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The Importance of Language in the Relationships between Humans and Non-Humans

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COMMENTS, DEBATES, REPORTS AND INTERVIEWS

Beyond Human-Wildlife Conflicts

Ameliorating Human/Nonhuman Animal Relationships through Workshops on Terminology

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ABSTRACT

Human-Wildlife Conflicts (HWCs) occur when nonhuman animals' needs clash with those of humans. One recent effort regards shifting HWCs into Human-Human Social Conflicts, where conflicts are about humans disagreeing on how to deal with nonhuman animals. This method can help reduce guilt placed on nonhuman animals, but also robs them of their agency. Conversely, some in the field of biology seek to increase animal agency and their moral status, even making them key stakeholders. A helpful relationship may seek both aspects. Fourteen workshops (147 participants, 40 subgroups), with relevant stakeholders, were run on this topic. Participants were involved in biology and/or environmentalism and/or sustainability. They sought to develop terminology diminishing guilt in HWCs, while maintaining agency. Common themes were then brought out. Eight subgroups argued for more inclusive terms, like "sentient beings" and 21 argued for diminishing human/nature dichotomies. Both fit well with increasing agency, and giving nonhumans greater moral status, by narrowing human/nonhuman animal gaps. Participants also discussed nonhuman animals as "icons", which 26/30 subgroups saw as, at least potentially, problematic, arguing it conceptually "freezes" species, ignoring their dynamism. In sum, the workshops aid in framing healthier relationships with the natural world.

Keywords: human-human social conflicts; human-wildlife conflicts; nonhuman agency; nonhuman animals as stakeholders; nonhumans as icons; nonhuman moral status; relational values; sentient beings; terminology; workshops.

1. INTRODUCTION

Human-Wildlife Conflicts (HWCs) can occur when the needs of nonhuman animals overlap with the needs or wants of humans (Distefano 2005).

(While the term Human-Wildlife Conflicts and HWCs are used in this paper as they are common in the field, "nonhuman animals" will be used wherever possible.) Conflict can manifest with a large range of nonhuman animals, including elephants, monkeys, and big cats, and in a variety of settings, including urban, peri-urban and rural settings (Distefano 2005). A key way to look at HWCs is a Relational Values perspective, linking nonhuman animals to humans (Baard 2019). The relationships go in both directions, as chosen mitigation methods, like culling, have an impact on nonhuman animals, just as they can impact the humans involved in HWCs. As discussed below, the relational component can include more human players, such as stakeholders disagreeing on how to deal with nonhuman animals (Peterson *et al.* 2010). This study will first discuss the concept of Human-Human Social Conflicts, highlighting its benefits and potential shortcomings. Then, workshops that were conducted to tackle these issues will be presented.

The need to include more human social factors in considering HWCs has been argued at length (Dowie 2009). For instance, HWC increases can occur when one group of humans pushes or restricts another group of humans (*ibid.*). Social components, including political, governance and power issues have been key to several reserve protection schemes (Mulder and Coppolillo 2005; Taljaard and Swemmer 2011). Even the social realm of religion can mediate and impact HWC issues (Distefano 2005).

1.1. *From human-wildlife conflicts to human-human social conflicts*

This study focuses on one approach to the social factor, chosen as it has the most impact from a Relational Values perspective. There has been a concerted effort to reframe HWCs so as to shift from seeing them as Human-Wildlife Conflicts towards framing them as Human-Human Social Conflicts or HHSC (Peterson *et al.* 2010). This is a Relational Values view of Human-Wildlife Conflicts which puts the human-human social relationships front and center. Generally, in this perspective, HWCs are considered as actually being conflicts between different human groups that are in disagreement on how to deal with nonhuman animals, like preservation or culling (*ibid.*). Except in a few examples, most cases do not consider animals as being significant agents in the conflict, as this "may perpetuate the anthropomorphic view that animals possess humanlike consciousness, including values, interests, and intents [and] thus representing wild animals as human antagonists" (*ibid.*, 79).

Some scholars pushing a "social" aspect of HWC do discuss some agency, like when nonhuman animals explicitly target an individual or seek vengeance, but these are seen as rare cases (Peterson *et al.* 2010; IUCN SSC HWCTF 2020). This increase in the human social dimension, however, is not an adequate shift, as it robs most nonhuman animals of any agency, which can lead to unfortunate mitigation efforts. An example can portray this, namely that of a person driving a car and hitting a deer (*ibid.*). If the person ran over the deer because they disagree with deer management, it is considered a "true" Human-Wildlife Conflict (namely retitled as a Human-Human Social Conflict) (*ibid.*). If this was just an accident, it may not be a "true" conflict (*ibid.*). Another example is given when regarding a Red-tailed Hawk, which is considered to be involved in an "true" HWC only if "local people exhibit disdain toward the Red-tailed Hawk or intentionally persecute it for its actions" (White, Kennedy, and Christie 2017, 265). Even in cases which don't discuss Human-Human Social Conflicts directly, some tend to fall into the mindset that if there is an encounter with nonhuman animals, and no human is detrimentally affected, there is no impact. In fact, some argue that if no human "has been injured or has suffered a loss", there is no conflict (Conover 2002, 347). In fairness, some authors do discuss that some in the field of HWCs would use other definitions (IUCN SSC HWCTF 2020).

1.2. *Going beyond human-human social conflicts*

A beneficial component of transitioning from traditional views of Human-Wildlife Conflicts to Human-Human Social Conflicts is its attempt to diminish the guilt placed on nonhuman animals. However, it may miss important components. The robbing of agency of nonhuman animals is an example of a Relational Values perspective that is not fully adequate. Perhaps a restructuring of language, as advocated by the Relational Values perspective, can help reframe this issue (West *et al.* 2020). Certainly, a restructuring of language has been argued in attempts to give nonhuman animals more agency, even consider them as having the moral status of stakeholders whose views must be inferred and included (Merskin 2021).

A proper Relational Values perspective of nonhuman animals must take the impact and agency of nonhuman animals into account, while seeking, as in the HHSC view, to limit the "guilt" placed on nonhuman animals in conflicts. As has been argued, once the agency of nonhumans is considered, they could be seen as stakeholders (Tallberg, García-Rosell, and Haanpää 2021). The need to see animals as stakeholders in

the events in which they interact with humans is not new (Sage *et al.* 2014; Kenehan 2019; Tallberg, García-Rosell, and Haanpää 2021). Once this shift is done, a proper Relational Values perspective could be developed, one that reduces the guilt placed on nonhuman animals, while still maintaining their agency.

As mentioned, the Relational Values perspective also argues for efforts in modifying/restructuring language to better understand relationships, which is key to this study (West *et al.* 2020). Such views of the need to change language is also present in the larger HWC field, as discussed at length elsewhere (IUCN SSC HWCTF 2020). Modifying the term "Human-Wildlife Conflict" to "Human-Wildlife Coexistence" or "Conservation Conflicts" are two such examples (*ibid.*). Other language shifts are possible, as discussed below.

2. Methods

The aspects of Human-Wildlife Conflicts articulated above, from nonhuman animals as stakeholders to reducing the guilt placed on nonhuman animals, were key in workshops run in 2020 and 2021. These 14 workshops were conducted with 147 participants involved with biology and/or environmentalism and/or sustainability. Participants were collected through listservs, both university- and discipline-based. In a Snowball Sampling method, potential participants were encouraged to also suggest other individuals or organizations who might be interested. The workshops were done virtually, with the facilitator in Canada. The ethics approval was obtained from the relevant institution. The original reason for the HWC workshops related to dam development projects and their links to the themes discussed above and in the workshops. All participants signed an approved consent form. This consent form text informed them that there would be both primary, and, potentially, secondary uses of the workshop information. There were several activities in the workshops, but only some were of relevance to this current paper. The workshops were not recorded, with notetakers writing key information down. Notetakers were told to avoid names. Each participant received 50 Canadian dollars, with notetakers receiving an additional 50 Canadian dollars. The data from the workshops was anonymized for the original use and for this specific study.

Before the participants were split up, the general views of Anthropocentrism, Biocentrism (in its Sentientism/Pathocentrism version) and Ecocentrism (value to collectives) were described. A poll was taken to

determine in which category the participants consider themselves. Participants were then divided into subgroups (40 subgroups in total) and tasked with developing terms and themes which would shift the conversation by diminishing the "guilt" which may be attached to nonhuman animals in HWC cases. They were also advised to keep the "agency" of the nonhuman animals in mind. The former is linked to a key goal of the Human-Human Social Conflict shift, namely its attempts to reduce the guilt placed on nonhuman animals in conflicts. The latter is linked to what is missing in Human-Human Social Conflicts, namely seeing nonhumans as potential agents, and even stakeholders.

A few starting examples were given by the author. For key terminology, the example of using the term "accident" rather than "attack", and "damage" rather than "conflict" were suggested. For key phrases, the idea of a nonhuman animal "having a right to be" in a location, that it is "just an animal", that a nonhuman animal is "responding to impact", and, finally, the idea of a nonhuman animal as "an icon or symbol", were all suggested. The idea of these terms and phrases was to get conversations started, in case the groups needed prompting. The concept of Relational Values was not presented to the workshop members, although, as mentioned, the differences between Anthropocentrism, Biocentrism, and Ecocentrism were briefly presented. While the term "nonhuman animal" is used in this paper, it was not used when introducing the workshops, in order to avoid any bias in expectation.

Notetakers were tasked with writing down the terminology, key phrases and general discussion topics in their subgroup. Following this, the author went through the resulting documents, noting, through Content Analysis, recurring themes. A previous reading of topics in HWCs, as well as Relational Values, helped situate the discussion results, but the themes recovered were also allowed to come from the notes themselves, as suggested for thematic analysis and Grounded Theory (Gale *et al.* 2013). As the participants sought to develop clear, consensus-based, terms and themes, the Content Analysis process, in terms of common themes and terminology, was straightforward.

3. Results

For the general poll, the winning category was Ecocentrism (94 participants), followed by Biocentrism (38 participants) and then Anthropocentrism (15 participants). The subgroup discussions were lively and two

common themes that arose were the need to change the term "animal" to more general and inclusive terms like "living beings", "nonhuman animals" and "sentient beings". This theme came up in eight subgroups. Another, related, common theme was the need to diminish the human/nonhuman animal dichotomy. This discussion appeared in 21 subgroups. In terms of the notion that "an animal has the right to be" in a location, 30 subgroups discussed this, agreeing that it was valid, with one adding the caveat that species migration must be taken into account as well.

The prompting concept that led to the most in-depth discussion was the idea of making a species a "symbol" or "icon" for a region. Interestingly, the discussion was quite varied in terms of support for this idea. The main concept is that if a species can be made a symbol of a region, there will be more will to protect it and the mitigation methods when dealing with HWCs would be less severe (Hill 2002). The opposite view, that having a species as a symbol could lead to more hunting, has also been discussed in the literature (Kelly 2015). Of the 30 subgroups (out of 40) which discussed the topic, 15 saw the process of making an animal a "symbol" as problematic. Eleven subgroups saw it as a potential benefit, but with clear potential downsides as well. Four subgroups saw it as a positive endeavor.

4. Discussion

The results demonstrate that participants in these fields are open to large changes in how humans approach the natural world, including rethinking our role *vis-à-vis* nature. The poll and discussions suggest that giving value only to humans is not the general position. The workshops also garnered several examples/agreements of terms which could help reduce the "guilt" that may be placed on the nonhuman animal.

Interestingly, without being directly guided, participants argued for changes that are discussed in the literature on Relational Values, including diminishing the human/nature dichotomy (Riechers *et al.* 2021). In terms of restructuring language to create healthier relationships, as advocated by Relational Values (West *et al.* 2020), the workshop participants hit on finding terminology that further connected humans to nonhuman animals.

Giving nonhuman animals more agency, even putting them on the same level as humans, can also arise from the restructuring of language tackled in the workshops. For instance, by transitioning to more inclusive

terms for nonhuman animals, like "living beings" or "sentient beings", one can reframe the car/deer collision example discussed above. The view of the deer, being a "sentient being" (just like the human motorist) must be taken into account. One way to consider this is that even if the motorist doesn't care about the car accident, the deer, as a "sentient being", probably did not want to be struck by a car. As has been argued, once the interests of nonhuman animals is sought, unnecessarily ending the life of a nonhuman animal is clearly a form of suffering (Regan 1985; Davidson 2013). This can develop a more expansive concept for HWCs, which can thus combine the social concept of Human-Human Social Conflicts, such as how people interact with differing methods of dealing with Human-Wildlife Conflicts, with the benefits of regarding nonhuman animals as potential agents and stakeholders. As with other "restructuring" of language, this can help create a more complete Relational Values perspective.

While it may seem like a trivial change in language, it can be a first step towards seeing nonhuman animals as stakeholders in themselves and giving them a moral status closer, if not equivalent, to humans. Terminological changes discussed in the workshops certainly target the importance of such shifts. Several attempts in the scholarship have been made to achieve this, and they often involve a restructuring of language (Frawley and Dyson 2014; Merskin 2016). In certain cases it is the application of legally recognized terminology, such as granting some nonhuman animals agency and "personhood" (Boyd 2017). One can also find several philosophical attempts to raise nonhuman animal moral status towards being stakeholders, including discussions regarding the application of the Veil of Ignorance to include nonhuman animals (Matevia 2016). Reframing is an important aspect in creating healthy relationships with nature, and this is certainly true in the case of considering nonhuman animals as stakeholders. The recent inclusion of children as stakeholders, such as in Child-Friendly Schools (Kagawa and Selby 2014), can act as an analogous effort. The workshop results certainly fit with these efforts.

In terms of turning a species into an icon, the majority of subgroups that discussed it pointed to at least some potential negative components. This "icon building" certainly creates a new relationship between people and nonhuman animals. Some saw this as too anthropocentric or a way of metaphorically "freezing" a species and not seeing it as a living entity. Analogous arguments have been discussed regarding Indigenous groups (Rice 2014). In terms of nonhuman animals, "icon building" may rob the nonhuman animal of some agency and value. Some pointed to cases where it has been attempted but which the workshop participants saw as having failed to work, such as turkeys and kangaroos. Despite being

"symbols", these animals are still routinely killed, which several workshop participants saw as unfortunate. Some subgroups pointed to the "presidential pardoning" of a turkey in Thanksgiving to be an example of "icons" not being protected. Some scholars have also critically discussed this "twisted Thanksgiving publicity stunt" (Brown 2015, 62). In the case of kangaroos, scholars have argued that reducing the population size of this iconic national animal is necessary (Read *et al.* 2021). Turning a species into an icon in order to encourage protection of threatened species is something discussed in the Human-Wildlife Conflict literature (Messmer 2000; Hill 2002). However, a study on "iconic" species suggests that it may not be sufficient to protect a species (Montgomery *et al.* 2020). In fact, it can work against conservation, as discussed by scholars regarding jaguars in Mesoamerica (Kelly 2015). This action of turning species into icons may mostly work with charismatic species, as discussed in the literature (Macdonald *et al.* 2015). Some have argued, however, that protecting a flagship species usually means protecting its ecosystem and protecting other, less charismatic species (Kellert 1986). In the end, workshop participants certainly honed in on the fact that there can be benefits and potential detrimental components to the effort.

5. Conclusion

In sum, this piece began with efforts, in the literature, of removing the "guilt" placed on nonhuman animals in HWCs. While this was one of the goals of the workshops, participants went much further, being tasked with delving into nonhuman animal agency. The workshops helped bring out themes that could be beneficial to the views of HWCs, particularly from a Relational Values perspective. Changing the terms used, a key aspect of Relational Values, was discussed by the workshop participants. Arising themes included the necessities of reframing perspectives of species in their interactions with humans. The workshops suggest the importance to giving species a level of agency and even stakeholder rights. The participants were open to accepting a higher moral status for nonhuman animals, potentially equivalent to humans in at least certain HWC circumstances, as suggested by egalitarian terms like "sentient beings". As mentioned, using this frame, events like deer/human collisions can be reinterpreted, so as to create a more Relational Values perspective, which considers nonhuman animal agency.

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