the fields, the result would be an entirely wired landscape that is desired neither by the park nor by the farmers. The park has a unique position in the local web of relationships that enables prompting the co-creation of complex diagnoses, management tools and social-natural collectives.

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