

Chapter 23

Coexisting with Wolves in Cultural Landscapes: Fences as Communicative Devices



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Abstract This paper argues that many conflicts regarding the return of the wolf to the thoroughly humanized and densely populated cultural landscapes of Western Europe rest on the dualistic idea that culture and nature are two strictly separated realms of reality, and on the assumption that wild animals are primarily passive beings without proper agency. Once we acknowledge wolves as beings with agency with whom we share the landscape, we come to see that the challenge of coexistence with wild animals such as wolves is not primarily a matter of finding a compromise between human interests and the interests of wild animals. Rather, we have to learn and negotiate that the landscape is a space that is interpreted and inhabited by many different beings, with whom we are always already communicating, even if we are not always aware of it.

23.1 Wolves Recolonizing Europe

Throughout history, many animal species have sought the proximity of humans because of the opportunities this provided in terms of food and shelter. Domesticated animals have of course been members of the mixed community of humans and animals for thousands of years. The so-called liminal animals (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011)—rats, foxes, seagulls and pigeons—have found ways to flourish in human spaces, making use of the various assets that cities provide. These non-domesticated species have also learned to live close to humans, in some cases they even prefer cities to the wild habitat in which they evolved.

However, in recent years, wild animals are also returning to our landscapes. Species such as Wolf, Golden Jackal, Lynx, and Wild Cat—animals associated with wild nature par excellence—have started to repopulate the thoroughly humanized and often densely populated cultural landscapes of Western Europe from which they

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went extinct only a few centuries ago. The spontaneous return of these wild animals sheds new light on the relation between humans and wild animals.

The return of the European Grey Wolf to Western Europe is surely the most controversial example of the ‘return of the wild in Anthropocene’ (Drenthen 2015). The wolf was eradicated in large parts of Western Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Only small populations remained in the East and the South (in the areas East of the former Iron Curtain, and remote parts of Italy, the Balkan and Spain). However, due to changes in land use, land abandonment in rural areas, increased legal protection, and the rise of more ecofriendly environmental attitudes towards nature (De Groot et al. 2011) wolves have been able to repopulate areas where they had disappeared earlier.

In the year 2000, Polish wolves repopulated the Lausitz region in Germany, south of Berlin. From there, the population gradually expanded to the North-West; now, less than twenty years later, they are recolonizing parts of Denmark, Belgium and the Netherlands.

In 2013, the first wolf visited the Netherlands. Each following year, the numbers of wolf sightings went up. In 2018, at least 10 wolves visited the Netherlands. In January 2019, the Dutch government officially declared that two female wolves had settled in the Veluwe, a large nature area in the center of the Netherlands. Only a few months later, in May, a camera trap revealed that one of these female wolves had a male companion, and in June it was announced that the first pups were born. This rapid colonization—from one individual in 2013 to an entire pack of wolves less than 6 years later—has caused a lot of debate about wolves in Dutch society.

23.2 Wolf Debates

Wherever wolves reappear, they give rise to social tensions. Most nature conservationists celebrate the return of the wolf as a success of European nature policies; they argue that predators such as the wolf are a welcome addition to the ecosystem and will have a positive effect on biodiversity. Many urbanites are fascinated by the idea that the wolf again lives in this densely populated part of the world. People in rural areas, on the other hand, are more worried that wolves will pose a danger to humans and livestock. However, many people appear to take a rather moderate and pragmatic approach towards the return of the wolf.

Surveys suggest that basic attitudes towards wolves among the Dutch population have not really changed much since their arrival. In 2012, just before the first confirmed wolf sighting in the Netherlands, a survey among Dutch citizens (Intomart 2012) found that about 45% of respondents would welcome the arrival of wolves, while 32% were against, and 23% took a neutral position. Ever since the actual arrival of the wolves in the Netherlands, these numbers seem not to have changed much. A survey in December 2018, found that 30% of respondents feel that wolves should not be restricted in their behavior, while an equally large group does not agree. However, 58% agree with the proposition that we should not chase away the wolf, but rather

should be focusing on protecting ourselves and our livestock from the wolf (Kantar Public 2018).

In short, the majority seems to have a pragmatic attitude towards wolves, one that combines a willingness for coexistence with wolves with a cautious approach to possible risks associated with the presence of predators in our landscape. They are willing to give these animals a chance of finding a place in our landscape, and feel that we should seek to find a form of coexistence with wolves. Yet, most people also believe we should be on our guard for those individual wolves that cause disproportional damage to livestock and pose a threat to humans and their interests (Van Slobbe 2019).

However, in the debate about wolves, the extreme voices tend to be the loudest, and as a result, the debate easily becomes polarized. A small group of wolf lovers tends to romanticize the wolf. They refuse to acknowledge that the return of a large predator in a cultural landscape can be troublesome; any problem that might emerge will be solely to blame on humans (Drenthen 2016a). On the other side, some people are convinced that there is no room for wolves in a densely populated country like the Netherlands. They argue that the Dutch landscape is no longer suitable for these animals, because the Netherlands lacks the large-scale nature areas that most people associate with wolf habitat. Especially sheep farmers vehemently oppose the wolf; they see wolves as a threat to their livelihood.

23.3 Wolf Predation on Livestock

Young wolves leave their parents when they are two years old. They start to roam the landscape in search for new unoccupied habitat. Wolves can travel up to 80 km each night, and can migrate over many hundreds of kilometers from their birthplace. These wandering wolves try to keep a low profile while migrating through strange wolf territory in order to prevent conflicts with settled wolves. These wandering wolves are the biggest threat to domestic animals such as sheep. Wandering wolves tend to see sheep as an easy ‘snack’ along the way. As soon as wolves set up a new territory, they tend to shift their attention to wild prey such as deer and wild boar—probably because they prefer deer to wooly sheep, but also because they prefer to hunt away from human land. Moreover, young wolves learn how and what to hunt from their parents, and will normally learn that wild ungulates are the preferred food source. Yet, wandering wolves need to make a different trade-off and will not miss out unprotected sheep as an easy meal.

Because large carnivores have been absent for so long, sheep farmers in Western Europe abandoned the traditional methods of protecting livestock against predators that are still in use elsewhere. In those places where wolves never disappeared, people see wolves as belonging to the landscape and are used to dealing with them. They use so-called guard dogs or flock-protection dogs to protect the flocks against wolf attacks, and sometimes shepherds themselves stay with their sheep around the clock (White 2019).

In contrast, in those places where wolves went extinct, farmers abandoned the old practices that protected livestock against predators: sheep stay behind low fences designed to keep sheep in, but not to keep predators out. Moreover, without any natural predators, sheep are left to roam in relatively safe hillsides, without shepherds. Many sheep farmers only visit their livestock occasionally to check on their health. In the mountainous regions of the Alps, for instance, farmers stopped with the practice of full-time shepherding when large predators disappeared. Nowadays, in certain areas, the role of shepherds has become redundant (Hollely 2018).

The return of wolves to new territories forces shepherds to change their shepherding practices and start protecting their sheep again. Some proponents will argue that this should actually be a reason for shepherds to welcome wolves: wolves are good for shepherds, because without wolves, they would not have a job.

Another positive effect of [the return of] the wolf is also that it is bringing back the shepherds. Shepherding has been part of Europe's cultural landscape for thousands of years. The increase in shepherds is now leading to the renovation of mountain huts, and increased job opportunities in rural communities. Switzerland has just opened up a new school in shepherding in recognition of the need for shepherds through Europe. (Hollely 2018)

Yet, it is also clear why sheep farmers in Western Europe dread the return of the wolf, since this change in keeping sheep, will make shepherding more time-consuming and less cost-effective, thus making their life more difficult.

23.4 The Cultural Conflict About Wolves

In order to help the acceptance of returning wolves in Europe—the wolf after all is a legally protected species—governments across Europe have come up with financial schemes that support farmers that suffer from livestock predation; they offer financial compensation for their losses and help with preventive measures such as electric fencing.

Financial compensation schemes certainly help the acceptance of wolves, but only up to a certain point. Most farmers do not just fear the financial costs of loss of sheep but also despise the killing of their animals by wild predators.

Wolves do not just pose a financial risk; they also are a perceived threat to an entire way of life. Farmers in rural areas are usually well aware of the vulnerability of their livelihood vis-à-vis the threats posed by uncontrollable natural events: thunderstorms, floods, draughts—and predation. Part of the identity of being a farmer revolves around the idea that the land has to be ‘worked’ and cultivated, by controlling and managing wild nature if one is to make a living from the land.¹ Living a life that consists of facing up to the encroaching wild, farming communities typically value a sense of independence and autonomy. Farmers take pride to be able to grow their own food

¹Research shows that this attitude also translates into an aesthetic landscape preference: rural populations typically appreciate more manicured and orderly landscapes compared to the type of landscape urbanites like (Van den Berg and Koole 2006).

and live a life of independence. For many of them, it is important to be autonomous and self-sufficient, and not dependent on the government, as so many urban dwellers are. The presence of a wolf undermines that feeling of being autonomous.

Moreover, the idea that the state will compensate for the financial losses due to wolf predation may itself be problematic to some. The idea of getting money from the state without having to work for it in itself does not fit well in this ideal life of self-sufficiency (Thorp 2014). Some wolf opponents complain that too much taxpayer's money is being spend on the losses due to wolves, even though they are the recipients of that money. Farmers opposing wolves do not want financial compensation; they want their livestock to be safe from predation.

It is a commonplace that human-wildlife conflicts are in fact most often human-human conflicts and the same applies here. It is not just the fear of livestock predation that fuels the opposition against the wolf, but also the unease about the overall societal movement that welcomes the wolves and argues for their protection. Those who oppose the wolf see its return as a threat to a way of life that exists in living a life of independence in the face of the encroaching wild, but they also feel that society fails to take their worries seriously.

There exists a deep sense of unease among wolf-sceptics with the way that urban-ites tend to approach the issue of coexistence with wild animals, and with nuisance animals and large predators in particular. On Facebook accounts of anti-wolf groups such as No Wolves,² one can illustrate this sentiment: "City people are naïve, and fail to see that these animals are dangerous." "All these animal cuddlers in the city ignore the real danger." "These people don't know what misery the wolves will be bringing to us." "Eventually they will find out that we were right and they were wrong in trusting this animal, but by that time it will be too late." "Only when the first children will be killed by a wolf will they realize what they have inflicted upon us."

Opponents of the wolf say that the Dutch landscape is no longer suited for the wolf, and fear that they will be forced to change their way of life if large predators are a permanent presence in the landscape. Wolf sceptics worry that society fails to acknowledge the fact that some of these animals can be dangerous to human interests. More fundamentally, however, their worry is that society fails to consider their perspective. By focusing on wolves as vulnerable animals that need protection, society seems to ignore that living in rural areas means being vulnerable to forces of nature that the average city dweller does not have to face.

However, rather than bringing forward what may be justified feelings, many wolf opponents instead try to convince others by claiming that wolves do not belong in the landscape, that they cannot be controlled, and that their impact will be mostly negative, et cetera (Van Herzele et al. 2015). Whereas some conservationists see the extermination of the wolf in the nineteenth century as a wrong to be undone, some wolf opponents argue that there were good reasons to exterminate wolves in the past and that we should try to exterminate them again today. Others argue that the animal might have been in place in the past, but that the landscape has changed

²<https://www.facebook.com/nowolvesnl/>.

since then; that it may be that the wolf once lived in these regions, but that now it no longer belongs there. Still others claim that the wolves that are currently roaming the landscape are in fact not at all wild wolves. Rather, so the argumentation goes, these animals either have escaped from private zoos or have been released on purpose; they are probably hybrids and therefore should not be protected at all. As far as the wolf opponents are concerned, the wolf is not a native species taking back its rightful place in its original habitat, rather it is a dangerous intruder into human space.

In an attempt to circumvent the European protection schemes, some wolf opponents are claiming that wolves did not come back spontaneously at all, but have been intentionally introduced by radical environmentalists. The narrative that the wolf resurgence is not at all a spontaneous occurrence, but rather the result of a secret introduction by environmentalists is very persistent, and can be witnessed in many places where wolves are returning after being absent for a while (Skogen et al. 2008).

As can already be gleaned from the above, the conflict about wolves appears to be linked with a much more general *cultural* conflict of worldviews. This cultural controversy prevents a pragmatic approach to wolf predation of livestock, because in that context, wolves become a symbol for the larger rapid changes in the landscape that people see as a threat to their way of life and their sense of identity. The wolf can easily become a symbol for the regional populist movements to signify a more general feeling of unease towards rapid disappearing of local identities and loss of control due to globalisation and the dominance of urban elites, along with other perceived threats like immigrants, European bureaucracy, and the environmental regulations in general. It may be only a matter of time before populist movements in the Netherlands discover the potential of the wolf case and decide to exploit the feeling of unease among rural voters against the urban elites for political purposes.

It seems that the legal protection schemes for wolves fuel the sense of unease wolf opponents, who feel that they cannot protect themselves and their livestock against a perceived threat. Capitalizing on this sense of disenfranchisement, some politicians with constituents in rural areas argue that the strict European legal ban on wolf hunting should be lifted, and the animals instead should be “managed”, a euphemism for population control through lethal measures. In other words: a part of the rural population is aware of its vulnerability and feels that the danger is not taken seriously by those who see wolves as an asset to nature. Moreover, they do not believe that it will be possible to find ways to coexist with predators with little or no conflict.

23.5 The Stewardship Model as Underlying Cause of the Conflict

In order to counteract human animal abuse and the instrumental exploitation of animals by humans, both animal ethicists and conservation lawmakers have sought to articulate principles and values that should govern human behavior with respects

to the intrinsic value of animals. In the case of wildlife, the dominant approach is to find ways in which wild animals can live their life in the wild, undisturbed by negative human impacts. However, in their focus on human wrongs, animal ethicists typically have difficulty dealing with those cases of conflict where wild animals pose a threat to the interests of humans or their livestock.

The European Habitat Directive demands that all member states have to ensure that endangered wild animals are in a “Favorable Conservation Status” (Epstein et al. 2015). It is illegal to hunt or disturb endangered animals.³ This idea is relatively uncontested in case of those species that are relatively innocent and do not cause nuisance to humans. However, in the case of recolonizing predators such as the wolf, it is controversial, especially when these animals enter cultural landscapes inhabited by humans.

Much of our thinking about our relationship to wildlife revolves around the idea that animals are vulnerable and should be protected against intrusions and harms inflicted upon them by humans. Starting from the premise that wildlife typically lives in nature, nature protection often involves setting aside nature reserves, wildlife sanctuaries or national parks as habitat for animals. In this model, animals are mere passive recipients of human concern. The problem with this approach in the case of the returning wolf is that these animals surely appear to have agency and sometimes even pose a danger to our human interests. To those who fear its presence, the wolf is not an innocent victim, but a potential dangerous actor.

Therefore, it would be useful if we could develop an approach to wolves that recognizes the animal’s agency, and the fact that there can be conflicts between animals and humans, and yet without framing nuisance animals as intruders or enemies.

23.6 Wolves as Sovereign Beings

In their 2011 book *Zoopolis*, Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka criticize the dominant framing of our relation to wild animals in terms of the ‘stewardship model’,⁴ because that model fails to take seriously the agency of wild animals and sees them purely as passive objects of our care. Instead, their theory of animal sovereignty recognizes animals as having agency and acknowledges the independence and autonomy of wild animal communities.

³Most legislation also makes clear when circumstances are not normal, and permit lethal and nonlethal intervention, for instance when an individual animal behaves ‘unnatural’, and is showing aggressive behavior towards humans, or is specializing on predating protected livestock.

⁴Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka criticize this dominant “stewardship model”, because even though in this model “human access and use might be strictly limited” this is “not as a recognition of animal sovereignty, but rather as an exercise of human management. This stewardship may be relatively interventionist or relatively hands off, but either way the relationship is conceptualized as one in which a human sovereign community has set aside a territory for a specific use, and to which the human community retains the right to unilaterally redefine boundaries and use” (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011, 170).

Donaldson and Kymlicka distinguish three types of animals, each with a different relationship to humans. *Domesticated animals* are those animals that live in close proximity to humans and have intense relations of interdependence with human beings. According to Donaldson and Kymlicka, we should treat these animals as co-citizens, that is to say, as full members of a mixed community of humans and animals held together through all kinds of mutually beneficial relationships. Justice demands we grant them the appropriate rights and duties that belong to being part of such a community. The so-called *liminal animals* also live in the proximity of humans, but unlike domesticated animals, they are relative outsiders to our community. They have adapted to living amongst humans and even have become dependent on living in our proximity (for food or for housing), but they do not have intimate and reciprocal relationships with humans. Therefore, they do not possess all the rights and duties of full citizens, but they do deserve respectful treatment as co-inhabitants of the place we live.

Most relevant for us, though, is their view on *wild animals*: those animals who avoid humans and human settlements, and maintain a separate and independent existence (insofar as they are able to) in their own habitats or territory. Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011) suggest that we understand our relationship with wild animals in similar terms as our relationship with different human sovereign communities such as nation states. A fair relation between sovereign communities of humans and wild animals aims at a just allocation of harms and benefits between two communities. From this starting point, so they argue, we should recognize “that the flourishing of individual wild animals cannot be separated from the flourishing of communities, and...reframes the rights of wild animals in terms of fair interaction between communities” (p. 167).

This view on the relation between wild animals and humans can be useful to our discussion of wild wolf’s comeback, because it not only acknowledges their agency, but also makes room to think about possible conflicts between animal and human interests. In highlighting animal communities as sovereign entities, it becomes possible to think of our relation with wild animals in a way that is more symmetrical. On the one hand, “the recognition of animal sovereignty limits our actions in terms of encroaching on wild animal territory, and imposes obligations on us to take reasonable precautions to limit our inadvertent harms to wild animals (e.g., by relocating shipping lanes, or building animal bypasses into road construction).” On the other hand, “it also limits our obligations in terms of positive assistance to wild animals.”⁵ Similarly, “it restricts the terms on which we can visit sovereign wild animal territory (or share overlapping territory), but at the same time it establishes terms for wild animals entering sovereign human societies.” The sovereignty approach “obligates us to respect the basic rights of animals, but also protects us from violations in return” (ibid.).

Thinking of wild animals as sovereign entities implies that humans do not only have duties towards them, but also allows humans to pose limits on animals as long as these are part of a just arrangement that distributes costs and benefits fairly among

⁵See Clare Palmer’s Chapter 21 in this volume.

different sovereign communities. Thus, the sovereignty theory seems much better equipped than the stewardship model to deal with the question of how to deal with returning wolves in cultural landscapes in a way that recognizes the worries of those who fear the arrival of wolves in cultural landscapes.

23.7 Parallel Sovereignties in a Shared Landscape

Even though resurging wolves do not actively seek out humans, it is inevitable that they run into contact with humans because they are traveling across huge distances through one of the most densely populated landscapes in Europe in search for territory (a pack needs 50–300 square kilometers). Moreover, because they are highly intelligent and flexible animals, they succeed surprisingly well in living in our humanized environments and in remaining unnoticed by most humans.⁶ Since wolves are resurging in landscapes that were until recently exclusively human habitat, the questions regarding our relationship with wild wolves are of a different kind than those with wild animals that stay in their place within “nature”.

Many problems in our relationship to nature in general and in our relation with predators in particular, derive from a dualistic way of thinking that assumes there is a clear boundary between “nature” and “culture”.⁷ Even the most outspoken opponents of wolves would be fine accepting that wolves should have a place “in the wilderness”.

Problems appear when wolves show up in cultural landscapes. To many wolf opponents, the mere fact that wolves appear in a cultural landscape is a sign that there is something wrong with these animals. They argue that “a real wolf would never come this way” or that “a real wild wolf would never chose to walk on a sidewalk or use a human road or bridge.” As soon as a wolf is comfortable navigating the human landscape, they see it as a sign that the animal must be a hybrid, an escapee from a zoo, or intentionally introduced by “rewilding activists”. The simple fact that wild wolves appear in cultural landscapes is in itself already undermining the worldview that depends on a clear schematic separation of “nature” and “culture”.

It is this dualistic frame of mind—in which wilderness and cultural landscapes are seen as two mutually exclusive domains of reality—that underlies many of the problems regarding wolves returning to cultural landscapes. For those who are against the wolf’s return, the animal is an intruder, and the spontaneous resurgence of the wolf means a breach in the comfortable separation between wild lands and cultural landscapes (Drenthen 2015). However, recognizing wolves as real animals that live in the ecological and social context of our landscapes means that we have to acknowledge that sharing spaces with large carnivores will never be easy. We need to find

⁶In early 2019, a radio-collared wolf entered the Netherlands from Germany, walked all across the urbanized center of Netherlands to finally end up and settle in Belgium, all without being noticed by humans. See: <https://www.wur.nl/nl/nieuws/Wolf-doorkruiste-Nederland-van-noord-naar-zuid.htm>.

⁷See Cor van der Weele’s Chapter 30 in this volume.

a *modus vivendi* that allows us to live together with wolves, and that will require some degree of management and control. Respecting wolves as sovereign entities, and more generally respecting nature's autonomy, also implies a willingness to live with wild creatures, not just when they are charismatic and cute, but also when they are a nuisance.

In reality, nature and culture are not different domains of reality, but rather two aspects of the same reality. "Culture" is what we have designed and control, "nature" is what we do not fully control or what constantly challenges our control. There is always nature in the cultural landscape (and that certainly applies to the wolf who will see every border as a challenge) and always culture in the so-called nature reserves (where we are not only occasionally present, but which we also manage and protect). Our landscape cannot simply be divided into two separate parts. Those cases where wild animals stay within a designated nature reserve are the exception. In principle, we always live in the same landscape as wild animals; more often than not, our territories will overlap.

Different wild animal species occupy (and compete for) the same territory, and many species need to move large distances across territory occupied by other animals or by humans. Sovereignty, therefore, if it is to mean anything in practice, cannot be tied to a picture of neatly divided communities and territories. (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011, 188)

This means that we need a perspective on the landscape that acknowledges that we inevitably share landscapes with multiple species. Recognizing justified claims of sovereign animal communities on the landscape can be complicated. Respect for the sovereignty of wild animals implies that we have to allow them to migrate through our territory. Conversely, we may use our own corridors to cross their territory or visit wild places, as long as we do so in such a way that damage to the sovereign animal community is kept to a minimum.⁸ Sometimes, a strict territorial separation will be possible between wilderness areas with very restricted access for humans, and areas for humans and domestic animals that are restricted for wild animals. However, especially in the case of species with large territories, we need to acknowledge that our territories will inevitably overlap and thus abandon "an overly simplistic concept of territory-like the boundaries of a national park". Instead, to allow for "sustainable and cooperative parallel co-habitations" (ibid., 191) with animals with territories overlapping ours, we must think of the landscape as a "multidimensional" place.

⁸"Sovereignty is importantly tied to territory, since a community, especially most animal communities, cannot be ecologically viable, let alone autonomously self-regulating, without a land base to sustain it. But sovereignty need not be defined in terms of exclusive access or control over a particular territory, but rather in terms of the extent or nature of access and control necessary for a community to be autonomous and self-regulating." (ibid., 190).

23.8 Living in a Multidimensional Landscape

Sharing a landscape with wild animals means that that landscape has become a “multidimensional” place, where several landscape features will mean different things to different beings. Our territories may overlap in spatial terms, but we may nonetheless inhabit different worlds in semiotic terms. What for us is an office building or an apartment building may appear a rock face to a pigeon or a peregrine falcon. Similarly, wolves will interpret our cultural landscapes differently than we do.

The challenge is that these different semiotic worlds do not exist independently of each other. We are not the only ones to define the meaning and significance of features in the cultural landscape. These differences in interpretation may lead to conflicts if wild animals make decisions based on different interpretations that do not go well together with those of humans. Coexistence with wildlife is therefore not just about finding a compromise between human and animal interests. It is about figuring out *what it means* to inhabit a place that means different things for different inhabitants.

According to Susan Boonman-Berson (2018), co-habitation between humans and wild animals “requires that wildlife management be approached as an interactive and dynamic endeavor that focuses on the relation between humans, wild animals and landscape” (p. 64). She argues that such a relational perspective “implies an understanding of agency and subjectivity as emergent and as produced through learning in practice and through interactions between humans, wild animals, and the landscape” (p. 93). Both humans and animals interpret the landscape and change it—they ‘read’ and ‘write’ the landscape.⁹ In order to understand how these readings and writings may interact with each other, she introduces the concept of ‘multi-sensory writing and reading’. In this process, “signs (visual, olfactory, auditory, tactile), materialized in words, signals or things, are communicated between humans, between wild animals and between humans and wild animals through the writing and reading of these signs in the landscape” (pp. 70–71). The communication with wild animals does not take place directly, rather, it is itself based on material traces or signs. The shared reading and writing of the landscapes takes place on the basis of material aspects that can be accessed and interpreted by both humans and wild animals (p. 71).

Boonman-Berson points out that “communication with wild animals is apparent in most traditional hunter-gatherer practices where the success of a hunt may depend on the ability of a human hunter to ‘think like’ his or her quarry”, which “requires years of experience in which animals are recognized as independent actors” (p. 71). Yet, she stresses the symmetry of the situation. Humans may read traces and signs left by animals, but animals do the same thing:

Our notion of multi-sensory writing and reading recognizes that both humans and animals leave traces as well as trace, interpret and respond to these traces. Human writing in our case refers not only to the use of words, such as in policy and management plans that describe how to deal with human-wild animal interactions, but also to communication without words,

⁹In a similar vein, the ecosemiotic work of Morten Tønnessen (2011), clearly shows how the semiotic relationships between humans, wolves, and sheep have shifted and changed through time.

such as in placing fences to physically demarcate human from nonhuman spaces. Animal reading refers to the interpretation and enactment of these human writings as they become observable in the changing behavior and movements of the animals. The responses by animals are communicated through signals or things – animal writing –, such as footprints, left fur, faeces, and scent markings that indicate their presence in an area or demarcate their territories. (p. 72)

In order to find ways of dealing with the fact that we share a landscape with other beings, we have to understand how these other beings understand and navigate the landscape, and how they may understand and interact with the signs that we—consciously or unconsciously—leave behind in the landscape. Only if we can find ways of translating one species’ interpretation into another, may we develop an understanding of the multidimensional landscape that can help avoid unnecessary conflicts.

23.9 Wildlife Management and the Biosemiotics of Borders and Fences

Living together in a layered multi-dimensional landscape with potentially dangerous predators such as the wolf, means that we will inevitably share the landscape and that we therefore have to come up with arrangements to avoid conflicts. Luckily, there are many alternative methods to lethal predator control that can solve the so-called “predator paradox”: that in order to protect predators we need to protect humans against predator impacts (Shivik 2014).

One of those arrangements is the use of fences, in particular fences that keep predators from attacking livestock. Sheep are part of the mixed community of humans and domestic animals that is held together by mutually beneficial rules, with all parties having certain rights and duties towards each other. Humans have a duty to protect their sheep against predation and other harm. However, we also have a duty towards wild animals as sovereign beings to make sure they are able to live their lives and satisfy their essential needs. When wild animals predate on livestock, both duties come into conflict.

Yet there are ways in which we can navigate these conflicts and try to prevent them from playing out. In the case of potentially conflicting human land uses, we developed several ways that might inspire to find solutions in our relation to wild predators as well. For instance, in forests and other recreation areas, we developed ways to ensure that hikers do not run into conflict with mountain bikers and equestrians. Starting from an acknowledgment of the different needs and desires of these different groups of users, we devised a network of hiking trails, MTB trails and equestrian trails that avoid these groups from unnecessarily bumping into each other.¹⁰ These arrangements only

¹⁰In addition to these spatial arrangements, one can also to make temporal arrangements, where different groups use the same location at different times of day. Humans and wild animals often use the same places at different times. Is it really such a big problem when wolves roam our streets

work as long as each user group accepts to stick to the designated trails. There is no absolute guarantee that all parties always abide to these rules; that would require stationing a park warden or police officer in every remote corner of the forest. In reality, these spatial arrangements usually also work without policing, because it is in the interest of each party to avoid unnecessary conflict and stick to the designated path. That only works, of course when the path design matches the needs of the particular user group, so that there is no need to break the implicit rules. If that is the case, we dare to trust each other, and are even willing to accept that occasionally an individual will violate that trust. The courage to trust each other is what enables different users to coexist and avoid unnecessary conflicts.

In a similar way, we could think of fences as means to prevent conflicts between predators and livestock. In the case of wolves, the problem is a lack of trust: many wolf opponents do not dare to rely on the possibility of coexistence without policing. They refuse to believe in a peaceful coexistence with wolves and claim that wild wolves will always attempt to climb over or dig under fences that wolf experts considered impenetrable to wolves.

It may be tempting to respond to this lack of trust by suggesting that fences can indeed impose a strict border between human and sheep on one side, and wolves on the other. In reality, however, once wolves are determined to cross a fence, most fences will not be able to stop them. The idea that it will always be possible to keep wolves out is based on a misunderstanding of what wolves are capable of. What is key, however, is that even if there is no absolute guarantee, in those landscapes where people and wolves have successfully learned to live together, most fences do seem to work nonetheless. Apparently, in these places human culture and wolf culture have somehow converged.

In those places where sheep farmers consistently protect their sheep with fences that are difficult enough for a wolf to cross, wolves typically have learned to change their behavior in response; they shift from preying on domestic livestock and focus instead on wild prey. Young wolves learn how and what to hunt from their parents, and will also tend to ignore livestock (provided that there is enough wild prey available). In time, a local wolf culture will develop in which young wolves are taught that it is much easier and safer for them to hunt wild prey and leave sheep be.

Evidence points out that this process is currently taking place in the new wolf territories in Germany. Recently, in the German state of Niedersachsen livestock predation has been going down while the number of wolves is still on the rise (Wolven in Nederland 2019). In Sweden, where wolves have been present for quite some time now, livestock predation is relatively low due to active measures such as state subsidies on prevention measures such as fencing. Yet, even though Swedish government subsidizes preventive measures and refuses to compensate farmers who did not protect livestock properly, some farmers even decide to not build fences because of

in those hours that we humans are asleep? It would mean, of course, that we would have to accept that there are times in which particular places are not exclusively ours, that there are certain times when we would be the ones out of place. Would it be possible that wolf and humans learn to deal with each other by negotiating mutual temporal divisions?

the low risk and the trouble it takes to build them. Wolves have stopped attacking sheep anyhow (Karlsson and Sjöström 2011).¹¹

Yet, it is also clear that in practice fences will never be a fully impenetrable barrier that can uphold a strict separation between our cultural landscape and their wilderness. Instead, these fences are mere communicative devices that help parallel sovereignties navigate a multidimensional landscape and arrive at a common understanding.

23.10 Building Communities with Humans and Wolves

There is another dimension to fences that should be mentioned here. We have seen that one of the problems of the spatial arrangements is the lack of trust by some parties, both a lack of trust in the possibility of peaceful coexistence with wolves, and also a lack of trust in society to take seriously the worries of people in rural areas. In response to this problem, in some European countries, groups of volunteers have started to help farmers to build fences to protect their livestock.¹² Typically, these volunteers are people living in the city who want to help find a peaceful coexistence with the wolf. They know that there may be good reasons to like the idea of wolves returning, but also realize that the farmers will have to put up with the downsides of the presence of wolves in the landscape. These volunteer groups help farmers and sheep in order to help the wolf.

One of the sheep farmers helped by Wolf-fencing, Gijsbert Six, told a local newspaper how he views the wolf's return and the help from volunteers:

I'm ambivalent about it. On the one hand, the wolf is a fascinating animal, on the other hand he kills sheep. And not in a gentle way, as I have seen for myself. This is quite a tough blow when it happens to you as a sheep farmer. Yet, for thousands of years we have eradicated everything that stood in the way. Should we also do that with wolves if their visit is not convenient for us? As long as it's not disruptive to society, I think we should learn to live with it. The fact that the volunteers of Wolf-Fencing helped me easily saves me a thousand euros in costs. *Plus, I feel like I'm not alone.*¹³

As the embodiment of solidarity between farmers and non-farmers, the volunteering work of Wolf-fencing and similar groups contributes to sense of community. In the

¹¹It should be noted, though, that experts warn that young wolves, like human adolescents, do like to experiment, and might be tempted to attack sheep anyhow if an easy opportunity presents itself. One should prevent them from developing a taste for sheep, and make sure that any attempt to attack a sheep will result in an unpleasant experience, such as an electric shock from an electric fence (Reinhardt et al. 2012).

¹²In Germany, a group called 'Wikiwolves' (<http://www.wikiwolves.org/>) started in 2015 in North-East Germany, and has grown ever since. Now they are active across the country (<http://www.wikiwolves.org/>). In 2018, a similar group called 'Wolf-fencing' (<https://www.wolf-fencing.nl/>) has begun work the Netherlands (building wolf-fences based on fences used in Sweden), one year later followed by Wolf Fencing Belgium (<https://www.wolffencing.be/>).

¹³<https://www.wolf-fencing.nl/voor-wie>. My emphasis, MD.

end, the biggest effect of this volunteering work may be that there is also a developing mutual understanding between the city dwellers and the farmers; both groups learn to understand the worries and concerns of the others in the process, friendships might even emerge.¹⁴ The volunteers get to understand the fears and worries of livestock keepers, whereas the farmers may get a better understanding of the reasons for wanting to protect wildlife. Moreover, by working together on building fences, both groups get to know each other better, thus a sense of community can emerge that can counteract the feeling of being disenfranchised. These volunteering groups *and* the sheep farmers who decide to accept their assistance, together built a human culture of devotion to the very idea that living with predators is possible and a goal worthwhile pursuing. At the same time, by building fences, they also help develop a culture among wolves that is conducive to that coexistence.

Living with wolves of course also requires that we take into account the wolves' way of understanding the world, their needs and behaviour, and that we are willing to communicate with them. If we want to live with wolves, we must learn from and about wolves, and wolves must be able to learn from us how they can live with us. An analysis of the possibilities and limitations of the interspecies communication can help us understand how our actions not only have meanings for ourselves but also for the nonhumans we share the landscape with, and it can make us realize how we have changed the world of wolves.

In the end, however, the pragmatic approach to coexistence with wolves will only be possible if society recognizes that sharing the landscape with other beings is somehow meaningful, and therefore considers coexistence with other beings as a goal worthwhile pursuing.

23.11 The Meaning of Living with Wolves

An understanding of the landscape as a multidimensional space should become part of a broader world view that gives meaning to the fact that we co-inhabit the landscape. The pragmatic perspective on multidimensional landscapes has to be integrated with an overall *human* perspective on the meaning of coexistence with wolves, in which all the objective features are put into the interpretative narrative context and comes to *mean* something (Drenthen 2016b). We have to engage in a moral conversation about what the current situation means and what it requires. An understanding of the role of wolves in the landscape can make clear what the challenges are, and how they can be met. But what is also needed is a *reason why* we should be prepared to respond to those challenges in the first place. Why should we be willing to share our

¹⁴In a video clip on the wikiwolves website, a volunteer makes clear how the initial interest in wolf protection gradually changed into an interest in shepherding, and in helping shepherds with their problems. The aim is "to help the sheep farmers and let them know they are not alone." Euro LargeCarnivores (2019).

world with these sometimes annoying animals in the first place, rather than trying to finally get rid of them and have the world all to ourselves?

One reason might be that the world becomes more interesting and meaningful when there are other beings present. The world would be a lonely place if we would only encounter beings like ourselves.

A few years ago, I visited the Harz National Park in Germany, a wild remote area located along the former iron curtain in the center of Germany. On a hike in a forest, I met a park ranger and asked him if he knew whether wolves had already started to recolonize the area. “Not that I am aware of”, he responded. “But while we are talking here, they might be watching us from behind the trees. In nature, you are never alone. In the forest you are not the only one watching, you are always also being watched. One pair of eyes is looking in, while a thousand pairs of eyes are looking out.”

The ranger referred to an old German saying “Der Wald hat tausend Augen” (“The forest has a thousand eyes”) that reminds hunters that the animals that they are hunting are aware of their presence. The saying articulates an awareness of the landscape as a multidimensional space, inhabited by a multiplicity of species that all have their own perspective on the world. The multidimensional landscape is a world full of meaning and wonder, because it is not just our world but also the world of other beings. In other words, the presence of other beings makes the world a larger, more interesting place.

Moreover, being confronted by the existence of other beings can make us aware of the finite nature of our own bodily existence in and perspective on the world; other beings open, as it were, a transcendent realm beyond our own daily mundane existence.

This idea is articulated more clearly by John Berger. Berger argues that the way we usually experience the world, is habitual, and is confirming our existing worldview. “What we habitually see confirms us” (Berger 2009, 9). However, every now and then we are presented with something that breaches this self-confirmation, and this sometimes happens when we encounter animals. Berger uses an interesting cinema metaphor to explain how animals inhabit a different world than we do:

The speed of a cinema film is 25 frames per second. God knows how many frames per second flicker past our daily perception. But it is as if at the brief moments I’m talking about, suddenly and disconcertingly we see *between* two frames. We come upon a part of the visible which wasn’t destined for us. Perhaps it was destined for night-birds, reindeer, ferrets, eels, whales... (Berger 2009, 10)

Because the world of animals is usually inaccessible to us, and yet is not entirely separated from us either, animal encounters can confront us with the fact that we cannot take our normal view for granted. The realization that “our customary visible order is not the only one: it co-exists with other orders” may be enriching: “Stories of fairies, sprites, ogres were a human attempt to come to terms with this co-existence” (ibid., 10) But the same experience can also be deeply confusing or unsettling. Seeing between the frames may be an uncanny experience.

Berger discusses the enigmatic work of Finnish photographer Pentti Sammallahti, in which dogs appear as beings that are “attuned both to the human order and to other

visible orders” and as such they inhabit the “interstices,” the world *in between* ours and theirs. As a result, in each picture

the human order, still in sight, is nevertheless no longer central and is slipping away. The interstices are open. The result is unsettling: there is more solitude, more pain, more dereliction. At the same time, there is an expectancy which I have not experienced since childhood, since I talked to dogs, listened their secret and kept them to myself. (ibid., 10–11)

Berger suggests why it is that the presence of some animals seems to be so unsettling to some people and fascinating to others. Berger argues that even though we can appropriate animals by killing and eating them or by taming them, essentially they remain alien to us:

But always its lack of common language, its silence, guarantees its distance, its distinctness, its exclusion, from and of man. Just because of this distinctness, however, an animal’s life, never to be confused with a man’s, can be seen to run parallel to his. Only in death do the two parallel lines converge and after death [...]. With their parallel Jives, animals offer man a companionship which is different from any offered by human exchange. Different because it is a companionship offered to the loneliness of man as a species. (ibid., 14–15)

Wolves may not be experts of interstices in the way dogs are, but they do have their own distinct perspective that is different from ours. Moreover, by performing their lives as sovereign beings independently of us, they are also putting into perspective the human order.

The fact that our landscape is being inhabited by wolves may be unsettling because it undermines the steady traditional human-centered view of the world in which all the meanings are a given, and our view of the world is being confirmed. Yet, to those who are open to it, the presence of these other creatures opens up a new perspective on the world and our place in it. This may explain why the responses to the resurgence of wolves are so extreme, and wide ranging: from deeply felt fear and hatred to wonder, excitement and awe.

According to environmental philosopher Glenn Delière, this ambivalence has to do with a more fundamental characteristic of how we experience meaning altogether. Delière (2016, 414) argues that we can only experience meaning when we are engaged with a reality that is external to ourselves:

The reality towards which we are oriented in our quest for meaning and with which we hope to establish contact is only really external to our desires if it can negate those desires and resist full appropriation. It is only when our quest for meaning can be denied by the reality towards which we are oriented, that we know we are oriented towards a reality that is truly external to us. The presence of meaning is thus premised on the possibility of its counterpart: the denial of meaning.

Building on the work of Delière, Mateusz Tokarski (2019, 121) argues that nature “as a domain independent from human control, an autonomous order of existence that follows its own purposes”, can have “an importance in human life that transcends mere usefulness.” But Tokarski also stresses the ambivalence of experiences of the unruliness of nature.

There is [...] a clear ambivalence in the experience of such meaningfulness of nature: the possibility of meaning is dependent precisely on the possibility that we will not find meaning, that the meanings we seek in nature will not be confirmed. This ambivalence is not just a side effect we grudgingly accept. Rather, such ambivalence is intricately tied to how we come to experience meaning. (ibid.)

In his ‘ethical guide to ecological discomforts’, Tokarski concludes that the unruliness of nature appears to be a requisite for experiencing nature as meaningful altogether, and that for this reason, experiences of unruly nature are even more significant: “As such, ecological discomforts acquire a constitutive role in our interactions with the non-human world” (ibid., 121.).

The analysis of Berger, Deliège and Tokarski can explain both the feeling of unease with the presence of unruly animals such as the wolf in human landscapes, but also the feeling of wonder and excitement that the animals evokes. But even more so, it also confirms that living in a multidimensional landscape with unruly beings might be a complicated task, but also one that is deeply significant and worthwhile.

23.12 Conclusion

Living together with resurging wolves in a cultural landscape can only be achieved if we think of wolves not as merely vulnerable endangered species, but also recognize them as sovereign beings that belong to a sovereign community. Recognizing their sovereignty means accepting the legitimacy of their spatial claims, but that does not have to imply we give up our own legitimate claims. The challenge of coexistence however, is not a matter of finding a compromise between human interests and the interests of wild animals. Rather the challenge is to find a new understanding of the landscape as a multidimensional space inhabited by many parallel sovereignties. It means that we have to realize the fact that we are always already communicating with other beings, even if we are not always aware of it.

Our relation to these sovereign communities of wild animals will inevitably contain tensions, and a need to keep distance from one another, despite the fact we co-inhabit the landscape. Often we will be able to live next to each other in peace, sometimes our relationship will be more challenging, and in those instances, our respect for these sovereign beings will be the “respect” for a powerful opponent. However, if we learn to appreciate the game, we can also learn to wish our opponent all the best.

At the same time there is something to be won, our world can become bigger, more rewarding and more meaningful, knowing that we live in a landscape that is bigger than us, knowing that we are not the only ones using, knowing and understanding the land.

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