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HUNTERS' PERCEPTION OF DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THEMSELVES AND OTHER INTEREST GROUPS AND THE CONSEQUENCES ON WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

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Summary: Wildlife management is a complex task which needs the cooperation of many different interest groups, including agriculture, forestry, tourism, nature conservation and hunting. Although all of these groups share a high appreciation of nature, there are often conflicts about how to manage its wildlife and ecosystems. For wildlife managers it is essential to understand the drivers of such conflicts in order to overcome impasses in wildlife and ecosystem management.

The starting point of this paper was the assumption that there is often more to these conflicts than just material interests. As hunters play a major role in wildlife and ecosystem management our aim was to identify drivers of conflicts from their perspective. We analysed passages of group discussions with hunters in different regions of southwest Germany (originally carried out on the topic of the lynx) in which hunters reflect on such conflicts. The method for analyses was Bohnsack's documentary method.

The results show, that hunters find themselves in a dilemma of differing societal expectations when it comes to wildlife management, none of which reflect their own values and moral standards. Furthermore hunters feel that their work is under-appreciated and that the knowledge and competencies on which they pride themselves are often disrespected. This creates the wish to positively distinguish from the groups they interact with. However, group differentiation, according to the theory of social identity, leads to group conflict. This conflict can extend from the images the groups have of each other and reflect onto the topics where they interact, such as wildlife management, and may even result in poaching. The aim of our article is to draw attention to such group differentiation processes and its effects, to help wildlife managers further communication and cooperation between the interacting groups.

Key words: social conflict, group conflict, hunters, nature conservation, interaction

Introduction

One of the biggest challenges for wildlife management is not the management of the wildlife itself, but the management of the many concerned interest groups (agriculture, forestry, nature conservation, tourism, hunting, etc.) and the conflicts which arise amongst them (Madden 2004, Marshall et al 2007). Although all of these groups share a high appreciation of nature, there are often different ideas on how to manage wildlife and ecosystems. Therefore, it is essential for wildlife managers to understand the drivers of such conflicts in order to overcome impasses and enhance cooperation amongst the interest groups.

In Germany the hunting association that most hunters belong to, is officially recognized as a nature conservation organization, which hunters are very fond of. However, conflicts between hunters and other nature conservation organisations are very common (Lüchtrath et al. 2012). We assume that they are not always based on differing material or biological interests, but that other drivers and motivations are at hand. As hunters play a major role in wildlife and ecosystem management our aim was to identify drivers of conflicts from their perspective.

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Material and Methods

Hunters and nature conservationists distinguish between “us” and “them” when talking about each other, which means, the collective orientations of the group are in the focus of their interaction rather than those of the individual. Collective orientations form and become evident where group members get together and exchange views and arguments (Pollock 1955). Therefore group discussion is the preferred method for data collection (Lamnek 2005). We conducted five group discussions (8-12 participants each) in the state of Baden-Württemberg, Southwestern Germany (SBF, CBF, NBF, SA, DT). They were originally carried out to assess hunters’ perception of the lynx (*Lynx lynx*). However, in the course of the discussions many more topics than that of lynx were covered, one of the most frequent ones being the conflict between hunters and other groups, such as forestry, nature conservation and general public/society. For the purpose of this paper, we will focus on the conflict between hunters and nature conservation. These passages are used for the analysis.

Transcripts of the discussion were analysed with the help of MAX QDA software and Bohnsack’s (2003) Documentary Method. The documentary method analyses the group’s discursive descriptions in which the collective orientations and the experiential contexts become evident (Bohnsack 2003). Central indicators for these orientations are the positive and negative comparisons which the group draws upon for explanation. It is through these comparisons, called “counter-horizons” (“Gegenhorizonte”), that the group’s orientations become apparent. The groups with whom participants expressed to have the most conflicts are forestry, general public and nature conservation. The latter two are often intermingled in the descriptions, as participants perceive nature conservation to be a contemporary value orientation of society. In this paper we will focus on the conflict between hunters and nature conservationists.

To explain our findings we draw upon the Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel and Turner 1986). SIT assumes that individuals strive for a positive self-concept. This can be derived from membership in a social group (e.g. hunters, nature conservationists) and how this group is rated in comparison to relevant outgroups (Zick 2005). The stronger the members identify with their group (in-group), the stronger the desire to maximise its positive distinctiveness in contrast to relevant out-groups. However, if the group-comparison turns out negatively for the in-group there are strategies to cognitively “upgrade” its status (e.g. focussing on dimensions where it out-matches the out-group and downplaying dimensions on which a positive distinction fails). The process in-group favouritism and out-group-discrimination can eventually result in group conflict (Tajfel and Turner 1986). Strong cohesiveness within a group and conflictive values and norms are factors which enhance group conflict (Zick 2005).

Results

First of all it has to be said that the Hunting Association of Germany is also an officially acknowledged nature conservation organisation which “deservedly” fills hunters with pride:

5: *We are deservedly proud of being an officially acknowledged nature conservation association. But there are different interests.*

?: *Right*

1: *But not necessarily concerning animals, but also ANTI-HUNTING. (J DV: 194 ff.)*

Being a nature conservationist is therefore in principle a positive counter horizon for hunters and helps to attain a positive social identity. Nevertheless there are differences with other nature conservation groups, which participant 1 claims do not primarily concern animals but feature in an attitude he calls “anti-hunting”. In the following passage a discussion group expounds on the nature of these differences and how they feel hunters are perceived in society.

11: *Nowadays we don’t depend on using wild animals for our nutrition. Some people are even vegetarian. They don’t accept it anyway that animals are hunted for consumption. Now the lynx is supposed to regulate things [...] It is still missing in the ecological equilibrium and is supposed to substitute the human. Those are really romantic and actually not-natural beliefs.*

4: *Substitute the human, but moreover the hunter. [...] That of course is a topic of influence: [the lynx] is fascinating. It enthuses people. It is something exotic in our oh-so industrial, populated world. This central idea of romanticism comes in and it is damn well marketable. By tourism and others who jump on this train. There is a lot of money being involved in this. [...]*

1: *I mean nature conservation always sells well over here. Certain organisations sell better than the hunters do. We hunters sell relatively poorly. But the others don’t kill deer. They only protect frogs and do this and that. They are all protectors and we are the evil hunters, who kill and destroy everything. [...] In the countryside people have – let’s say*

– a different attitude about the topic of hunting. In former times, if you were a hunter you were someone. You were someone, then.

7: The priest, the teacher and the hunter. [laughter]

8: And the reeve! [laughter]

7: Ah yes, him as well! [laughter]

1: Let's say, even today hunters have a different lobby in the countryside and you can talk about things more non-judgementally. It is normal there, that you shot a roe deer or something. That's part of the game. You get laughed at if you DON'T shoot anything. And let's say in the urban parts – that happened to me myself – [...] we put down the kill [“Strecke legen”], and then a woman came who I incidentally knew from my job. I know she's from the city. “So! You are also one of these murderers?!” And then it went off - she harangued me. Half an hour later we arrive at the tavern and who sits at the table in front of the biggest sausage? That was her, right? That doesn't fit together. (J CBF: 156)

In the group's perception legitimations for hunting are the supply of meat or the regulation of ungulates. For many hunters, providing meat is an important incentive. But since nowadays there is no dependency on game for nutrition anymore, they feel this legitimation is lost or in some cases even turned around: as more and more people despise the killing and eating of animals for moral reasons, the act of hunting is despised as well. Especially by city people hunters feel perceived as “evil” and as “destroyers”. Some even associate hunting with murder and accuse hunters of being “murderers”. This shows that hunters' values and group-characteristics are in fact highly conflictive, which is an enhancing factor for group-conflict. Assuming that hunters, as a group with strong cohesiveness and high identification of individuals with their group, strive to gain a positive social identity, these attributes are obviously counterproductive – participants feel that hunters are marginalized or even turned into social outcasts.

The positive counter-horizon is located in former times, when hunters (next to priest, teacher and reeve) were perceived to be the most respected people of a village. Up until today killing animals is more accepted in the country-side. Making a kill is even expected of hunters. It is a sign of a good hunter. To participants this is in line with their own orientations about hunting and contributes to the positive social identity they strive to achieve.

To the participants' dismay, the legitimation of hunting as a tool to control ungulate populations is also perceived as obsolete by many people, who prefer large carnivores as a natural solution to substitute hunters. To participants this attitude represents a negative counter-horizon and a reproach to the group. According to SIT a group whose positive identity and central group-specific features are threatened by comparison with a relevant out-group will react with in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination. In defence of their group identity the carnivore-advocates' orientations are put down as “not-natural” beliefs. Their motivation is described as that of city people who try to compensate their life in a world far from nature. This estimation cognitively recreates the hunters' status. However, in practice this is cold comfort since the general public's fascination for large carnivores joins forces with the interests of nature conservation associations. The nature conservationist's ideals get reconfirmed and their status in society strengthened while the status of hunters is weakened. Participants have the impression that hunters' views and values become subordinate to the ones of nature conservation and general public. Their own orientations and group-specific features are condemned by the out-groups. In extreme cases this questions their right to exist as a group. Throughout all discussion groups in fact, this aspect was a central point of concern:

But we also need to be aware that it is also partly in the interest of these associations that hunting is more and more limited and, better yet, stopped completely. [...] They even say [agitated]: “Well that is great, then we won't need those hunters at all anymore! Then we have the lynx! Let's also get some wolf and some bear into the mix.” (NBF: 280)

Considering these citations it is conspicuous that the conflict is not about differing interests on a factual biological or ecological level. Instead it is mostly about group-specific characteristics and whether these are respected by relevant out-groups or not. The resulting group-differentiations were in fact a common point of debate during the group discussions. Following we will present some examples.

The most fundamental differentiation between hunters and nature conservationists is also the most obvious: while most nature conservation groups define themselves via the protection or conservation of species and ecosystems, hunters define themselves through making prey and killing game.

I am a hunter. I want to GO and make PREY – that's my AIM. I don't hunt just to go and sit and only enjoy nature. I am a HUNTER. I stand by it that I kill game. That's no question. (J DV: 134)

In this aspect hunters differ from most other groups. Being a hunter and killing game represents a positive counter-horizon and a central group-characteristic, while just sitting around enjoying nature is looked down upon. However, hunters feel that this unique feature does not necessarily bestow them with a very positive

social image. This brings them into the dilemma of having to find a positive distinctiveness strategy. It is found on the dimension of expertise, where participants think hunters outmatch other nature conservationists. Throughout all discussion groups hunters kept emphasizing the special competences and extensive expertise which they consider an immanent trait of being a hunter. Being a hunter means to spend a lot of time in the hunting ground, to interact with nature and to have a deep understanding of the local conditions such as geography, community borders, protected areas, resident animal species and habitat types. Because of their influence on and responsibility for the hunting ground participants perceive hunters to be a local authority and privileged compared to non-hunting nature conservationists, especially when it comes to judging ecological matters:

I am in the hunting district every day. And I know what's going on and I know my stuff. I am not God, but I claim that I know my district and know the creatures that live there. Someone who does a one-time inventory certainly cannot know this. [...] You have to live in nature and know it and gather experience. You can study and be as good as you want, but if you don't understand nature and don't know what goes on outdoors, nothing prudent can come of it. That's that. (NBF: 397 f)

Participants frequently pointed out differences in quality between the expertise of hunters and the one of the average non-hunting nature conservationist. The citation shows a distinction between the knowledge which comes from living in nature and gathering practical experience and the theoretical knowledge which comes from studying and achieving good grades. The practical knowledge of hunters is displayed as much more respectable than the theoretical knowledge of academic, non-hunting nature experts. Such experts are often perceived as highly specialized and ideologically focussed on a certain species on which they concentrate their efforts and activities. To the hunters' point of view they lack the holistic perspective on the ecosystem and other surrounding circumstances, which hunters pride themselves on.

There are people, academics, who have only the ideology: „this bird and nothing else“. And that I have to blame the Nabu [a large German nature conservation association] for: they have many good people, but the spectrum [of knowledge] is only this broad [shows length with thumb and index] and specifically on the orchids, on the owl, on the devil-knows-what, but they don't see the broad spectrum [of knowledge] of a hunter. Now, that's where I see the difference. (J SBF: 88)

The inter-disciplinary knowledge about wildlife biology, ecosystem functions as well as forestry and agriculture is part of the examination to acquire the hunting licence. It is a comparatively high entry criterion and ensures a high identification of members with their group. It also leads to a strong group-cohesiveness. The hunting license is an important part of hunters' identity and they derive a positive self-image from this.

We at least passed an exam and can therefore judge things from more dimensions than – I'll say – the self-proclaimed animal rights activist or nature conservationist. There are good people amongst them which have the according expertise, but the majority just doesn't. (J SBF: 116)

From participants' point of view, becoming a nature conservationist is an act of self-proclamation. It doesn't require passing an exam nor is there any other selection or initiation as it is the case for hunters.

The conflicts between the groups about values and group-characteristics become relevant when it comes to the management of species and habitats. The conflicts rub off onto the factual level as the demarcation between the groups also leads to a demarcation of the topics they stand for. This becomes evident through the animal species that the groups campaign for: there are hunters' animals (e.g. red deer, hare, wood grouse) and nature conservation's animals (e.g. beaver, cormorant, wolf) and neither group would advocate for the other group's animals (i.e. interests).

The people who argue why lynx could be here again don't accept the same arguments for other animal species [refers to red deer]. In my eyes that is a selection of a favourite animal as a flagship [original phrasing: Lieblingstier-Steckenpferd], but it has nothing to do with a complete ecological consideration. (DV: 52)

Nature conservationists' dedication for certain animal species is considered to be not purely ecologically motivated but to depend on the "label" of the animal: "hunters'" or "conservationists'". If a species is under the hunting law it belongs to the sphere of influence of the hunters. Even if it is also endangered and protected it doesn't necessarily receive support from other nature conservation groups. On the other hand, if a species is protected and not huntable, it belongs to the sphere of influence of nature conservation and management through hunting is not an option for nature conservationists. Even if a population has recovered (as in the cases of cormorant and beaver) and is causing damages, loosening the protection status and managing it through hunting would be seen as a gain of power for hunters at the cost of the nature conservationists. This, for example, is the case for beaver management, where animals are caught and relocated or killed by rangers to control populations, while hunting is not allowed:

That's like with the beaver. They sometimes make the most laborious actions for catching it. They cost a heap of money. [...] I say, what's all this fuss about? If the population is big enough for a sustainable harvest, then they should also say, they are free [to be hunted] (SA: 156f)

Because of such experiences the participating hunters perceive that a conservation status is a “one-way-road” (SA: 165) without the prospect of future hunting. Therefore they are critical of protection measures, because they fear a loss of involvement and authority.

If certain animal species [...] are put under protection, they never get out again. Even if you notice something is going wrong, and from an ecological point of view it is just not correct anymore. (NBF: 323)

Through this separation of spheres of influence the animals also become representatives of the power of their supporting groups. Whichever group succeeds in reestablishing their favourite animals in the area at the same time demonstrates the prevalence of the group's values. This in many cases is enough for the out-group to oppose to collaboration in the management of a species. It can even lead to boycotting the other groups' efforts. For example regarding the protection status of large carnivores, the hunters' stated that the perceived impossibility to manage populations through hunting could lead to frustration which again would result in defiance and poaching.

And if it [the lynx population] reaches a high density [...] a hunter would suffer. And he says: if nobody helps me, I'll help myself [...] and then the problem is solved. And if you don't know what to do with it: dig a 1,20m deep hole and then it is gone. (DV: 170)

We are not taken seriously. And that's the danger, because that pushes us into a corner. And one day we are in the corner and then we say: “Okay, that's how it is”. Well then nobody needs to wonder why the lynx gained absolutely no acceptance in the hunting community, because they [nature conservationists] had such extreme points of view in the first place. (SBF: 418 f.)

In the following table (1) the positive and negative counter-horizons are recapitulated to give a brief summary of hunters' perception of differences between themselves and other nature conservation groups.

Table 1: Group differentiations and arguments for positive distinctiveness

Positive counter-horizons:	Negative counter-horizons:
• Hunting as nature conservation	• Nature conservation without hunting
• Examination to enter the group and to ensure competence and quality standards	• Self-proclamation suffices to enter the group, no minimal requirement of knowledge
• Multidimensional view on the ecosystem, interdisciplinary knowledge	• Specialization in one area or on one subject
• Regular presence outdoors in the hunting ground, long experience	• Irregular presence outdoors, one-time inventories
• Hunting as a tool for population control and wildlife management	• Population control and wildlife management without hunting
• Hunting as a means to acquire meat	• Eating meat but despising hunting
• Hunters as upholders of a respectable tradition	• Hunters as murderers

Conclusion

Hunters in Germany are a group which is endowed with certain privileges and responsibilities compared to the rest of the general population, such are for example carrying weapons and managing game populations. The group is not easy to access since becoming a hunter requires passing an exam. With regard to SIT (Tajfel and Turner 1986) hunters can be described as a group with high identification of the individual with the group and strong cohesiveness within the group. The effect is that hunters feel proud of their group and membership bestows them with a positive self-image (see also Kaltenborn et al. 2013). However the way participants see hunters to be perceived by out-groups is negative, as the “license to kill” also represents a conflictive value to many non-hunters, a precondition which with respect to SIT can enhance group-conflict. Labels such as being “murderers” jeopardize the hunters' striving for a positive social identity. Participants feel that hunting as a tool for wildlife management is derogated by out-groups. According to SIT this situation encourages in-group-members to find dimensions on which the in-group positively distinguishes from the out-group. The participating hunters find it in the level of competence.

Here, they derogate the specialized but perceivedly narrow knowledge of “self-proclaimed” nature conservationists and devalue the views and values of “city people” as romantic and actually not-natural ideas about nature. This cognitively upgrades hunters' group status.

The group-differentiation and the resulting group-conflict are transmitted onto the topics in which the groups interact, such as wildlife management. Certain animal species become the symbols for a certain group's values and interests. Decisions on the management of such species are dominated by the interest to demarcate the in-groups spheres of influence and attempts to exclude the out-group from management, rather than finding sound solutions for the management problems.

Leaders of wildlife management projects should be aware of such dynamics and try to counteract them. The Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport 1954) suggests that personal contact, equality among groups and a shared higher goal dissipate prejudice and positively affect inter-group relationships (Pettigrew 1998, Hewstone 2003). A shared higher goal in the case at hand can be found in both groups' identification with nature and its conservation. Involving the groups in dialogue and joint decision making processes has been found to establish mutual trust and enhance communication and cooperation (Redpath et al. 2004, Lüchtrath et al. 2012, Davies et al. 2013). If within these processes conflicts arise which are rooted in prejudice and out-group-discrimination and lead away from a factual discussion, addressing these dynamics and reflecting on them can help to overcome them.

There are several articles which address the negative image of hunters in society (Campbell and Mackay 2009, Knezevic 2009) – a topic which participants also expressed in this study as a challenge to their positive social identity. Recent research argues that a socially legitimate hunting ethic is necessary in order to gain public support (Kaltenborn et al. 2013) and sustain hunting as a socio-cultural and recreational activity (Ljung et al. 2012). The field of nature conservation leaves plenty of opportunity for hunters in this respect and participants did describe it as a positive aspect of their identity. However, many hunters focus mainly on their favourite animals just as much, as they blame nature conservation to focus on theirs. We think that if hunters could step forward and seek true cooperation instead of competition with other nature conservation groups, this would also greatly benefit hunters public image.

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