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Bad Wolves? Political Ecology of Responsibility and More-Than-Human Perspectives in Human–Wildlife Interactions

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ABSTRACT

Given the widespread failure of anthropocentric approaches to wildlife conservation, questions of conviviality have become increasingly important for conservation efforts. We propose that political-ecological conceptualizations of other-than-human perspectives offer promising avenues for fostering more just and sustainable human-wildlife interactions. To explore these issues, we investigate wolf conservation in northeastern Finland, focusing on the contested coexistence of humans and wolves. Our study draws on data obtained through interviews and participant observation with local residents, interviews with wolf behavior researchers, and analysis of policy documents. Our findings highlight the fundamental roles of power and responsibility in human-wildlife coexistence, as well as the importance of attending to wolves' intrinsic patterns of behavior. We argue for the value of distinguishing between human agency and other-than-human actions, as attributing intentional agency to wolves can obscure important aspects of human responsibility, political decision-making, and power dynamics at the intersections of humans and other-than-humans.

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Introduction

There is growing interest in more-than-human perspectives, or, for new avenues for understanding human–nonhuman interrelations, in political ecology, animal geography, and related research fields (Ampumuza and Driessen 2020; de Silva and Srinivasan 2019; Evans and Adams 2018; Lorimer 2010; Margulies and Bersaglio 2018; Margulies and Karanth 2018; Srinivasan and Kasturirangan 2016; Toncheva and Fletcher 2021; Van Bommel and Boonman-Berson 2022). Mainstream approaches to wildlife conservation, focusing mainly on the ecological aspects of other-than-humans or on conservation's negative effects on human populations, have largely failed to reduce biodiversity depletion, leading to recent calls for significant transformation using approaches such as convivial conservation, proposing socially integrated conservation approaches that

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transcend nature/culture dichotomies (Büscher and Fletcher 2020; Massarella et al. 2021, 2022). In this article, we argue that combining other-than-human perspectives with political-ecological conceptualizations of the power relations at the intersections of humans and nonhumans could open new paths toward more just and sustainable human–wildlife interactions.

A rich body of research has analyzed human–animal relations by framing animal actions as forms of relational agency, where agency is understood as the (co-)production of effects in networks (Ampumuza and Driessen 2020; Hobson 2007; Van Bommel and Boonman-Berson 2022), thereby challenging the tendency of silencing other-than-humans in political ecology (Evans and Adams 2018; Johnston 2008; Wolch and Emel 1995). Although we appreciate perspectives countering human/nature divisions and human mastery over nature, we suggest that a relational view of human and other-than-human actions may mask power differentiation and human responsibility, overlooking what we term the “political ecology of responsibility.” Our goal here is not to provide a definitive definition of “agency,” but rather to add more nuance to examining human interpretations of animal perspectives, and differences in human and nonhuman abilities to intentionally affect the world. To this end, we utilize the concepts “intentional agency” and “intentional actor” as heuristic tools to characterize actions and activities that we understand as primarily or distinctly human in nature. Through the lens of political ecology, we furthermore emphasize the importance of considering power imbalances and questions of responsibility in human–wildlife interactions.

Our contribution to these theoretical discussions is grounded in an empirical study of human–wolf relations in northeastern Finland. As in many (post)industrial societies, wolf conservation is a deeply contested issue in Finland, where, following near or total extinction, wolf populations have increased in recent decades (Komi and Kröger 2022; Kränge and Skogen 2011; Skogen 2009; Slagle et al. 2019; Young et al. 2015). Wolves offer a highly relevant case for studying human–nonhuman relations, as conflicts surrounding human–wolf encounters are multifaceted, and wolves are an adaptive species, with flexible ability to affect their surroundings, including humans. Wolves are also animals imbued with rich symbolism (Fritts et al. 2003; Laaksonen 2013). Contrary to many other wild animals, wolves are often attributed intentional agency in public debates and popular discussions concerning their effects on humans (Peltola and Heikkilä 2015). However, as our study will show, framing wolves as “intentional actors” can obscure human responsibility, directing attention away from the institutional factors and societal structures shaping human–wolf interactions, and the power relations imbued within them.

We make two central arguments in this article. First, considering the perspectives of other-than-humans is important for furthering human-wildlife coexistence. Second, recognizing the needs of wildlife does not require attributing intentional agency to nonhumans; rather, such conceptualizations may obscure crucial aspects of politics and power. As an alternative way of addressing anthropocentric biases and dichotomous understandings of human-nonhuman relations, we emphasize human responsibility for humans’ unmatched capability to affect what can and cannot exist on the Earth. However, instead of a homogenous focus on “humanity” as a whole, we need a political ecology of responsibility—an examination of responsibility that extends to other-than-humans, but also acknowledges

the unequal opportunities to shape the world and make decisions that affect both human and nonhuman others.

To examine these two arguments and the alternative we suggest, we engage with the following interrelated research questions: When, how, and for what purposes is agency attributed to wolves? What implications may attributing intentional agency to wildlife have for questions of responsibility? How can we bring the perspective of other-than-humans to the forefront of wildlife conservation without diminishing the significant differences between human and other-than-human capabilities, abilities, and responsibilities? Our empirical research is based on fieldwork in northeastern Finland in 2019–2020, and an analysis of policy documents and media reports related to wolf conservation and human–wolf conflicts. To answer the questions above, we trace recurrent situations in which conflicts related to wolves lead to them being seen as intentional actors, while also examining potential wolf perspectives in these situations and the underlying societal structures that shape them.

In the following section, we present recent theorizations related to other-than-human roles and positions in human–wildlife interrelations. We then explain our study context and the materials and methods on which we base our analysis. Thereafter, we analyze situations in which wolves are frequently presented as intentional actors and discuss how these framings coincide with cognate views of what constitutes (un)typical wolf behavior. Then we examine risks and the political ecology of responsibility within human–wolf coexistence. We conclude by showing interlinkages between human responsibility, more-than-human perspectives, and convivial conservation.

Political Ecology of Human–Wildlife Interactions

Other-Than-Human Perspectives

Discussions of other-than-human roles and characteristics in environmental conservation have created multiple, often contradictory, conceptualizations. Within political ecology, there has been a long-standing call for approaches that bridge the “politics of power relations and the study of environmental modification, or the ‘nature of nature’” (Nygren and Rikoon 2008, 768), in ways that do not end up “smothering either ecology or politics” (Hinchliffe 2008, 89). Several scholars have emphasized the need to incorporate other-than-human perspectives in such ways that the intersections between humans, other-than-humans, and their shared lived environments are not rendered apolitical (Hobson 2007; Johnston 2008; Robbins 2003; Srinivasan 2016; Wolch and Emel 1995). The tendency in conventional social sciences has been to present the non-human world—and the animals within it—as mere context for human-centered actions (Ampumuza and Driessen 2020; Castellanos-Navarrete 2021; Edelblutte, Krithivasan, and Hayek, 2023; Margulies and Karanth 2018). Such anthropocentric views leave out many forces, processes, and beings that are beyond human control, or in complex interaction with humans (Nygren 2021; Srinivasan and Kasturirangan 2016).

As a response, an emerging body of research in human and more-than-human geographies and related fields frames animals as subjects with agency (Ampumuza and Driessen 2020; Boonman-Berson, Turnhout, and Carolan 2016; Hobson 2007; Hodgetts and Lorimer 2015; Lorimer, Hodgetts, and Barua 2019; Nygren and Jokinen 2013; Van

Bommel and Boonman-Berson 2022). This conceptualization is rooted in Latourian-oriented actor-network theory and science and technology studies, where new ways of understanding the “other” have enabled researchers to “re-place and re-politicize the nonhuman” (Johnston 2008, 635). In this literature, agency is often conceptualized as a relational ability to produce effects, or to leave a track (Ampumuza and Driessen 2020, 3), with the assumption that actors can never be detached from the networks within which they co-produce action (Jepson, Barua, and Buckingham 2011; Latour 2005). Hobson (2007, 251, 255) argues that as animals “intersect [our] daily lives as food, pets, amusement, wildlife, neighbors, helpers, nuisance,” agency should be seen as “a continual outcome of multiple relations through which we come to understand and relate to animals, to each other, and to our lived worlds.”

The emerging social scientific research on nonhumans outlined above have made important steps in unraveling human–nature dichotomies, however, there is a risk that approaches that understand agency and its political iterations as primarily relational, and that emphasize horizontal networks (Castree 2002), may not sufficiently consider the uneven power relations among and between humans and nonhumans. Understanding agency as the outcome of shared relationality between humans and nonhumans (Hobson 2007) may overlook unequal relations between them (Hornborg 2015). Here, we claim that a perspective of relational, horizontal networks may have depoliticizing effects on conservation discourses and practices. Moreover, a relational view of agency may not align with other approaches to agency that include the ability to represent or to speak for oneself (Nygren and Rikoon 2008).

We do not intend to deny that humans and animals share certain cognitive capacities. According to research in human and animal cognition, it appears “that the basic building blocks of cognition might be shared across a wide range of species” (de Waal and Ferrari 2010), meaning that abilities to react, impact, and understand causalities are likely shared by humans and animals alike. However, we argue that acknowledging differences between human and nonhuman capacities for intentional agency does not make animals mute (Hincliffe 2008) or dumb (Buller 2015, 375). Moreover, it does not erase the ability of nonhuman beings or forces to affect humans and the environment, or to influence conservation politics. We wish to reiterate that as we cannot embody animals, and animals are not equally positioned in the arenas in which their conservation and management is being decided, we must acknowledge that there are certain inescapable differences between humans and nonhumans and dissolving them may have unintended detrimental outcomes.

Political Ecology of Responsibility

As we will show in our empirical analysis, if there is no distinction between humans and other-than-humans, questions of responsibility can become difficult to address. Although we share the concerns about the serious effects of objectifying animals, conceptually framing animals as active agents does not automatically highlight their needs within the decision-making spheres that impact human interactions with animals. Thus, attributing agency to animals is not sufficient to foreground their perspectives in human–nonhuman interactions and wildlife conservation. As agency can also be

understood to include certain self-representation capacity (Nygren and Rikoon 2008), attributing such ability to animals could, paradoxically, lead to less advocacy for them in political decision-making, a process in which they cannot partake. As an alternative to attributions of agency to draw focus onto other-than-human perspectives, we propose what we call a political ecology of responsibility.

Rather than viewing all beings and forces as equally relevant in shaping a particular interaction, we argue for carefully examining who has the ability, authority, and power to influence human–wildlife interrelations, and to make decisions over wider conservation policies and practices. As elucidated within debates on the Anthropocene, we live in an era where humans—rather than wolves, plants, or rocks—determine the fates of other species and the planetary conditions. But without careful attention to contextually determined and socially differentiated power relations among humans, as well as cognate questions of responsibility and justice, the analytical power of non-anthropocentric perspectives is curtailed. For a more just and convivial conservation, we need to reshape our relations with animals, to reflect on what we know about particular animals and their needs and desires, and to shape human actions in response, with responsibility, to them (Haraway 2007). This includes considering how we understand interlinkages between multi-species justice, human responsibility, and politics and power.

A shift toward non-anthropocentric multispecies justice and socially just convivial conservation necessitates acknowledging that animal actions are always perceived and interpreted through a human lens. By this we do not mean to invoke human exceptionalism, according to which only humans are intrinsically valuable while other organisms hold a utilitarian value (Callicott 1997; Kopnina et al. 2018), but rather follow de Silva and Srinivasan’s (2019, 188) proposal toward “less anthropocentric perspectives that prioritize both vulnerable people and wildlife.” However, human relations to things, beings, forces, and surroundings are always imbued with relations to other humans (Hornborg 2015), and thus there is no way to escape “the lens of human perception and its inevitable anthropocentric bias” (Toncheva and Fletcher 2021, 18). Conflicts regarding wildlife conservation have more to do with prevalent legislation, institutional rules, power relations, political-economic conditions, and differences in values and priorities between different people, than between humans and wildlife (Marchini 2014; Dickman, Marchini, and Manfredo 2013; Jacobs et al. 2018). As we will show in our empirical analysis, acknowledging wildlife conservation’s anthropocentric basis, and the constraints and biases involved, does not negate the intrinsic value nor the inherent needs of other-than-humans, which exist independently whether humans recognize them or not (Kopnina et al. 2018). Instead, it reiterates human responsibility regarding human activities’ impacts on other-than-humans.

Context and Methods

When Finland joined the European Union in 1995, wolves in Finland were incorporated into the European Union annex V of endangered species and became strictly protected (Hiedanpää and Ratamäki 2015).¹ Since then, the previously small wolf population has grown; and according to official estimates, in March 2022, there were around 37 packs and 23 pairs living in established territories in Finland (Heikkinen et al. 2022).

Simultaneously, communities are increasingly included in wolf conservation, with representatives of different stakeholders invited to participate in updating the wolf population management plan. Nevertheless, wolves continue to induce heavy contestation both in local and national politics in Finland, and illegal killings are a considerable factor in wolf population size reductions (Suutarinen 2019).

As a highly adaptive species, wolves have spread fairly evenly around Finland, except the reindeer management area in northern Finland. A primary challenge to wolf conservation is rural and semi-urban populations' (un)willingness to live close to, or within areas of, wolf territories. Although economic losses due to wolf predation are relatively low in Finland compared with countries in which sheep farming is a common livelihood, anticipating possible encounters with wolves often leads to anxiety, fear, and frustration (Gieser and von Essen 2021). In Lieksa, our main study site, conflicts concerning wolves primarily arise from their threat to hunting dogs. In these controversies, characteristic of Nordic countries, hunters have ambivalent attitudes toward wolves' innate characteristics, such as their hunting patterns and territorial behavior, while wishing to portray themselves as wilderness caretakers (Kaltenborn, Andersen, and Linnell 2013; von Essen and Allen 2020, 2021). Together, these factors lead to heightened perceptions and claims of wolf agency, making this case study apt for displaying how attributing intentional agency to other-than-human species plays out in practice.

The primary empirical material for this study was collected through ethnographically oriented fieldwork in the municipality of Lieksa, northeastern Finland, where the first author lived in a remote village for five winter months in 2019–2020. It included 83 interviewees, 10 of whom worked in wolf research and management, or wilderness education. Most of the interviewees lived in or around Lieksa, while two interviews were conducted with people working on national wolf research and management elsewhere in Finland. The interviewees were selected using strategic snowball sampling (Given 2008). In the selection of informants in Lieksa, the aim was that they represent diverse age groups, different genders, and a variety of livelihoods and vocations, including residents in villages and larger population centers. Additionally, the aim was to include wolf conservation supporters and opponents, and those who consider wolves to have little effect on their lives and livelihoods. In qualitative data gathering, there is always some self-selection, as the participants must consent to be interviewed; this is especially pertinent when carrying out research on highly sensitive issues of nature/wildlife conservation (Nygren 2004, 192).

The open-ended interviews were based on a prepared set of questions on the diverse aspects of wolves' impacts on local people's lives, such as sightings, fears, attitudes, and local knowledge of wolf behavior. Interviewees were encouraged to direct the conversation to what they considered the most important issues. Interviews with people who worked in or adjacent to wolf research and management were additionally geared toward their specific expertise on wolf behavior, conservation, and management. The interviews lasted on average one and a half hours. Most of the interviews were recorded, and later transcribed and coded thematically using the "Atlas.ti" qualitative data analysis program.

The interview data were complemented with participant observation and informal conversations in diverse situations, including local cafes, visits with wolf enthusiasts,

conversations in sauna events, hunting-dog training sessions, and meetings arranged by national wildlife population management staff and local stakeholders. In addition, we analyzed relevant documentary materials, including policy briefs, reports on wolf protection, (E)NGO material on wolf conservation, and media reports and social media discussions on human–wolf encounters, to examine the discourses and metaphors used to frame the actions of wolves in human–wolf interrelations.

The impossibility of transcending human interpretations surrounding the conceptualization of nonhumans renders it methodologically challenging to perform a deep analysis of other-than-human perspectives. Wolves, although charismatic large land mammals, avoid humans as much as possible (Kojola et al. 2016), and in Finland, it is illegal to follow wolf tracks in the direction of travel. Thus, accounts of their behavior and interactions with humans are almost always mediated either by fuzzy pictures or reports produced by experts working in wolf conservation research and management. These accounts, based on human interpretations of animal behavior (Hodgetts and Lorimer 2015), highlight the general limitation for finding ways to “let animals speak” (Evans and Adams 2018, 632). Some animals are more physically visible and leave more obvious traces, while the significance of others—including wolves—can be difficult to notice and interpret within shared environments. Still, admitting animal perspectives within conservation discourses and practices should not depend on these animals’ abilities to communicate or make marks in ways that humans are able to discern.

To try to comprehend how wolves may “see” their environment and behave in human presence, we analyzed local residents’ knowledge, especially regarding their spatial and historical understanding of wolf behavior, as well as the expertise of animal biologists, ethologists, and conservation scientists undertaking genomics and population modeling based on scat collection and sightings recorded by field personnel and trained volunteers. This enabled us to better understand the intrinsic needs and situational relations shaping wolf behavior. We do not claim that these methods overcome the challenges of understanding nonhuman perspectives; rather, we emphasize that despite creative efforts “towards more-than-human participation in research” (Van Bommel and Boonman-Berson 2022, 136; O’Mahony, Corradini, and Gazzola, 2018), ultimately, it is always humans who make the interpretations. Acknowledging the fact that humans cannot become wolves does not mean that we should not strive to understand and advocate for their needs.

Attributing Agency to Wolves

Wolves in “Human Territories”

Although local perceptions of wolves in Lieksa are not homogenous, a prevalent theme across the interviews was the attempt by people to understand the conflicting encounters between humans and wolves in a manner that implicitly ascribed intentional agency to the wolves. For instance, when wolves moved closer to human homes than was considered comfortable or attacked dogs, the interviewees attributed these actions to the wolves’ intentionality. This involved wolves being discussed as actors who purposefully transgress boundaries of human-inhabited territories. These perceptions reveal how the

interviewees made sense of the wolves' actions and how their behavior affected human-wolf coexistence in the area.

Wolf sightings, usually in the form of tracks on snow, were among the most common conversation topics about wolves. While sightings are rare, the widely held impression in Lieksa is that, since the early 2010s, wolves have begun to come closer to human habitations, going against perceptions of wolves as “timid creatures of the wilderness.” Wolves do endeavor to minimize their contact with humans: brief visits close to human habitations usually happen at night when people are least active (Kojola et al. 2016). However, as strict protection measures have enabled permanent wolf populations to return, their increased numbers have led to more frequent encounters between wolves and humans.

Simultaneously, human habits and living conditions have radically changed, as Riitta², a biologist in her 50s living in a remote village, summarized:

If you always clear snow with a tractor, have an indoor toilet, ... throw beef feet to the dog [in the yard], drive right to the porch and go inside, in other words never move yourself in your yard, then how can a wild predator know it's someone's yard? ... There are buildings everywhere, all over the forests. [The animal] doesn't know that a building and a human go together if there is no human smell.

As pointed out by Riitta, due to contemporary life's odorless sanitation, while wolves tend to avoid humans, they do not always know where “human territory” starts.

The population density in Lieksa is about 3 inhabitants per square kilometer (Lieksa 2022), far below the Finnish average of 18 (Eurydice 2022) or the European average of 34 (Worldometers 2022). Lieksa is situated at the Russian border, and there is a wide border zone in which civilians are not allowed to move. Many interviewees therefore found it difficult to understand why wolves come close to human population centers when there are uninhabited forest areas nearby, as Toni, an agricultural worker in his 40s, attested: “*This is human territory, and we don't need them here; there's plenty of forest in Finland!*” Simo, a life-long hunter in his 80s, reiterated these sentiments: “*A wolf won't occupy this piece of land ... I take care of my territory and it's my right—and even responsibility.*” The human–nature dichotomy in these statements is evident and reflects mainstream views in which nature conservation has been envisioned for decades as a strict spatial division between humans and pristine untouched “wilderness” (Adams 2004; Brockington, Duffy, and Igoe 2008). Although these ahistorical premises of conservation have been challenged by approaches such as convivial conservation, often formulated as a joint endeavor with indigenous populations or other local residents (Büscher and Fletcher 2019, 2020; Massarella et al. 2021, 2022), human–nonhuman dualisms shape strongly what is considered acceptable behavior for different species (Figari and Skogen 2011).

The premises of this dichotomy—whether there actually are “wilderness areas” with enough prey for wolves—divided interviewees. Many repeated statements about the large forest areas the wolves could inhabit, while others commented on the vast timber road networks, which make even the farthest forest corners easily accessible for humans. Keijo, an avid hunter in his 60s, recounted his thoughts on a legal wolf hunt: “*We were [keeping watch] by the main road, and all the time you could hear the sounds of trucks, human sounds in the background, so the wolves too must be used to it.*” As intensive

commercial forestry is pervasive in and around Lieksa, and people frequently move in the uninhabited forests, seeing, hearing, smelling, and encountering people—usually inside machines—is an almost everyday experience for the wildlife within these heavily managed and largely monocultural forest landscapes. In contrast to many residents' wishes, the lines between human and non-human are quite blurred.

Wolf Behavior

The idea of the “human-fearing wolves” became prevalent during the 20th century in Finland, when all wolves that challenged this assumption were routinely killed (Komi and Kröger 2022; Lähdesmäki 2020). The persistent notion that wolves are afraid of humans, and their avoidance of people, are thus less based on wolves' innate characteristic, but rather produced by adaptation and historical human-wolf relations (Anderson et al. 2022). Many interviewees—especially middle-aged and older men involved in hunting—were adamant that increased wolf sightings proved that these animals had lost their “natural fear of humans,” or become “tame” and “outrageous.” When the wolves' actions digress from what is considered normal, they are imbued with a sense of unpredictability that is difficult for people to anticipate and therefore tolerate. Even wolves' routine nightly movements around their territory can be perceived as unnatural behavior if the tracks appear close to people's homes, animal pens, or busy roads. “*I've nothing against wolves, but for the ones that visit yards, an appropriate fear of humans must be put into them... They can exist, but there are limits with everything,*” said Pentti, a resident in his 40s, who was active in municipal politics. Thus, wolf behavior—and people's perceptions of it—become central factors upon which people's willingness to coexist with wolves hinges.

When the reasons for wolf behavior, such as hunger due to game depletion, disease, or injury, are not evident to people, the behavior is easily interpreted as intentional rather than instinctive. Many residents recounted a highly publicized case where an individual wolf had started to linger around a smallholder farm. Jonna, in her 30s, recapped it: “*It was in full daylight. [The wolf] came by the road and dug in the yard, made rounds around the animal pens... In [the neighboring village], it had... turned around a compost heap, and there were sightings in multiple yards.*” The same wolf also “*went close to summer cottages, where it ate the balls and cookies that women had left for the birds,*” told Maria, a researcher on wolf behavior living in North Karelia. Conservation law in Finland allows the police to issue permits to expulse or kill protected wild animals when they are deemed to pose danger either to humans or, in some circumstances, to pets and domestic animals (Maa-ja metsätalousministeriö 2019). In this instance, the wolf's behavior was considered threatening both to children and farm animals, and after unsuccessful expulsion attempts, an official killing permit was issued, and the wolf was killed. The carcass investigation revealed that the wolf had an encapsulated shotgun pellet in its leg and suffered from scabies.

In the interviews, the event was interpreted in two distinct ways. In one, the actions of an individual sick wolf represented all the wolves, proving that wolves should not be protected to the current extent because they are a species that inevitably causes threat: “*They come to... yards and bare their teeth, and go and eat the fat from bird feeders,*

which is completely unusual. Of course, it brings problems," described Markku, a pensioner in his 60s. For him, the unexpected events were tantamount to future difficulties. In the other, Maria, the local researcher, endeavored to understand the wolf's behavior: "It never attacked anyone... A starving wolf, first, has no strength to attack, but tries to eat [anything]. Can you imagine, birds' balls?! Just fat and seeds... Usually there is a reason why they are so close... Probably there wasn't enough prey killed for the pack, [so] this one had to go if he wanted to survive." In the first interpretation, the fact that the wolf ate bird feed indicated brazenness, and by mentioning the baring of teeth, it seems that Markku wanted to highlight that tolerating such wolf behavior was dangerous. In the second interpretation, the same actions implied starvation and harmlessness and were seen as natural, instinctual, and understandable wolf behavior in specific circumstances.

Interestingly, although the official investigation explained that the main reason for the wolf's behavior was its weakness and suffering due to the injury and illness, people's sightings of, and encounters with, this particular wolf were reframed by many as a proof of the wolves' "unnatural taming." One reason for this interpretation might be that the wolf's visitations to yards received much higher visibility in the local media than the later investigation of the wolf's health. The disproportioned interest in the wolf's actions, rather than what drove its behavior, has connections to the wide appeal of framing wolves as intentional actors. Arguing that wolves are "inherently" dangerous is widely used as grounds for opposing wolf conservation, although actual damage or threatening situations are rare. By emphasizing wolf culpability, people can underscore the intolerability of risks associated with wolves and reduce human responsibility, as we will demonstrate in the following section.

Risk and Responsibility in Multi-Species Encounters

Wolves as a Risk

In Lieksa, the situation that draws most attention to wolves is dog predation, a risk characteristic to the Nordic countries (Peltola and Heikkilä 2015; Ratamäki 2009). Until the early 2010s, wolf attacks on dogs in yards were nearly as common as in hunting situations in eastern Finland (Peltola and Heikkilä 2015); however, in Lieksa in 2019–2020, when the interviews for this study were conducted, dogs who were kept outside at night usually had sturdy pens; thus, people mainly spoke about wolf attacks on dogs in hunting situations.

Hunting is a popular leisure activity in rural areas in Finland, and while hunters are a minority among rural populations, they have considerable influence in managing wildlife, and are powerful opinion leaders in their communities (Ilvesviita 2005; Komi and Kröger 2022). During the 20th century, when wolves could be killed at sight, hunting dogs became central especially to moose hunting, with dogs tracking and baying moose for easy shooting. *Hirviseurat*, small hunting clubs organized around collective moose hunting, and their *peijaiset*, traditional hunting feasts to which whole villages are invited, form a tight community. Thus, every time a hunting dog is attacked by a wolf, the effects are widely felt.

Hunting dogs may be killed in many types of accidents, but only attacks by wolves are reported in the local media. It is difficult to put deaths caused by wolves into perspective since there are no definitive statistics available on hunting dog deaths. Many interviewees—both hunters and non-hunters—viewed wolves as the biggest threat to hunting dogs, due to perceived and real controllability and frequency of such situations. Several informants believed that the ways in which wolves kill their prey are particularly cruel, strengthening the perception that wolves pose a greater danger to dogs than other types of accidents. In most extreme statements, wolves were considered as inherently bad. “A moose calf had half of his head eaten, but the poor calf was still alive... I like animals and I don’t understand when they are abused or left to suffer,” Jouni, a hunter in his 50s told indignantly, while Sauli, another hunter asked: “Is it really protecting nature when one protected predator kills [many animals] every year?... More animal lives would be saved if this [species] were eliminated.” Although views of wolves as absolutely “cruel” and “bad for nature” were rare, lighter tenets of this logic were often portrayed in narratives of hunting dog accidents.

An important finding from the interview data was that those hunters who owned hunting dogs and opposed wolf conservation were less likely to consider a wolf attack to be a risk inherent to hunting, unlike other types of accidents. Krista, a biologist in her 20s, recounted this disconnect: “An eye of my friend’s bear dog was blinded in a hunting situation by a branch, and in another situation a moose kicked it in the [other] eye... And it was just like, oh no, what bad luck. Events like this are just seen as natural losses. But then a wolf is a separate danger.” These sentiments are closely linked to perceptions of wolves as willful actors, as Mikko, a pensioner and an active hunter, stated when asked to compare wolves and other risks to dogs in hunting situations:

M: How should I say, being run over by a car is like an accident.

I: Isn’t it considered an accident when a wolf comes?

M: No, I don’t think it’s an accident.

I: Then how would you describe it?

M: Well, a wolf kills to eat.

I: Isn’t that quite natural?

M: Your best friend getting eaten? Well, it doesn’t feel all that natural!

Similar views were expressed by two women comparing the risks posed to dogs by wolves and venomous vipers. Liisa, a teacher in her 40s, said: “A viper acts in self-defense, while a wolf would intentionally attack my dog,” and Raija, an agricultural worker in her 30s: “A wolf understands what it is doing, unlike a snake.” These examples reflect common perspectives found not only in the narratives of local residents but also in local media reports that depict wolves as intentional, cunning, or cruel. This portrayal of wolf behavior as distinct from instinctual animal behavior stands in contrast to the perceived passivity of most non-human nature.

Simultaneously, technological advances have made other hunting accidents more preventable. Most moose dogs in Lieksa wear at least one, often two, satellite collars when roaming free in the forest, which helps hunters monitor the dogs’ movements in relation to roads and thin ice in the early winter. In comparison with the increased control over other risks, many hunters feel a frustrating helplessness when wolves are involved. As Anna, in her 30s, an active hunter and a hunting dog hobbyist, stated: “My friend’s

moose dog was run over by a train, and it was a shitty thing, but in a way it was easier to accept, because he saw the dog was headed to the train tracks and he should have done some maneuvers and gone in front of it, so in a way it was his fault... But then if [the dog] had been barking a moose... and a wolf comes, well, you can't do anything." Several informants also highlighted that dogs can be trained to minimize risks from bears, moose, and vipers, but with wolves it was thought to be impossible. Paradoxically, the management of other risks to hunting dogs in Lieksa can increase their vulnerability to wolves, as the use of satellite collars allows hunters to let their dogs roam larger areas independently.

Furthermore, for years hunting dogs have been trained for high tenacity, which many informants criticized. The most tenacious dogs used to be considered the best hunting dogs, even if their instinct to chase and/or bark at prey might be so strong that hunters find it difficult to get them out of the forest. Recently, this trend has started to slowly change, with some hunting dog competitions awarding more points for dogs that return when called. However, the fact that (previously) desired traits in hunting dogs make them more vulnerable to wolves is an issue some hunters are reluctant to admit; thus, they emphasize wolves' agency as a reason for attacks. As Kalle, working adjacent to wildlife tourism, summarized: *"When people... say that wolves are nasty and do this and that, [the wolves] are humanized... What I try to say is that it's a completely instinctive animal, one of nature's creatures... Maybe it's just human nature that when there's a clear culprit, then... people prefer to blame it rather than themselves."*

Many hunters have tried to find different ways to mitigate risks, for example by driving around timber roads looking for wolf tracks before letting the dogs out and, inspired by the first author's suggestion, in 2019 hunters created a Lieksa-wide WhatsApp group for disseminating timely wolf sighting information during the hunting season. As there is high variation in the yearly number of reported wolf attacks on dogs, and many go unreported (Peltola and Heikkilä 2015), it is difficult to ascertain whether these measures have had an attack-preventive effect. The challenges in tolerating potentially dangerous wildlife were evident even among those hunters and dog owners who accepted wolves as a risk inherent to their hobbies and livelihoods. Miina, a sheep herder in her 50s, explained: *"If a wolf kills my herding dog, I need to be mentally prepared for that... [But] it's hard to get acceptance [from others] for taking such risks."* While considering themselves realists concerning the risks their dogs might face, people did not want to sound flippant or irresponsible. Accepting wolves as a part of the environment was thus wrought with a sense of guilt, reflecting implicit views that people who do not oppose wolves' existence are in essence inviting them to hinder local life.

The wolves' perspectives in their encounters with dogs are difficult to decipher, as these encounters seldom happen visibly to humans (Kojola and Kuittinen 2002; Peltola and Heikkilä 2015). People learn of encounters between wolves and dogs almost exclusively when they end poorly for the domesticated canines. When dogs are roaming freely in the forest, or kept outside in insufficiently protective pens, wolves tend to interpret them as either rivals or prey (Kojola and Kuittinen 2002; Peltola and Heikkilä 2015). However, it is difficult to know how often wolves and dogs meet with no consequences. In 2019 in Haapavesi, a hunting dog's collar camera captured an encounter, in

which two wolves observed the dog for a while before eventually walking away on their own without any provocation (Mtvuutiset 2019). There have also been rare instances of wolves and dogs mating and reproducing in the wild (Kojola and Kuittinen 2002), implying that the relations between these closely related species might be more co-existing than attack reports suggest.

The relationship between wolves, hunting dogs, and rural residents is complex and multifaceted, and hinges on how risks posed by wolves are perceived. Some residents view them as an unfortunate but natural aspect of rural life, while others see them as a threat to be eradicated. Those who are willing to accept coexistence with wolves seemed to be more proactive in adapting to and mitigating risks, for example by creating new communication channels or altering hunting dog competition rules. Conversely, those who blame wolves for attacking dogs may be less likely to modify their own behavior. Thus, people's sense of agency and the agency they attribute to wolves are intertwined, and having a sense of agency can empower individuals to take more responsibility in managing the situation (Peltola and Heikkilä 2015).

Coexistence and Political Ecology of Responsibility

Our field material suggests that wolves' intentionality is emphasized in situations where the people involved do not want to be blamed for actually or potentially harmful outcomes. Thus, a key issue is: who is responsible for the risks in human-wolf interactions? This question becomes a practical concern in human-wolf-dog encounter management. Informants with neutral or supportive views toward wolf conservation—most of whom were not active hunters—tended to emphasize the dog owners' obligations, as Irja, in her 60s, summarized: “[Hunters] want to be left in peace in the forest and believe wolves should be somewhere else. To me that's strange; one should understand that if you go to the forest, anything can be there.” Conversely, hunters argued that “Conservation should not go against folks' normal life ... Hunting's not a new hobby ... and now people can't do it anymore,” as Reetta, a dairy farmer in her 30s, claimed. Her views align with research suggesting that negative attitudes toward wolves serve to protect traditional rural lifestyles (Skogen and Kränge 2003).

The unwillingness of many hunters to consider wolves as one risk among others must be understood in the context of large-scale transformation and marginalization of rural life during the middle-aged hunters' lifetime. Traditional habits of human-wolf coexistence were lost when wolves were purposefully eradicated in the turn of the 20th century, after which industrialization of agriculture and forestry together with urbanization have made rural livelihoods increasingly precarious (Komi and Kröger 2022). Finnish agricultural policies continue to favor larger farm sizes, despite the attendant human and ecological costs, and increased susceptibility of livestock owners to predator attacks (Komi 2021; Nikkanen 2018). Against this backdrop, it is understandable that the return of potentially dangerous wildlife near human territories can be difficult to accept. (De Silva and Srinivasan 2019; Doubleday 2018).

Furthermore, many informants called wolves *valtion rakit* (“government mutts”), referring to wolves' strict protection status, which transforms them from a natural part of the environment into something that is the responsibility of the government and the

EU (Evans and Adams 2018; de Silva and Srinivasan 2019; Komi and Kröger 2022). Local people's experienced lack of control in wolf policies at the EU level is deeply intertwined with their feelings of societal alienation and resentment of *Helsingin herrat* ("the lords of Helsinki"), who are perceived as controlling rural life without considering local priorities. A commonly shared sentiment is that urban decision-makers prioritize wolf protection over rural smallholders' livelihoods and living conditions. These feelings of powerlessness are reinforced when wolves attack hunting dogs. (Komi and Kröger 2022). As a result, people feel disenfranchised to mitigate risks and less willing to take proactive measures, even in areas where they do have agency. Attributing intentional agency to wolves is thus tightly connected to wider issues of marginalization and exclusion from decision-making.

In this context, wolves represent both a potential threat and a symbol of contemporary rural challenges (Anderson et al. 2022). Some politicians have capitalized on this sentiment: In 2022 the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry issued a decree for *kannanhoidollinen metsästys* ("population management culling") on wolves, despite their endangered status. Although the cull was halted by conservation NGOs through legal action, it conveyed a message to rural people that they do not have to accept living with wolves. However, culling a few wolves each year would not change the coexistence realities, as wolves will always seek areas that best suit their needs. A responsible predator policy must prioritize supporting local residents in adapting to and mitigating the risks.

Responsibility requires understanding the needs of others, and coexistence is based on anticipating and adjusting to the behavior of others in reciprocal adaptation (Peltola and Heikkilä 2015). While wolves have learned to avoid humans, responsible hunting practices should acknowledge wolves' presence as an inherent aspect of the hobby. However, when dogs are brought into wolves' territory, the unknown nature of wolf-dog encounters can make adaptation challenging. A vicious cycle thus emerges: unexpected wolf behavior is easily interpreted as intentional rather than instinctual, limiting people's sense of their own power and responsibility, especially in peripheral rural areas, where people experience structural marginalization. And when people do not feel responsible, they may have a diminished incentive to try to understand wolf behavior, which perpetuates the cycle. Clearly, understanding wolf behavior is a key issue in fostering human responsibility; however, it is equally important that wolf population management aligns with conservation goals, and people are not given false expectations.

Understanding multispecies coexistence as a network where all parties affect and are affected by each other equally may reinforce views of wolves' responsibility in harmful encounters, especially in situations where people wish to downplay their own agency. Simultaneously, a relational view can overlook other multifaceted factors, such as hunting practices, conservation policies, and wider political-economic structures that shape human coexistence with risky wildlife. While it is important to take nonhuman perspectives into consideration, it is also necessary to pay attention to the political ecology of responsibility, including political decision-making, and power dynamics at the intersections of humans and other-than-humans.

Conclusion: From Anthropocentrism to Responsible Coexistence

This article has examined the differing human perceptions of wolf behavior in the contentious human–wolf interactions in northeastern Finland. The public understanding of wolves as intentional actors stems partly from the long history of their near extinction in Finland, during which wolves came to be perceived as “timid creatures of the wilderness.” This kind of categorization of wolves’ “normal” behavior is based on an anthropocentric human–nonhuman distinction that defines the living space for nonhumans to be outside the human-controlled territories, even if the drastic changes in human activities and habits during the past century make it increasingly difficult for wolves to avoid humans. In these contexts, ordinary wolf behavior becomes understood as abnormal, and intentional, as it transgresses general expectations.

Our study has shown that political-ecological conceptualizations of other-than-human perspectives offer important insights into human responsibility and differentiated power relations at the intersections of humans and nonhumans. When hunting dogs come to contact with wolves, the latter are easily interpreted as intentional actors, especially when people involved wish to downplay their own perceived or potential culpability for the risks and occurred harms. The focus on nonhuman agency in these situations takes attention away from the role of human habits, practices, and larger societal structures that might be contributing to unwanted outcomes, including attacks on hunting dogs. Interpreting human-wolf encounters with actual or potential harms for humans as being based on a wolf’s intentional agency is grounded in an anthropocentric view that prioritizes the need to prevent harm to humans above other-than-human perspectives.

Instead of framing contentious human-wolf interactions as wolves displaying intentional agency, our study suggests that more focus should be placed on an enhanced understanding of wolf behavior, and on the ways to mitigate harmful encounters. As de Silva and Srinivasan (2019, 188) assert: “living as part of nature, as social natures, requires the equitable sharing of landscapes with nonhuman Others and entails mutual risk.” While more consideration of other-than-humans is needed in shared lived environments, our study shows that maintaining a certain distinction between humans and nonhumans is important for the serious implications that attributing intentional agency to nonhumans entails concerning the uneven power relations and human responsibility.

Whether wolves can or cannot exist in certain places is partly contingent on their behavior; however, wolves or other types of wildlife cannot easily advocate for themselves in human-dominated political forums, nor take part in human-led wildlife population management planning. To understand the needs of animals, it is not necessary to attribute intentional agency to their actions. Instead, it requires humans to empathize with the needs and concerns of animals that differ from their own, and to recognize and encourage non-anthropocentric perspectives on human-wildlife relations. Wolves’ needs, behavioral patterns, and impacts—especially concerning the risks for humans living near or within wolf territories—are factors to be carefully considered in wolf conservation. However, the main responsibility lies within humans, especially those in positions of authority and power, to develop policies and practices that enable human-wildlife coexistence based on mutual respect, shared risk, and socially just, non-anthropocentric conviviality.

Notes

1. Except for the reindeer management area.
2. All names have been pseudonymized to protect the informants.

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