Framing the landscape: Discourses of woodland restoration and moorland management in Scotland

Anke Fischer*, Keith Marshall

Macauley Land Use Research Institute, Socio-Economic Research Group, Craigiebuckler, Aberdeen AB 15 8QH, Scotland, UK

Abstract

There is a long-standing debate in Scotland over the use of upland areas, as initiatives to restore the native Caledonian pine forest are vying with traditional moorland management for shooting. Our study set out to improve our understanding of argumentation processes with regard to these issues. We conducted semi-structured interviews with a wide range of local people, including both stakeholders with professional interests and randomly contacted members of the public. We then explored the frames that our interview partners chose in interaction with us to make sense of the interviews. While we had anticipated that they would frame our conversation as a debate between woodland restoration and hunting interests, some of them chose different framing contexts, such as animal welfare, biodiversity enhancement, or climate change. Often, these frames had a strong social element: the roles and relationships of different groups of actors were described, and our interview partners positioned themselves within these stress fields. Strikingly, those interviewees who did use the ‘woodland restoration versus hunting’ frame described themselves explicitly as being somewhere in between the different camps and as being able to understand both sides of the debate. Rather then establishing their social identity alongside those with polarised views, these interviewees – even if they had professional interests that were strongly inclined towards a particular group – constructed their identity as neutral, pragmatic or as a mediator between extremes.

To conclude, we discuss the implications of our findings for both the methodology of socio-environmental research and our understanding of the social complexities underlying environmental disputes.

Keywords:
Balance
Discourse
Framing
Hunting
Identity
Woodland restoration

1. Introduction

Ecosystems are more than just ecological systems – they are a place and an object of human appreciation, management and use. In Scotland, there is a long-standing debate on the use of upland areas. These are currently characterised by a mix of heather moorland, plantation forests and semi-natural pine woodlands, as the consequence of, and providing the basis for, a range of different uses such as forestry, sheep grazing, hunting and stalking (particularly red grouse and red deer), and other types of recreation.

At the same time, the Scottish uplands are the object of a debate on the ‘right’ way of managing this land. While there is a strong lobby for restoration of the native or ‘Caledonian’ pinewoods, demands on the land for development, tourism and maintaining traditional types of hunting are also vehemently expressed (Midgley, 2007; Hobbs, 2009). Arguments often refer to previous states and traditions for legitimacy, although historic states of the uplands are also strongly contested. For instance, some researchers suggest that for centuries the Highlands might have been pastoral landscapes widely populated and used by humans, being neither densely forested nor abundant in game species as is often claimed (Holl and Smith, 2007). Actors from very different backgrounds, including entrepreneurs, conservation agencies and volunteers engage in rewilding and reforestation activities (e.g., McGhee, 2007). Debates go beyond land management and can also have, for example, implications for the management of species such as raptors: while for some actors, these are one of the main targets of upland conservation efforts, they are considered as pests by others (Marshall et al., 2007).

We set out to explore how people argue when asked about their views on the management of their local natural environment. Rather than simply assessing their opinions, we were interested in the process of their argumentation. Through this we aimed to gain a more profound understanding of the context of their views and...
how such views are formed. This is important if we are to be able to
make sense of the arguments put forward by different interest
groups, and the rationales that individuals claim to have for sup-
porting them.

Previous research has analysed such structures of reasoning
looking at images of nature (Buijs, 2009a) or social representations
of biodiversity (Buijs et al., 2008), specifically focusing on the beliefs
and values that shape people’s arguments (Fischer and Young,
2007). A different strand of the literature focuses on the perceived
moral claims that different actors might have with regard to the
‘right’ use of the land or natural resources (Enticott, 2003; Brown,
2007). Some studies interpret such situations as conflicts over the
management of nature, especially with regard to conservation and
protected areas, and use the idea of social identities to analyse
people’s arguments (Stoll-Kleemann, 2001; Opotow and
Brook, 2003). In these studies, clashing identities are seen as the
factors that underlie conflict, as opposed to economic motives which
are increasingly regarded as less important in conflict dynamics.

Many of these studies do not rely on naturally occurring talk, but
on interviews and focus group discussions, where discussions are
deliberately initiated by the researcher. We thus need to be more
flexive of our own role: How do people argue towards us when we
ask them about their view on the management of local nature? Such
views are co-constructed in a social context, constituted to
some degree by the interviewer (Marvin, 2000). Our aim is here to
to explore processes of co-construction that involve the interviewer in
the discursive process. This includes a critical analysis of the cate-
gories and concepts used by us in interviews: in what way are they
meaningful to the interviewee?

Of particular importance to better understand people’s argu-
mentation is the framing of a conversation. We understand frames
here as “principles of selection, emphasis and presentation
composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens,
and what matters” (Gitlin, 2003, p. 6; see also Scheufele, 1999), in
other words, as implicit organising ideas (Gamson, 1992, p. 3). The
idea of framing goes back to Goffman (1974), and is increasingly
applied when exploring disputes over land management (Buijs,
2009b; Shmueli, 2008; Kaufman and Smith, 1999). In these studies,
frames are interpreted as ideas that shape people’s understanding of
a situation, and that can be actively employed by actors such as
organisations or the media to influence public views.

In the context of interviews, frames can be seen as lenses that
respondents implicitly or explicitly choose and develop in inter-
action with the interviewer to make sense of the interviews. Such
framing processes are rarely explicitly discussed in qualitative
research, researchers seeming to assume that their own framing of
an issue is faithfully adopted by their respondents. However, it
might be that alternative frames are more meaningful to the
interviewee, and it is therefore important to recognise how the
interview was understood in order to analyse its contents. We
explore here how the choice and construction of a frame shape the
conversation between interviewer and interviewee, and argue that
the latter might be best seen as an interview partner rather than a
merely reactive respondent.

As mentioned above, the framing we selected for our study
referred to two types of upland habitats, namely woodland and
moorland. Thereby, we picked up an ongoing debate among
organised stakeholders on woodland restoration versus mainte-
nance of moorland for hunting. Our frame is thus not only rele-
vant to ourselves but reflects a wider discourse: in other words, a way
of thinking that is shared with a wider group of people.

In many studies on discourses of rural land use and natural
resource management it seems that sharing a discourse is equiva-
 lent to sharing an opinion, as the rationalities inherent to the
discourses lead individuals to take a certain position (Elands and
Wiersum, 2001; Svarstad et al., 2008; Collier and Scott, 2009). For
example, Collier and Scott (2009) differentiate between an
ecological, a utilitarian and a social rationality with regard to
peatland restoration. Each of these implies specific value judg-
ments and is represented by a specific group of stakeholders: scientists participate in the ecological discourse, the mining
industry advocates a utilitarian stance, and the local population
represents the social discourse.

Here, we will see that this is not a useful perspective in our case,
as our interview partners often combine arguments and express
opinions that would typically belong to different discourses sensu
Collier and Scott. What is more, they often frame the conversation
with us in fundamentally different ways. For this reason, we
distinguish between topic-related frames that, through their focus
on a broader topic, shape the way people think about their local
natural (and social) environment without prescribing their exact
standpoint in the debate. We argue that such frames tend to be
overlooked in research as the topical frame is determined by the
researcher a priori, and the assumptions made in its con-
ceptualisation are often not challenged. Here, analysis of framing
processes provides us with valuable insights into the context in
which people locate their views.

In the remainder of this article, we present findings from a study
into such framing processes, drawing on semi-structured inter-
views on the management of local nature in Strathspey, Scotland,
with professional land managers and local residents from a wide
range of backgrounds. First, we give a brief overview of our inter-
view partners’ representations of local nature, with a special focus
on woodland and moorland habitats. We then show how these
conversations on local nature were framed by our interviewees in
interaction with us, often reflecting wider societal discourses.
Finally, we explore how discourses were seen as social contexts in
which individuals could position themselves, and through which
they could construct their identities.

2. Methods

2.1. Study site, interviews and sampling

We selected Strathspey, in the north-western part of the
Cairngorms National Park in Scotland, as our study area. The
Cairngorms National Park was established in 2003, consists largely
of upland and montane landscapes, and is the UK’s biggest national
park. The region of Strathspey, i.e., the valley of the river Spey,
extends over more than 50 km, includes several settlements (Fig. 1)
and the area’s major tourist attractions, as well as a wide range
of natural habitats, stretching from the river valley up to the higher
peaks of about 1300 m.

We conducted semi-structured interviews (Table 1) that began
with relatively open and general questions, and then drew on
verbal and photo-prompts to obtain reactions to a range of stimuli
that were selected to be provocative, but to allow complex and
ambiguous responses. We chose these prompts as our initial
research questions revolved around the processes of argumentation,
and we wanted to explore how interviewees reacted to such
provocation. The interviews thus usually started with their ideas
and views on local nature in general, and were then narrowed
down to address more specific aspects, namely their views on
woodlands, moorlands, and their management.

Our sample included both professional land managers selected
from a range of different backgrounds and professional affiliations
(Table 2) and randomly contacted members of the general public.
The interviews with land managers were pre-arranged and we
emphasised that we were interviewing them as private persons,
but not as representatives of their employer. This was necessary to give
them the freedom to refer to personal as well as professional experiences and understandings.

In contrast, most members of the public were contacted in their homes. Overall, we obtained 21 interviews in autumn 2007, representing a broad range of different backgrounds, interests, and places of residence within Strathspey. Differences between professionals and non-professionals were blurred, as some of the randomly contacted local residents had interests and backgrounds that provided them with knowledge similar to that of the interviewees contacted based on their profession as land managers.

2.2. Coding and analysis

All interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewee, transcribed verbatim and analysed with the aid of NVivo software. We chose a grounded approach for our analysis. While we had devised initial, rather broad research questions that informed the design of the interview guide (Table 1), analysis of the data was not constrained to these, but kept deliberately open. First, each of us (AF and KM) coded the data separately in an exploratory manner, not constrained to these, but kept deliberately open. First, each of us (AF and KM) coded the data separately in an exploratory manner, taking into consideration not only our initial research questions but also other phenomena that emerged from the interviews. On the basis of these explorations we then developed a systematic coding approach used to code each interview jointly and in negotiated consensus. Ultimately, this led to a substantial extension of our initial research focus, including not only the processes of argumentation in a narrow sense, but also framing processes and the role of social identity in framing.

3. Results

3.1. Representations of local nature

Our interview partners’ spontaneous descriptions of local nature were characterised by three different elements.

First, our respondents conceptualised nature in very different ways. While some focused on specific habitats or landscapes, others centred their description on animal and plant species and similar categories such as ‘stags’, or groups of species. Several respondents used very generic terms to describe local nature (‘Well, just the environment, the trees, the way things, nature put it’ [Alex]), or labels such as ‘the hills’ that are difficult to define in precise terms, but encapsulate the combination of mountainous terrain and predominantly open land.

Second, our respondents approached our question on their thoughts about local nature in different ways: while some components were mentioned because they were relevant for leisure or professional activities, others were presented to us because they were perceived to have recently changed, or because our interview partners strived to give us a complete overview by listing a range of habitats and species.

Third, it seemed that specific habitats, landscape types or species were often mentioned also because they were characterised by particularly salient attributes, such as beauty or uniqueness, or because of the cultural or ecological role that they played.

Many interview partners spontaneously mentioned the role of woodlands and/or moorlands in local nature and, as the focus of our study, these representations were probed in greater depth. Most continued to use these categories after we had introduced them through our questions. Some respondents made clear that they did not differentiate between habitats within these categories:

I think a moor is a moor and a forest is a forest whether it is pine or whether it’s birch; it’s just really nice to walk through the trees – the trees are lovely, you know, just for themselves. [Amanda]

However, many respondents did not see them as homogenous and made finer distinctions, discussing different types of woodlands, often distinguishing plantations and, to a lesser degree, different qualities of moorlands. These were described drawing on a wide range of attributes (Table 3).

Often, attributes were combined in our respondents’ arguments. For example, aesthetics was often associated with naturalness:

I’m into wild … and to me that is, that’s natural, that’s self seeded, that’s not man-plantated that and it looks natural. You can see they planted young trees there. You see, I think they are ugly when you see them with the protection on them. It just makes the landscape look ugly. [Susan]

Places with greater diversity were seen as more natural and hence also as more aesthetically pleasing [Bill, John, Amanda]. In a similar vein, nature that instilled reverence was also considered

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Abbreviated interview guideline.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. If you think of nature in this area, what comes to mind?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Let’s continue with a statement which you may or may not agree with: some people say that pine woods are Scotland’s equivalent of tropical rainforest and that heather moorland is just a desert. What is your opinion on that?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What has influenced your views most?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Now that we have talked a lot about your views on moorland and woodland, we would be interested in where these views come from. You said … [picking up a reference to an information source that interviewee mentioned earlier in the interview]. From what other sources do you get your information on this? What has influenced your views most?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
beautiful, such as the gnarled limbs of an old Scots pine tree [Catriona, Douglas, Robert]. Ideas of balance, connectivity between natural elements and human influences (Table 3) were particularly closely intertwined.

Most interestingly, however, our interview partners drew on these attributes to compare woodland and moorland habitats, and to ponder arguments for and against specific management options. Primary amongst these was the idea that there was a balance to be struck between the relative areas covered by moorland or woodland:

I would just like to see probably a little less of it, it does dominate, dominate – you know, you look from the hills and there are just huge areas of moorland.

I would like to see a greater balance between woodland and moorland … [Mark]

A second recurrent criterion was the perceived naturalness of the respective habitats. Naturalness often seemed to imply both the degree of human intervention as well as the autochthony of the species involved, here referring to a specific situation depicted on a photo:

Because it is artificial and it’s a plantation and it is not native Scottish, I think it’s Sitka spruce, is it? It’s not a native Scottish tree and I think that is just a blight on the landscape. That has just been planted – I don’t even know if there maybe were trees here before, but I would rather be walking on the open moorland, to me that’s how it should be, and this is artificial. [Bill]

A similar argument – the naturalness of a habitat type – was used to explain the differences in emotions that Matt felt for moorland as opposed to woodland:

I really do like moorland but it doesn’t captivate me in that same way that pine woodland does, doesn’t have that same effect on me. In a lot of ways it kind of it resembles what man has done and … how we have controlled everything or we’ve changed everything. [Matt]

For him, moorland was symbolic of human control over nature. However, for others, human influence was not per se an attribute that led to the depreciation of a habitat:

… even the Forestry Commission, I know they planted introduced species and I’m quite happy to walk through them. [Catriona]

Interestingly, Catriona here demonstrated her awareness of the critique of introduced species, but at the same time implied that this did not affect her enjoyment of the forest.

Woodlands and moorlands were also compared with regard to the role they played in the local economy, where moorlands were often seen as providing both local employment and being central to attracting tourists to the area. Overall, our respondents deliberated different arguments, taking into account their own values but also recognizing (if not sharing) those of others. As indicated above, discussions were characterised by a desire to strike (or show an awareness of the need for) a balance between habitat types, and between uses. Although our respondents certainly had preferences, they acknowledged the needs of others, and hardly any extreme views were aired.

3.2. Framing our conversations about local nature

3.2.1. Diversity of frames

As woodland and moorland habitats and their iconic and symbolic representations seem to be omnipresent in the study area, we had initially anticipated that an interview about views on woodland and moorland would be immediately meaningful to our respondents (independent of the terminology they would use to
discuss these). However, not all interviewees made use of the context that we offered especially in the second part of the interview. Instead, some of them framed our conversation in contexts more meaningful to them.

We use the term ‘frame’ here to denote a dominant theme, a lens that a person uses to make sense of the interview, and that allows them to talk about what they know in a way that appears appropriate or meaningful to them (see Section 1). These frames helped to shape and bound the ways in which our interview partners dealt with the topic of their local natural environment that we confronted them with. They were typically expressed as recurrent references to an issue rather than as clear, coherent narratives; referring to issues and topics such as biodiversity enhancement, animal welfare, or threats posed by local development activities.

Most of our interview partners, both land managers and ‘ordinary’ citizens, framed their conversation with us, as anticipated, as a discussion on woodlands and moorlands and their management. Typically, the frame was recurrently used by alluding to the two habitat types in order to bound and reference the viewpoints expressed. John, for example, constantly played out woodland versus maintaining moorland when commenting on the photos, for example describing expanding woodland as ‘sneaking’ or ‘encroaching’ onto heather moorland.

From the simple conversation about two habitat types our interview partners often developed a more in-depth debate of institutionalised conservation that often favours woodland restoration versus maintaining moorland for other forms of land use such as hunting. Some of these statements illustrated the difficulties of reconciling conservation and sporting demands on the land, especially where the conservation legislation was seen to be made elsewhere, for example in Europe [John] or London, as in this quote:

... This is when you think about the people down at the government in London say, trying to stop country pursuits. You feel that the people making those decisions have, most of them, never lived in the countryside and what are they basing their feelings on? And if you've never seen how the countryside works I think it's unfair that others who don't know enough about it are against it. [Eve]

However, despite the obvious dominance of the woodland versus moorland frame, some respondents used different frames for their conversations with us. A very striking example was an animal rights theme that a female respondent consistently and frequently referred to throughout the entire interview:

I just don't believe in culling – I just don't agree with that. They did a massive culling of the deer and there was a big outcry about it in this area because they are God's creatures, you know who are we to say there is too many? I mean there are too many humans in this world. Who are we to say there are too many animals and they shoot them just for the sake ... I mean they were shooting them while they were pregnant. They were shooting the hinds with the calves by their side. To me that is brutality ... [Susan]

Susan discussed with us not only her views on wildlife management, but also talked about other types of animals, always going back to her main theme, animal welfare:

We've always loved animals – we used to go to the cattle sales and the sheep sales and you know, I just always loved animals like you know? I don't agree with zoos either, I think they are cruel. I like safari's where animals are allowed to roam free, but I don't agree with the animals being kept in cages.

Another frame that emerged centred on global change. While several respondents [James, Robert] mentioned global environmental issues, especially climate change, in their conversations with us, this theme had a pronounced framing function in two of the interviews [Imogen, Gavin]. Interestingly, this frame was particularly used by a young tourist, a father of three young children, who did not have strong opinions in relation to woodland and moorland; however, he repeatedly referred to the global nature of environmental problems in general and of climate change in particular, setting our conversation on local nature in a less parochial context. He became more expressive after the formal interview was completed and elaborated his perspective on the topics that we had suggested in more depth. For him, talking about the local natural environment seemed to make most sense when framed as part of a global environmental issue.

But it's the same – any country you go to it's got the same problems with emissions and factories, and I think Britain or Europe as a whole is quite good on that, but I think places like Japan and China and America I think they are ... they should be more involved because they make most of the gas emissions but they seem to be taking less, spending less money on trying to fix things. [Gavin]

One female interviewee combined her recurrent references to enhancing the productivity of the land with her ideas relating to climate change impacts in Strathspey:

I just think there's so much moorland that if you can use it for something else in patches I don't have anything against that. I think it's what Scotland needs, a bit more initiative and variety of crops, and with global warming hopefully it might happen, you never know. [Imogen]

She brought these ideas of productivism repeatedly into the conversation with us, not only referring to productivity of the land with regard to crop production (“I keep thinking there must be something else we can grow on all this ground”), but with regard to economic usefulness of the land in general, trading this off against its aesthetic values:

... although they are the biggest mountains here the Cairngorms, they are not the prettiest by any manner of means and if you try and get an extra bit of ski area on the mountain it's sacrilege and you think oh my goodness – it's boulders and heather and it's not pretty, you know, can't we have some fun on it? [Imogen]

Like global change, development threats to local nature and village communities was a theme that emerged sporadically throughout the interviews with Alex and Duncan (“It would be a shame to see all that destroyed and stacks of flats and houses going up”). Arguments referring to this theme were also used elsewhere [Fiona, Malcolm] but again, not in a framing function.

Interestingly, some interview partners with a professional background in land management also chose unanticipated frames for their conversations with us. Most strikingly, this was the case where our discussions of woodland and moorland in Strathspey were framed as a more general debate on biodiversity enhancement. Whenever we discussed the characteristics and merits of the different habitat types, a link to biodiversity was drawn, with a normative implication that biodiversity needed to be protected or even enhanced:

There has been a huge reduction in woodland habitats which we've got about and I think there is a moral obligation to try and reverse that, particularly as that seems to have had quite detrimental impacts on biodiversity. [Tim]
Conversely, Fiona always brought our conversation on different habitats in Speyside back to the example of her farm. Her contributions to the discussion were almost literally tracing her ideas like spokes from a hub, namely the farm she worked on, out into the environment around the farm. When asked about nature in Strathspey as a wider area she referred back to a little loch on her neighbour’s farmland, and when shown a photo with young trees planted in protective tubes, she immediately commented on these in relation to her own farm: “We had some of these down for aspen down in the woods in the woodland scheme as well – birch woodland scheme.” Nature in relation to the farm she worked on was thus the frame she used in contributing to our conversation.

One interview partner in particular, a 19 year old boy who was about to leave his home village as a 1st year student, neither picked up the habitat-related frame implicitly suggested by us, nor seemed to develop his own frame. While he was happy answering our questions, it seemed as if he took nature and landscape in his area as a given. Consequently, our questions did not allude to any issues that he perceived to be important and he did not offer any contributions to the discussion that he found particularly important. By doing so, he made sense of the interview as a formal exercise which required him simply to respond to questions, rather than giving it a substantive meaning or relevance.

In this section we have shown how our interview partners used frames to give meaning to their conversations with us. These framing processes were dynamic, constituted by their interaction with us, and not always unambiguous, and we will explore the process of creating these in the next section.

3.2.2. Co-construction of frames

These frames developed in interaction with us as the interviewers. While this was particularly obvious for the ‘woodland versus moorland’ frame which was a constitutive element of our questions and prompts, especially in the second part of the interview, the other frames were also co-constructed in interaction with us. Frames could emerge also from non-verbal prompts – here an example of a response to a photo of a plantation that was interpreted by Tim in clear reference to his ideas about biodiversity enhancement:

Yes, it’s not ideal, it’s a very artificial edge to the woodland, it’s very dense woodland as well. I’m guessing that the biodiversity value of that woodland is probably not terribly high simply because it is so dense [...] [Tim]

This frame was then picked up by us to obtain a better understanding of Tim’s ideas about biodiversity conservation (AF: “you just said ‘enhancing biodiversity’ and then I noticed you translated that into improving the number of species and habitats as long as it’s not at the expense of others – is that what means enhancing biodiversity or what means that?”). We thus unintentionally stimulated Tim to reinforce this theme, and to develop it into a frame for the entire interview. Such reinforcement may have been caused by the researchers’ interest in the topic (even if not foreseen in the interviews guideline), the need for clarification of complex or ambiguous statements, or the desire of the interviewees to reassure and encourage the interview partner to speak about a subject they seemed more familiar and comfortable with. Such interactions constituted the co-construction of the conservation and its framing.

In situations where habitat-related topics were not readily engaged with we actively prompted the respondent to adopt a stronger focus on habitat management in general, or on woodlands or moorlands in particular. Sometimes, these prompts did not have much impact at all, for example in the case of Susan, who came reliably back to her ideas of animal welfare:

KM: [...] some people would say that the pine woods here are the equivalent of a tropical rainforest, the moorlands are pretty much just a wet desert. What would you say to that? Susan: I more or less agree, aye. Especially the moorlands – they are wet, plenty of bogs, I’ve been caught in plenty of them and it attracts wildlife, it attracts wild birds – I’m not really a bird person like but I do like to see them.

AF: In the moorland? Susan: Yes, I don’t like to see them down at the duck pond – we’ve got a duck pond here, it’s inundated with seagulls and it’s just like you go down to feed the ducks and they kill the ducklings which isn’t very nice, so we tend to chase the seagulls, we flap our bags to get rid of them and we have worked out a technique to feed the ducks but not the seagulls.

In other cases, our respondents could only develop their own frame towards the end of the interview when they felt they could express more freely what they thought important [see above: Alex, Gavin]. Others started off with a personal frame in response to our initial broad questions, but then focussed in on woodland/moorland when our questions indicated a more specific topic.

These frames reflected our interviewees’ perspectives on the issues raised by our questions and were therefore, to some degree, malleable, and developed in co-construction between interviewee and interviewer. This highlights the active role that the interviewee can potentially have in shaping a conversation, which does not consist solely of responses to given questions. Semi-structured interviews – although based on a common guideline – can thus have very different foci and address quite different issues, depending on the meaning that the interview partner assigns to the questions. On the other hand, our observations highlight the active role of the interviewer who emphasises certain topics through probing questions and discourages others, thus co-framing the discussion.

3.2.3. Frames reflecting societal discourses

In many cases the themes used to frame interviews were more than just a personal viewpoint, but reflected a particular debate of wider societal importance. We argue that these themes can be seen as discourses, i.e., as shared ways of thinking about the local natural environment. Rather than defining a certain position or opinion, these discourses encapsulate the societal context in which an individual sees the questions brought up during the interview. While the frames were created during the interviews, the related discourses have been constructed independent from and external to these and thus relate to a wider societal view. Some interview partners referred in a very explicit way to such ‘external’ discourses by mentioning to dispute in the locale or media. These discourses were often characterised by the need for trade-offs and to find a balance, where different actors argued over the ‘right’ way to manage the land.

This was most obvious in the case of the woodland–moorland frame, which was often alluded to as a debate on woodland restoration versus maintaining moorland. This was in turn often used to symbolise the struggle between institutionalised conservation and other land uses such as traditional hunting, and tourism and recreation. The debate was not seen to revolve simply around conservation versus economic gains. Instead, land use based on hunting and even tourism seemed to be legitimised by its ethic of a rural way of life more than by simple economic arguments. Again, references to the societal dimension of the frame were given by both professional land managers and non-professionals:

You get one side of the coin where I’m a hunting, shooting, whisky drinking guy and the rest of humanity are just townies and bloody trash that get in my way and …, which is stupid, and
the other side of the coin: I think all wildlife is sacrosanct and shouldn't be touched and you bastards that shoot them should be put on a remote island and volcaneed to death or something like that. [Douglas]

I've got a lot of friends locally who are very fired up about it. It has caused a few rifts in families when a cousin is works in estate management and the rest are shepherds and others are gamekeepers and all coming at it from different points of view. [Catriona]

Some of the other frames also seemed to reflect wider societal discourses, such as biodiversity enhancement, animal welfare or productivism:

I read about it [the deer cull] – other people, everybody spoke about it. It was so ... I mean the locals were up in arms about it. The same, the wildlife park now they have killed all their wolves to bring in another species of wolves – there was a big uproar about that as well. [Susan]

While we could expect the global change and development threats to frames to be linked to societal discourses in a similar way, there was very little explicit reference to this: “everybody knows that the environment is getting damaged” [Gavin], which might simply reflect that these frames were rather tentatively used.

Most frames were thus not only used to construct meaning within the interviews, but also to set these into a societal context. In the next section, we will explore how these, as concrete social contexts, enabled our interview partners to position themselves within a discourse.

3.3. The social nature of frames and discourses: constructing identities

Actors, and their roles, featuring in the discourses were an important part of most frames. It would probably be an overstatement to claim that frames were expressed as narratives or storylines (Adger et al., 2001). Due to the structure of the interview frames did not emerge as coherent and sufficiently detailed narratives. However, most frames (and hence, most discourses) did have a ‘cast’ of actors (Adger et al., 2001).

Interestingly, our interview partners tended to position themselves within these ‘casts’ of actors. Some even constructed parts of their identity through positioning themselves within a discourse.

For example, Susan who framed our interview as a conversation on animal welfare issues in the context of wildlife management presented herself very clearly and repeatedly as an animal lover: “Oh yes, I’ve always been an animal lover, all kinds of animals.” She saw herself in opposition to others she perceived as cruel, such as the gamekeepers on an estate she used to live on who she felt were mistreating foxes, and pet owners ignorant of the needs of their pets. At the same time, she emphasised that she regarded herself as a rural person: “I must admit I would never survive in the city. I’m a rural person: ‘I’m born and bred in the countryside and I don’t even like cities.”

Gavin, who repeatedly referred to global environmental change, pictured himself as environmentally concerned, not least because of his young children:

I could see myself helping out, trying to make changes because if nobody makes changes then it will all be problems. When she [my daughter] grows up to be my age, she ... maybe she won’t see some of these things because people aren’t doing much. [Gavin]

He had clear views on the roles of other actors in this debate, namely the government and environmental activists:

We can protest and do things, but it’s up to the government really to do something about it, I think. That’s what they get paid for – to make the big decisions, to go to meetings with other countries. But I don’t think I will ever be one of those protesters that goes to all of this – I don’t think I would go as far as that, camping out in all sorts of weathers and standing at the gates of power stations and nuclear plants and stuff like that. I don’t think I would be one of them. [...] You see them in the news all the time, and they're chaining themselves to the gates and all this. I don't think I'm going to be one of them like. [Gavin]

For him as well as for Susan, the questions on woodland and moorland management that we raised were part of a far bigger question that they found so relevant that they, without prompting, expressed how this discourse related to their own identity.

However, those interviewees who adopted the discourse around woodland and moorland management as a frame for their conversation with us would also often present this discourse as a social struggle between clearly identified actors. These were often presented as a spectrum from ‘hunters’ to ‘conservationists’ and strikingly, our respondents often tried to position themselves on this imaginary spectrum. They would indicate that they knew the extreme views of, e.g., bird conservationists or gamekeepers, but suggest that they themselves would be in between these, ‘with one foot in both camps’. They thus indicated an awareness of a conflictive debate, but placed themselves explicitly in neither of the extreme camps.

Bill: I think you will find in your research certainly huge anti-RSPB [Royal Society for the Protection of Birds] feelings, for example, in and around this area. If you talk to the actual local locals, they are all anti.

KM: What about yourself? What do you think in relation to that?

Bill: I've probably got a balanced viewpoint in the sense that I think the RSPB do some wonderful work. I'm a bit sceptical when I hear some of the stories from the local folk and [...] and what has happened to the land as to whether they should necessarily get away with everything. They get away with in buying so much land and then controlling it. [Bill]

Matt felt the need to manifest his ‘in-between’ position by actively engaging with what could be seen as ‘the other side’:

I'm trying to arrange this year that I actually learn to stalk for the first time. I've never done that before but it's something I want to do. I almost feel like a hypocrite to say within my job that I agree with deer culling and I think deer numbers should be reduced because there is a huge conservation problem now but, I have never done that myself, and I don’t have the ability to do that, and I don’t know how to do that. I want to learn how to do that. [Matt]

For a former gamekeeper like Douglas, activities that allowed him to express his appreciation for beauty in nature were explicitly described as part of his identity, again positioning him away from the extremes:

That’s maybe why I was no good deer stalking – I wasn’t just focused on it, I wasn’t focused on the one thing. If I found a little wee isolated raspberry cane growing at 2000 feet I would stand and marvel at that for 10 minutes while the client fumed, you know? [...] I could have ended my days keepering I suppose but I had other things to do – painting and drawing, writing. [...] I kind of sketch and draw and paint and creatively write and things like that, and what I've always tried to do is give people hopefully a more balanced view of the countryside. [Douglas]
John attributed his ability to take a position ‘in-between’ (“I can sit quite comfortably with a foot in each camp”) to his role as an estate manager that required him to meet a range of management objectives. These objectives were not seen as a normative given, but resulted from deliberate decisions made in a stress field of legal, economic and cultural factors.

They are very happy with the open moorland, they like the deer stalking and that’s fine. I also work in an area where we are doing the opposite, we brought the deer numbers down in the last 3 years from over 1200 deer to a 120 on the hill, and that’s also fine, but it’s just objectives and I think it’s very good especially in this area of the national park, that we have got all these different types of objectives. But of course there is conflict, because within very small areas some people will want regeneration where some people want high deer numbers, and managing that conflict is also very interesting. [John]

Interestingly, this construal of self as ‘in-between’ seemed to have a legitimating function, and was used to support their arguments: their views seemed to appear ‘more balanced’ and thus more truthful when the speaker indicated that they could understand ‘both sides’:

What I’ve always tried to do is give people hopefully a more balanced view of the countryside. [...] I just try to tell folk it is what it is what it is – that’s me. [Douglas]

This striving for a balanced view mirrored the conciliatory perspective that many chose when discussing woodland and moorland (Section 3.1), where rather than advocating extreme positions, an understanding of the multiple demands on the land was expressed.

4. Discussion

Discussions about the management of the natural environment can be framed in many different ways. Our interviews showed a range of such potential frames: nature management as a struggle between conservation and other types of land uses, as an issue of animal welfare, or as an issue of global environmental change, to name but a few. We described these thematic foci as lenses that allowed the interviewee to give subjective meaning to the conversation. Such frames were developed through interaction with us as a response to the cues and reinforcement we gave through our questions, photo-prompts and other verbal and non-verbal cues. While much of this co-construction was situational and dependent on the participants in the dialogue, the photo-prompts and the provocative quote used in the first part of the interview (Table 1) were fixed and thus made the interviews to some degree comparable.

Frames were not only used to bound and give meaning to the assumed topic of the interview; they also bounded the conversation about related social aspects and often reflected societal discourses. In contrast to previous research, frames were not group-specific. For example, the woodland–moorland frame was adopted by professional land managers, both from conservation agencies and shooting estates, and members of the general public alike. Unlike Collier and Scott (2009) who distinguished utilitarian, ecological and social rationalities reflected in their discourses, each advocating their own set of values, we found strong similarities between our stakeholders, with respondents striving to acknowledge different types of values and demands on the land.

This has implications for the practice of interviewing. We argue that processes of co-framing and co-construction of an interview should be subject to critical reflection rather than considered to have no effect on the type of responses given. Frames make an interview meaningful to the respondent but interviews that a respondent frames in a way that diverges from that anticipated might not be seen as useful by a researcher. In our view it is important to explore the reasons why such diverging frames were chosen rather than to disregard such results.

We did not investigate in detail why certain frames were chosen. However, in contrast to what, for example, Halfacree (1993) suggests, it does not seem to be the degree of background knowledge or a professional relationship with land management that made some respondents adopt the anticipated woodland–moorland frame while other used alternative contexts. For many, the frame they used not only made sense in terms of the logical arguments used but also referred to an issue that was important to them, that they were emotionally involved in, or that was related to their identities.

Our interview partners tended to position themselves within the frames that they used in two ways. First, they often positioned themselves within the discourse, expressing a substantive attitude on the management questions involved. Second, they also positioned themselves in the cast of actors in a discourse (Adger et al., 2001), taking a role (however inactive), or identifying with and positioning themselves in relation to other actors. The discourses thus had strong social element, suggesting that our respondents saw the issue addressed in the interview as highly socially relevant and not restricted solely to technical questions of management.

Ideas of balance occurred strikingly often with regard to both of these aspects. For example, it was seen as essential that different land uses be balanced, implying that commercial as well as aesthetic and other values should be taken into consideration. Also when talking about different habitat types and animal species many respondents argued for a balance, for example between woodlands and moorland, or predator and prey. Views, demands and positions of different stakeholders were to be considered in a balanced way, too. Consequently, despite having their own preferences, many of our interview partners presented themselves as understanding the polyvalence of the land, and adopted a non-confrontational position.

We can only speculate about the causes of this prevalence of balance-related arguments. First, the argument that a balance must be struck might be a rhetorical device to communicate awareness of the complexity of the issue, whilst avoiding taking a position in this matter. Second, the prevalence of balance-related ideas might have been facilitated by our approach to ask questions about both woodland and moorland, rather than just about one of the habitat types. The respondents might have expressed more polarised views had we, for example, just interviewed them about their views on semi-natural pine wood. Third, our interview partners possibly regarded a desire for balance, expressed in their conversation with us, as a way to give their statements additional legitimacy (see above). Fourth, although traditional moorland management has been heavily challenged by well established actors in the recent past, and is constantly negotiated in complex institutional arrangements such as the Moorland Forum and Deer Management Groups, there is currently no acute conflict in Strathspey and it is therefore relatively easy and inconsequential to argue for a greater balance. Fifth, these factors might also have contributed to a real desire to reconcile different views and demands on the land: previous conflictive situations might have led to the insight that land management is indeed a complex issue, and that simplistic or one-sided views are likely to be inadequate. Also, previous studies on attitudes towards biodiversity management have found a similar prevalence of balance-related arguments (Fischer and Young, 2007; Fischer and Van der Wal, 2007).
While such a strong coincidence of balance-related arguments could be an excellent basis for the development of collaborative management plans for the area, there is a risk that due to its frequent use for a very wide range of argumentative purposes the term ‘balance’ is rendered meaningless. Its communicative function might then be reduced to that of a merely rhetorical or superficial agreement on the importance of balance, which might collapse as soon as more concrete issues need to be addressed.

To some degree, the prevalence of these ideas might also be a ‘post-conflict’ phenomenon. Those interviewees using the woodland–moorland frame appeared to be very familiar with the public discourse on local land management, and seemed to be actively avoiding to be labelled, for example, as a typical conservationist or game manager. This might be due to the caricatured nature of the stereotypes shared in the public discourse (as expressed, for example, by Douglas, Section 3.2.3). It might have seemed more desirable to construct an identity lacking those characteristics associated with the stereotypes. For example, Matt, an ecologist working for a public authority, explicitly talked about his close family- and personal relationship to deer stalking. Douglas, the former gamekeeper, presented himself as being interested in arts and the beauty of nature. These presentations of the self as a ‘bit of both’ reveal also how those that were previously seen as the ‘other’ are perceived. In addition to the respondents’ recognition of their own complex identities, it seems also interesting that ‘other’ are perceived. In addition to the respondents’ recognition of their own complex identities, it seems also interesting that management objectives were often presented as relative, as negotiable and changeable.

In our study of people’s views on land management of the Scottish uplands, we thus identified two major issues: First, our interview partners framed our debates on land management in very different ways. We argue that it is important to understand and recognise these frames in order to understand people’s views, and to acknowledge also the interviewee’s contributions to these framing processes (Section 3.2.2). Second, frames often reflected societal discourses that included a field of actors. Our interviewees positioned themselves in this field, and often chose a position in between the extremes, looking for reconciliation between different demands on the land. Consequently, we argue that researchers should be cautious in their approach and not assume that stakeholders hold extreme or non-negotiable positions representative of stereotypical discourses with simplified value patterns (Stoll-Kleemann, 2001; Opotow and Brook, 2003). A more open approach that allows stakeholders to express multiple values and more complex discourses might help to derive more effective recommendations for land use policy.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all interview partners for their ideas, time and effort, Bridget Fido for transcriptions, and Sally Huband and two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on earlier versions of this manuscript. This study was funded by the Scottish Government Rural and Environment Research and Analysis Directorate (RERAD) Programme 3.

References


Buijs, A.E., 2009a. Lay people’s images of nature: comprehensive frameworks of values, beliefs and value orientations. Society and Natural Resources 22, 417–432.


