

Finding Common Ground with Wolves: Interspecies Communication in a Shared Landscape

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Research shows time and again that the vast majority of the European population today is abandoning anthropocentrism and is moving towards a non-anthropocentric view. A recent survey in the Netherlands concluded that Dutch in the majority have ‘an ecocentric view of nature’ (van den Berg *et al* 2021). Most Europeans today no longer believe that humans are the crowning glory of creation and instead share the premise that we should seek a more just, more equal relationship with other species (Van den Born 2008; De Groot *et al* 2011; Manfredo *et al* 2020). But while many people reject anthropocentrism in principle, it turns out to be difficult to give substance to this basic attitude towards nature in practice. This is particularly apparent when environmental problems lead to controversy, and when it turns out that concern for non-human nature has implications for vested interests and ingrained habits. It is easy to love nature when it is cute and beautiful, but in our dealings with troublesome, unruly or unappealing nature, or nature that simply gets in the way, this turns out to be far from obvious. Then the first impulse is still to control and master nature. The fierce debate surrounding the return of the wolf to western Europe is a clear example of the difficulty to find a more ecocentric view on human–wildlife coexistence. There appears to be an enormous gap between the pious intentions for a more nature-friendly lifestyle and the choices that are made in everyday practice, in which human self-interests most of the time still prevail over those of other species.

An important cornerstone of traditional anthropocentrism is nature–culture dualism: the idea that there is a sharp distinction between the world of humans and the natural world.¹ Although today it has become a platitude to emphasise that we humans are part of nature, this dualism, and the human exceptionalism that comes with it, still plays a major role in our dealings with non-human nature.

To a large extent, humans have been able, with the help of culture and technology, to detach themselves from the immediate ecological contexts in which they had long been absorbed. According to the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (2011), we can best understand modern culture and technology as continuations and extensions of the human immune system, with which people protect themselves not only against viruses and bacteria, but against all the outside

¹ For more on nature–culture dualism, see *Ethics and the Environment* 11 (2), Fall/Winter 2006, special issue on nature–culture dualism. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i40014558>

threats to their safe inner world. But it is an illusion to think that humans can also disconnect themselves from the rest of nature. It is equally illusory to think that people can eliminate or control all these threats in nature, because evolution is an infinitely creative process. Humans, with all their modern technology and culture, are still part of the ecological web of the planet, even though they themselves may have become a major disruptive factor within it.

Yet we often hear people saying that coexistence with 'wild nature' is impossible in Europe, since western Europe is, after all, a cultural landscape in which 'no real nature exists'. The implicit assumption is that nature conservation means that certain areas must be set apart so that endangered plant and animal species can survive there, while the area beyond that is exclusively at the disposal of us humans; it is there that we can and may manipulate nature to suit our own needs. The only real nature is untrammelled 'wilderness', which can be neatly separated from the rest of the land by clear boundaries and partitions. Where in the past people used to put up fences around towns and yards to keep wild animals out, nowadays fences and wildlife grids serve primarily to keep wild animals in. In this dualist view of the world, it is of crucial importance to make sure wild nature and human cultural lands remain neatly separated. Wild beings should not be allowed to enter 'our space'. The call for control of nature is perhaps most evident when it comes to the return of the wolf to the western European landscape.

Current fauna management in most west European countries implicitly assumes that keeping a strict separation between nature and the cultural landscape can solve many problems. And admittedly, that often works reasonably well for those animals that stay neatly within or relatively close to a designated nature area. Often a simple boundary between cultural land and nature areas – such as a fence – is enough to keep most animals in 'nature' and out of farmland. Conversely, prohibition signs telling people to stay out of vulnerable nature areas are often enough to safeguard nature reserves from the harmful effects of human activities, signs that confirm for people the existence of a symbolic boundary between nature reserve and human land. Sometimes these boundaries will need to be made more explicit: chickens can be protected against fox attacks by using sturdy poultry runs, domesticated pigs can be protected from African swine fever infection by wild boars by keeping them in a hermetically sealed pen. And sheep can be kept safe from wolf attacks by putting them in a corral at night or by using well-designed electric fences and sheep guarding dogs.

But sometimes the problem of the impact of wild animals on livestock production cannot be solved by providing such a separation, and the situation requires a different approach to wild animals. The animal for which this is perhaps most clearly true is the wolf.

WOLVES IN WRONG PLACES?

In the spring of 2020, a young German wolf turned up in West Brabant, a densely populated area in the Netherlands with intensively used agricultural land. It is hard to imagine that a wolf could find suitable habitat here: too much human infrastructure, not enough space, not enough prey. In fact, most experts agreed that West Brabant is an unsuitable place for a wolf, not because we people think so, but because of the characteristics of the landscape. Contrary to expectations and expert predictions, however, the animal did not immediately move on, but lingered in the area for weeks. Because of the absence of wild prey, the animal focused on predation of livestock: within a few days, it attacked and killed over 60 domesticated sheep – most of which were

killed but not eaten.² This behaviour of the Brabant wolf – who was named ‘Billy’ – led to great consternation and calls to shoot the animal and declare the whole of the Netherlands a wolf-free zone. Only after the Provincial government and volunteer groups rushed to help farmers protect their sheep, thus making these sheep unavailable as a food source, did the wolf decide to move on. It moved to Belgium, only a few tens of kilometres away.³ The behaviour of this Brabant wolf led to a fierce debate on whether or not the Dutch government should declare certain areas wolf-free zones: should we not try to keep wolves out of areas that are unfit as wolf habitat, perhaps not by shooting them, but at least by actively chasing them away or by capturing them and releasing them elsewhere?⁴ Others argued we should get used to the idea that wild animals do not only reside in so-called ‘natural areas’, and instead acknowledge that we actually share the landscape with them. Sharing the landscapes with wolves means that we acknowledge that they will occasionally also show up in areas designed to meet our needs, even if those places are not suitable as habitat to wolves because they do not fit their essential needs. Is it possible to accept that from now on predators will be roaming the countryside looking for a territory? To start, we perhaps should no longer focus our efforts on controlling wild animals, but rather on increasing the resilience of ourselves and our vital interests and protect our domesticated animals from the impact that wild animals might have. However, that would mean a major shift in the dominant approach to wildlife in western Europe.

The wolf as a species is vulnerable, but the behaviour of individual wolves can be unruly and a nuisance, especially to livestock keepers; living together with wolves will require livestock farmers to protect their animals. Wolves typically need large areas, and in the densely populated and relatively small-scale landscape of western Europe there is likely to always be overlap between their territory and that of humans. Moreover, wolves are so intelligent and flexible that their presence will not be confined to nature reserves. The wolf is an outstanding example of an animal that tends to cross human-made borders. Wolves challenge the very distinction between culture and nature that is so important to many humans. Wolves lay a claim on the landscape that until recently humans regarded as their own exclusive domain.⁵

In doing so, wolves confront us with the question of the extent to which we are really prepared to make room for other organisms. According to Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka (2011), this is not only an ethical but also a political question; it is not just a matter of protecting wildlife, but of seeking a just distribution of benefits and burdens between humans and sovereign animal communities.

While not reducible simply to lines on a map, the recognition of sovereignty for humans and animals does require drawing boundaries. ... A sovereignty framework ... insists that we treat

- ² Even though experts can explain this so-called surplus killing as a natural behaviour (wolves kill all the prey they can get, keep the extra meat for later; but in the wild, wolves hardly get a chance to kill more than one individual of a flock of ungulates), in the case of predation of livestock, this so-called surplus killing added to the public outrage: it is one thing if a wild animal preys on livestock to eat; it is seen as quite another thing that sheep get killed without apparent reason.
- ³ A few weeks later, this wolf moved to Northern France, where it was eventually shot by a farmer (Meijer 2020).
- ⁴ As was decided by the Parliament of the Province of Friesland (Van den Berg 2000).
- ⁵ One might argue that all creatures lay a claim to land, but wolves and other big animals do so in a way that is hard to ignore. Whereas humans can afford not to notice the justified claims of small animals and plants, wolves directly present themselves as a species that occupies land and does not simply retreat if its claim to space is being challenged by humans.

the distribution of risks as an issue of justice between sovereign communities. ... Imposing risks on others must meet a number of conditions, including: (a) the imposed risks are genuinely necessary to achieve some legitimate interest, and are proportional to that benefit, and not just the result of negligence or callous disregard; (b) both the risks and the attendant benefits are equitably shared over all the people who suffer risk in one context benefit from risk in other contexts, rather than one group being continually the victims of imposed risk; (c) society compensates, where possible, the victims of inadvertent harm. (p. 198)

PARALLEL WORLDS

Animals live in their own world, which overlaps with ours in spatial terms, but which belongs to another dimension in terms of meaning. Animals occupy their own semiotic realm, or 'Umwelt', to use the term coined by Jacob von Uexküll (2010). Von Uexküll argued that all living beings – no matter how simple or complex – have to be understood as subjects, and that the worlds they lived in were constituted through their specific ways of perceiving their 'Umwelt'. What we see as an office building or an apartment building may seem like a rock wall to a pigeon or a peregrine falcon. The point, of course, is that these different worlds of meaning do not exist independently but touch each other. Our actions therefore affect not only the landscape for ourselves, but also that of other creatures, in a material sense, but thus also in terms of meaning. Susan Boonman-Berson (2018) points out that communication with wild animals does not occur directly, but is based on material traces or signs to which both humans and wild animals have access and which must be interpreted by them. Some of these signs are given consciously, but, more often, we send out signals that are interpreted by other beings without us being aware of them. The fascinating interactive movie *Bear 71* explores this idea, by telling 'the true story of a female grizzly bear monitored by the wildlife conservation offices from 2001– 009.' The movie is giving a voice to a radio collared bear in Jasper National Park that reflects on what it is like to navigate a landscape filled with signs that one can or cannot understand, and to be part of human systems of surveillance:

Chances are; your picture gets taken dozens of times a day without you really knowing it. This type of surveillance is done so that you don't steal gas, steal a car, or steal a kiss.⁶

There is an old German hunter's saying that could become topical again in our time: 'Der Wald hat tausend Augen' (The forest has a thousand eyes). Several years ago, I visited the Harz National Park, a wild and remote area along the former Iron Curtain in the heart of Germany. On a long hike, I met a forester and asked him if he knew if wolves had reached that area yet. 'Not that I know of', he replied. 'But while we are talking here, they can watch us, from behind the trees. In nature, you are never alone; while you are watching, you are also always being watched. One pair of eyes looks in, a thousand pairs of eyes look out.' Although some of us are aware of the presence of other animals if we visit nature areas, often this awareness is lacking in more humanly cultivated lands. And yet, through our land use, we are also constantly giving

⁶ *Bear 71* (Jeremy Mendes and Leanne Allison, Canada, 2012) is available online at <https://bear71vr.nfb.ca>. Also see this interesting review, Castellano 2018

signs, and thus constantly communicating with other species, usually without being aware of it. Timo Maran (2015) argues that an ecosemiotics approach to species management can help species management and communication about human–animal interactions to better deal with changes in the ‘encounter of different semiotic subjects’.

A meadow with high protein grass shouts to a goose flying overhead: come and eat here! A meadow with unprotected sheep does the same for a wandering hungry young wolf looking for a new territory. Conversely, animal behaviour can also be misinterpreted by humans: what is natural behaviour for an animal may appear as problem behaviour to humans. These differences in interpretation of the other’s behaviour, and of the meaning of different landscape features, can unintentionally lead to conflict, especially when wild animals make decisions based on landscape features that we humans are not even aware of. The challenge of coexisting with wildlife is therefore not just about finding a compromise between human and animal interests. It is also about learning to understand how the landscape has a different meaning for another species than it does for humans, and that certain behaviours result from this that can lead to conflict.

A semiotic analysis can contribute significantly to a better understanding of changing animal–human relationships and can help explain the interrelation between the way that animals make sense of their world and the way that people think of these animals, and point to changes in the semiosphere due to recent environmental changes. Animals and humans both understand the world as a correlate of their sensory apparatus; they understand functional relationships between their own sensory existence and their surroundings, and thus form a representation or model of the world. Conversely, their communication forms consist of exchanging signs that represent aspects of their relationship to their environment. Humans share this kind of semiotic understanding of signs with other animals. However, humans are also capable of a different kind of understanding, human understanding of meaning, which transcends a mere ‘instrumental’ relationship (Drenthen 2016). Human interpretations of world do not so much represent, but rather present, a world; and thus they transform a simple environment (‘Umwelt’) into a world ‘that one could inhabit’, to use a phrase by Paul Ricoeur (Ricoeur 1991, 149). It is because of this capacity to interpret the world as a meaningful place that humans can decide to change their given relation to their world and adapt their behaviour so as to make it more meaningful. Once we come to see the world as a place occupied by multiple species, and establish a positive attitude towards that multiplicity, we can choose to aim for a more peaceful form of coexistence with wildlife, even if they sometimes can be a nuisance and challenge existing ways of life and conventions.

LIVING TOGETHER WITH PREDATORS

There are countless examples in the world of people and communities managing to coexist with wild animals, in many cases animals that are much more dangerous and much more difficult to coexist with than our wolf.

A good example exists in the village of Charotar, in central Gujarat in India, where people have learned to live alongside one of nature’s most dangerous predators, the crocodile (Pooley and Marchini 2020). Villagers have built islands for crocodiles where they can lie in the sun. Perhaps because they know that people help them from time to time, and because they do not expect anything to be done to them, crocodiles tolerate human encroachment, and even accept it when fishermen pick up and drag the animals. The day before setting their nets, fishermen moor their boats in the lake as a warning to the predators. They then usually retreat to neighbouring wetlands

or densely vegetated parts of the lake, giving the fishermen space. How strong the faith is in the possibility of coexistence is shown by the fact that among the defenders of crocodiles there are even fathers of children who have been killed by a crocodile attack (Pooley and Marchini 2020; Pooley *et al* 2020; and Vasava *et al* 2015). The people of Charotar thus show that living alongside dangerous predators is possible.

Sometimes such a relationship with wild animals can even go beyond mere conflict-free coexistence, and we can even speak of true cooperation between wild animals and humans. There is a famous example from the Australian whaling village of Eden, where for centuries local whalers in Twofold Bay cooperated with the resident orcas when hunting baleen whales (Clode 2002; Neiwert 2015).

In all these cases, one might say, there is some sort of communication going on that allows both the human community and the community of wild animals (be they crocodiles or orcas) to know where things stand. In landscapes where people and predators have successfully learned to live together, people and predators have become attuned to each other. In these landscapes people and animals have developed a shared understanding of the landscape as a multi-layered space, which has led to a trust among both people and animals in a conflict-free coexistence. But the emergence of such a tradition probably requires a long-term view.

One might be tempted to think that such an interspecies understanding is not feasible for Europe, with its long history of dualistic anthropocentrism. Fortunately, we can also draw inspiration from contemporary examples of how we have learned to avoid human land-use conflicts.

In forests and other recreational areas, for example, a variety of ways have been developed that prevent hikers from unnecessarily colliding with mountain bikers and horseback riders. Based on a recognition of the different worlds of meaning, needs and desires of these diverse user groups, route networks of hiking, mountain biking and equestrian trails have been created that prevent these groups from unnecessarily colliding. These networks of paths could be seen as a way of giving concrete form to the multidimensionality of the forest as a user space for various groups of recreational users. When such a network is well designed, and the paths match the experience and needs of the different groups, it is in everyone's interest to avoid unnecessary conflicts and the groups can usually rely on each other's goodwill, even without a forester standing behind every tree to hand out fines. People are also more likely to tolerate the occasional transgression when a trail user does not keep to the agreement. Mutual trust and a mutual learning and communication process can lead to different groups living together with relatively little conflict.

In a similar way, we could consider measures to prevent conflict between predators and livestock. Between humans, communication is relatively easy with signs and signposts, but for animals we need signs that they can 'read'. In the case of wolves, electric fencing proves to be an effective means to get a message across.⁷

FENCES AS COMMUNICATION TOOLS

If farmers consistently protect their sheep so that it becomes so cumbersome and risky for a wolf to take sheep that it becomes unappealing, wolves will learn to adapt their behaviour, provided of course that there is enough wild prey to hunt. Experience elsewhere shows that, after a few

⁷ With other animals, there might be other suitable signs that might influence wildlife behaviour. An interesting study from the Netherlands showed how crop damage resulting from foraging behaviour of badgers can be reduced by strategically planting specific maize varieties within a cornfield (Thissen *et al* 2018).

generations, young wolves will grow into the culture of the adult wolves, in which kept livestock are ignored. In Switzerland, the number of attacks on livestock has been decreasing in recent years, while the number of wolves is still increasing (Group Wolf Suisse 2020). The same is going on in the German state of Lower Saxony (Wolven in Nederland 2018). In Sweden, the same process has been going on for a few years longer (Karlsson and Sjöström 2011) and some farmers have even decided that fences are no longer needed; they are apparently confident enough to rely on the local culture among wolves of refraining from sheep meat. It should be noted, however, that young wolves, like human adolescents, like to experiment and may be tempted to attack sheep if an easy opportunity arises. It is important that young wolves learn, from their parents or from us, that it is easier and safer to hunt wild prey and leave sheep alone behind the fence, for example, by ensuring that any attempt to attack a sheep results in an unpleasant experience, such as an electric shock.

It might be tempting to think of wolf fences as hard borders between culture and nature, but that would bring us back to the outdated dualist mode of thinking. Rather, these fences should be thought of as means of communication between species, that help establish low-conflict human–wolf coexistence.

Living with large predators such as the wolf inevitably brings tensions and the need to keep our distance from each other, despite the fact that we inhabit the landscape together. Often, we will be able to live peacefully side by side; sometimes our relationship will be more challenging. At the same time, there is something to be gained: our world can become larger and more satisfying, knowing that we live in a landscape larger than ourselves, that we are not the only ones who use, know and understand the land. Whichever way things will develop in the near future, what the experiences from elsewhere show is that it makes no sense to see fences as embodying a strict distinction between nature and culture. Fences and other means of prevention should be interpreted as communication tools that can help avoid conflict between humans and wildlife communities that live in parallel worlds but share the same landscape.

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