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CHAPTER FOUR

Environmental history and conservation conflicts

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In the mid-1990s in Scotland, two historians chaired the board of the government's statutory body for nature conservation, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH). Television broadcaster, journalist and expert on the Icelandic sagas and Viking history, Magnus Magnusson KBE, was its first Chairman from 1992; and socio-economic historian and Historiographer Royal, T. C. Smout CBE, was Deputy-Chairman from 1992 to 1997. This choice of senior management has remained something unique, quirky perhaps and yet visionary – two 'historians of people' presiding over what might rightly be perceived by many to be a purely scientific organisation concerned only with the biological management of the natural world. However, both men were firmly of the vision that people were a part of nature and found a home pioneering the emerging discipline of environmental history in Scotland. Smout reflected on those exciting days on boards and committees where he learned, 'how deep and complex were the issues surrounding nature conservation, and how little it was appreciated that they were matters of history as well as of contemporary manoeuvring and posturing round vested interest' (Smout, 2009: 1). Here was an evolving recognition and acceptance within a nature conservation policy-making world that human attitudes, values and perceptions (the socio-cultural) shaped behaviour and responses to the natural world, and that those same attitudes were both complex and had evolved over time in response to different stimuli.

Smout (2000: 2) outlined in *Nature Contested* how all conservation conflicts had a history, often ignored or forgotten in the heat of the moment: 'I was struck by the passions unleashed by the difficult cases that came before us – here was hotly contested ground – and by the essentially historical nature of many of the problems. If a wood needed saving, it was because it had a history in which human beings had once played a central part, and because today other human beings (with their own histories as foresters) wished to play a different part. When a Highland sea loch was proposed as a marine nature reserve, the anger which this aroused had to do with ancient concepts of *usufruct* (the temporary right to the use and enjoyment of the property of another, without changing the character of the property) and property, opposed to more recent concepts of

heritage and public interest. Yet both sides in such conflicts tended to see them as problems with only contemporary and immediate significance, nature versus the developers, jobs versus birds, right versus wrong.'

Environment and history: strange bedfellows?

Environmental history is the history of our changing interactions with nature and the natural world over time (Hughes, 2006). It is not only about the way that we have used and tamed nature, engaged and interacted with it, but also about how nature limits and restricts us. Environmental history is often about tracing, understanding and confronting our dominant attitudes and responses (Coates, 1998) and how they have shifted through time (Thomas, 1984) and shaped our conduct and policy (White, 1967). Environmental history also blends the planet's history (the scientific story) with the people's history (the socio-cultural story), therefore offering up a much more real and meaningful understanding of the past (McNeill, 2000). Academic life in the second part of the twentieth century tended to promote a clear division between research and teaching in the Arts and Sciences, as the novelist and physicist C. P. Snow bemoaned in 1959 while delivering the Rede Lecture in Cambridge on 'The Two Cultures', separated by a gulf of incomprehension (Snow, 1959). Yet, people are a part of nature, and not to appreciate that we are so has fuelled much environmental conflict (Hughes, 2000). Indeed, hotly contested contemporary landscapes (Lambert, 2001a) or beasts (Lambert, 2002) reflect deeply held and intertwined historical forces, both natural and cultural. Environmental history exists to challenge the divide between the Arts and Sciences, and to build a bridge across.

From the late 1960s, historians of the American West sought new interpretations of both settlement and invasion (Nash, 1967). At the same time, environmental history also carved a niche for itself in British Empire studies in southern Africa, Australia and New Zealand (MacKenzie, 1988; Griffiths and Robin, 1997; Dunlap, 1999; Beinart and Hughes, 2007), often linked to the idea of ecological imperialism promoted by Crosby (1986), before being embraced by British university history departments and scholarship, most especially in Scotland (Smout, 1993b; Clapp, 1994; Sheail, 2002). This is not to deny the concurrent existence of a strong tradition in Britain for landscape history, rural history, historical geography and historical ecology (Sheail, 1980; Hoskins, 1986; Rackham, 1986; Simmons, 2001).

It is the newest of all the historical subfields (coming as it does after the post-World War II emergence of new ways of looking through social, cultural, gender and racial history), and it gives a voice to a forgotten part of the historical story: the environment (which some traditional historians perceive to be just a mere non-participant backcloth against which the human story unfolds). Indeed, political historians often berate environmental historians for dethroning people from the centre of history (Coates, 1996), when actually environmental historians place nature and people together as twin actors (McNeill, 2003). Indeed,

we see humans as keystone species in that interaction. While environmental historians introspectively muse on why traditional historical scholarship has been slow to welcome this new field (Sorlin and Warde, 2007), the discipline is open to all, and embraces and blends insights from the Arts and Humanities, the Social and Natural Sciences, making it a truly 'interactive performance' (Smout, 2009).

Environmental historians are concerned with non-nation state mind-set ideas (Mosley, 2010); they try to be cross-disciplinary and incorporate social and ecological theories and skills as well as new theoretical frameworks (McNeill, 2003). Environmental history also challenges us to think just what a historical document is: using archival and documentary research techniques, but also viewing natural entities (e.g. trees and species) as documents. It views landscapes as semi-natural, shaped by natural forces in partnership with the human hand and imagination; it challenges the overuse of that culturally loaded Euro-American term: wilderness. Environmental history at its best can overcome the tendency of some scientists who look no further back than their data. Environmental historians have interests in both human culture and nature (in the past) which allows them to challenge what is perceived as natural and what is a baseline. Indeed, historians, and others, can push that baseline back further, and avoid the dangers of assuming that what happened say x years ago was the natural state. They seek to identify the scale of human impacts in the past, and unearth key stepping stone moments, attitudinal and value shifts that changed established ways of thinking and shaped environmental policy-making. They ask who the principal stakeholders were in our environmental past, and muse on the idea and test myths of historical sustainability, when they describe relationships between nature and culture.

Within the discipline of environmental history, the sub-field of species history, founded on 'good science, good history and pragmatism', has proved to have huge academic and popular appeal and application as we seek to understand how the fortunes of certain species have been shaped over time by a mix of natural changes and human impacts (Ritchie, 1920; Lambert, 1998). Modern species histories of so-called problem animals or invasive alien species are emerging from all over the world (Sheail, 1972; Love, 1983; Lovegrove, 1990; Jones, 2002; Lazarus, 2006; Carter, 2007; Rotherham and Lambert, 2011). In 2003, Reaktion Books launched its series 'Animal', each a natural and cultural history of an individual species. They complement studies with a longer time frame using archaeological evidence (Yalden, 1999, 2003) as we seek to understand what is native. More broad histories of nature conservation in Britain (Sheail, 1976, 1981, 1998; Moore, 1987; Evans, 1992; Marren, 2002; Sands, 2012), that look back to nineteenth-century formative roots, are another vehicle through which land-use or species-based conservation conflicts are often explored using archival and documentary research in private or public collections (Lovegrove, 2007). Nature, like us, has a history. We would do well to remember that.

Birds of prey and landed sporting estates: a conflict illuminated by history

The attitudes of some gamekeepers and estate owners today in northern England and Scotland can best be understood by the fact that the sporting estates that they own or manage are themselves a nineteenth-century creation, replacing sheep farms; and by the fact that an immense destruction of predators accompanied their heyday, when takes of game (quarry) were also vast. Environmental historians have uncovered this through the study of estate papers, family archives and, above all, Game Books (annual records of harvest kept by gamekeepers). The predator control figures are stark, column after column of birds of prey and small mammals destroyed (Smout, 2000); and, although of its time, make uncomfortable reading, even ‘testing credulity’ (Smout, 2009). While we must approach this evidence with the historian’s critical eye, as shot or trapped predators were passed around keepered estates to obtain duplicate bounty scheme payments or proprietorial grace, the dominant culture of the Victorian and Edwardian sporting estate was that all birds of prey and predatory mammals were bad (classed as ‘vermin’).

This historic culture, whether perceived as right or wrong over time, resulted in a substantial modification of the natural world in the late nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century in the upland ecosystems of Britain, the consequences of which we still wrestle with today (Holloway, 1996). The traditional utilitarian attitude to predators still survives and brings those who are charged with managing wildland and game species for economic benefit, leisure and class (sometimes with associated environmental benefits), into direct conflict with those who have non-utilitarian views (Smout, 1993a). The fortunes of some species have, in large part, undoubtedly improved in the second half of the twentieth century. Following the pesticide crisis of the 1960s, some raptors, including the osprey *Pandion haliaetus*, red kite *Milvus milvus*, white-tailed eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* and peregrine falcon *Falco peregrinus*, have gone from persecution to reintroduction and restoration to sustainable tourism icons (Cairns and Hamblin, 2007; Lambert, 2011). However, negative attitudes to these species still exist. Others like the hen harrier *Circus cyaneus* remain seemingly trapped in a historical time warp of negative attitudes to protect sporting interests, despite national conservation endeavours by powerful mass-membership environmental NGOs such as the RSPB and county Wildlife Trusts (see Box 2).

It is important to reflect here that history, while illuminating past attitudes and responses to conflict species over time, can also be a barrier or hindrance to conflict resolution. Tradition, deeply shaped by socio-cultural forces embedded in issues of class, property and status, can hugely influence trust and responses towards land ownership and management, and any mitigation techniques that may be proposed or deployed. What is considered acceptable as a management



Figure 4.1 A very visible public manifestation of deeply held anti-raptor reintroduction attitudes (in part rooted in cultural history, as well as contemporary concerns) from farming interests and landed estate owners on the coastal strip of East Anglia, England. In response to historical patterns, conservationists now endeavour to bring back predators, itself a deeply contested practice. Photograph © James Bradley, A12 near Blyth Estuary, Suffolk, 4 January 2010.

strategy, as a way forward to ease conflict situations and promote resolution, depends on a diverse suite of factors shaped by traditional, scientific and emotional values. The dire nature of a situation, coupled with issues of historical mistrust, can lead to entrenched and immovable stances. While we are all victims of the past, we can also be prisoners of that same past. Negotiating a way out of that mental jail can be fraught with challenges for all stakeholders.

Coping with grey seals: conservation success and a contested beast

In Britain, the Atlantic grey seal *Halichoerus grypus* represents perhaps the most obvious and extreme example of how nature conservation success can lead to conflict (see Box 4). While we often lament the failings of nature conservation, rarely if ever in Britain do we address the impacts of the successes, which can generate people–people conflicts. The story of the grey seal is as much an examination of socio-cultural history as it is a history of a biological creature.

Shot for sport, food and pelts in the nineteenth century, the grey seal became the first mammal protected by the British Parliament under legislation in 1914, with more legislative protection offered in 1932 (Sheail, 1976). That came about not from massed ranks of concerned nature-lovers (they would emerge powerfully post-1960s), but from lobbying by concerned sportsmen who had noticed the decline of their chosen quarry to a perceived low of just 500 animals (Lambert, 2002; National Archives of Scotland AF56/1443). The 1914 Grey Seal (Protection) Act ended centuries of direct subsistence hunting, commercial and sporting exploitation of the grey seal. By the mid-1960s the grey seal population of 34,000 was expanding at a rate of 6% per annum, rising to 124,300 in 2000. By the mid-1930s, fishermen and fishing organisations were concerned over the impacts of rising seal numbers on fisheries, most especially along the salmon fishing rivers and estuaries of the north.

The battle lines were drawn around the Farne Islands off Northumberland in northeast England and close to the River Tweed; initially between fledgling conservation/wildlife groups, local naturalists (Hickling, 1962), and beleaguered fishing communities and organisations who talked only of an advancing national 'seal menace' that needed to be halted to protect livelihoods and recreational salmon fishing. Fishermen urged government in the 1950s to make the animal a subject of scientific enquiry, hoping that a cull would be proposed (Lambert, 2001b), but this set in motion decades of claim and counter-claim, posturing, petitions, direct action, media manipulation, propaganda and political lobbying. Thousands of seal pups died as well, from the Farnes up to the Orkney Islands off the north coast of Scotland. The government-sponsored seal culling on the Farnes in the mid-1960s was initially justified to satisfy fishing interests, but later the islands' owners themselves, the National Trust, started culling their grey seals in the 1970s to reduce the breeding female population to 1000 animals, selling it to their angry membership as a way to reduce perceived seal overcrowding on the nature reserve and prevent the crushing of vegetation and Atlantic puffin *Fratercula arctica* burrows (Lambert, 2002; National Trust archives NT 208/2/PF). On the wave of a post-war environmental, social and cultural revolution, from the 1960s onwards, and especially in the years of the largest seal culls in Scotland, the public took up the plight of the grey seal as an environmental cause in a far more popular and egalitarian crusade than the few who had sought the initial protection back in 1914. By the 1970s, this domestic campaign linked up with well-funded international seal protection crusades led by Greenpeace and the International Fund for Animal Welfare (Watson, 1982; Davies, 1990), with greatest success standing against the annual harp seal *Pagophilus groenlandicus* hunt on the pack-ice off Newfoundland (Busch, 1985; Mowat, 1997). In 1978, the proposed Scottish culls were abandoned due to an alliance of Greenpeace, local people, the media, many other

wildlife enthusiasts within the British public, and a consequent loss of political will in government. The political reality of men with clubs killing baby seals was too much to stomach for all but the most resolute supporters of the cull. Naturalist and nature-writer John Lister-Kaye (1979) described it as ‘a towering controversy’.

The crux of the matter now is this. Grey seals are of interest to a whole range of competing viewpoints and sectors of the population. Government sees the seal issue as a political question; to nature conservationists they are a wildlife management question; to scientists they are a biological or ecological question; to fishing communities they are an economic question; to humanitarians they are an animal welfare issue; to the wider general public they are a social/cultural question informed by things as varied as recreational seal-watching trips and wildlife television; to international agencies and NGOs they are an international marine issue (Redpath *et al.*, 2013). All of these attitudes and perceptions are rooted in history. Some are new, post-1960s environmental revolution values (Grove-White, 2001), while others are more deeply rooted in ideas of use and harvest, and myths of marine superabundance. The grey seal is an exceptionally challenging animal to manage. What might be perceived as a cherished marine icon for many thousands of recreational seal watchers around Britain from the Isles of Scilly to Shetland might just as easily be perceived as a vulgar activity, merely ‘city folk gawping at vermin’, by hard-pressed fishing communities.

Emerging consensus over the way forward for the grey seal in twenty-first century Britain can only come from stakeholder dialogue and local management plans (Young *et al.*, 2012), founded upon a deep understanding of past controversies, debates and bitterness, and a historical understanding of our diverse and shifting relationships with the animal over time and place (Bonner, 1982). Those charged with managing grey seal populations in the modern era must not only take into consideration all scientific and fisheries viewpoints (Matthews, 1979) but also be keenly aware of, and take into consideration, the weight of popular and contemporary support for this beast whose population has grown dramatically since the 1960s. The trial of wildlife management by public opinion is here to stay, especially with species that we have culturally constructed as most like ourselves and afforded them almost totemic status in our minds. Much action in the past has derived from whichever side pushed government the hardest, fishing organisations or conservationists, with scientists in the middle stating that the evidence is unclear as to whether killing seals would make a difference as to how much fish humans can catch, and thus calling for more research. While the BBC television *Springwatch* millions (Rollins, 2006) take great delight in watching seals (often pumping eco-tourism money into remote rural communities), they suffer no economic loss from the animal’s presence. For their part,

fishing communities have been blind for much of the twentieth century to their over-harvesting of the sea (Smout and Stewart, 2012), and in the face of low fish stocks, blame seal competition for declining catches. The fact that much of this conflict is a coastal one further muddies the water, as we have rallied far better to protect and understand our terrestrial ecosystems for all species to inhabit than we have our marine ecosystems.

One uncomfortable option that the nature-loving British have refused to debate was suggested by ecologist Frank Fraser Darling, as early as 1951. Darling believed that to diffuse potential conflict, absolute protection was not always the way forward for some species, and that ‘an overall carefully controlled annual toll of Atlantic grey seals’, would both cut out criticism from established fishery interests and yield a natural resource in meat, oil and skin that would benefit all, including the health of the seal population long term. ‘The seals are extremely efficient gatherers of energy which the nation should not neglect at present’ he advised (Lambert, 2002; National Trust archives NT/208). Grey and common seals *Phoca vitulina* were legally shot (by licence or police endorsement of firearms certificates, initially under the Conservation of Seals Act 1970) at netting stations or around fish farms in northern Britain, as one part of ongoing broad and inclusive management strategies since 2005 that seek to balance seal and fish conservation with the protection of inshore fishing and wildlife tourism values (Butler *et al.*, 2008). The Marine (Scotland) Act 2010 promulgated at a time when the Scottish grey seal population was estimated to be 186,000 (alongside 19,800 common seals) replaced the outdated 1970 Act, and offered improved overall protection for seals year round while delivering a new system of regulated seal management licences, and stakeholder forums, to allow the killing of animals to protect fish, fisheries and nets under strict welfare guidelines.

Environmental history, as with all histories, is replete with wise and compromise-laden ‘voices from the wilderness’ warning of impending conflict in years to come if bold decisions are not taken and case histories examined with openness and clarity (Darling, 1970). Frank Fraser Darling wrote an open letter to members of the Scottish Committee of the government agency, the Nature Conservancy, on 28 December 1950 in which he declared: ‘My ultimate aim is to see the British stocks of the Atlantic grey seal valued as a natural resource, conserved as such and regularly used’ (Lambert, 2002; National Archives of Scotland NAS AF62/929/14).

Looking back to look forward

Although a substantial part of this chapter has focused on a specific British case study of the Atlantic grey seal conflict, the themes mapped out here are common to many international conservation conflicts where nature conservation

priorities and animal welfare impulses so often clash over the optimal way forward in conflict species management. Historical insights are contextually important to understanding and securing that management balancing act, and without them, or if we ignore them, we would be left floundering in an ahistorical void with no real sense or understanding of change over time. Without that important context we render the contemporary, in part, meaningless. However, we do not have to be a slave to history. People live in the present and their concerns and plans focus almost exclusively on the future. While we must never be a prisoner of the past (and at times competing parties in a conflict can dwell too much on the historical roots) we can be empowered and informed by it. It is important that we understand that fact, because ultimately it is not that history explicitly tells us what to do, rather that it will always indispensably shed new light and help us to understand and reflect upon our current position (or predicament), if we know what has happened in the past. History helps us to understand people and societies, as well as to understand environmental change and how the society that we live in now came into being; and how past societies responded to environmental pressures through changed behaviour because of shifts in public opinion or political impetus. Environmental change happens over time, and to be ignorant to the temporal (historical) dimension ultimately leaves our understanding floundering without broad context. To that extent, accessible environmental history, widely disseminated, and based on the cumulative and cooperative efforts of historians working with all types of natural and social scientists (Knight, 2000) and their data sets, can help us mould and reinvigorate future environmental policy-making decisions, by informing us of 'our' environmental past (Watson, 2002); in this instance, they provide the why and the how of environmental change and conflicts.

If we listen well to that past, and reflect on the stories it offers up, we will learn something of real value as we plan for a future of reduced and effectively managed conflicts. We will also learn a good deal, not just about nature, but also about human nature. As Smout (2000: 2) observed about conservation conflicts (or 'quarrels' over the modern British countryside), 'once we recognise our character, we can see choices more clearly'. To do that, we must first look back, to then look forward.

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Archival sources

National Trust: Central Office, Heelis, Kemble Drive, Swindon SN2 2NA at ref: NT.

Department of Agriculture and Fisheries for Scotland: National Archives of Scotland (NAS), HM General Register House, 2 Princes Street, Edinburgh EH1 3YY at ref: AF.

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