

‘They’re part of what we are’: Interspecies belonging, animal life and farming practice on the Isle of Skye

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ene**Tom Fry** 

University of Cambridge, UK

Abstract

This article develops the concept of interspecies belonging: a process of co-habitation between humans and non-humans achieved through material, affective and situated practises. This dynamic is generative of an intimate, personal sense of belonging and a socio-spatial politics of belonging. The article is based on ethnographic fieldwork amongst hill farmers and the animals they live alongside on the Isle of Skye, North-West Scotland. It considers how farming work is an embodied and sensorial immersion in more-than-human worlds, undergirded by affective intensities that produce a feeling of being right with the world, but also of the farming self as producer of commodity goods. Within the fraught political ecologies of a post-productivist uplands, and the growing influence of nature conservation in farming life, they animate a political belonging aimed at protecting access to natural resources. I demonstrate how the imbrication of animal behaviours, mobilities and bodies within this dynamic of belonging shapes how they are understood as legitimate or illegitimate presences within upland landscapes. Through this, I consider how the recently reintroduced sea eagle is engaged with by farmers as an exemplar of exogenous institutional intervention that marginalises an already precarious way of life.

Keywords

Political ecology, conservation, affect, farming, more-than-human

Corresponding author:

Tom Fry, Department of Geography, University of Cambridge, Cambridge CB2 1TN, UK.

Email: tjf46@cam.ac.uk

Introduction

"I don't see the sea eagle as part of the natural environment, because it was introduced here by environmentalists. I know that it was here before, but it still doesn't fit right, it's not like the rest of what we have. Those birds don't belong here"

"Seeing the lapwings, curlew, the rabbits, that's very much a part of what we are, it's important to us, it's part of hill farming. It makes you feel better. Everything works together you know, skylarks, stone chats, bees, they're part of it too"

The above two quotes are from two sheep farmers on the Isle of Skye, an island off the North-West Coast of Scotland, who were interviewed as part of research seeking to understand how reintroduced white-tailed eagles are situated within localised understandings and practices of a crofting community, a form of traditional small-scale hill farming particular to the Scottish Highlands. Usually part time, and predominantly geared towards the extensive production of lambs for sale, the small-scale and low-input character of crofting has a distinctly socioecological character. The upland farming system maintains both a form of agrarian livelihood, a sociocultural community, and, through the year-round grazing of sheep in the hills and mountains, a set of semi-natural heather moorland habitats and their associated species assemblages. The above quotes draw attention to the main concern of this article: the question of which species belong to agrarian landscapes, and which don't. Put differently, it seeks to explain the socioecological relations that determine how a stonechat can be considered as '*part of what we are*', whilst a white-tailed eagle is deemed an illegitimate presence, and in doing so conceives of belonging as an interspecies dynamic.

The sociocultural reception of novel species is an increasingly pertinent topic in Europe. Over the past two decades, there has been a shift in nature conservation away from a focus on preservation, territorial integrity and ecological composition and towards what Adams has called creative conservation, where practitioners actively seek to create new ecologies (Adams, 1996). Species reintroductions, whereby populations are restored through the deliberate movement and release of animals, have been steadily increasing on the continent, and are now a well-established practice of institutional conservation, with widespread regulatory and institutional support (Seddon et al., 2014). In Europe creative conservation often explicitly targets the uplands, owing largely to their remote location, expansive semi-natural habitat and biodiversity value (Navarro and Pereira, 2012). These areas, the socioecology of which is often centred around low-intensity agro-pastoral farming systems, are undergoing structural transformation towards a post-productivist countryside, with processes of agricultural abandonment, and economic and social diversification, all reducing the centrality of agriculture to social and economic life (Krau  and Olwig, 2018). Conservation interventions in the uplands enter into a fraught political ecology, with the economic decline in hill farming undermining farming livelihoods and cultures, and increasing sociopolitical opposition by farming communities to the influence of nature conservation in rural land use and regulation.

The article contends that understanding what a novel species means to local people, and the sociopolitical implications of this meaning, requires charting a geographical conception of how humans and non-humans belong to upland landscapes. This means understanding not just the reception of the newly introduced animal, but the ways in which other already present non-humans are entangled within rural residents' sense of belonging. It is just as interested in the interlinked belonging of people and other animals as it is the ways in which newly introduced species are socially positioned, and argues the latter can only be understood via the former. The article outlines how localised understandings of which animals belong are mediated by the ways in which the socioecological relations inherent to upland farming landscapes instil a sense of sociocultural belonging for

farmers through the iterative practices of hill farming. Furthermore, the activities and inhabitations of non-humans within these worked landscapes, the ways in which farming is not a solely human act but intertwined with the practices of animals themselves, means that this sense of belonging is a more-than-human achievement, 'in which people are situated through their practical engagements and affective relations with heterogeneous others' (Whatmore and Hinchliffe, 2010: 11). These relations are personal, affective and intimate, but are also generative of political affirmations of the need for autonomy over landscapes and natural resources by farming communities who feel that their way of life is under threat.

I argue that the extent to which a new species can be considered as belonging within a localised farming socioecology is contingent on understanding the interactive and material practices of belonging undertaken by both humans and non-humans, and the ways in which these are shaped by structural transformations of agrarian landscapes. In order to capture this dynamic I develop the concept of *interspecies belonging*. Here, I seek to build upon geographical conceptions of belonging by integrating them with animal geographies that centre the geographies of non-humans, and with affective and emotional political ecologies of environmental subjectivity. This allows for an approach that is material and experiential, concerned with the everyday, embodied co-habitations of humans and non-humans, but is attentive to how these co-habitations are shaped by and find expression within the political ecology of a transforming uplands. Here I seek to develop an approach to belonging that can position it as more-than-human, a co-constitutional relation that exists between and through the co-emergence of humans and animals (Wright, 2015), but is not tethered to a context-less and unsituated material immersion or affective encounter. Instead, it allows us to consider how interspecies belonging is embedded within and conditioned by political ecological dynamics. This brings the non-human into our understanding of belonging, whilst maintaining geography's established conception of belonging as both emotive, personal and affective, and a political socio-spatial relation of inclusion and exclusion (Antonsich, 2010).

The contours of an interspecies belonging

The idea that landscape and the relations with the non-human become meaningful through processes of being immersed in the world through practices and material interactions has long been a concern in geography (Tuan, 1990), and in recent years has begun to grow influential in geographical conceptions of belonging. Here belonging is conceived, in its broadest sense, as an 'emotional attachment' of 'feeling 'at home'', but not as a reified or essential social category or identity, but instead as an affective relation which is dynamic, processual and performed through sets of practices (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 197). Belonging is couched in an emotive, personal sense of being in and having a sense of self enmeshed with the place (Probyn, 1996; Wood and Waite, 2011), which is enacted and generated via sets of locally spatialised everyday symbolic and material practices (Bell, 1999; Mee, 2009). This work moves beyond belonging as a socially constructed category, or as a conflation with identity or social collectivity, and instead allows us to think of it as an experiential, affective and non-representational set of practices and feelings tethered to the materiality of place (Wright, 2015).

Thinking of belonging as spatially localised affective practice shares conceptual ground with work that has emphasised the emotive registers of engagements between people and landscape, in which the relational interactions between humans and other life forms are material and embodied, but also bound up in emotional and felt experience (Jones, 2005; Wylie, 2002). Cloke captures this interrelation between practice, embodiment and emotion well: 'landscape is about feeling, emotional investment, and rhythms of involvement; it is both a site of cultural meaning and a sensorium of experience' (Cloke, 2013: 226).

If a geographical conception of belonging can broadly be understood as a socio-material relation with space and place, then this work has allowed us to consider the constitution of that relation as, first, emerging through practices that can instil an affective sense of being in-place and at-home (Hooks, 2009; Yuval-Davis, 2006); second, that these practices are interactive and immersive with the materiality of place or landscape (Devine-Wright et al., 2019); third, that this interaction and immersion is embodied and sensuous, with belonging felt and realised corporeally (Bennett, 2014; Hall, 2013). This conception of belonging, reflecting wider phenomenological and affective turns in geography, is inherently relational, with belonging existing not as a static feeling rooted in a discrete individual, but as something realised through and between people, materials, bodies and places (Ahmed, 2004; Probyn, 1996; Simonsen, 2013).

This article makes two principal contributions to this understanding of belonging. First, by considering belonging via animal geographies, it seeks to bring the animal into the dynamics of how belonging is felt and materialised. Animal geographies have extensively considered the ‘complex entanglings of human—animal relations with space, place, location, environment and landscape’ (Philo and Wilbert, 2000: 4). These have been centred on what Philo and Wilbert termed ‘animal spaces’, the social placing of animals as belonging through scientific classifications, socio-cultural representations and institutional management. Discussions of how novel or reintroduced animals are placed have often focused on native/alien binaries, demonstrating how these categories have been employed and rhetorically associated with sociopolitical battles over immigration, nationalism and citizenship (Antonsich, 2020; Warren, 2007), with little attention paid to how the emplacing of novel species is reflective of more localised, sociopolitical ideas of belonging and boundedness (Drenthen, 2014; Rikoon, 2006).

However, animal geography and related social science approaches are increasingly seeking to understand human–animal relations as constituted by the behavioural and agential geographies of animals themselves, to more effectively ‘hear the cry’ of the animal, as Buller has it (Buller, 2014; Gibbs, 2020). The aim has been to move away from thinking of animal life as a product of social relations, with animals as blank canvases on which rhetorical representations of nature and nativeness are projected. Emplacement can be bound up with everyday practices of people and the biophysical attributes and rich materiality of animals themselves (Lavau, 2011; McKiernan and Instone, 2016). Tracing an interspecies belonging then means not distinguishing between the two, but to demonstrate how non-human lives condition, co-produce and assemble with the social worlds of people who inhabit and work within landscapes, and the codetermined processes of producing both their material conditions and the sense of belonging they harbour (Poe et al., 2014).

This is not to extend the concept of belonging itself as something that non-humans experience or enact (although see Patter and Hovorka, 2018; Van Dooren and Rose, 2012), but to outline how what Lorimer and Hodgetts call ‘animals’ own lived geographies’ are constitutive of a relational, processual sense of belonging, and so how they shape the stories that are told about them (Hodgetts and Lorimer, 2020: 1). More-than-human geography has allowed us to conceive of landscapes, and their discursive-material enactment, as animated by and taking shape through the relational involvement of non-human entities, forces and materials (Lorimer, 2006; Matless et al., 2005). The lively presences of animals in dwelt landscapes, their movements and practices, are a form of processual material engagement with the world, and intersect and enmesh with those of humans to form dynamic compositions of cohabitation (Barua, 2014; Hinchliffe, 2002). As Garlick puts it, ‘animal landscapes... constitute specific historical-geographical constellations of place, people, and animals, performing particular “versions” of human, animal, nature, and landscape’ (Garlick, 2019: 217–218). If belonging is a matter of embodied, felt practices of material interaction, then it must be considered as an interspecies relation, in which the spatial lives of animals shape what otherwise could be considered an anthropocentric concern.

The second theoretical contribution of this article is to integrate an understanding of belonging centred on grounded, practice-oriented and affective relations with an account of how these relations are conditioned and articulated politically. What unites attempts to frame belonging in geography is as an emphasis on belonging as both affective, practiced and somewhat pre-reflexive, and as an articulated, collective and political form of boundedness (Yuval-Davis, 2006). This is captured well by Antonish's distinction of belonging as 'personal, intimate, feeling of being "at home" in a place', and as a 'discursive resource that constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion' (Antonsich, 2010: 645).

The analytical potential of understanding belonging through everyday affective practice should not preclude an analysis of its political-ecological determinants. Roderick Neuman warns that relational approaches can be 'uninterested in asking, much less answering, the question of how or why the embodied, self-knowing subject appears in any particular landscape at any particular moment, hence emptying from that moment all social and political content' (Neumann, 2011: 847). Political ecologists have centred materialist conceptions of landscapes not as romanticised expressions of an 'authentic' lives, but as dynamic, changing places in which the relations between human and non-human, and the practices inherent to them, are constantly shaped by wider political economies of rural transformation (Ogden, 2008; Raffles, 2002).

Feminist political ecology (FPE) has advanced our understanding of the formation of environmental subjectivities within these landscapes by focusing on embodied everyday practice as constitutive of a sense of self (Elmhirst, 2011; Nightingale, 2006). Mobilising a performative understanding of subjectivity, FPE seeks to understand the self as unstable and differentiated, and as emergent and maintained through practices that are always in relation to fields of power and authority (González-Hidalgo and Zografos, 2020). Nightingale has extended this relational political ecology of subjection, demonstrating how subjectivity-as-practice includes spatialised material interactions with more-than-human environments (Nightingale, 2013). Here then environmental subjectivities are generated through a dynamic interplay between the broader political-economic forces that shape and discursively frame environments and natural resource use, and the everyday material interactions between people and the non-human world (Singh, 2013). A political ecology of belonging must then track this process: if belonging is a socionatural relation, then its constitution will take place via both the experiential, material imbrication with this world, and the geometries of power that shape this imbrication and how it is personally understood.

Central to understanding the relation between material practice and belonging must be an appreciation of the dynamic interplay between affective life and subjectivity. Affect, as the non-cognitive and trans-human intensities of embodied experience that are transmitted by and move between people and non-humans (Anderson, 2016; Simpson, 2017; Thrift, 2004), is experienced as a corporeal feeling, what Anderson calls 'proprioceptive and visceral shifts in the background habits, and postures, of a body' (Anderson, 2006: 736). It is then registered by individuals as a subjective and emotive experience in a 'socio-culturally recognisable form' (McCormack, 2008: 426). The onus is on considering both the political-economic contexts of the practices through which affective life unfolds, and how the 'affective experience of space is... conditioned by previous experience, by habit, by familiar emotions and sensations that produce feelings of belongingness' (Edensor, 2012: 1114). In this sense a political-ecological understanding of belonging is concerned with 'how subjects emerge, and embody and give materialisation to the politics of particular places: [to how] they are made manifest through the affective responses of bodies' (Dawney, 2013: 640; Nightingale et al., 2022).

Researchers have also sought to demonstrate how intimate relations with the material world, and the tethering of belonging to it, is expressed in and informs political representations and symbolic narratives in political contestations over natural resources. As Emerey and Carrithers have it, the 'homely acts of dwelling' allow farmers 'to turn their own politics of experience (their lived realities

encumbered by the macro-economic structures which impinge upon their activities) into a politics of representation' (Emery and Carrithers, 2016: 406). Research on emotional political ecologies have demonstrated how these struggles are resonant with the sociomaterial attachments central to personhood, and imbue political claims with emotional dimensions tied up with affective belongings (Dallman et al., 2013; Singh, 2018; Sultana, 2015).

An interspecies belonging can thus be aligned with Sarah Wright's conception of belonging as more-than-human 'emergent co-becoming', whereby people and non-humans 'actively co-produce feelings of belonging, ... sculpt and participate in practices and performances of belonging, and ... materialize belonging in, through and with place' (Wright, 2015: 402). Whereas Wright's relational understanding of belonging is founded on indigenous ontologies of place, my work retains a focus on localised co-constitutive practices of belonging but extends it conceptually by outlining how this co-emergence is also a political-ecological process determined by historical and contemporary geometries of power. Retaining geographic scholarship's emphasis on the politics of belonging (Antonsich, 2010), I seek to demonstrate how this co-constitution is situated in a political ecological context that shapes affective and material relations. This requires charting material practices of belonging within the socioecological transformation of landscapes, and the orderings and institutional designs they are subject to, being attentive to power dynamics and their intersection with biophysical conditions. This forms a productive conceptual encounter between political ecology and materialist understandings of belonging to landscape (Neumann, 2011; Singh, 2013), a relational political ecology attuned to how human-animal relations 'fabricate landscapes whilst they are collectively caught up within fields of power' (Barua, 2014: 916). In doing so it charts how the belonging of those people who inhabit upland landscapes, and their ideas of which animals belong within them, traverse from the embodied, sensory and embedded practices of co-habitation, to a political sociality that shapes engagement with resource struggles and institutional conservation.

Charting interspecies belonging in the crofting landscapes of Skye

This research sought to track practices of co-habitation amongst crofters and non-humans in the farming landscapes of the Isle of Skye, part of the wider Highlands and Islands region. Like other European upland farming systems, crofting landscapes are undergoing agrarian transformations towards a post-productivist countryside, with livestock production facing crises in income and costs, leading to widespread de-stocking and the abandonment of the grazings (SRUC, 2008). As small-scale hill farming becomes increasingly uncompetitive in global markets, upland agricultural regimes have been territorialised as landscapes of recreation and tourism, wildlife and habitat preservation and sustainable countryside management (Burton and Wilson, 2006).

This ongoing shift formed the political-economic backdrop to the reintroduction of the white-tailed eagle (hereafter referred to by its common name, sea eagle), spearheaded by the Scottish government conservation agency NatureScot (NS) and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), which has seen a series of phased reintroductions between 1975 and 2012. After widespread persecution by landowners in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the last sea eagle in the UK was most likely shot in 1917 in Shetland, but the reintroduction has been a success, and by 2016, there were 106 nesting pairs, projected to increase to 200 by 2025 (Scottish Natural Heritage, 2016). For the past decade, crofters have been reporting increases in lamb losses in areas where eagles are nesting, above normal mortality rates experienced during the lambing season. A 2019 report by NS concluded that eagle predation is a factor in lamb losses (Scottish Natural Heritage, 2019). In what could be termed as an exemplar of human-wildlife conflict, considerable resentment and public disagreement has developed between crofters, their representative organisations, and conservation bodies over the ongoing presence of the birds.

Tracking the contours of an interspecies belonging as practiced by humans and non-humans, within such a contested and dynamic political ecology of agrarian change, required immersive and in-depth ethnographic fieldwork. Research was undertaken on the Isle of Skye and the wider region for a total of 11 months between September 2017 and February 2019. Participant observation was directed at attuning to both the social worlds of crofters, and the lived experiences of the non-humans with which they co-habit. In line with recent similar work, this involved deploying a ‘tracking’ of cohabitation, seeking to capture the generative capacity of animal presence through both direct observation, the knowledges and experiences of those who work with animals, and formal accounts of animal behaviour and upland ecologies (Barua, 2014; Crowley et al., 2017). It is important to note here that the concern in this article is not with the interiority or ontologies of animal life, their own perceptions and understandings, but instead to explain their generative presence for crofters’ subjectivities. This generative capacity results from animal agencies, their practices and mobilities and the ways these are imbricated in farming tasks, but the emphasis remains on how this informs people’s understandings of belonging, rather than animal’s own place-making or phenomenal experience.

During fieldwork the author lived on crofts, taking part in a range of farming practices, from feeding lambs to digging drainage gullies to controlling of predators, as well as in collective crofting activities, like the gathering of sheep from the hills. Walking interviews and ethnographic go-alongs with crofters and conservationists were conducted in the hills, visiting sites of socioecological interest, for example, upland wader nesting sites or areas of different grazing intensity (Kusenbach, 2003; Vergunst and Ingold, 2016). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 42 crofting and farming households who keep sheep on the upland grazings, as well as with a range of staff from conservation bodies, government, community organisations and crofting membership organisations. The author also shadowed conservation staff who undertook monitoring work on the sea eagles, accompanying them to nest sites and observing the birds. These methods acted as not just an immersion in the sociocultural realities of crofting lives, but as a means to disentangle the agencies involved in the material-ecological interactions inherent to farming practice.

Belonging as autonomous socioecological practice

The crofting system resulted from the period of rapid commercialisation and dispossession broadly known as the Highland Clearances, which was concentrated between 1770 and the 1870s. Landlords forcibly evicted communities from vast areas of the interior in order to establish large-scale sheep ranching systems, resulting in widespread poverty and emigration. They also established small landholdings for some remaining communities on poorer, marginal lands, known as crofts (Devine, 2004; Smout, 1998). Rebellions and political mobilisation led to crofters being granted secure tenure, the result of which is the fossilisation of the croft system into a form of agricultural holdings still prevalent today. Crofts vary in size, but average around 5ha, and usually comprise a farmstead, house and fields, and a share in the common grazings, usually vast, hilly or mountainous ranges of rough grassland and moorland suitable only for grazing livestock.

For many of the research participants belonging as a crofter is not borne from simply owning or renting a croft, or just having ancestral links to the region, but is determined by a set of practices that are deemed to constitute crofting: you have to work the land to be a crofter. Here then belonging is working. As a middle-aged crofter put it when describing his land:

“The croft here was cleared, if you go back two or three hundred years, if you go back most places on Skye, you’ll find mounds of stones, they’re greened over now. What I’m trying to say is blood and sweat went into clearing the crofts... It’s in your blood you know, all that work that was done”

As the above quote exemplifies, this emphasis on subjectivity as constituted by practices is inter-generational, with strong genetic and embodied metaphors commonly deployed to present the deeply felt connection between how you work the land as a continuation of the work of your ancestors. Gray, in his ethnography of hill farmers in the Scottish borders, uses the term consubstantiation to describe this extension of personhood, biography and genealogy into place: ‘what is essential to hill sheep farming people is a spatial relation between family and farm, between beings and a place, such that the distinct existence and form of both partake of or become united in a common substance’ (Gray, 1998: 345). My account builds on Gray’s by emphasising that this mutual substantiation emerges through the affective intensities of farming work: the everyday, physical practices of moving and shearing sheep, repairing fences, provisioning feed or mineral blocks, driving the quad over hills, amongst myriad other farming tasks. A crofter, who inherited his croft from his father, described how this feeling of historic belonging to the land is bound up in the very act of working on it:

"I believe the land owns me, rather than me owning the land, we’re only passing through, as my father and grandfather did too, so you have to work to leave it how you got it, or make it better, you have to work it and keep it right"

This work is visceral and precognitive, bound up in the physical sensations and learned, habitual understanding of the land which crofters are interacting with. Underlying these practices is an immersion in the relational fields that connect sensing bodies, terrain, weather and animal sentience: farming tasks are not simply impositions of human action on the landscape, but instead are socio-ecological mediations between diverse agencies, whereby the task itself is shaped by the embodied movements of the crofter as well as the behaviour of sheep, the bogginess of ground, the growth patterns of heather. The tasks rely upon an unconscious but learned sense of the relations between other bodies, terrains and elements in a specific moment. For example, when collecting a stray lamb, a crofter will know the bodily expressions of the lamb’s mood, the slope of the land it is running on and the thickness of the vegetation it traverses, and this will affect their own movements and actions. This interweaving of bodies, movements and materials through work becomes generative of mood and feeling, what Simonsen defines as ‘attunements — contextual significances of the world, associated with practices, lifemode and social situation’ (Simonsen, 2007: 175; Stewart, 2011). The processual movement from affective intensity to felt experience to articulations of belonging can be seen most stridently in descriptions of a sense of feeling good or right when undertaking farm work. As a crofter put it when describing his love of farming:

"I’d be out there every day if I could, it’s where I feel at home you know, where I feel good. I bust a gut all year, all weathers, pissy shit wet nights you’re out there walking round, soaked to the balls, wading through it. I do it because I love it"

Trekking out in cold temperatures, amongst beating, constant winds and biting, heavy rain to repair a fence or to try and find a sick lamb are reliant upon accumulated knowledge of terrain through learned and habitual movement of hand and body in an environment rich with felt and sensed experience. In this sense, belonging becomes a relational affect of socioecological practice and immersion. For those crofting, the acting out of farming tasks is a compulsion, a way of feeling at place in the world. It is the particular affective intensity of farming practice, the correspondence between the different material entities engaged with by those undertaking this work, that crofters feel compelled to return to, and which bring forth a particular feeling of being in place. As James Rebanks, in his memoir of life as a shepherd in the English Lake District, puts it: ‘our sense of belonging is all about participation. We belong because we are part of the work of this

place' (Rebanks, 2015: 146). Rebanks use of 'our' here is important: some hill farming activities are undertaken collectively, with crofters coming together to gather the sheep from the hills, for shearing, or for transporting stock and taking part in local sales. Although much croft work is done alone, the communal experience of some working practises can affirm and amplify senses of belonging. Crofters would often remark that through working together they were reminded that crofting still had a place on the island. If a personal, affective sense of belonging emerges in farm work, it is through instances of cooperative farm labour that it can be collectively asserted and sedimented within crofting communities.

This sociomaterial relation between landscape and belonging finds a more concise expression in the commonly used term '*way of life*'. The phrase is used extensively when crofters describe what they do, for example below a participant explains why they continue to farm:

"So many times you ask yourself why are you doing this? And it just boils down to it's the way of life, it's the way it's always been, and you just want to do it"

The plainness and succinct quality of this term are fitting and emblematic of many crofters' way of talking about what they do, unadorned with romanticism or florid description that can sometimes be found in other accounts of crofters' relationship with the land. This emphasis on socioecological practice coheres with now well-established and familiar phenomenological understandings within landscape geography, which depart from an emphasis on symbolic representation to instead show how the landscape is constituted in and through what Hayden Lorimer has called the 'embodied acts of landscaping' (Lorimer, 2005: 85; Wylie, 2012). In these dwelt landscapes meaning emerges through materiality, in the embodied practices of inhabitation, what Ingold calls 'relational contexts of the perceiver's involvement in the world' (Ingold, 2000: 51).

However, if belonging is a relational affect achieved through the immersion of farming practice, then how can it be understood within the wider political-economic forces that shape landscapes? Outside of landscape studies, a strand of critical phenomenology has emerged which seeks to situate the embodied, practicing subject as also composed through relations of power and social meaning (Guenther, 2013; Kinkaid, 2021; Simonsen, 2013). Subjectivity emerges through practice and encounter, but within bodies and selves that are sedimented with the history of previous practices and encounters formed within fields of power, which compels an analysis that focuses on 'the connections between the production of subjectivity and trans-individual spatial, symbolic, and material economies' (Kinkaid, 2021: 311). This work, with its focus on understanding the subject as constituted relationally through dwelt experience and particular, historically situated social relations, finds resonance with emotional political ecology scholarship from the Global South, which presents socioecological personhood as bound up in the intimate, everyday socionatural practices and the relations of power which shape resource use and access (Singh, 2013; Sultana, 2015). A relational belonging of affective practice is not then a universal condition, but must be understood as situated in and afforded by particular socio-spatial orders and political-ecological dynamics.

Within crofting, this dynamic relation between affective practice and political-ecological subjectivity is most observable in crofters' understanding of farming practice as a form of control. The below quote, from a crofter discussing everyday farming tasks, is emblematic of such an approach:

"So one of my crofter neighbours said to me the other day control is what we do anyway. We control the number of sheep we've got. We control the number of deer on the hill. We control the heather. You sell lambs, you move sheep, you keep the cycle going, it's all a control measure. So it's something that has to be done to make the land right"

For crofters farming work requires some level of control over the non-human life around them in order to produce. Whether it be ensuring pasture remains palatable to stock through regular muirburn and the moving of animals on or off the hills, or controlling bracken to stop it suffocating fodder plants, the tasks so central to belonging and livelihood are considered a means by which the non-human has to be controlled. Here then material practices find meaning through affirmation of order and productivity, itself a reflection of their status as ‘good farmers’ (Burton et al., 2020; Silvasti, 2003). The ‘good farmer’ construct argues that a sociocultural attachment to productivism results in the maintenance of farming practices that are seen as representative of optimal productivity, and which have symbolic importance within farming communities as demonstrative of farming knowledge and skill. This sociocultural emphasis on productivism is further acted out in cooperative farming work, where the idea of a ‘good farmer’ is affirmed as the means by which farming practise is socially assessed (Burton, 2004). This emphasis on farming as oriented towards production has roots in the history of agricultural policy in the UK, which post-Second World War tied farming subsidies to output, and which has embedded within farming subjectivities an idea that good farming means producing food for the market (Burton, 2004; Wilson, 2001). The sense of rightness in the world felt through embodied and affective practice cannot be cleaved from the farming self as productivist: belonging as acts of home and as historically situated producer of small commodities.

Although many crofts are barely profitable the idea of a well-ordered hill is still often associated with productivist values: the reason to keep an effectively managed hill is to produce good stock for sale, not to meet environmental management standards or provide aesthetic value. Fundamental to this is the ability to assert and maintain control over how land is managed. The value of autonomy, independence and self-determination has been demonstrated to be a core component of the farming self in many Western rural contexts, a way farmers understand themselves and a virtue considered essential to being a good farmer, which often forms the basis for sociopolitical engagement with other actors and institutions (Stock et al., 2014; Stock and Forney, 2014). Increasing regulation, intervention and enforced legal compliance by state institutions in food production and land management is often interpreted by farmers through this sociocultural emphasis on autonomy, a means by which their own power over their lives and farms is being marginalised. From muirburn, to bracken control, to regulations over grazing numbers and the designation of protected areas, many crofters perceive themselves as being increasingly subject to bureaucratic intervention from NS, rural payments agencies and conservation NGOs.

Revill has outlined how a critical phenomenology forgoes the universal subject, and instead focuses on the spatiotemporal and social specificity of embodied and affective experience, and the particular politics that this experience animates and articulates (Revill, 2016: 247). The below quote, where a crofter is discussing the environmental requirements attached to farm subsidy schemes, exemplifies how the experience of practice and the sense of belonging it instils animates a sociopolitics of resource access:

“They come up here and they start laying down the law, making up laws for us, but it wasn’t for the way that we have done it here for generations, they think it might look half-baked or whatever, but the birds here survive, they always have... They lay down laws without realising that they should just leave it alone”

The resources of the hill are emotive, the acts of working land are bound up in a sense of inter-generational continuity, which reconfigures resource struggles as not just defences of legal access but of personhood and ‘a way of life’ (Sultana, 2011). This is felt particularly keenly as hill farming slowly recedes in the region, with the number of sheep kept on the hills declining, and crofters facing continuing reductions in subsidies and price squeezes for inputs and outputs (SRUC,

2008). Crofting families struggle on as often the only hill farmers in their townships, with common grazing institutions and collective labour arrangements close to complete dereliction, the financial viability of their businesses in question, and often without clear successors for the family farm.

On Skye, the imposition of rules and regulations which hinder or restrain the practices considered essential to maintaining a good hill are seen as not reflecting local knowledge borne from crofter's own work, and as emanating from outside the borders of the hill. As one crofter put it, describing environmental state institutions: *'They've got this arrogance, that's always been there, that crofters are thick as shit, and they have all the answers'*. It is when contesting this dynamic that the communal dimensions of crofting are stridently asserted, with a discursive emphasis on 'we' and 'crofters' that mobilises the idea of a legitimate, localised collective battling marginalisation by endogenous forces. It is during cooperative farming work, in discussion with other crofters, where many vocalise their resentment with environmental bodies, and so assert a collective belonging premised on socio-spatial exclusion (Antonsich, 2010).

Crofters put a strong emphasis on their own knowledge of nature, borne from their everyday, embodied and intimate relations with their own land, and this often forms the rhetorical basis of political positioning against the external imposition of controls over natural resource use (Emery and Carrithers, 2016). They regularly contrast their own knowledge and increasing lack of power over natural resources to the knowledge of those who construct the rules, *"away in their offices in London or Edinburgh, never set foot on a croft"*, and the power that they have over the land that crofters work. As elaborated by Toogood, this differentiation is reflective of a deeper, historical dynamic, whereby the apolitical bureaucratic scientism of statutory conservation in Scotland marginalises crofters' own knowledge, and in doing so occludes their political claims over how landscapes should be managed (Toogood, 2003). In a post-productivist uplands, where crofting is struggling economically and subject to increasingly strict environmental regulation, belonging is far from a romantic oneness with the land. Instead 'personal belongingness', an intimate sense of being at home through affective practice, diffuses into and amplifies a 'politics of belonging' which makes more collective, sociopolitical claims against the external forces seen to compromise the acts which constitute belonging, the 'way of life' of crofting landscapes (Antonsich, 2010: 645).

The materialisation of animal belonging

If the above account outlines the affective, material underpinnings of belonging to upland landscapes, then where do non-humans stand in this dynamic between practice and landscape subjectivity? As Mee and Wright have it: 'Belonging connects matter to place, through various practices of boundary making and inhabitation which signal that a particular collection of objects, animals, plants, germs, people, practices, performances or ideas is meant "to be" in a place"' (Mee and Wright, 2009: 772). This account builds on this understanding by arguing that belonging is a matter, so to speak, of co-habitation centred on material interaction between humans and non-humans, formed through farming practices that are bound up within the social relations of upland agrarian landscapes.

Animals should be understood as constitutive of these relations: their own ways of living and behaviours are central to the affective intensities of farming work. Understandably the most prominent animals here are the Scottish Blackface and the North Country Cheviot sheep. These are the two most common breeds on Skye, known for their hardiness and ability to thrive in hill and mountain farming systems. They originated in the eighteenth-century large-scale sheep farms of the Borders region between England and Scotland, and as the sheep frontier of British agrarian capitalism pushed north into the Highlands so did these breeds, and with them the Clearances and creation of commodity-oriented livestock production (Devine, 2018). The hill farming system is centred on the autonomy of the sheep themselves: their physical resilience means they are left

un-shepherded throughout the year, and their ability to sustain themselves is reliant upon their ethological dispositions and traits. The ewes that form the flocks become accustomed to a specific part of land, developing knowledge of grazing boundaries and the locations of different plants at different times of year, and where to find shelter and natural hazards like gullies or cliffs. They also develop site-specific disease resistance, and pass both the knowledge and the immunity down to their lambs each year (Mansfield et al., 2006). For those that work with them this self-reliance is a hallmark of their place on the hill, as opposed to the farmyard where they are taken for shearing and lambing: *‘These hill sheep, you know, they don’t like it in-bye, they want to be out where they belong. If you take them in they’re away at the end of fence, looking out and away at the hill, trying to get out there. They don’t belong down here’*.

Here then, it is the way the sheep forge lives on the hills through their own knowledge and temperaments, and this imbrication with the commodity production system of farming, which shapes the way they are related to. This relation is also embodied, in that the bodily condition of the stock becomes a marker of good stockmanship. The sheep’s health and vitality are a tangible, felt indicator of the way that animals and the land have been nurtured to generate something they can be proud to sell. The sheep thus embody a sociocultural ideal of productivist good farming through their own corporeal matter, their exchange on markets an affirmation of the role of the farmer in raising them to healthy and strong condition. It is through collective crofting work like sales or the gather where crofters discuss the bodies and health of their sheep with each other, and so affirm productivist articulations of this embodied relation.

Crofters are highly attuned and sensitised to the bodies and movements of their animals, a largely unspoken connection that is enacted and sensed as crofters go about their daily workings on their farms and grazings. It is striking the extent to which their farming practices are affected through an embodied attunement to animal presence. Practices form as unsaid instinctive reactions to nuanced differences in a ewe’s condition, from their gait to the quality of their fleece, or to their comportment and behaviour, from the speed with which they might butt another, to where yearlings stand in relation to older sheep. This connection can form strong emotive bonds between crofters and their stock. An elderly crofter described the relation between self and sheep as follows:

“Sheep are part of your being really. They’re part of yourself. You do all of this for them, and they’re part of what you are, if you see what I mean”

The sheep are active participants in belonging through their own making of life on the hill, the imbrication of this making with the small-commodity farming system, and through their own embodied presence acting as a marker of the hill as the site of vitality and productivity. These same relational dynamics that undergird the socioecology of the hill are evident in other animals that make their lives within the semi-natural habitat of upland landscapes. These are the species that thrive in the unimproved grassland closer to the steadings and the higher elevation moorland and bog habitats, and can be understood of as being adapted and suited to the specific habitat compositions produced by crofting agriculture (Signal and McCracken, 1996).

For example, participants talked fondly of the Eurasian curlew, a bird that they would often see on the grazings when undertaking farm work. Many crofters have intimate knowledge of the nesting and feeding sites of individual curlews, and how these relate to the grazing patterns of their flocks (Fry et al., 2022). The lived patterns of curlews’ interactions with the hill, their own mobilities (Hodgetts and Lorimer, 2020), are spatialised through the habitat heterogeneity maintained by grazing and muirburn: the curlew feed extensively on the improved but still rough grasslands closer to the farm, and nest in the taller, tussocky heather moorland at higher elevations, where there is a large variation in sward height (Franks et al., 2017; Pearce-Higgins and Grant, 2006). Curlews adjust their feeding and nesting in response to changes in grazing intensity or

more drastic habitat changes like muirburn or drainage (Douglas et al., 2017). The below quote captures how this imbrication of animal life with farming work forges a sense of place:

“If you saw the curlews and the plover come back you’d be delighted, because you would know that the land is the way it should be, not particularly because you have a love of curlews or peewits, but you know, if you see these birds, that the environment is the way it should be”

For those who work the uplands this relation between farming practice, habitat heterogeneity and the lived patterns of animals finds expression in the idea that animal life is ‘part of the whole thing’ or ‘part of what we do’. Like the bodies of the sheep, a hill where species that have adapted to grazed upland habitat are present, where crofters encounter and come to know these animals, is a material marker of place as it should be. The lives of animals, their bodies and patterns of behaviour, are enfolded within the socioecology of farming practice and its affective properties, and so become active in shaping how those who work the uplands conceive of who and what should belong.

The unbelonging of the sea eagle

“We’ve always had the raven, and we’ve always had the hoodies, and so many others. They’ve always been here, they belong here”

The straightforward explanation for why the sea eagle reintroduction has often been derided by those who keep livestock is that the bird is implicated in the predation of lambs. However, considering its sociocultural reception through the dynamics of interspecies belonging offers a more nuanced understanding of the place of carnivores in upland socioecologies. It is generally accepted by active crofters on the island that there exists a group of mesopredators which pose a risk to lambs, especially those newly born: the hooded crow, great-backed gull, Northern raven, and most of all the red fox. However, all of these species are allowed to be legally controlled by farmers in Scotland. The below quote is a research participant describing how this control is an emotive part of crofting life:

“You’ve always had fox, and I enjoy going out and shooting the fox. Going out there, finding them, it’s a challenge, it’s part of life here. I love it”

Observing crofters taking part in predator control it is obvious to see how the affective and corporeal character of working the hill also pertains to this pursuit. ‘*Sometimes you can smell them, you know if you’re near the den because of that smell*’. Finding and successfully killing foxes relies upon a felt, sensed and experiential understanding of landscape and animal behaviour, the ways in which different habitats and terrain, and the prevailing weather conditions, influence how the fox will behave and how its pursuers will react. This has strong echoes with Lescureux, who in his work on human–predator co-existence, has utilised Ingold’s thoughts on reciprocity: ‘humans and animals constitute themselves reciprocally with their particular identities and purposes’ (Ingold, 1996: 131; Lescureux et al., 2011). Here then co-existence between predators and farmers is maintained by the reciprocal nature of their dynamic correspondence, the ways in which each of their behaviour and knowledge informs the relationship between them, for example in the ways in which hunters track wolves through a landscape (Lescureux, 2006).

The acts of killing these predators are part of the autonomous socioecological practice that constitutes belonging: it is both affective and embodied, and stridently defended as a form of control

over natural resources. This reciprocity, expressed in the embodied and emotive acts of locating and killing predators, is key in allowing them to be placed within the landscape as legitimately belonging. This was put quite simply to me by one research participant, who after ending a lengthy story of how he spent a long evening hunting for a particularly wily old fox, reflected on the potential for the species to be locally exterminated: *'I would hate to be going out on that hill, and to think there wasn't a fox watching me'*.

It is important to note here that NS, the RSPB, and many crofters themselves, accept that the number of lambs taken by eagles is probably low, especially in comparison to other predators. However, for many crofters, the issue is not so much scale, but control. One of the most common refrains across interviews, conversations and interactions with crofters on Skye was a comparison between predators which they were able to control, and the eagle, which they were not. Controlling predators is often done cooperatively, and is commonly mobilised in collective claims to legitimate control of the hill's resources. The following quote was expressed emotively by a crofter, with an animated frustration, when discussing the issue: *'The control has been taken out of our hands. But historically we have had control, generations of crofters have managed the land, and, erm, now it's been taken away from us'*. The sea eagle is a Schedule One species under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, meaning it is afforded the highest level of protection, and no licenses are available to control it under any circumstances. This is understandable given its low numbers and narrow range nationally, but it underlines how the eagle sits materially and legally outside of the autonomous practices that shape interspecies belonging. This was felt particularly deeply, and elicited very strong and emotive reactions of anger, resentment and a sense of unjustness. Implied within this was that it contravened the logic, necessity and sociocultural importance of practices that allow for the control of life on the hill, captured in the quote below from a research participant:

"At lambing time here, I was sitting out, and there was three eagles floating about... I thought to myself you know if that was three foxes I could go out there and shoot them, that's the frustrating part, you know they're doing it but you can't do anything about it, it sticks in your throat"

The ethological attributes and mobilities of the eagle also contrast with those of birds, like the curlew, whose patterns of daily activity are imbricated within farming practices. Sea eagles build their eyries either on remote cliff ledges or more commonly in trees in the Sitka spruce plantations of commercial forestry, habitats that sit outside of and are not impacted by farming work. The eagle is also known for its bold behaviour, its willingness to fly or perch closer to people than other raptors, and to nest near human habitation. It is a physically striking bird, with a wingspan of close to 2 m, and a large body and rectangular wings, a sight impossible to miss as it soars above the grazings. These habits and morphological traits mean that crofters regularly encounter the birds whilst working. Being with crofters when encountering a sea eagle, sometimes perched very close by, it is vividly clear that this is an affective experience that lacks the material engagement of co-habitation, and instead channels into feelings of exasperation and sadness. The politics of belonging to land, expressed through an emphasis on the need for crofter autonomy and independence in the face of external impositions on their ability to pursue a way of life, is felt emotively in the presence of these birds.

In many discussions of the eagles, and of the organisations responsible for the reintroduction and management of it, talk would seamlessly move into broader contestation over the ways in which modern conservation and environmental management regulations and interventions deny the autonomy of farming communities, diminish practical farming knowledge, and threaten the socioecological balance of the hill. As a crofter described it, the reintroduction exposes the emotively felt contrast between farming knowledge and bureaucratic environmental management:

“With the eagles they’ve shown a complete lack of respect for people who manage land again. These people who put themselves up as environmentalists, right, but they don’t, they’re not. We do though, we manage the land, we work with nature, we know what’s going on”

This social representation of novel predators as emblematic of larger struggles for control of the countryside has been observed in discussions of the wolf (Figari and Skogen, 2011; Skogen and Krange, 2003) and the sea eagle reintroduction in Ireland (O’Rourke, 2014). The legal protection given to the eagle denies crofters access to the material practices of farming that allow for co-existence with other species, but also shapes the collective political engagement with the bird, as an emblem of the increasing authority of post-productivist conceptions of rural space and the marginalisation of hill farming communities own knowledge and self-determination over natural resource use.

The place of the sea eagle in the landscape, and so within localised conceptions of what constitutes the authentic in-place natural world, is largely deemed as illegitimate, as not belonging. The quote below demonstrates how this is often felt by crofters, a sense of the bird not being right in this place:

"I don't see the sea eagle as part of the natural environment. I know that it was here before, but it still doesn't fit right, it's not like the rest, it doesn't make sense here"

The ways in which the sea eagle is represented as out-of-place by those who work on the hills resonates with other research on the animal spaces of carnivores. The eagle is often equated with species that are classified as invasive: *‘the sea eagle is like, like a foreign weed that comes in, you know, like Japanese knotweed’*; or that by feeding in-land it is not conforming to its ‘natural behaviour’: *‘The kids used to run outside and shout at the eagle, “Get Back to the sea”! That’s where they’re supposed to be’*. Similar representations, which seek to dislocate a carnivore from a locality by arguing that it lacks ecological authenticity, have been observed in the social reception of wolves (von Essen, 2017; Linnell et al., 2008). These narratives, which contest conservation organisations’ framing of the reintroduction as a successful ecological integration of a carnivore, can function politically as a form of quiet resistance to official orthodoxies and applications of power, and in doing so can reveal the sociopolitical foundations for ‘cultural representations of the animal and of what belongs in... the countryside’ (Theodorakea and von Essen, 2016: 29; Scott, 1992)

The preoccupation of this article though is not to centre these representations of animal spaces, but instead to help understand their position within a wider choreography of belonging, one which enfolds personal and political subjectivities with the situated material practices of crofters and animals. The non-human entities enrolled within this process are imbued with significant emotion, they are central to the everyday routines that constitute a way of life, and the strength of feeling directed towards the eagle must be understood within this context. The eagle has entered into the lives of crofters at a moment of what often feels like an existential crisis. It was not unusual for discussions with crofters about the bird to move seamlessly into discussions about the future of crofting itself, and the deep changes that have taken place in communities as farming has declined. The eagles are soaring above a landscape that is increasingly devoid of livestock, and of the people who work it. The unbelonging of the eagle, its place outside of the material fabric of landscape emanating from farming practice, must be understood as part of a wider decline in the very way of life to which the belonging of those who work the hills is tethered.

Conclusion

This article has sought to understand the ways in which people feel themselves and the non-humans they co-exist alongside as belonging to agrarian landscapes. In doing so, it has conceived of an interspecies belonging: a dynamic process of co-habitation, through which situated and spatio-temporally specific affective practices of crofters and animals, are generative of an intimate and personal sense of belonging, and which animate a particular political sociality. This process is conditioned within broader political ecologies of land use, which shape both the materiality of affective practices, the emotive endowment of those practices, and their articulation politically in claims over what should belong and what should not.

This account has sought to extend and strengthen geographical conceptions of belonging that have centred its constitution through affect, materiality and embodiment, and more specifically the still nascent idea of a more-than-human belonging, where belonging is conceived of as relational and co-produced by the non-human (Country et al., 2016; Wright, 2015). Considerate of the critique of affective and phenomenological approaches as being universalist, ahistorical and romantic, it has combined this approach with insights from affective and emotional political ecology, critical phenomenology and animal geography, with the aim of understanding belonging as a process of the generation of subjectivity through affective socioecological practice that is critically situated and politically articulated. Belonging thus becomes a productive means to avoid a tired affirmation of relational constitution, and instead to demonstrate the importance of non-human agency and affective experience within the contested political ecologies of agrarian change and nature conservation (González-Hidalgo and Zografos, 2020; Singh, 2018).

In this sense, it can be considered a contribution to the growing body of work that seeks to combine political ecology and post-human geographies in order to account for the generative power of non-human life and materiality in political-economic relations (Margulies and Bersaglio, 2018). In particular it demonstrates how our understanding of conservation politics and encounters can be enhanced through a conception of landscape and environmental subjectivity that centres affective relations with an active, causal non-human world. Building on recent work in emotional and affective political ecologies (González-Hidalgo and Zografos, 2020; Nightingale et al., 2022; Singh, 2018), it has centred the generative capacity of affect and non-human agency in the process of environmental subjection, demonstrating their importance in how people position themselves and animals within political contestations over species conservation and environmental management.

This approach underlines the importance of considering the complex dynamics that shape how novel animals are socioculturally received. This question matters for conservation interventions, as the social legitimacy of recolonising or reintroduced animals cannot be taken for granted in a structurally transitioning countryside. In the post-productivist uplands, which as Krauß and Olwig put it is 'caught between abandonment, rewilding and agro-environmental management' (Krauß and Olwig, 2018: 1019), the acceptance and legitimacy of novel ecological change will be contingent upon how it accords with the wider spatial and material compositions of practices, objects, humans and non-humans that constitute belonging for farming communities.

Highlights

- Develops the concept of interspecies belonging: A dynamic process of co-habitation achieved through material, affective and situated practises.
- On the Isle of Skye farming practices engender an intimate personal belonging and a political, bounded belonging.

- Through their own behaviours and bodies, animals are active participants in this belonging.
- This shapes how animals are considered as legitimate or illegitimate presences in the political ecologies of a post-productivist upland.

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ORCID iD

Tom Fry  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9104-4671>

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