



# **‘Killing with Care’: Locating Ethical Congruence in Multispecies Political Ecology**

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## **Abstract**

Increasing calls to re-conceptualise human relations with nonhuman nature in the Anthropocene have spurred a range of multispecies studies seeking to analytically de-centre the human to focus on the lives and struggles of nonhumans. Scholars have also called for deeper collaborations between conservation biology, political ecology, and critical animal studies. Research spanning these disciplinary approaches has considerable analytical potential but presents seriously discordant ethical positions for interdisciplinary multispecies researchers like us. This paper centres the personal ethical dilemmas of three political ecologists of conservation to explore what a multidisciplinary coming together portends for the ethics of multispecies research in local/indigenous contexts that involve extensive livestock

farming, hunting and animal sacrifice. Here, everyday human-animal interactions span intimate connections, care, fear, avoidance, and death. While these traditional practices may involve varying levels of animal control and suffering, for our local interlocutors, they are central to maintaining claims over lands, livelihoods, and identities. Through three auto-ethnographic accounts, we unpack how a situated relational approach that requires the researcher to deeply engage with all their subjects might offer a productive pathway to multispecies ethics. We argue that an ethical centring of the nonhuman does not equal a political centring. We encourage other researchers like us, who may find themselves ethically conflicted as they wish to uphold their commitments to nonhuman life, species conservation, and socio-economic-cultural justice, to explore a relational, context-specific and politically-engaged multispecies ethic grounded in everyday situated practices of attachment, detachment, and exclusion.

### **Keywords**

Human-animal relations, local and indigenous people, multispecies, ethics, political ecology, conservation

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### **Introduction**

Against the backdrop of human-induced climate change and accelerating rates of species extinction, there have been increasing and urgent calls to re-conceptualise human relations with nonhuman nature. This has spurred a range of multispecies studies that have sought an analytical de-centring of the human to focus on the lives, struggles and world-making projects of nonhumans (Tsing, 2015; van Dooren et al., 2016). This literature has largely remained separate from the larger discourse on nature conservation, and the corresponding critiques and alternative visions proposed by environmental anthropology, environmental humanities, and political ecology (Adams and Hutton, 2007). The challenge of the Anthropocene calls for a deeper collaboration between disciplines that are naturally concerned with the combined exploitation of humans and nonhumans under unsustainable growth-based economies, including but not limited to conservation biology, political ecology, and critical animal geography (Collard et al., 2015). However, a coming together of distinct disciplinary goals, epistemologies, ethical orientations, philosophies, and methodologies poses vexing ethical dilemmas for multidisciplinary researchers who share and identify with these approaches (Brister, 2016), which we believe has received little attention. Through the in-situ experiences of three multidisciplinary political ecologists of conservation who study human-wildlife relations, this collaborative paper explores what an entanglement of traditionally disparate disciplines portends for the ethics of multispecies research in local and indigenous contexts.

This paper is based on three distinct yet overlapping personal accounts of everyday ethical conflicts that each of us encountered during and after fieldwork. Sahil's (Nijhawan) interdisciplinary fieldwork focused on understanding the layered relationship between the endangered tigers and the cultural practices of the animist Idu Mishmi people (hereafter Idu) indigenous to the Dibang Valley (hereafter Dibang) of North-eastern India. Agnese's (Marino) research took place in the Cantabrian Mountains of Spain. Here, she worked with traditional livestock farming communities that have historically coexisted with wolves, having developed a series of strategies, including hunting, to cope with livestock depredation. Tom's (Fry) research on the Isle of Skye amongst crofting communities, a form of traditional small-scale hill farming practised in the remote Highlands and Islands of Scotland, focused on species conservation, socio-cultural understandings of nature, and rural livelihoods under significant ongoing land-use change. Our ethical dilemmas arose primarily as we endeavoured to work across the incongruent ethical positions of conservation science, political ecology, and critical animal geography, but also when our personal ethics and subjectivities conflicted with disciplinary traditions and local realities of human-animal relations.

## **Ethical Discordance of Interdisciplinary Multispecies Research**

As disciplines, both conservation biology and critical animal geography share concern for animal life as a result of human aspiration for economic growth. However, this concern is directed at different categories of animals and units. Conservation biology focuses on populations, species, ecosystems and evolutionary units of wild animals, generally ignoring agency and welfare of individual animals (Sommer, 2017; Fraser-Celin and Hovorka, 2019), while critical animal geography emphasizes the experiences and sufferings of the 'animal' as a category – at an individual and an aggregate level, and both for wild and domesticated animals (Philo and Wilbert, 2000). Political ecology has broadly treated animals as resources, objects that generate conflicts between human groups, or as backgrounds against which human projects of uneven development, unequal distribution of power and wealth, environmental change and nature conservation unfold (Walker, 2005; Hobson, 2007; Collard, 2015).

Attempting to produce research that spans the interests and approaches of these disciplines leaves us with an interdisciplinary space that has considerable analytical potential, but discordant ethical positions. Scholars who have drawn from these approaches in order to equalise human-animal hierarchies, and highlight human and animal suffering have reported challenging ethical choices. Kiik (2018) has voiced how studying conservation and representing the suffering of wildlife was seen as 'absurd and obscene' in his field site in Northern Myanmar's Kachin state, which has seen war and catastrophic human suffering for the past 60 years. Heatherington (2010) writes how she was confronted by a sheep farmer in her field site who argued that she could not be an anthropologist and an environmentalist at the same time. Similarly, Collard (2014) has written about her ethical struggles working as a wildlife rehabilitator as she performed the very hierarchical power relations between humans and rescued wild animals that her political ecology research sought to contest. These experiences speak to a broader ethical dilemma at work in participant observation research with human and animal subjects where both make ethical demands. While multispecies studies have (rightfully) aspired to 'push humans from centre stage to study the lives and deaths of critters who abide with us in multispecies worlds' (Kirksey, 2014:2), Kiik (2018:227) has appropriately asked: how ethical is it to really push from the centre stage the world's poorer underclasses that have hardly ever taken the 'centre stage'? We have struggled with the same question in our respective research and personal lives.

Like other political ecologists of conservation, we strive to challenge mainstream conservation's constructs of human-nature dualism by shedding light on the multiple ways through which local people interact with their environment (Escobar, 1998; Peterson et al., 2010), offering a broader view of conservation that emphasizes "the active cultivation of cultural, economic, political and ecological plurality" (Brightman and Lewis, 2017:17). We try to centre the global structural determinants of environmental degradation, challenging narratives that place the blame of ecological destruction on local and indigenous communities, and instead focus on examining the processes through which place-based ecologies, traditional livelihoods, and socio-cultures are disrupted and marginalised (Robbins, 2012; Sundberg, 2015). At the same time, we believe that conservation is a valid world-making process, which is of critical importance to achieving socio-ecological justice. The accelerating loss of biodiversity, and the plight of wildlife at the species and population level, are matters of deep personal and ethical concern to us.

Kiik (2018:22), in his provocative call for 'wilding' the ethnographies of conservation, points out that: "ethnographies of conservation encounter...do not explicitly treat ecological crises as worthy problems...They do not explicitly voice concern about the future of the field site's endangered animals or eco-systems...[and] show little sympathy for conservation as a goal". Like Kiik, we suspect that many political ecologists are more aligned with the goals of conservation than is apparent in their work, which is usually broadly reflective of the humanistic ethical approach of critical social research. We align with Kiik and others on the importance of researchers being more forthcoming about their valuing of the living

world beyond the human, in particular because of the ethical dilemmas and anxieties it can produce for those who consider themselves as both political ecologists and conservationists.

Our ethical sensibilities, and the dilemmas and conflicts that thus emerge during fieldwork, do not stem solely from our disciplinary trainings. Our solidarity with those structurally disenfranchised did not suddenly materialise through our training in political ecology. Similarly, our valuing of nonhuman nature is not a direct consequence of our background in conservation science. These ethical choices are informed by our own socio-political identities, inclinations, and values (see also Sundberg, 2015). In this sense, our own personal ethics can exceed disciplinary norms. For instance, while we strive to produce work relevant to conservation and engage methodologically and conceptually with conservation science, our own personal relationship with the nonhuman world is not reserved to conservation biology's focus on species and populations (Lindsey et al., 2006). As people who work alongside and with animals through immersive fieldwork, whether livestock, or the carnivores who are the subject of conservation interventions, the lifeworlds and agencies of individual animals, their capacity for subjective experience, is readily apparent to us. Animals do not enter our own personal ethical worlds solely as representatives of their species and their associated conservation status, but also as subjects who think, feel, suffer, experience pleasure, and make decisions that affect their own and other's lives. Whether through the new wave of 'compassionate conservation' models, including 'just conservation' (Vucetich et al., 2018) and 'just preservation' (Treves et al., 2019), or critical animal geography's liberationist political commitment to the lives of animals, there is increasing focus on this topic within nature-society research, a focus that is challenging and provocative for work that spans political ecology, conservation science and multispecies studies. We have struggled to navigate the ethically charged terrain produced when all our subjects - human and nonhumans, with whom we have developed intimate relations - make ethical demands.

### **Ethics when Species Compete and Co-Flourish**

Working at the messy confluence of these disciplines, and our personal beliefs and commitments, we have found ourselves gravitating towards the 'situated and relational' understanding of interspecies ethics as an appropriate anchor for the complex, ever-evolving, and context-specific ethical choices we have often (inadvertently) made. This approach, inspired primarily by Donna Haraway's writings (2008), allows us to chart context-specific and politically engaged ethics that allow a moral commitment built on attentiveness and compassion toward local people, biodiversity, and individual nonhumans. It is an ethic suited to situations where there are no obvious, clear, or right priorities (Greenhough and Roe, 2010), and where mutual flourishing is understood as necessarily awkward. This ethical approach offers a way of engaging with a set of relations between both humans and nonhumans that are unequal, differential or simply incommensurable.

Sharing, learning and living always occur in relationship with others, so that what emerges from these practices is an inherently relational ethical approach, not confined to the demands of a single subject or collective, but instead dependent on, and situated in relation to, a broad network of subjects and collectives, each with their own competing claims (Greenhough and Roe, 2010). Along with a duty to 'pay attention to' others, this ethical approach therefore also dispenses with prescriptive ethical codes that attribute intrinsic rights only to some living beings. This approach demands researchers continuously cultivate openness and sensitivity towards their research subjects, to pay attention to their ways of being, their subjectivities and bodily experiences. Ethical relations with other beings, according to this perspective, do not ignore the dark or awkward side of multispecies encounters, but require us to emerge from these with a productive sense of discomfort, uncertainty and humility. As alluded to by Kiik (2018:224), everyday ethical discomforts, anxieties, and choices then become central to ethnographic methodology and analysis. These ideas take inspiration from non-Western, often indigenous peoples'

cosmologies and social ontologies, where deep relationality between human and nonhumans spans kinship, care, and violence.

In the following sections we offer ethnographic explorations of this productive ethical discomfort that was generated in our fieldwork, specifically focusing on the three ethical impetuses of interdisciplinary research on conservation encounters: the interests and sociocultures of local people, the urgency of wildlife conservation, and the lifeworlds of individual animals. We acknowledge that serious ethical issues arise due to power imbalances between educated, urban researchers, and the often rural, researched local people. These have been addressed in greater detail elsewhere by several authors (see Sultana, 2007; Guillemin and Heggen, 2009; Miller et al., 2012), and also form the focus of most present-day institutional ethical review processes. Here, we draw attention to the 'everyday' ethical practice of research, or what Riessman (2005) calls 'ethics-in-context', in multispecies systems marked by unequal power differentials between and amongst researchers and different groups of human and nonhuman participants. These everyday events may not be 'red-letter' ethical dilemmas that call for large-scale ethical deliberations (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004); however, they leave researchers feeling troubled and compromised. Our aim in writing this article is not to generate universal ethical guidelines on how to conduct multispecies research, but to create conversations around these issues which we argue go beyond ethical deliberations, requiring researchers to make active political choices (also see Collard, 2015).

In places, our writing might read as discordant. Beyond space constraints in a journal article, this reflects the challenges and messiness of collaborative and comparative ethnography. Despite the messiness, given the similar personal and disciplinary ethical concerns we experienced while working across such diverse systems, we stress the need for more collaborative-comparative ethnography. We suspect such ethical conflicts to be experienced frequently as more researchers foray into multidisciplinary human-animal research.

Like so many critical nature-society researchers, we undertake fieldwork without any settled or coherent ethical direction. Through our varied ethnographic encounters described below, we offer nuanced considerations of ethics at play in multispecies research, that in the case of Dibang, Skye and the Cantabrian Mountains harbour complex human-animal relations. In the discussion that follows we expand upon this, detailing how in our field sites mutual flourishing is reserved to only certain species assemblages and interspecies relations, which are premised on the exclusion of and violence towards others forms of life. The alignment between the interests of the communities we work with, conservation goals and individual nonhumans is partial, unstable and structurally mediated. We detail how a situated, politically-engaged and relational ethics, rather than mono-disciplinary approaches or universalist codes, allow for the ethical anxieties experienced when encountering these relations to become analytically productive and ethico-politically formative. The way we bring forth these worlds through our writing thus becomes a potent political process, but reflective of a form of ethical engagement that we feel is particularly relevant to those who identify with and research wildlife conservation.

### **Tigers, Animal Flesh and Indigenous People**

Sahil was drawn to local stories of tigers inhabiting Dibang Valley's mountainous geography, unknown to outside scientists, governments, and conservationists. At the turn of the decade, a large majority of the world's nearly 3500 wild tigers, down 97% from a century ago, were restricted to protected reserves managed by governments and NGOs (Walston et al., 2010). Tigers living in 'unprotected' indigenously-owned forests were therefore of particular interest as their presence indicated a form of coexistence with people that was rarely associated with this heavily traded, endangered and dangerous animal. Through a combination of ecological tools and long-term participant observation, Sahil sought to understand the ecology of Dibang's mountain tigers and explore their relationship with the Idu people. Intimate participation in the lives of the largely forest-based Idu people involved

partaking in animal sacrifice, hunting and consumption of meat. Sahil's upbringing as a strict vegetarian had instilled a deep aversion for meat, raw or cooked, smell of flesh, sight of blood, and more generally, the killing of animals. For the Idu, killing of animals, both wild and domestic, is an ordinary part of life. People hunt animals, and in return are 'hunted' by animals and spirit masters; the essential principle of animist existence (Fausto, 2007).

From the beginning, Sahil sought independence from the identity he believed was presumed for him by the Idu – a wildlife researcher from mainland urban India – often distant, vegetarian or eater of 'clean' meats (e.g., chicken), and suspicious of the hunting ways of Northeast India's indigenous communities. He accompanied his Idu interlocutors on hunting and gathering trips into the forest. He ate the same food as his host family, whether it was forest greens, rice and corn, rodents, large forest animals, or water bugs, whilst also observing food taboos. Many Idu people found his lack of inhibition with eating rodents and insects refreshing. He handled and ate meat in shamanic ceremonies such as *Rē* (feasts of merit) and *Ya* (funeral), where a great number of domestic animals are sacrificed, often in ways that would be judged inhumane by 'modern' mainstream ethical standards. Gradually, Sahil settled into a mechanism that permitted ethical and sensory anxieties to be shelved away, at least temporarily, while he partook in handling and consumption of animal meat. At times, he relished the meat and how it allowed a more intimate and embodied inclusion into Idu lives and Idu-animal relations. Furthermore, all forms of hunting are illegal in India. While the efficacy, practicality and morality of such top-down bans on all hunting remains a topic of scholarly debate (Coad et al., 2019), Sahil's presence in these clandestine activities seemed to invite his collusion in 'illicit' behaviour, bringing additional disquiet.

Despite personal and professional discomfort with hunting and animal sacrifice, Sahil's research showed that a complex interplay between Idu cosmo-cultural practices, wild animal ecology and geopolitics contributed towards maintaining sustainable conservation outcomes for most species. However, while tigers thrived because of these practices, local populations of the commercially valuable musk deer dwindled (see Nijhawan, 2018). Importantly, Idu hunting and associated taboos appeared to maintain identities and vital distinctions between people and animals, men and women, creating a broader framework of human-animal morality (Nijhawan and Mihu, 2020). While it includes animal death and suffering, it does not recognise human dominion and superiority over all animals. This multispecies moral structure provides equal opportunity for animals to exact 'revenge' on people when they transgress morally-correct boundaries. Animals have agency, yet, violence and death are omnipresent, operating in all directions.

One particular incident following the death of a tiger that had been attacking livestock and had become a threat to the safety of the villagers, exacerbated Sahil's existing ethical concerns. This was a rare event as tiger killing is strictly prohibited for the Idu. If the spirit of the slain tiger is not properly pacified through ritual, not only the killer but the entire clan may face retribution. A widely-known origin myth tells the tale of two ancestral brothers – the tiger and the Idu. Tigers are persons too; dangerous both spiritually and physically. For the Idu, the tiger isn't just an animal (and definitely not one that is globally endangered). It is also a mythical brother, spirit messenger, and spiritual power of Idu shamans. Tigers and people not only make decisions about their own lives, but also about each other's. Those who have had close physical encounters with tigers in the forest often speak fearfully of the animal's great powers, guile and capacity to "think just like us". They also hope never to face one again. The Idu coexist with these various tigers through a careful dance of dependence, fear, distance, and 'hoped-for absence' (see Ginn, 2014).



**Figure 1.** An artist's rendition of the multispecies world of Dibang Valley. The tiger and the Idu Mishmi are shown as the most prominent amongst other life forms, all placed against a mountainous and riverine background where the spirits dwell. (Credit: Kruti Patel).

In the exceptional case of tiger killing, it is afforded the same funeral rites as a human person. A lengthy and expensive purification ceremony (*tamama*) is conducted by an experienced shaman followed by a strict five-day taboo for the entire village. *Tamama* ceremonies are extremely rare because only those shamans who possess a powerful 'tiger spirit' can conduct them. As Sahil listened to the shaman narrate how he negotiated with the spirit of the dead tiger, coaxing it to move on without harming the villagers, his thoughts coalesced around the dead animal. He understood the circumstances under which the tiger died; conflict animals that threaten human safety are removed regularly even by governments and conservation groups. Yet, he felt disturbed at the loss of an animal whose species inched ever close to extinction. It was unclear what he mourned more – the loss of genetic fitness of the endangered species, or the suffering of a 'conscious' free-willed animal that destabilised notions of human primacy over animals. At the same time, the combined sense of loss and anger he felt at death of the tiger also questioned his unwavering ethical commitment towards the interests, protection, and safety of his Idu interlocutors.

Throughout, Sahil inhabited an uneasy ethical space - personal, disciplinary and professional - unable to decide on whose behalf he was writing – the persecuted, endangered and sacrificed animals, both domestic and wild, or the local Idu, marginalised in their own way, preyed upon by tigers, both real and spirit, and by the Indian state's plans for large-scale infrastructure development and top-down conservation.

### **Conviviality and Control in the Cantabrian Mountains**

Agnese's interest in researching coexistence between people and large carnivores in a western rural setting led her in 2014 to the Cantabrian Mountains in the northwest of Spain, where pastoral communities and wolves have shared land for centuries. Before then, she had worked in wolf

conservation projects across predominantly agricultural landscapes in Italy, where the wolf population had only recently recovered and where discussions around wolf management centred relentlessly on their protected status. Wolf culling is a cause of social fracture across the species' range as well as an object of scientific debate, with recent research suggesting that sustainable levels of culling do not significantly reduce livestock depredations or are, in any case, less efficient than non-lethal damage prevention measures such as livestock guarding dogs (Wielgus and Peebles, 2014; van Eeden et al., 2018). This, along with the knowledge that Europe's extensive livestock breeding sector is undergoing an economic crisis that spans well beyond the problems caused by wolves, provided Agnese with an easy way to rationalize her personal discomfort with wolf culling, but it did little to help her understand it.

As she began her research in the Cantabrian Mountains, looking into farmers and hunter's everyday coexistence with carnivores, she was drawn to the subjective and embodied experiences that bind people and nature. Wolves in these territories are either hunted or they are culled by rangers, and predator management is historically embedded within a set of livelihood and environmental practices that heavily shape the local landscape and its living beings. Habituation to wolves meant that they were seen as just another animal, so that local relations with wolves reflected those practiced towards domestic livestock and other wildlife (Marino, *forthcoming*). Livestock rearing is among the main economic activities in the Cantabrian Mountains, and everyday livelihood practices encompass acts of care and nurturing as well as control, coercion, and slaughter. While grazing produces a mosaic landscape that hosts a rich variety of plant and animal species, it also prevents shrub growth and forest regeneration. Planted fruit trees and, until recently, livestock carcasses are believed to have enabled bears and wolves to survive in the area at a time when they were disappearing everywhere else. Hunting, like livestock breeding, is considered by many to serve an important ecological role, preventing wildlife diseases and helping the recovery of locally endangered birds, small mammals and ungulates by keeping carnivores in check. In this way, the practices of farming and hunting are a way through which local people perform control over the environment, but they also represent acts of care towards some of its living beings.

Such discursive and material expressions of conviviality are nonetheless fraught with tension. Wolves were seen as part of the natural landscape and at the same time as a significant threat to livestock farming (Marino, 2019). Even more, they represent a threat to the shared forms of existence and labour through which farmers and livestock carve out space for each other within the landscape, and the meaning this holds for farmer's identity, autonomy, and sense of place. Conservation policies that interfered with resource users' ability to reciprocate carnivore attacks and shape the landscape they inhabited were perceived by farmers as restrictions on their ability to pursue their productive activities, to fulfil their role of landscape stewards, and to enforce symbolic and physical boundaries (see also Buller, 2008; Lescureux and Linnell, 2010). Even though most farmers saw a place for wolves in the landscape, several alluded to a level of population control that would inevitably interfere with their conservation (Marino, 2019).

The central role that humans are seen to play as ecological engineers in the Cantabrian Mountains sits uncomfortably alongside conservation discourses predicated on the importance of preserving nature from human activity. Nature, for Agnese, had always been something 'out there', both a place that offers respite from the everyday stress of urban life and an abstract idea, which wolves in many ways have come to represent. The wolf's untamed and irreverent nature evokes the notion of a subaltern world that 'looks back' and refuses to be completely subsumed. This dualistic ontology manifests on a physical level every time Agnese 'is in nature': in the way her eyes instinctively scan landscapes to settle on





**Figure 2.** The Cantabrian Mountains, interspersed with pastures, forested areas and traditional livestock shelters known as '*teitos*'.

patches where the signs of human endeavour and economic development are less evident; or in the sense of stillness she experiences when the frantic noise of traffic fades out to make way for organic sounds. The first time she heard a wolf howl is marked indelibly in her memory and her heartbeat still performs a tiny skip each time she encounters the weathered traces of wolves along a hiking trail. By now, she has spoken with enough interlocutors and read sufficient anthropological literature to know that her dualistic and fetishized notions of nature are culturally specific and dangerously hegemonic, and yet, no effort of unlearning is likely to radically alter her emotional and physical responses. More importantly, she remains unconvinced that such a change is even desirable.

Although born out of dissonant ways of being, the embodied and affective ties with nature felt by Agnese and her interlocutors are not altogether alien. Local farmers described their landscape and lifestyle as tranquil and beautiful, especially in relation to the urban lifestyles that most had experienced at some point in their lives. They often expressed a sense of pride and an appreciation for the landscape's uniqueness, and associated it with the imagery of mountains, plants and wildlife. Moreover, the pastoral traditions of husbandry and stewardship evoked by farmers are political articulations with which they assert their rights to self-determination. In this way, they represent a way of life that also 'looks back' and refuses to be subsumed. Here then, are examples of the many layers that characterize multispecies relations in the Cantabrian Mountains. Affective ties and acts of care towards livestock and wildlife coexist alongside practices of dominance and control over them. The same relational interactions that enable social and natural worlds to coexist are also fundamentally power-laden, hierarchical and asymmetrical. For Agnese, this has meant accepting that her portrayals of coexistence are implicated

with the killing of a species she admires, and learning to navigate the moral uncertainty and personal discomfort that this entails.

### **Morbid Contingencies of Coexistence in Upland Farming Landscapes**

Tom's research participants from Scotland's crofting communities were for the most part self-defined 'locals', people still undertaking extensive sheep production in the hills and mountains, who have multigenerational ties to the land and strong sociocultural attachments to the working of it. The intertwined lives of crofters, the Eurasian Curlew, and mesopredators, are an example of some of the ethical and political tensions that Tom faced as a political ecologist of conservation.

The curlew is the largest European wading bird, and with its long, scimitar-shaped bill and eerie call, has marked aesthetic and corporeal charisma (Lorimer, 2007). It is an iconic bird of the UK's uplands, but the species is of global conservation concern. It is classified as Near Threatened by the IUCN, and as having a moderately rapid global population decline. The UK has a globally significant number of the breeding population (19-27%), but this is dropping steeply, and there is little evidence of this trend reversing (Douglas et al., 2021).

The curlew is well adapted to crofting landscapes, feeding in the unimproved and rough grassland habitats close to farmsteads, and nesting in higher elevation moorland and bog (Franks et al., 2017). These are the ecological compositions produced by crofting agriculture through the effects of grazing sheep on the hills and periodically burning vegetation, which provide the heterogeneity in sward height and insect populations favoured by the bird. This species assemblage, of which the sheep are an important part, has particular sociocultural valence for crofters, a landscape of intergenerational farming practise which harbours a deep sense of belonging for those who work on the hills. The curlew, like other species whose mobilities and life-courses are entwined with crofting practise, is often talked about fondly by crofters, and many know individual animals and their nesting sites. A common refrain is that these birds are 'part of what we do', and for many crofters the curlew become markers of place-as-it-should-be (Fry, 2020).

However, this interrelation is mediated by larger political-economic dynamics. Crofting is facing an ongoing crisis of lowering incomes and agricultural abandonment, which threatens this distinctive way of life. The lack of grazing stemming from sheep leaving the hills will eventually produce scrub and woodland habitat unsuitable for curlew (Holland et al, 2011). Conversely, where farmers intensify production in order to become more competitive, the higher stocking numbers, drainage and grassland improvement will also reduce suitable habitat (Brown et al, 2015).

Perhaps the most locally significant threat to curlew numbers is nest predation, and in most of their upland habitats their breeding productivity is reliant on some level of lethal control of predators (Roos et al, 2018). For crofters there are two mesopredators which pose a particular risk to lambs: the Hooded Crow and the Red Fox. These generalist mesopredators are common in the region and across most of Scotland. They are also a significant risk to the ground nests of curlew. If crofters hold the appropriate license both species can be legally killed, and persecution is a routine farming task for many. At the same time these animals were tolerated by crofters as a legitimate presence in the landscape, as being part of the place. The intimate control of hunting them is seen as an act of broader ecological care, a way of maintaining socioecological balance that benefits both crofters and a wider array of species (Fry, 2020).

For Tom what was both analytically striking and ethically uncomfortable was how the fates of curlew as a population, and of the local mesopredators, was bound up in acts of interspecies violence. Doing ethnographic research means that these acts can be witnessed and experienced first-hand. Losing



**Figure 3.** On the Isle of Skye a flock of sheep graze against the rugged and overcast mountain-scape, with croft houses visible in the background.

any sense of abstraction or distance for Tom, these became earthly, material and direct instances of suffering, with considerable affective power. He found it deeply unsettling to hear stories of nest predation from crofters, and to see adult curlews feeding in the fields without the usual nervous vigilance of parents who are on guard because of their nearby chicks. This discomfort and upset was because these birds were emblematic of their population, and the looming spectre of extinction that haunts any species whose numbers are dwindling so rapidly. This spectre is not an intrinsic quality of the curlew, but is summoned by people like Tom, for whom conservation holds personal emotive weight. But at the same time this discomfort was something he felt viscerally, immediately, and as bound up in the specific life-course of those individual birds who had lost their chicks. That same uncomfortable immediacy of the taking of an individual animal's life would also arise when he saw the dead body of a fox who had been shot near a lambing shed. The lethal control of predators is a matter of suffering and the retraction of freedom and autonomy, their capacity for full expression of their own agency and needs curtailed through the act of killing them.

The deaths of these animals cannot be separated from the livelihoods and sociocultures of those with whom Tom worked, and whose voices he felt ethically obliged to amplify. The presence of curlew on the grazings, and the killing of crows and foxes, are interspecies relations which affirm their own sense of belonging to the landscape (Fry, *forthcoming*). For the crofters and curlew there is undeniably a

story of multispecies coexistence and co-constitution of landscape, but this is contingent on wider agrarian transformations which at present are undermining this fragile “collaborative survival” (Tsing, 2015:19). Crofters as stewards of curlew life is not a given, and only persists under specific political-economic conditions, and so advocating for crofters is not necessarily advocating for curlew, especially if agricultural practises change. This coexistence is also not simply one of benign care for the nonhuman, and is instead founded on the deaths of other animals. For Tom, whose political solidarity lies with those humans he learns alongside, who believes in the fight against extinction, the intertwined fates of crofters, curlews and mesopredators are a source of considerable ethical disquiet. They underline the complexities and contingencies of coexistence, both ethical and political, and that conserving life and upholding certain socioecological assemblages will mean the foreclosure of other lives and assemblages.

## **Discussion**

Our ethnographic accounts highlight some of the tensions and synergies between personal ethics and the ethical stances of conservation, political ecology and multispecies research. The multispecies stories we experienced are contradictory and unsettling for outside researchers like us as they oscillate between harm and care. Ideas of balance and harmony between species are bound up with productivist notions of control in both the Cantabrian Mountains and Skye, and with relations of kinship, fear, avoidance and mutual predation in Dibang. In the Cantabrian Mountains, coexistence with wolves was largely achieved through some level of population control, but some farmers desired a level of wolf culling that would likely bring their population below sustainable levels. In Skye, it involved causing suffering to foxes and crows to protect the endangered curlew and the more numerous sheep. In both locations, grazing systems suspend ecological dynamics and maintain specific grass and shrub ecosystems which favour certain species compositions, preventing succession to scrub and woodland habitats (Evans et al., 2006; Plieninger et al., 2006). In Dibang, sustainable and reciprocal human-tiger relations were maintained through occasional removal of the globally endangered tigers in self-defence. While traditional hunting and sacrificial practices in Dibang reify moral relations between humans and nonhumans, they cause bodily harm to nonhuman animals and have led to a decrease in the populations of the endangered musk deer.

We at once challenge fortress conservation approaches predicated on the separation between humans and nature (Brockington, 2002), and critical animal studies perspectives that predicate multispecies justice through “distance” and the cessation of livelihoods that depend on livestock breeding, hunting and “other forms of intimate control over animal bodies” (Gillespie and Collard, 2015:9). All three sites are examples of contexts where a complex combination of historical proximity and everyday interaction (physical, but also spiritual in the case of tigers in Dibang) result in tolerance even towards ‘conflict-prone’ animals like carnivores. They highlight instances where proximity, habituation and kinship rather than permanent distance and separation, foster ethical relations with nature (Goldman et al. 2010; Singh, 2013; Govindarajan, 2018). The complex multispecies lives of our interlocutors, that include fear, domination, control, and predation amongst and between humans and nonhumans, necessitate a constant, deeper, and reflexive engagement with ethics for researchers like us, one that standardised disciplinary ethical prescriptions do not permit. While we entered these spaces with the knowledge of the ethical stances of the various disciplines we are trained in, in each case, our subjects have led us to a relational-situated ethical orientation. It is a pragmatic approach to ethics born out of everyday interaction with all of our interlocutors, and being in-place as power circulates in uneven multispecies relations.

### ***Killing and Conviviality***

Accounts of nonhuman encounters that deploy relational ethics often focus on embodied, earthly, interspecies practises of benign care, through which ethical commitments to nonhumans are borne from the situational acts of learning from and interacting with them (Buller, 2016; Srinivasan, 2016). Our field sites have instead illustrated how conviviality can be premised on exclusion and violence. Our ethnographies demonstrate that in certain contexts mutual flourishing is often predicated on acts of killing, and this is often pivotal to achieving tolerance for animals like carnivores, and maintaining a fragile alignment between local livelihood practises and wider conservation goals. The environmental practices of local and indigenous communities described through close ethnographic engagement often do not align with the essentialised depictions of benevolent ecological stewards that can be found in some conservation discourse (Sandbrook, 2015). In our cases, the deaths of wolves, foxes, crows and tigers at the hands of our interlocutors are part of a wider set of practises that maintain certain ecologies and species compositions within landscapes, which inevitably exist at the expense of other assemblages of nonhuman life (see Ginn et al. 2014). The human-animal relations we describe entail hunting or culling of wildlife, slaughter, and various other types of interventions that, to various degrees can favour some species and disadvantage others, and that unequivocally impinge on the sensory experiences, needs and lives of certain nonhumans.

These relations are bound up with localised sociocultural attachments, whether through the extension of personhood and culture to animals in Dibang, or the ways in which animal agency is central to landscape subjectivity in Skye and the Cantabrian Mountains. But they also traverse fear, avoidance, death and suffering. Any ethical orientation must, in line with Govindarajan (2018) and others who have interrogated the contours and boundaries of togetherness with other creatures, accept that mutual flourishing is of necessity awkward. As Ginn has put it: “Any practice of relation has a constitutive violence – it is also an exclusion, an act of prioritising one possible connection over another, and to ensure it lasts, it may involve the subjugation or death of outside others” (Ginn, 2014, 533). Drawing from Haraway’s ideas of aiming to “kill well”, Ginn (2014) has further proposed that “detachment” and “hoped-for absences” are ways through which coexistence can be achieved with those nonhumans whose presence in our lives may not be desired. For researchers like us undergoing processes of personal disquiet and introspection during fieldwork, this framework has allowed for greater analytical clarity in tracing these complex and fraught relations.

### ***A Relational and Situated Ethics to Multispecies Research***

Through charting interactions between crofters, mesopredators and curlews, farmers and wolves, or indigenous people and tigers, putting the agency of these animals more centrally in our analysis allows for enriched and deepened depictions and understandings of the conditions by which coexistence with nonhuman life can or cannot take place. In doing so, it allows for a strengthened commitment to inclusive and just socioecologies for the people we work with. However, reflections on our work with these communities has shown that this ontological centring of animals, which acknowledges relations of co-constitution between humans and nonhumans, does not automatically entail a political centring of nonhumans, which grants them equal ethical claims. The visions of a better life of the communities we work with do not always envisage ways of living with nonhumans in which the political, economic or corporeal marginalisation of humans and nonhumans are granted equal import. Across our field sites, material and reciprocal interactions with the natural world, and their associated socio-cultural imaginings, inevitably prioritise the life plans and political struggles of people above the welfare of nonhumans. What the farming communities of the Cantabrian Mountains and Skye value above all is a productive landscape where hill-farming can continue, in which the traces of past generations are evident and in which new generations may have the chance to stay and work. Even amongst the Idu, where nonhumans are moral persons, people prioritize their own well-being and longevity over that of the animals, both wild and domesticated.

Haraway's situated ethics offer a way of engaging with the type of unequal and differential relations that we observed in our field sites. Her reflection on situated and relational ethics is, in her own words, meant to address what it means to "live in and through the use of one another's bodies (...and) to be polite in responsible relation to always asymmetrical living and dying and nurturing and killing" (Haraway 2008:42; 79). Haraway's notion of co-flourishing provides an understanding of humans and nonhumans as continuously 'becoming with', in processes of co-production that inevitably unravel in specific historical, economic and metabolic contexts. These relations are structured through the prism of colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, and human exceptionalism and thus are inescapably hierarchical and asymmetrical (Ogra, 2008; Munster, 2016). Instances of multispecies connections across hierarchical differences have been explored by Govindarajan's (2018) work on asymmetrical kinship and relatedness, and by Munster's (2016) description of the ambivalent intimacies that have evolved between historically disenfranchised forest dwellers and elephants in India, and the ways these are situated within regional environmental histories of logging, colonial capitalism and forest conservation.

The communities where we worked are, each in their own way, structurally disadvantaged. The multispecies relations they are engaged in are interconnected with larger issues of resource access and use, and therefore subject to mediation through wider political and economic shifts (Ghosal et al., 2015; Margulies and Karanth, 2018). For example, processes of trade liberalisation and agricultural intensification have resulted in the gradual abandonment of traditional upland grazing and a consequent rewilding of many European upland landscapes. Similarly, the plans for the development of large hydro-projects and government-controlled tiger reserves in Dibang are fundamentally altering Idu relations of reciprocity with tigers, other wild animals and land. Whilst historical and current socio-economic structural transitions may be seen to universally intensify the power asymmetry in human-nature relations, an attention to localised realities and responses can reveal multispecies entanglements where power flows in multiple directions.

In all three of our field sites, wildlife is materially and symbolically enrolled both in the structural marginalization of local communities, and in struggles over the legitimacy and persistence of traditional practices (also see Hobson, 2007). Through the threat of greater government-controlled land and species protection, or the gradual rewilding of depopulating rural landscapes, animals in our field sites are powerful subjects, implicated in processes that shape social life and political autonomy. Likewise, the practices of nurturing, reciprocity and population control that sustain the multispecies relations in our field sites are also political affirmations, means by which people assert their rights to access and use natural resources. Despite inherent violence, the traditional hunting and extensive livestock breeding practiced by our interlocutors likely entail lower levels of animal suffering than the alternative, more intensive forms of livestock production so often analysed by critical multispecies studies (Gillespie, 2014). Moreover, despite resulting in the death of individual and sometimes endangered animals, these local and indigenously managed systems often support higher multispecies diversity than those produced by separating humans from nonhuman nature (O'Bryan et al., 2021). Our experiences lead us to conclude that, compared to urban or West-centric notions of nonhuman ethics that critical animal studies often promote, the situated ethical relations we describe and the diverse worlding practices they bring about hold greater potential to support diverse species assemblages in our field sites. In this context, we find Haraway's (2008) ethic useful in sketching the intellectual and moral work required of people who use (or study people who use) other animals unequally. It implies that being 'multiply engaged' does not preclude one from participating in differential and unequal relations, yet it invites researchers to practice moral sensitivity by paying and drawing attention to competing ethical claims. Like the work of other authors that similarly engages with post-human and multispecies approaches, our research tries to move beyond established political ecology in how we understand nature-society interactions (see Srinivasan and Kasturirangan, 2017), whilst maintaining and replicating its critical and political thrust (Barua, 2019; Margulies and Bersaglio, 2018).

### ***Writing Multispecies Worlds***

Beyond the personal conundrums experienced in in-situ fieldwork, we feel it important to caution that ethical incongruence and responsibility also comes to the fore in the acts of writing. In-depth social science research is performative, as Collard notes, it is about “bringing worlds into being” (Collard, 2015:136). The extent to which we bring nonhumans into our written work as ethical subjects has political implications for the people we work with. van Dooren and Rose have remarked that “making others fleshy and thick on the page, exposing readers to their lives and deaths, may give rise to proximity and ethical entanglement, care and concern” and so that we must understand that our works could be “powerful contributors to the becoming of our shared world” (van Dooren and Rose, 2016:89).

For those who identify as political ecologists and conservationists this is a particularly troubling ethos. An ethical centring of nonhumans means that the practises of coexistence we document in our field sites, and the resultant conservation of certain species assemblages of conservation value, could instead be framed as impositions on nonhuman lives which restrict their autonomy, reduce their populations, and cause embodied and fatal suffering. The world brought into being through an ethical centring of nonhumans would significantly alter the description and political thrust of the lives of the local and indigenous communities we work with. The extensive livestock farming, hunting and sacrificial practises that are central to maintaining claims over lands, livelihoods and identities would likely lose their political valence, being reframed as a set of practises that inhibit the flourishing and autonomies of some nonhumans. Perhaps most significantly this could undermine local visions of sustainability and socio-ecological justice, disrupt existing coexistence mechanisms, and threaten the local practices that currently sustain the conservation of certain species. Ultimately, our choice of which subjects or collectives to centre in our accounts of multispecies relations remains a personal and political decision, which no existing ethical framework can determine. Nonetheless, a situated ethical approach can promote more inclusive and attentive storytelling practices, enabling a deeper exploration of researcher’s own positionality in relation to multiple research subjects (Sundberg, 2015), and guiding them through the disturbing task of confronting the darker side of multispecies encounters.

Haraway, and other multispecies scholars, would perhaps argue that researchers should stay with this trouble, that it will be generative, even if indeterminate and unknown, and is in itself a form of caring. When the ethico-political imperatives for local people and endangered species are so immediate and pressing, and so personally felt by researchers, we would however caution that the performance of multispecies research should be approached carefully, empathetically and with a sense of political wariness. Researchers must take responsibility for the implications of their writing by remaining attentive and responsive to what it could mean for the varied experiences of their subjects.

### **Conclusion**

The focus of this paper has been on how researchers with discordant personal ethics, who also do research at the interface of disciplines with incongruous ethical frameworks, face instances of ethical disquiet when doing ethnographic fieldwork alongside humans and nonhumans. In particular we have focused on the knotty interface of ethical commitments to nonhuman life, against extinction, and against socioeconomic and sociocultural marginalisation. We believe that it is not uncommon for researchers who work at the juncture of distinct disciplines to experience ethical disquiet when personal ethical and political orientations collide with disciplinary traditions. These emotions are compounded when disciplines are tied to normative professions and identities, such as those within conservation and development, that intend to do ‘greater good’. However, we rarely encounter accounts of potential ethical pathways for interdisciplinary researchers like us who wish to at once uphold our commitment to marginalised people, animal collectives and individual nonhumans. The primary motivation of this paper has been to address this lacuna within the broader literature.

We have not only attempted to lay bare the deep ethical stirring that happens when nonhuman ‘others’ make ethical demands at par with humans, we also unpack through our lived experiences why a relational multispecies ethics approach might be a productive ethical terrain for those who identify both as conservationists and political ecologists. A relational ethical approach has been widely affirmed and established within multispecies and more-than-human literature, however its salience and applicability for those who work on and identify with conservation has not received attention, and nor has its relevance and analytical productivity for the political ecology of conservation.

When trying to understand our field sites, and our disorienting encounters within them, we found little ethico-political purchase from the normative approaches of political ecology, conservation science, or of critical animal geography and compassionate conservation. Instead, and in line with Haraway (2008), Munster (2016) and Govindarajan (2018), we argue that ethical multispecies relations allow for care, harm, exclusion, and (some degree of) hierarchy. They may include relations that are mediated and contingent on larger political-economic structures, and which are precarious and dissonant. At a practical level, this relational approach to multispecies ethics may not eliminate killing of all nonhumans or, allay all personal ethical struggles researchers may experience. It can, in our experience, help reduce suffering when killing is inevitable, and help us make sense of it analytically. As Haraway notes, “...there is no way of living that is not also the way of someone, not just something, else dying differentially” (2008:80). Our ethnographies outline how killing and exclusion is an intimate dimension of convivial relations with conservation-priority species and socio-economically marginalised groups. Instead of suspending the reality that the continuance of human life is intimately predicated on the disruption of nonhuman lives to varying degrees (Srinivasan, 2014), we argue for an intimate attention to killing when it becomes essential to multispecies flourishing.

We suggest that the resulting ethical disconcertion that comes from engaging in these relations is an analytically productive way to engage not only with personal discomfort, but also with our work: it aids in understanding and describing the complex relations between humans and nonhumans in landscapes like the Cantabrian Mountains, Skye and Dibang. It is here where we hope this argument will appeal in particular to those who work on the political ecology of conservation, and beyond to conservation scientists and practitioners, where similar ethical anxieties are often found (Kiik, 2018; Sandbrook et al., 2019). In writing this article, we wish to encourage more conservation researchers to engage in deep, honest, and raw introspection of what it means to be ethical when humans and nonhumans make competing claims.

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