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## Conservation's All about Having a Blether and Getting People on Board: Exploring Cooperation for Conservation in Scotland

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### Abstract

A 'blether' is a colloquial Scottish term signifying 'a lengthy chat between friends', and this paper draws its inspiration from the conservationist who suggested that 'having a blether' and 'getting people on board' is what conservation is all about. Contributing to scholarship on conservation conflict and on convivial conservation, this paper explores the 'who', 'where' and 'when' of 'having a blether', seeking to understand what might cultivate and contribute to cooperative relations between conservationists and other land-managers. It draws on feminist political ecology and anthropologies of conservation to provide a framework with which to unpack the personal, spatial and temporal dimensions of conservation relationships, and applies this to a case study in the Cairngorms National Park in Scotland. Considering the 'who' in conservation relations, led to looking beyond professional affiliations to highlight the importance of intersectional identities and interests, as expressed through personal connections and emotions. Considering the 'where' of cooperation for conservation, so-called 'informal' and 'everyday spaces' were found to be highly significant as shared sites in which productive relationships can be built. Considering the 'when' of conservation relations revealed their emergent nature, and of the building of understanding and appreciation through shared pasts and experiences. This paper promotes the need to open up and move beyond stereotyped stakeholder groups, to consider what promotes not only commonalities but also appreciation of differences. It also draws attention to the political and structural forces that mediate conservation relations and shutdown opportunities for greater cooperation and inclusivity. Ultimately, this paper highlights the need for dialogue and for listening to diverse others with care and attention, seeing the ideal and practice of 'having a blether' and 'getting people on board' as a way to promote cooperative – or convivial – conservation.

**Keywords:** conservation, conservation conflict, cooperation, convivial conservation, social relations, stereotypes

### INTRODUCTION

*"A basic definition of the word blether is tricky - in colloquial terms, people usually know it to mean a lengthy chat between friends"* The Scotsman (2013)

This paper is inspired by a Scottish conservationist who suggested that *"conservation's all about having a blether and getting people on board"* (field-journal 2013). This humble statement reflected both their sentiment towards conservation i.e., how it should be approached, and their long experience 'on the ground' i.e., what actually makes things work. 'Having a blether' and 'getting people on board' indicate the importance of communication, of a sense of connection and familiarity, of persuasion and dependence, and of the element of time. This

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paper explores these dimensions of conservation, revealing what might cultivate and contribute to cooperative relations between conservationists and other land-managers.

Conservation faces multiple challenges, including how to negotiate conflicts that arise over how to manage land and conserve biodiversity (Redpath et al. 2013, 2015). It has been suggested that “*Building and maintaining...strong working relationships with landowners and managers may be the most important aspect for country agencies responsible for managing and sustaining biodiversity*” (Young et al. 2016: 201). Others call for the need to understand “*the quality of relationships*” between conservationists and their audiences (Stern 2017: 267); something which is voiced by land-managers themselves, given that “*The better the dialogue, the levels of understanding, the levels of respect, the consistency and behaviour...the better off we’ll all be*” (Interviewee Henry, in Pickerill 2009: 78). Leading conservation conflict scholars offer five principles for collaborative conflict management all of which reflect the importance of relationships and dialogue; communication, transparency, inclusiveness, influence and trust (Redpath et al. 2015). It is noted that ‘success’ here may not mean achieving specific conservation goals, but “*simply...an increase in trust and more positive working relationships*” (Reed and Sidolo del Ceno 2015: 234). Conservation conflict scholarship provides an important springboard for this paper, which responds to its demands for greater understanding of conservation relations and communication.

This paper also speaks to the emerging field of ‘convivial’ conservation, proposed and promoted by political ecologists seeking radical alternatives to conservation based on capitalism and nature/culture dichotomies (Büscher and Fletcher 2020). ‘Convivial’ refers both to a wish to “*find a better way to ‘convivre’, ‘live with’ (the rest of) nature*” and to the concept of ‘eutrapelia’ i.e., “*the quality of being skilled in conversation*” (Büscher and Fletcher 2020: 9–10). Convivial conservation seeks to promote equity and democracy in conservation, and to engage with and persuade others of their importance and potential. In putting forward a vision and actions for convivial conservation, Büscher and Fletcher (2020) discuss the need for integrated conservation landscapes and democratic governance arrangements. I posit that by exploring what it means to ‘have a blether’ and ‘get people on board’, this paper offers, on a small-scale, a version of and vision for convivial conservation i.e., that based on communication, cooperation and respect.

Contributing to scholarship on conservation conflict and convivial conservation, this paper offers a framework that explores the ‘who’, ‘where’ and ‘when’ of ‘having a blether’ and cooperating for conservation. It draws on feminist political ecology and anthropologies of conservation to unpack social relations in conservation and their personal, spatial and temporal dimensions. This framework is used to explore the case of conservation in the Cairngorms National Park, Scotland, and argues, ultimately, that those engaged in ‘having a blether’ offer hope for more cooperative conservation.

## BACKGROUND: UNDERSTANDING

## COOPERATION IN CONSERVATION

Whilst, perhaps understandably, many conservation conflict scholars focus on moments of conflict between distinct ‘stakeholder’ groups and consider their consequences for biodiversity, this paper chooses to consider relationships as pre-existing and emergent, and has no normative agenda as to their outcomes. In-so-doing, it builds on a rich scholarship within anthropology that studies conservation as a historically-embedded and relational practice, and which emphasises shared interests and commonalities; seeking to provide a “*distinctly symmetrical account of a conflict*” (Whitehouse 2009: 97; plus see Ingold 2005; Tsing 2005; Satterfield 2003). Here I combine such insights with those from feminist political ecology to offer a framework for understanding cooperation in conservation, inspired by the approach of ‘having a blether’, and its dimensions of ‘who’, ‘where’ and ‘when’. This focus complements work on conservation conflicts, such as that by Stern and Baird (2015: 6), who researching a long-running conflict between local residents and the Virgin Islands National Park found that;

*“...respondents who were alive at the time referred to the late 1970s as a time when park-people relationships... felt good [for once]...The superintendent at the time had a rather unique style of management and engagement with local people. He was famous for regularly walking the streets of the main town and chatting with people. He would often host social gatherings at his house. Before making any major decisions that might evoke a response from locals, he would spend a few hours with the locally hired maintenance staff to get their opinions”*

This quote highlights what can enable the building of ‘quality relationships’ (Stern 2017), including the importance of particular individuals i.e., the ‘unique’ superintendent, and of interactions between particular people and places i.e., of the superintendent walking the streets and chatting with people, of hosting social gatherings in his home, and of talking with local staff. Feminist political ecology and anthropologies of conservation help to unpack and explain the significance of these things further.

Political ecology has been identified as a useful discipline for understanding conservation conflicts, given its attention to politics and power, and by asking who wins and who loses in relation to conservation approaches and ideas i.e., why conflicts may arise (Adams 2015). Political ecology has much more to offer however, for example work by Turner (2004, 2019) in the Sahel which highlights that whilst conflicts are typically framed as ‘resource conflicts’, driven by access to physical resources, they are “*also conflicts over other things – things that are often held more dear than the ephemeral resource in question*” (Turner 2004: 879); including local and regional political histories, existing social divisions and relations, long-term strategies to maintain access to resources, and moral claims invoked by those involved. To avoid discussing ‘conflict’ in an abstract and generalised sense, Turner considers how ‘conflict’ itself is manifested, documenting specific

moments of antagonism and violence, but juxtaposing this to the multiple ways in which conflicting groups also interact and cooperate on a daily basis, through labour exchange and land management agreements.

In his anthropology of conservation on a Scottish island, Whitehouse (2009) does similarly, documenting moments of conflict between farmers and the RSPB (a large British conservation NGO) in the form of letters published in local newspapers by ‘very irate farmers’, and how the physical appearance of RSPB land was ‘a disgrace to farmers’ (a personal affront) as it looked ‘run down’. Whitehouse also shares however how feelings towards the RSPB (at least by some farmers) were tempered by shared understandings that everyone should have the right to do what they wished with their own land. Based on long-term research on conservation in Mexico, another anthropologist, Haenn (2016), argues that all too often conservation research “*presumes – rather than questions – the identity boundaries between conservation actors*” (Haenn 2016: 197), and assumes a ‘social drama’ framework for conservation, in which pre-existing and discrete groups (such as local residents or government elites) compete. Haenn’s work complicates such stereotyping and simplistic framings by exploring the identities of conservation employees (*vis a vis* campesinos, or peasants, they work with) and how these are blurred through kin ties, consumption habits and over time.

Feminist political ecology has long examined the ways in which relationships to nature and environmental governance are embodied, affective, emotional and situated (in time and space); meaning identities are created in relation to environments and engagements with them, and are contingent on the relationship between person, place and time (Gururani 2002; Nightingale 2006, 2011a; Singh 2013; Staddon et al. 2014; Sultana 2015). Sundberg (2004) for example, working in Guatemala, draws on the notion of ‘identities-in-the-making’ to highlight that those involved in conservation do not merely arrive at projects with pre-defined and static identities and relationships, but rather that these are constantly being (re) made through their involvement and interaction with projects and others involved. In feminist political ecology, identities are considered ‘intersectional’, whereby it is the intersection of multiple features, such as gender, race, profession etc., that combine in particular contexts to become relevant in social relations and which establish particular subjectivities and relationships of power (Nightingale 2011b). Nightingale (2013) highlights how the identity of Scottish fishers is intricately linked to their boats and the embodied act of going to sea, and contrasts this to the unfamiliar space of offices and meetings with policy makers that fishers occasionally engage with, which can lead them to feeling disempowered. Those researching the management of common-pool resources also highlight the importance of space, arguing that despite the creation of formal institutions and procedures for community engagement, much decision-making around resource use is “*often invisible, being located in daily interactions of ordinary lives*” (Cleaver 2001: 381), suggesting a need to “*shift the*

*focus from institutional design to the everyday spaces and practices wherein commons management occurs*” (Nightingale 2011a: 125).

This interest in ‘ordinary lives’ and ‘everyday spaces’ is also found in Haenn’s work in Mexico, in which she chooses to avoid “*social drama’s main stage*” and instead to study the “*fringes [as] offstage and backstage sites*”, where those involved in conservation “*simultaneously construct and borrow from one another*” (Haenn 2009: 198). Researching the negotiation of indigenous and non-indigenous interests in environmental campaigns in Australia, Pickerill (2009: 66) similarly finds everyday and informal spaces to be sites where commonalities across difference can be built; although often only over long periods of time, as reflected in the ‘3 Ts’ framework of ‘Talk, Time, Trust’. Exploring cooperation between Welsh farmers, Wynne-Jones (2017) offers an example of ‘the kitchen table’ as an important space in which farmers are brought together, nurturing less formalised interactions and increasingly habitual expectations of openness, generosity and care. Affect and emotions are seen as central, for example also impacting farmers’ interest and interactions in the cooperative project; “*The main thing that’s kept us involved? We’ve had a lot of fun*” (Wynne-Jones 2017: 266). It is noted that the productive nature of cooperation includes moments of ‘friction’, but that rather than undermining the group, they can provide opportunities for learning and innovation. Time, again, is seen as significant, and thus the process and potential of cooperation is argued to be an “*emergent process which can move the individuals involved beyond their preformed judgements and measures of social positioning, altering their conceptions of how to relate to others*” (Wynne-Jones 2017: 259).

This brief review of feminist political ecology and anthropologies of conservation, whilst necessarily incomplete, provides an important basis for understanding cooperation (and conflict) in conservation. Specifically, it helps to explain and explore the significance of the approach of ‘having a blether’, and its dimensions of ‘who’, ‘where’ and ‘when’. Firstly, a blether conjures up relationships of friendship, suggesting that with regards to the ‘who’ in bletthers, and more generally conversations around conservation, there is a need to go beyond simple stereotypes based only on people’s professional positions (and thus presumed perspectives on conservation issues). This literature indicates the need to question – rather than presume – how people are positioned, and what aspects of their individual and collective identities are relevant to their conservation interest and involvement. For example, we can go beyond stakeholder stereotypes and may choose to consider not just people’s professional positions, but also other aspects of their intersectional identities, such as personalities, family ties or shared interests through hobbies or histories; including how these emerge through emotions and affect. Secondly, in evoking a ‘chat’, the ‘where’ of a blether is implicitly advancing a focus on informal rather than formal spaces. The literature reviewed argues that identities are always ‘in-the-making’ and spatially situated, with ‘offstage’ and informal everyday

sites significant for observing commonalities and creating connections. When exploring cooperation in conservation, we may therefore choose to explore a range of locations beyond formal and professional work environments (such as offices, farms, or workshops), including the likes of homes, pubs and surrounding locales. Thirdly, and finally, as a ‘lengthy’ chat, the ‘when’ of a blether would appear to resonate with an on-going rather than a one-off engagement. The literature reviewed here emphasises the relevance of historical contexts, and of identities and relationships as emergent over time. In seeking to understand cooperation in conservation, we may thus ask questions about local political and cultural histories, about individual personal histories, and about the development of conservation relations over time.

This framework for understanding cooperation in conservation; inspired by the approach of ‘having a blether’ (and its dimensions of ‘who’, ‘where’ and ‘when’) and drawing on the insights of feminist political ecology and anthropologies of conservation, is used to explore the case of conservation in the Cairngorms National Park, in Scotland, which is described next.

## METHODOLOGY

### Case study

This paper is based on qualitative research conducted between 2013 and 2019 in and around the Cairngorms National Park (CNP) in Scotland, UK. The CNP was designated in 2003 and is the largest national park in the UK (4528 km<sup>2</sup>), it includes protected habitats and species as well as internationally important natural and cultural heritage, and is mostly privately owned (75%) (Blackstock et al. 2011; Dinnie et al. 2012). As Scotland’s national parks have multiple aims, including the delivery of social and economic as well as ecological benefits, the CNP relies on partnership working and co-management with land owners, managers and farmers. Matters of land ownership, control and management are highly sensitive in Scotland, given that historically this has been in the hands of a few wealthy ‘lairds’ owning private estates for sporting interests, and as a result of the ‘Highland Clearances’ in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century when common lands were enclosed and when thousands of subsistence farmers (called crofters) were evicted by lairds from their land to make way for the more profitable sheep. Land ownership and control is slowly diversifying, with owner-occupier and tenant farmers responsible for some, and conservation organisations and community groups becoming responsible for other areas, however many still argue against the historically-rooted inequalities evident in Scotland’s land (Wightman 2015). Current nature conservation in the Cairngorms is challenging given divergent views on a wide range of issues, including woodland expansion (for ‘rewilding’ or in line with reforestation for carbon), deer numbers (deer browse regenerating woodlands, but also provide the basis for estates’ stalking activities), grouse moor management (the sport of driven grouse shooting is another mainstay of traditional

estates), raptors (whilst legally protected they are reportedly persecuted by those managing grouse moors) and the potential of wildlife re-introductions (including lynx and beaver, and in-line with rewilding efforts) (Warren 2002; Glass et al. 2013; Hodgson et al. 2018; Barnaud et al. 2021).

The Cairngorms have been the subject of study for many researchers interested in the politics of nature conservation (Lambert 2001; Van de Steeg 2005; Rettie 2006). Like others, this research aims to contribute directly to the challenges of the CNP; of ‘integrating diverse views, especially relating to land use’ (Blackstock et al. 2011: 44), and as identified by the Chair of Cairngorms Nature at the Cairngorms Nature Seminar in 2015, who discussed the need to explore ways of working collectively and of building cooperation between conservation professionals and other land managers. This paper seeks to explore what such collaboration can look like in practice and what contributes to its emergence. Aiming for ‘analytic generalisation’ (Yin 2003) the paper also has relevance beyond the Scottish context by drawing attention to the significance of the personal, spatial and temporal dimensions of social relations in conservation.

### Methods

Data collection occurred during five 10-day long fieldtrips to the Cairngorms in the April of each year between 2013 and 2017. These trips formed the fieldwork component of a University of Edinburgh’s Masters programme and involved groups of 10-15 students and 2-3 staff meeting with a wide variety of land-managers, estate workers, farmers, community groups, conservation NGOs, government agencies involved in land management, and the CNP Authority. Occasionally these meetings took place in offices but most were outside (on farms or estates, in forests or at visitor attractions) which promoted the sharing of experiences, questions and stories. In 2015 the fieldtrip involved attending the day-long Cairngorms Nature Seminar (which was open to the public). These trips formed the inspiration for this paper and extensive field-notes made during them contribute to its findings. Consent to gather material was granted at the time of the trips, and has since been gained by asking key individuals quoted to read (and comment on if they wished) a draft manuscript of this paper.

A number of key informant interviews were also conducted, involving five individuals representing farming, estate, and conservation interests across Scotland. Interviewees held upper-management positions in a range of prominent member-based organisations and government agencies; all happened to be men (this was not intentional, but rather reflects the gender dynamics in Scottish conservation and land management). Interviews were semi-structured and explored the role of social relations in conservation. They took place during June and July of 2015 in a variety of locations conducive to interviewees; they lasted up to two hours and were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. All interviewees were assured of anonymity.

Field notes and interview transcripts were coded with a mix of a-priori and emerging themes, with successive rounds of



coding based on re-reading and reflecting on their significance over time. In presenting the findings of this research, the source of quotes and ideas are identified as either from field-journal or interview, and individuals noted as being from conservation or other land-management i.e., farming or estate management – gender is not referred to as to do so might risk individuals' anonymity (given that women tend to be in the minority, as mentioned above). Whilst this paper ultimately argues against the stereotyping of particular groups based on professional affiliation, these groupings are used here partly in order to create a level of anonymity, but importantly, also to demonstrate that a diversity of opinion and experience exists both within and between these groups.

## FINDINGS: EXPLORING COOPERATION IN CONSERVATION

### Exploring 'the who' in cooperation for conservation

*"A tangible ripple of shock and sadness ran through the room, as the seminar was opened with the news of the death of Dick Balharry, famed Scottish conservationist"*  
(field-journal 2015, Cairngorms Nature seminar)

This extract refers to an event run to celebrate the first two years achievements of an ambitious five-year plan to promote nature conservation in Scotland's Cairngorms National Park. The seminar brought together around 100 conservationists and other land managers; ostensibly to talk about nature, whilst what seemed more important was not nature but rather people, or at that point, one person in particular. It is not hard to understand the shared sense of loss amongst many of those present, as Dick Balharry was a devoted conservationist and known personally to many in the room. One obituary highlighted his dedication not only in a professional capacity but also through his personal life, his early career in deer stalking (a past-time not typically associated with conservation professionals), and importantly his character and humour, to which was attributed his popularity and following (Matthews 2015). The reactions that day to Dick's passing are a powerful illustration of the importance of people in nature conservation – but not just people in general – rather particular people, with particular personalities, passions and pasts. It also illustrates the importance of relationships beyond the professional, and of emotions in the creation and expression of those relationships. These issues are explored further here, through a consideration of the 'who' in conservation, moving beyond stereotypes and presumed identities (and thus positions) of conservation actors (cf. Haenn 2016) to consider what can be significant in creating connections and enabling cooperation, and how that might be expressed through actions and feelings.

The importance of cooperation for conservation was recognised at the Cairngorms Nature seminar in 2015, with the Chair emphasising the importance of "*understanding success, barriers...[in] how to work together*" (field-journal 2015:31). The need to understand better how to work together

was heard throughout this research, for example one estate manager suggested that "*the deer, the trees are simple, its people are the problem*" (field-journal 2016: 33) and another that "*we need to get ourselves sorted before we sort out the land*" (field-journal 2014: 42). Differences and 'silos' were certainly seen to exist within conservation, based (in part) on how people are positioned and perceived professionally. This was expressed for example, through the standing in rural communities of people such as gamekeepers, stalkers, farmers and shepherds, as "*the salt of the earth*" and the "*real managers of the land*" (field-journal 2017:5–6), given they "*get their hands dirty*" (field-journal 2017: 12). One conservationist felt that an opposite view existed of conservation professionals, as people working solely inside in offices and as being "*all white, middle-aged, and with beards*" (field-journal 2017: 7); with conservation organisations being "*seen as coming from outside...even if they employ local people*" (field-journal 2016: 1). Stereotyping and presumptions of difference and are clearly significant amongst those involved in conservation, however one conservation employee suggested that "*the good news is we're coming out of the silos*" (field-journal 2014: 44,42), and a farmer that "*with people that are actually working on the ground there's far more in common between most farmers, and most RSPB officers...than there is conflict*" (interview C, 2015).

In moving beyond stereotypes and professional identities, individual's character and personality was seen by many as being important in creating connections, as too were opportunities to get to know people personally; at which times it was suggested by one estate worker that "*you have to come across as yourself – if they like you, they're more likely to listen*" (field-journal 2015: 15). Conservationist Dick Balharry, who featured at the start of this section, was famed (in part) for his passion and charisma, that he was great fun to be with, that he told 'brilliant stories' and that he 'chuckled a lot' (Matthews 2015). As noted by one estate manager, "*it does often come down to individual personalities, a lot of the time it can actually hinge – success, failure – can hinge on individual personalities, because of the way they say things, the way they relate to people, the way they communicate and all that sort of stuff, language they use*" (interview A, 2015). Others spoke of particular people being a source of inspiration, for example one estate manager shared how Dick Balharry provided them 'a lightbulb moment' in which they learnt to look 'beyond antlers' (i.e., stalking) to the deer and to the land that supports them (field-journal 2015: 51).

Moving beyond professional identities and (presumed) differences, people engaged with for this research also indicated the significance of friendship in relation to the work they did, including friendships between people from groups or organisations or interests typically portrayed as in conflict with each other. We heard of close friendships between people from conservation organisations and private estates who publically hold firmly opposing stances on issues such as deer management and wildlife re-introductions. One farmer described their relationship with a conservationist they worked with as "*almost like a friendship*" (field-journal

2016: 18). Given the significance of agents or advisors in the work of farmers and other land managers (particularly with ‘the paperwork’ associated with funding schemes for environmental management), conservationists spoke of the importance of also creating friendships with agents and advisors; one commented positively on a newly developed relation with an agent, which was unusual in being on friendly terms, “*I can now call her up and vice versa*” (field-journal 2016: 21). Other conservationists shared that in collaborative and partnership working they “*overlook things that we don’t agree on, and generally get on well*” (field-journal 2015: 57), and that whilst “*there’s always run-ins, just like any relationship*”, that disagreements typically give way to “*connections overall*” (field-journal 2017: 28). Others similarly shared that “*we have totally different opinions but that doesn’t matter and we know each other well enough to have that conversation...to have that honesty*” (field-journal 2017: 17).

Relationships involving friendship and trust were not evident amongst all those engaged with, and feelings of being threatened and “*embattled*” were expressed by both conservationists and landowners (field-journal 2014: 43; field-journal 2015: 60). Emotional responses to and engagement with conservation were expressed by others as feelings of responsibility and care for species and habitats they worked to conserve, such as by one volunteer towards the aspen (*Populus tremula*) seedlings that they were propagating, referring to them as “*my babies!*” (field-journal 2014: 21). One government agency employee talked about their “*sense of pride, when you’re living in a community and LEADER [rural development scheme] gets something done and you’ve been involved in that*” (field-journal 2014: 28). The intersectional nature of identity is revealed here – with professional affiliation intersecting with place of residence, in creating interest in and enthusiasm for conservation. The importance of intersectional identities and personal interests was also revealed and illustrated by the story of a digger-driver contracted to work on a river management project, whose hobby of fishing led them to see ‘buy-in’ in the project and thus willingness to engage in the unusual task of landscaping river margins (field-journal 2014: 32).

The perceived shift towards more positive relations between conservationists and other land managers, was contrasted by a concern from some over growing conflict *within* conservation. The protection of particular species e.g., the woodland grouse Capercaillie (*Tetrao urogallus*), can be in conflict with the protection of others e.g., farmland wading birds, and as such policies and programmes of reforestation, in part for Capercaillie, can be seen as a threat to waders – and those conservationists who work to protect them. We heard of other such ‘internal’ conflict within conservation; “*there can sometimes be a bit of a conflict, we want something for moths and butterflies and RSPB want it for birds*” (field-journal 2016: 25). We also heard from one conservationist who spoke of others in their organisation as ‘birdy-birders’, and as ‘a clan’ where people like themselves (i.e., not ‘birdy birders’) “*don’t count*” (field-journal 2016: 21). Such findings challenge much

conservation conflict scholarship, which focuses on differences between conservationists and other land managers, rather than exploring the diversity that exists within the conservation community itself.

This section has illustrated the importance in productive working relationships between conservationists and other land managers, of things which go beyond their professional affiliations and identities. Other aspects of intersectional identities and relationships are revealed to be important, including personality, personal connections, friendship, trust and an ability to ‘agree-to-disagree’. Individual interests are also significant in creating connections and cooperation, with relationships built and expressed through emotions. These relationships do not just happen however, they have important spatial and temporal dimensions, as explored next.

### Exploring ‘the where’ in cooperation for conservation

Relationships and identities are situated, emergent and always ‘in-the-making’ (Sundberg 2004), with ‘everyday spaces’ and ‘off-stage’ sites significant in their (re)creation (Nightingale 2011a; Haenn 2016). These issues are explored here through a consideration of the ‘where’ of cooperation in conservation, moving beyond formal and professional work environments to consider the ‘informal’ and everyday spaces in which people engage and interact that can enable the building of productive working relationships for conservation.

Discussing the relationship between farmer and conservationist that was noted above as “*almost like a friendship*”, the conservationist noted that “*I happen to live in a house over there, so I know what’s going on*” (field-journal 2016: 19) and the farmer that “*if I see them walking their dog then I’ll stop and have a blether*” (2016: 20). Others too noted the importance of living within the area in which they worked, “*I live here and driving around I see what has been done, such as a scrape in the field...I see the [agri-environment scheme] works!*” (field-journal 2016: 30); as was also heard above in the example of ‘pride’ a conservationist felt when seeing the results of their work in their local area (field-journal 2014: 28). It is not only sharing in common a general geographic area, but also specific places and institutions within that area that were revealed as important in building relationships. One conservationist shared that in a previous conservation job on a Scottish island, that “*the best thing I did to build my standing in the community was put my children in the school*”<sup>1</sup> (field-journal 2017: 25), highlighting the importance not only of everyday places, but also intersectional identities, including in this case as a parent. Talking about the importance of building a good local reputation, they also shared that “*sometimes that’s from being in the pub and drinking!*” and how that can lead to positive conservation outcomes, for example a farmer managing their land to improve biodiversity; “*you meet him in the pub and have a wee blether and he’ll do it – it’s much better – it’s based on trust and friendship*” (field-journal 2017: 26). They concluded that living in the same village or area, having children at the same school, or drinking in the same



pub provides the shared common ground between people from across farming, game-keeping and conservation (field-journal 2017: 26-29).

We heard above of perceptions of conservation organisations as being “*seen as coming from outside...even if they employ local people*” (field-journal 2016: 1), however others offered experiences which complicated that stereotype. One conservationist for example relayed how a colleague in their organisation had moved to work on a Scottish island 20 years ago, but that they had married a local person and were now “*one of the most successful advisors as they are embedded in the system*” (field-journal 2016: 20). This again illustrates how intersectional identities, in this case as a spouse, lead to particular relationships for conservation that are spatially situated. Another conservationist shared that they will always be known on an island where they worked for a number of years as ‘the birdie-man’ – and indeed their wife as ‘the birdie-man’s wife’ (field-journal 2017: 25), demonstrating again how identities beyond the boundaries of professional affiliation, and beyond the individual, are significant. Others articulated the value of place in the creation of connections and relationships, and why ‘being local’ may be so significant; “*the success of the initiative is due to a colleague at the fisheries board – he’s a local lad and will know the landowner, and ghillie*” (field-journal 2017: 22).

In considering other dimensions of the ‘where’ of cooperation in conservation, attention was drawn to the significance of offices and inside spaces (associated primarily with those working in conservation) in relation to being outside, in the landscapes in which conservation takes place (associated more with other land managers such as farmers and those working on estates). It was noted that whilst much communication and negotiation takes place remotely and online, when trying to promote good relationships that “*face-to-face dealing with it helps...so you start to see that people are human, but if you’re doing it by email or letter or whatever it’s very easy to say, well I don’t like this*” (interview C, 2015). One conservationist also noted the importance of being outside of the office, and “*spending time on the hill, talking*” (2015: 31). One farmer bemoaned the format and location of the Cairngorms Nature Seminar in 2015, saying “*we’re here in the room, but we need to be in the field with a spade*” (field-journal 2015: 68), which was directed specifically at the need to engage more with farmers, and not just conservationists who formed the majority in the room<sup>2</sup>. Many conservationists do spend much time ‘in the field’, engaging with other land managers, but this statement reveals just how important this is perceived to be, from the perspective of those land managers.

These findings articulate the significance of place in enabling productive relationships and cooperation for conservation. Attention here is directed away from professional work environments such as offices, to consider outdoor environments, and to everyday spaces and institutions, such as pubs and schools i.e., ‘off-stage’ sites (Haenn 2016). As heard above, relationships are situated in particular spaces, but they are also emergent and always ‘in-the-making’

(Sundberg 2004), highlighting their temporal dimensions, as explored next.

### Exploring ‘the when’ in cooperation for conservation

Historical contexts and changes over time; involving individuals, institutions and landscapes, are all significant in the development of relationships for conservation. Focusing on conservation as an on-going process rather than as static moments, these issues are explored here through a focus on past experiences, past careers and past histories. Many of those engaged with for this research reflected on the important role of history in conservation and land management, and of how relations have changed over time. We heard above that some feel people are ‘coming out of their silos’ and that relations between farmers and conservationists are improving. Farmers shared that historically conservationists would “*come in from the outside and tell us what to do*” (field-journal 2016: 18) and that “*that’s what farmers get so infuriated with, bossy conservationists, because they say, well we were doing this long before you guys were ever invented*” (interview E, 2015). Others reflected that “*we’ve evolved to where we are, I think it’s getting better*” (interview D, 2015) and that “*farming is always changing but I suppose its evolution not revolution, things change over time but not hugely*” (interview C, 2015). Some conservationists shared this sense of change as happening only slowly, as ‘evolution not revolution’, by referring to the importance of ‘merging’ and ‘blending’ of ideas and interests (field-journal 2016: 23; 2017: 15).

Relationships are clearly dynamic, with productive and trusting relations taking time to build (field-journal 2015: 38), both at a wider level between generalised groups of people, and at the local level between individuals. One conservationist shared that their first meetings with farmers “*can be awful – they rant and I let them – but after that it is fine, once they know me as a person*” (field-journal 2016: 22). Another shared how it took multiple visits over years and years to a particular farmer to get them to agree to manage their land for a particular species (field-journal 2016: 24), with an estate manager reflecting more generally that “*you never know actually when a relationship that has been built up over many years, has become positive, that it is actually going to pay dividends; it might not be immediately, it might be five, ten years down the line that something happens...as a result of that relationship or that conversation*” (interview A, 2015). It was noted that there is however currently little acknowledgement of or support for such ways of working; “*the emphasis on delivery over the last 10, 20 years or more has been massively problematic...how do you kind of take the time to build understanding within and between people in organisations and land managers...against this kind of deliverology mentality where, you know, the only productive time is the time delivering that specific thing?*” (interview B, 2015).

Whilst productive relations can be built over time, it was also noted that these are subject to change at any time, with one conservationist sharing that “*If [my organisation] came*

out in support of lynx reintroduction [the farmer I work with] would be so annoyed that he'd probably stop working with me" (field-journal 2016: 23). This demonstrates too the limits of good 'personal' i.e., individual relations, in the face of wider organisational positions. Changes in organisational positions can of course lead to more positive relations too, with one conservationist describing the significance of a news story released jointly by the RSPB and farmers, and of how it was "a first" to have the conservation organisation looking at issues from farmers' perspective, rather than being in opposition to them (field-journal 2014: 45). Revealing why conservationists' and farmers' perspectives may be different, one estate manager shared that "I think that is often on the basis of cultural aspects and perceptions...and attitudes that can be very different depending on people's life journeys in a way, in a sense of what you know, who they talk to, what they read, you know, some situations they're exposed to and how they perceive the wider world" (interview A, 2015). Given peoples' different 'life journeys', there was definitely seen to be a need to "understand how the other side thinks" (field-journal 2014: 38), with a number of conservationists sharing how their previous jobs helped them to do just this; for example one who had worked on a sporting estate, who will now "often tell [their conservation] colleagues that they should have worked in something else" (field-journal 2014: 45) in order to widen their appreciation of where others are coming from. Others discussed the importance of staff moving from the Government's now dissolved Deer Commission for Scotland to SNH, and the importance of their previous engagements with stalkers; "because there are [now] people [in SNH] who can mix with the rest of their SNH colleagues and say "well, actually it isn't like that in practical terms and the horrible people who manage deer out there aren't as horrible as you think, come and meet a few", you know, that they've had a very disproportionate, I would say beneficial impact on SNH" (interview B, 2015).

The reaction at the Cairngorms Nature Seminar to the sad passing of famed conservationist Dick Balharry opened these findings, and we return to that to close them. Themes of people, places, pasts and connections were prominent in the Cairngorms Nature Seminar, with one participant discussing the adage that if you want to understand someone you need to 'walk a mile in their shoes' (field-journal 2015: 33). One conservationist explained that this is about "more than developing interpersonal skills, it's about being able to appreciate where someone is coming from" (field-journal 2015: 55). That 'where' might be the physical places where those 'shoes' have walked, but it might also be the values or assumptions about the ways land should be managed, as one conservationist indicates, "we are totally dependent on working with and through other people...we have to appreciate their view of the world, and be able to see and understand what motivates them and why they do the things that they do and, you know, how does that fit into what we're able to do and what we can do with them...walking a mile in someone else's shoes is totally vital to what we do" (interview A, 2015).

Dick Balharry offers a clear example of 'walking a mile in their shoes', as "significantly, Dick was a stalker" (Matthews 2015) - 'significantly' as his ability to 'get people on board' for conservation is in part attributed to this past-time and experience, and his understanding derived from that.

There is a far longer history – and politics – of land management in Scotland relevant to conservation that is not referred to here (but see section 3), which reveals the current relevance of past ways of working and attitudes of conservationists, how change happens slowly and takes time, but how that can be facilitated by shared past experiences including in workplaces. Appreciating where others have come from – physically and in terms of what motivates them – is seen as hugely significant to cooperative relations for conservation. Being able to 'have a blether' and 'get people on board' is made easier by such appreciation, as it is by considering people not just as their professional identities, and by seeing 'informal' spaces as relevant to relationship-building, as heard above. What this all means for conservation more broadly is discussed next.

#### **DISCUSSION: CONSERVATION'S ALL ABOUT HAVING A BLETHER AND GETTING PEOPLE ON BOARD – SO WHAT?**

This paper was inspired by a Scottish conservationist who stated simply that "conservation's all about having a blether and getting people on board", implying both how conservation should be approached and what makes things work in practice. This paper explored the 'who', 'where' and 'when' of 'having a blether' (i.e., a lengthy chat between friends), drawing on feminist political ecology and anthropologies of conservation to understand what might cultivate and contribute to cooperative relations between conservationists and other land-managers. With regards to the 'who' in conservation relations, it was seen to be important to look beyond professional affiliations to consider intersectional identities and interests, expressed through personal connections including friendship, and through emotions such as pride and care. In terms of the 'where' of cooperation for conservation, so-called 'informal' and everyday spaces were found to be highly significant in the building of relationships, such as conservationists and farmers living close-by to each other, or drinking in the same pub or sending their children to the same schools. And with regards to the 'when' of conservation relations, viewing relationships as always emerging but within specific historical contexts revealed the current importance of past conservation approaches, of the gradualness of change, but of the building of understanding and appreciation (and thus cooperation for conservation) through shared past experiences including through the workplace.

None of this will be news to those who work 'on the ground' in conservation and other forms of land-management, for example as farmers or estate workers, given it is the stories and experiences of these people that this paper gives voice and prominence to. The paper does not thus aim to speak to

such audiences, although it does hope to make explicit what is known to them, at least tacitly. Rather, this paper aims to speak to researchers working on conservation conflict and to directly respond to their calls to understand the ‘quality of relationships’ between conservationists and their audiences (Stern 2017), and proposed principles for improving collaborative conflict management i.e., communication, transparency, inclusiveness, influence and trust (Redpath et al. 2015). In highlighting the personal, spatial and temporal dimensions of conservation relations, this paper reveals what can lead to productive and trusting relationships; ones which enable understanding, appreciation and thus inclusiveness and influence. Such relationships do not always mean agreement on everything, but rather as heard above, such relationships allow people to ‘overlook things they don’t agree on’, to ‘know each other well enough to have the conversation – to have that honesty’ and essentially to agree-to-disagree. In this sense, cooperation and (potential) conflict in many ways co-exist within any relationship, and are not necessarily clear-cut in practice, given they represent parts of a continuum and reflect intersectional identities and interests. The co-existence of cooperation and conflict has been highlighted previously in political ecology (Turner 2004) and anthropologies of conservation (Whitehouse 2009), with others pointing to the productive importance of moments of ‘friction’ within otherwise cooperative relations (Wynne-Jones 2017) and of ‘agonistic pluralism’ (Matulis and Moyer 2017). In-line with such scholarship, this paper supports the argument of Haenn (2016) that conservation research should move away from a ‘social drama’ framework that presumes difference, and instead seek to question the identity boundaries of conservation actors. Doing so means opening up and moving beyond stereotyped stakeholder groups to consider what promotes not only commonalities but also appreciation of differences.

Drawing explicitly on feminist political ecology allows this paper to draw attention not only to the need to shift focus ‘to the everyday spaces and practices’ (Nightingale 2011a) where-in conservation takes place, but also to the political and structural forces which mediate conservation relations. We heard above of the ‘deliverology mentality’ dominant in conservation, whereby a focus on delivering on specific outputs or goals does not promote or appreciate ‘conversations’ or relationships built over time – in other words it does not recognise the value of ‘having a blether’. Of course, not all conservation operates in this way, and this paper would urge those interested in cooperative conservation to search out and learn from examples of conservation practice that explicitly takes a process-oriented approach – such as the ‘3Ts’ framework of ‘Talk, Time, Trust’ discussed by Pickerill (2009). It is also important to note the political ramifications of the observed conservation relations discussed in this paper, given their personal, spatial and temporal dimensions. Whilst these relations can lead to positive and productive conservation, for example based on friendship and trust built through drinking in the same pub, they may also be exclusionary, for example given that pubs may be frequented more by men than women. Conservation is

currently being tasked with promoting not only better working relations with other land managers but also greater diversity and inclusion in its own workforce (Kantai Duff et al. 2020; Tallis and Lubchenco 2014; Green et al. 2015), and whilst a full account of that is beyond the scope of this paper, it does indicate that everyday spaces and practices are important in opening up or shutting down such opportunities.

This paper also sought to speak to the emerging field of ‘convivial conservation’ and its ideals of ‘living with (the rest of) nature’ and of promoting conversation, democracy and equity (Büscher and Fletcher 2019). By exploring what it means to ‘have a blether’ and ‘get people on board’, this paper aimed to offer a small-scale version of and vision for such convivial conservation, based on communication, cooperation and respect. Discussing conservation in Australia, Pickerill (2009: 78) promotes the importance of “*tak[ing] the time and care to listen to each other more intently*” and that from such actions “*hope springs*”. The material and symbolic importance of listening in and for conservation has recently been highlighted (Staddon et al. in press) and fits within broader feminist and decolonial demands for dialogue between plural knowledges and cultures as a path to environmental justice (Rodriguez 2020; Santos 2014; Walsh 2005). Black feminist bell hooks draw attention too to the importance of ‘hope’ in the pursuit of justice, writing that her “*hope emerges from those places of struggle where I witness individuals positively transforming their lives and the world around them*” (hooks 2003: xiv). This paper borrows from the likes of bell hooks and Pickerill, and sees hope in conservation emerging from the ideal and practice of ‘having a blether’, and from those who engage in a blether – whether consciously or not – to connect across perceived differences and to cooperate for conservation. Hope may also emerge from policies, programmes and projects which favour process over outputs, which expect less in the short-term, which value success in the form of relationships, which build in flexibility, which report through qualitative assessments rather than simply metrics, and which don’t expect what works in one area to be transferable and to work in another.

In his widely acclaimed book *English Pastoral: An Inheritance*, influential shepherd and farmer James Rebanks makes a compelling case for the need for farming and nature conservation to be better connected. In the autobiographical book, full of family stories, he shares one in which he and his father were visited by someone from a river conservation charity, recounting how his father; normally “*suspicious of meddling outsiders*”, was won over by ‘Lucy’ because she showed “*no judgement or condemnation*” and created an “*atmosphere [that] was constructive and respectful*” (Rebanks 2020: 211–216). Ultimately, Rebanks concludes that “*everything good we have done on the farm has come from people finding ways to bridge the historic animosity between farmers and ecologists*” (2020: 269). In that spirit, this paper offers and explores the concept of ‘having a blether’ and ‘getting people on board’ as a way to find bridges and to promote cooperative – or convivial – conservation.



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The author declares no competing interests in the conduct of this research.

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### Research Ethics Approval

This research gained ethical approval from the University of Edinburgh's School of GeoSciences Research Ethics and Integrity Committee (NJM#1-1).

### Data Availability

The data is not accessible due to privacy restrictions.

## NOTES

1. Many rural schools across the UK struggle to maintain sufficient pupil numbers, so new children are very much welcomed
2. A 'ghillie' is a fishing guide
3. The organisers of the Cairngorms Nature Seminar readily recognised the issue with location and accepted its limitations in terms of engaging particular (groups of) people such as farmers – they stated that they did engage with these people directly in other ways though (field-journal 2015/69).

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