

To protect or to kill?

Polarising dynamics of public debate on foxes and wild boar in Flanders



The Brief in brief

This case study traces the development of public debate following the comeback of the red fox and wild boar in Flanders, Belgium, through observing a variety of forums (mass and social media, parliament, organisations' magazines and websites, etc.). The findings demonstrate that conflict and polarisation of opinions were not merely a manifestation of incompatible interests, goals and visions, but were heavily influenced by the dynamics of the debate itself. These dynamics were largely a result of the contending parties' efforts to enhance the effectiveness of their own arguments, and succeeded only in hampering resolution.

Context

Across many parts of Europe, a variety of bird and mammal species that had previously disappeared have made a comeback in recent years [1]. While the reappearing animals may create conservation success stories, there are often also conflicts over their renewed presence or the way in which they should be managed. This is especially true in Flanders in the north of Belgium, where the red fox and wild boar have been recolonizing after a long absence (foxes in the last decades of the 20th century, wild boar in the first decade of the 21st century). While welcomed by some as a victory for biodiversity, others detest the "returnees" for the nuisance, damage and risk they bring. All of this gave rise to continuous conflicts and disputes.

Arguments

Similar patterns of argumentation were observed in the different forums examined in the period from 1995 to 2013. The debates unfolded along mainly three polarised positions: "belonging/not belonging" (the animals belong in Flanders or in our nature versus they do not belong here); "opportunity/threat" (the animals are useful and provide opportunities versus they are harmful and pose a threat) and "control by intervention/nature controls itself" (the necessity to keep the animals under control by active management versus the capacity of nature to balance or control itself) [2].

Framing

People "frame" a situation to make sense of what is going on, that is, what the problem is, what should be done, by whom and how to do it [3]. In this case, framing and argument were conditioned in part by the type of socio-institutional network involved. For example, politicians were inclined to defend the case of those affected by foxes and boars (i.e. serving public needs), hunters emphasised their role in maintaining the balance of nature and animal help centres argued in defence of the injured or killed animals. Thus, institutional roles and identities are confirmed and reproduced during the course of the debate.

Processes

Several dynamics in argumentation increased the polarisation of debate and its resistance to resolution [2]:

- Arguments converged on a limited set of dichotomies. For example, the evaluation of “belonging” largely rests on a dichotomous definition (natural/artificial) of dichotomous facts (released or not, present or absent). Thus, if previously present animals come back on their own it is seen as a natural phenomenon and they are more easily accepted as belonging in Flanders and worthy of protection. This and other dichotomies have the effect of constantly steering the parties towards the same issues so that they continuously repeat their arguments, so limiting the scope of the debate.
- Arguments aligned either in support or in opposition to one of the poles of a prevalent dichotomy. In this way, initial divides in framing the situation were further sharpened. In particular, parties in debate selected and interpreted facts to support the pole that, in their opinion, ought to be preferred: For example, emphasis on either the damage caused by wild boar or an opportunity for the local economy. As a result, the incompatibility of the poles is emphasised and possibilities of finding intermediate alternatives are closed off.
- Single, local incidents that by themselves would be relatively insignificant tended to become associated with each other and interlinked. As a result, their inferences for argumentation grew to encompass further, related concerns at higher organisational levels. For example, one fox attack on backyard chickens was linked to similar attacks elsewhere, but also to concerns about fox predation on native fauna. This was in turn linked to biodiversity policies and Natura 2000 targets.

The progressive linking and scaling-up of issues in this manner magnifies their importance and weight of influence. This enlarges the particular problem, with the consequences that (i) the likelihood of finding a solution that satisfies all the issues is diminished, and (ii) a societal problem may be created that requires government intervention.

- As the debates developed, linkages to social and political relationships became more frequent. Arguments no longer revolved around issues of fox and wild boar per se but centred on unequal powers, assigned interests and responsibilities, group identities, and more. As a consequence, issues became less tangible and amenable to practical solutions.
- Relational tensions were further intensified by the imposition of stereotypes and stigmas. For instance, there was a tendency in public reaction to portray hunters negatively, in the sense that they kill (defenceless) animals for pleasure or out of frustration. In a similar way conservationists were portrayed as elite people and sometimes “nature destroyers”, even receiving governmental subsidies.

Effectiveness

Contending parties seek to legitimise their framing of the situation through arguments and strategies they think will be most effective. In this case, various strategies were employed to gain credibility and support with audiences: dichotomisation, linking and scaling up of issues and stigmatisation of out-groups. At the same time, however, these strategies tend to magnify the problem, perpetuate contradicting responses and complicate the resolution of conflict.

Transferability

Previous studies have shown that conflicts and debates on wildlife issues are typically quite intense, long lasting and often never fully resolved. This case study may contribute to conflict resolution in at least two ways. Firstly, it offers an operational approach to recognising the dynamics in debate that can lead to polarisation and deadlock. Secondly, the case study provides useful clues for transforming the dynamics perpetuating the conflict to different dynamics that allow for more constructive relations between the parties involved.

Lessons learned

- Conflicts on wildlife issues are co-created by the polarising dynamics of the debate itself.
- These polarising dynamics include the convergence and alignment of arguments (in particular, dichotomisation), the linking and scaling up of issues and the stigmatisation of out-groups.
- Polarisation is largely driven by the parties' strategies to gain credibility and support with audiences (i.e. enhancing the effectiveness of own arguments).
- Institutional roles and identities are confirmed and reproduced during the course of the debate, which, in turn, contributes to the perpetuation of conflict.

References

- [1] Deinet S, Ieronymidou C, McRae L et al. 2013. Wildlife comeback in Europe: The recovery of selected mammal and bird species. Zoological Society of London, United Kingdom
- [2] Van Herzele A, Aarts N, Casaer J 2015. Wildlife comeback in Flanders: Tracing the fault lines and dynamics of public debate. European Journal of Wildlife Research, DOI: 10.1007/s10344-015-0925-5
- [3] Van Herzele A, Aarts N 2013. "My forest, my kingdom" – Self-referentiality as a strategy in the case of small forest owners coping with government regulations. Policy Sciences 46(1): 36-81

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