

To protect or to kill? Polarising dynamics of public debate on foxes and wild boar in Flanders



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Context

Across many parts of Europe, a variety of bird and mammal species have made a comeback in recent years. In Flanders, the red fox and wild boar have been recolonizing after a long absence (foxes in the last decades of the 20th century, wild boar in the first decade of the 21st century). While welcomed by some as a victory for biodiversity, others detest the “returnees” for the nuisance, damage and risk they bring. All of this gave rise to continuous conflicts and disputes.



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Arguments

This case study traces the development of public debate through observing a variety of forums (mass and social media, parliament, organisations’ magazines and websites, etc.).

The debates in different forums unfolded along mainly three polarised positions: “belonging/not belonging” (the animals belong in Flanders or in our nature versus they do not belong here); “opportunity/threat” (the animals are useful and provide opportunities versus they are harmful and pose a threat) and “control by intervention/nature controls itself” (the necessity to keep the animals under control by active management versus the capacity of nature to balance or control itself).

Framing

The framing of the situation was highly conditioned by institutional roles and identities. For example, politicians were inclined to defend the case of those affected by foxes and boars (i.e. serving public needs) and hunters emphasised their role in maintaining the balance of nature.



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More information?

Van Herzele A, Aarts N, Casaer J 2015. Wildlife comeback in Flanders: Tracing the fault lines and dynamics of public debate. *European Journal of Wildlife Research*, DOI: 10.1007/s10344-015-0925-5

Polarising dynamics

Several dynamics in argumentation increased the polarisation of debate and complicated the resolution of conflict:

Dynamics in argumentation	Examples	Polarising effects
Arguments converge on a limited set of dichotomies	The evaluation of “belonging” (versus “not belonging”) rested on a dichotomous definition (natural/artificial) of dichotomous facts (released or not, present or absent): If previously present animals come back on their own it is seen a natural phenomenon and they are more easily accepted as belonging in Flanders and worthy of protection	The parties are steered towards the same issues so that they continuously repeat their arguments, so limiting the scope of the debate
Arguments align either in support or in opposition to one of the poles of a dichotomy	Parties in debate selected facts to support the pole that, in their opinion, ought to be preferred, e.g. either the damage caused by wild boar or the opportunities for tourism	The incompatibility of the poles is emphasised and possibilities of finding intermediate alternatives are closed off
Single incidents or issues that were previously separate become inter-linked	Fox attacks on backyard chickens were linked to similar attacks elsewhere, to concerns about fox predation on native fauna and to public health and safety issues	The particular problem is enlarged and the likelihood of finding a solution that satisfies all the issues is diminished
Issues are scaled up at higher organisational levels	The issue of fox predation on native fauna was seen in the light of biodiversity policies and Natura 2000 targets	The according issue’s weight is increased and a societal problem may be created that requires government intervention
Linkages are made to social and political relationships	As the debate developed, arguments no longer revolved around issues of fox and wild boar per se but centred on unequal powers, responsibilities and group identities	Issues become less tangible and amenable to practical solutions
Stereotypes and stigmas are imposed on particular groups	There was a tendency in public reactions to portray hunters as inhumane (killing animals for pleasure) and frustrated. Conservationists were depicted as elite people.	Relational tensions are further intensified

Transferability

Conflicts and debates on wildlife issues seem often intractable or resistant to resolution. This case study (1) offers an operational approach to recognising the dynamics in debate that can lead to polarisation and deadlock; (2) provides useful clues for transforming the dynamics perpetuating the conflict to different dynamics that allow for more constructive relations between the parties involved.

Lessons learned

The polarisation of debate is not merely a manifestation of incompatible interests, goals and visions, but is heavily influenced by the dynamics of the debate itself.

These polarising dynamics are largely a result of the contending parties’ efforts and strategies to enhance the effectiveness of their own arguments.

Institutional roles and identities are confirmed and reproduced during the course of the debate, which, in turn, contributes to the perpetuation of conflict.



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