

Summary ‘WILD’ IDEAS DIALOGUES | Session II | 14-1-2021

This session was 2 of 4 and organized by Sierra Deutsch and Kate Massarella to explore some of the diverse perspectives on Human-Wildlife Interactions (HWI) research at WUR in a bit more detail. Close to 60 colleagues from all corners of WUR (and the world) participated in the second session. The full recording can be found [here](#).

Opening by our facilitator, Janneke Juffermans, with suggested questions to reflect on during the presentations for later discussion in breakout rooms: 1) What about the talks stood out/surprised/inspired/ worried you the most?; 2) Did anything challenge your worldview or research approach?; 3) Is there something more you want to find out from the speakers?

Sierra Deutsch introduced the session, including a brief summary of the purpose of the series (for a more detailed explanation, see [Session I recording and summary](#)). The series was formed to support biodiversity research and transformative change at WUR in general and to start bringing researchers together to form interdisciplinary collaborations. Also important to note is that this series is part of a bigger project associated with Wageningen Dialogues to explore the potential for a campus-wide, collaborative ‘biodiversity initiative’. So please continue to come and be involved in these dialogues if you want to help support this initiative! For this series, we’ve decided to focus specifically on the biodiversity theme of HWIs because it’s an important theme for understanding successes and failures in biodiversity conservation. We hope to then build outward with more external collaborators and upward to more themes within a biodiversity initiative.

We believe that in order to fully address a problem that has global implications and consequences, we need to understand the problem from as many different angles as possible. We are aware that this may cause some tensions at times, as different perspectives sometimes clash and power dynamics play out. But we think that it’s important to identify these tensions and lay them out on the table, so that we can actively move beyond them to try to find synergies, while at the same time preserving our differences.

In this session, we invited four speakers from across WUR with very different approaches to researching HWIs. We began with two speakers, followed by breakout room discussions. Then the other two speakers presented their research before a second breakout room discussion. Finally, we concluded the session with a plenary discussion.

Liesbeth Bakker (prof. Rewilding Ecology at the Wildlife Ecology and Conservation Group (NIOO), ESG)

What is rewilding? In essence it means giving more space for natural processes to occur in nature areas. An example is that wild grazers are let into the ecosystems, and use their ecosystem engineering processes. Rewilding is more than that - it includes natural dynamics of water fluctuations, succession. It is often perceived as a way to restore ecosystems; but that perception assumes that nature needs to be ‘managed’. Rewilding means to let nature care for itself. We as humans just have to create the space (and the conditions) for nature to be able to do so. The question is if rewilding is good for biodiversity. Liesbeth explains that that may not be the case, but that that may also not be the purpose of rewilding. Why would we long back to the old

days of small-scale agricultural landscapes where biodiversity was thriving, but when systems were not 'natural'.

Lerato Thakholi (PhD candidate; Private conservation and spatial justice at the Sociology of Development and Change Group; SSG)

Lerato spoke about how spaces are produced through dual processes of conservation and capitalism, using a case study of the Lowveld region in South Africa. Her research was conducted with people living close to the Kruger National Park, famous for - among other things - its rhino population. Lerato highlighted some of the historical processes that led to the area's characteristics, grounding this in processes of deep inequality, including apartheid. Lerato then showed how conservation contributes to spatial injustices today, focusing on labour relations. She identified a racialised division of labour that saw a large amount of low paid - and in some cases unpaid - labour that provided the basis for a multi-million dollar tourism industry (enjoyed primarily by rich, largely white people). In this sense, the conservation spaces in and around Kruger park are built on an often hidden, and highly unequal labour regime. Lerato illustrated these points using powerful imagery and narratives that contrasted the luxurious tourist spaces, with the difficult conditions experienced by the local labour force.

In interactive breakout session A, attendees were encouraged to discuss what about the talks stood out/surprised/inspired/ worried them the most, whether anything challenged their worldview or research approach, and whether there was something more they wanted to find out. [The original given input can be found on the Miro board.](#) The questions raised and replies given plenary are summarized here.

Nature itself can also limit biodiversity when opportunists take over. Should rewilding or biodiversity then take priority? *Reply given:* We don't know what exactly happens when you start rewilding, it could indeed be that one species in nature takes over. It's therefore important that we allow enough dynamics when we stimulate rewilding to prevent single species dominance.

How should we build better connections between ecological approaches and social justice approaches? *Reply given:* There is not one silver bullet answer, but ecological means have been superseding other needs over the last decades. We should be building bridges between ecological challenges and social injustice.

Questions/comments that weren't plenary discussed, but functioned as food for thought for the breakout session:

- Is rewilding always a good thing? And if aimed for rewilding, what is/should be the goal?
- How is the action of rewilding different from managing a landscape/ecosystem?
- What are your views on the research showing human wildlife coexistence across various geographies (they found that extinction rates in Africa and Indian subcontinent are much lower than North America and Europe). What can we learn from them?
- Would you consider food forests as a rewilding action?
- If urbanisation 'frees up rural areas', does that mean that humans moving to cities and living more consumption-heavy lifestyles is seen as positive change for rewilding?

- How do you look at the potential positive value of introduced/non-native/exotic species (e.g. non-natives are not always bad because they can take over roles of extinct species).
- Some advocate that nature can manage itself, but can we as humans 'accept' what happens then? Shouldn't we address the role of acceptance by humans more central in our work? The fact that some farmers want a fence around Friesland to prevent the wolves coming in is worrying to me that we as humans cannot accept that.
- How do you think we can build better connections between ecological approaches and social justice approaches?
- What's the first step to take?
- Addressing these lock-ins is really important given the new focus of the South-African government on expanding protected areas by bringing in the private sector. Engaging with the government on the dangers and principles they need to put in place is super important.

Marc Naguib (professor and chair of the Behavioural Ecology Group, ASG)

Marc explains how his group focuses on behaviour of animals often in response to increasing anthropogenic pressures, involving a range of projects at different levels. The group investigates interactions among animals (from birds to crocodiles) at the levels from personality to social networks. Marc zooms in on an INREF project (ECO2) where ecologists, economists and sociologists investigate transformative solutions for animals and humans sharing the limited space along the river Nile. The question is how can animals be protected with the expansion drift of the human population in that specific area. The drivers between animal behaviour/decisions, human decisions, and the socio-economic and ecological settings are explored. The project started with working on the animal ecological side of the project. There is a positive example where, with shrinking natural and undisturbed wetlands, some bird species (flamingos and shoveler ducks) benefit from sewage ponds, if well managed. Finding experienced local social scientists that can bridge the human social/behavioural side is a bit delayed; but exciting and essential to make the project into a success from an integrated convivial conservation perspective.

Clemens Driessen (asst. prof. Philosophizing how we think about animals/biodiversity; GEO; ESG)

Clemens encouraged us all to take a step back and ask some fundamental questions, including 'what is an animal?' and 'what is wild?'. Using contrasting philosophical positions, Clemens explored different perspectives on how we know and understand animals and how we conceptualise their relationship with humans. By interrogating our framings of animals, we can better understand why and how we perceive human-wildlife interactions and the ways in which we study and attempt to manage them. Clemens argued that we largely live in a 'Cartesian world' in which we aim to find clear causal relations and focus on mechanics, and that other ways of understanding the world are often sidelined. Clemens then argued for an approach that questions underlying assumptions and ways of knowing the world, and looks instead at the complex entanglements' that exist between people, animals and landscapes, and at how spaces can be designed 'for and with' animals. Clemens highlighted the work of others at Wageningen who are approaching human-wildlife interactions in a way that questions how we know nature,

including Susan Boonman-Berson, Esther Turnhout, Christine Ampumuza, Eugebie van Heijgen, Yulia Kisora and Thijs de Zeeuw.

A summary of the questions raised (and replies) is given here. These questions also functioned as food for thought for the second breakout session in which again the questions were raised on what about the given views stood out to the audience and what challenged people's worldviews. [The meeting notes of all breakout groups can be found on the Miro board.](#)

Are there also projects where you investigate how humans should change behaviour to save the animals of study? And what behaviours of people are effective in doing so? *Replies given:* Yes, for example when we talk about or with hunters. We try to show them how they can also benefit from the wild animals. But this is very difficult, especially for people that have urgent needs in the short term (like earning enough money to make a living). Also, the people/researchers working on the ground should be trusted (so nationals from the countries) and have a social science angle as well. Working with communities helps. The first thing to do when starting such a project is listen to the people, to find out what it is they find so difficult about living 'together' with wild animals, before coming with all sorts of solutions that are not context bound. We need to listen before we can know what to say. And while I understand the urgency, I would also urge to reflect on the lack of effectiveness of top down approaches. I think we need to not only go talk with people who perceive problems, but also go to collect examples where things are going well as an example.

Can the different views also be phrased as 'subjective' versus 'objective', with both views having a role to play in this world and our lives? *Reply given:* Only having these two options doesn't work. In my work I try to find answers like 'What different ways of being makes something a gorilla?' I try to formulate questions so that the questions in itself are not subjective or objective.

- The study of animal behavior and human behavior require different training and approaches so collaborations are needed to study both sides.
- Perhaps it is the process of asking, and being willing to continually ask and listen and change views on what is 'wild' that is especially important?

In a plenary discussion after all presentations and breakout sessions, several follow-up questions, concerns and steps were raised:

Maybe we should ask ourselves why 'wildness' is so important at all. And to whom exactly. Why are we interested in biodiversity research? What do we try to achieve with our research? *Replies given concern e.g.* when we lose wild(er)ness (defined freely as uncontrolled nature with autonomy and intrinsic nature), we also lose a sense of purpose and connection to our environment and lives. I think wild(er)ness reflects something in us and we therefore like to see it around us. Also, we should value all species that make up biodiversity fairly and equally (e.g. pigeons and tigers all have a role to play in biodiversity).

The discussion already makes clear that instead of universal definitions, we need to address these questions in context, with sensitivity to the implications of ways of demarcating and defining for people and animals. There is no absolute answer to 'what is wild'. To move forward it is important to bring the different answers/layers together. If you're launching a project, you have

to be aware of the different perspectives and layers. So it's not just 1 person or organization: when working on it you should be aware of that and involve others.

Some raise the question how and why we need to categorize? And can we bridge categories? These are both social and scientific questions, which should be combined and continued to be asked.

But do we have the time to discuss such questions before biodiversity/wild animals are lost? How can we achieve a breakthrough? What are 'generalities' to be used to link the perspectives? We need to make steps now! But how do we act as researchers in this world?

What does it take to make the right progress, together? That's what the next two sessions will also be about!