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Controlling the Wilderness: The Work of Wilderness Officers

ABSTRACT

Ideologies having roots in the legal structure of the system of wildlife protection characterize the work culture of the Pennsylvania wilderness officer. This paper examines these ideologies and the characteristically strong social solidarity of the community of wilderness officers. Wilderness officers are both law enforcement agents and conservationists. They mediate between human and animal as well as between what is considered scientific management and what is considered unenlightened and even lawless behavior. In performing this boundary work, wilderness officers participate in the social construction of the science of land management, which views animals as renewable resources. The wilderness officer's job is to insure the continuation of this resource as a part of the natural heritage of Pennsylvania and the United States. The wilderness officer's concept of “animal” becomes a byproduct of this social construction and of the culture of hunting that supports it. The rural upbringing common to many officers suits them ideally to their task.

This research focuses on the occupational ideology of Pennsylvania wilderness officers, a collective term for “conservation officer” and “game warden,” the two types of field workers employed by Pennsylvania to police the forests. It examines their motivations, values, and their social constructions of “animals”
and “wilderness heritage.” The term “occupational ideology” derives from the concept of the culture of work as developed by Everett Hughes. This ideology is rooted in societal beliefs about natural heritage. Because society believes this heritage should be preserved for the permanent good of the whole people [Public Law 88-577, 1964], wilderness officers exist to enforce protective boundaries placed around and within the wilderness.

I became interested in studying the work of wilderness officers after I relocated to north central Pennsylvania from Lake Bluff, Illinois. North central Pennsylvania is a region filled with trees and natural beauty. In contrast, Lake Bluff is a rapidly growing suburb of Chicago. In Lake Bluff, I belonged to an activist group, “Open Lands,” that attempted to slow down habitat depletion. Through negotiation with land developers, the group worked to save small pieces of forest or wetland, where birds, ducks, a few deer, and some pheasants could live. While this organization continues to lose land to developers, it has created a number of refuges.

Bradford, Pennsylvania is rural, and its population is shrinking. There are heavily forested areas where wild animals live, and hunting, fishing, and wildlife observation are a major recreation as well as economic force. I was curious about the types of laws and methods of conservation management that were in place in north central Pennsylvania. Being a member of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), a vegetarian, and an animal rights advocate, I was anxious to meet wilderness officials in hopes some held beliefs similar to mine. Perhaps this was naive. I wanted to understand, from their own perspective, more about the experiences and interactions of the men and women whose work it was to conserve wilderness. What were the problems that concerned them? Why did they choose this occupation? How were they educated? What did they do on the job? How did they interact with the animals?

**Methods of Research**

I began research on this topic in 1998 by taping the educational presentations of five wilderness officers at a deer management seminar. I also taped the question-and-answer session that followed. I remained after the program and chatted with each officer about the conflicts that had surfaced during the
seminar. A recently retired state game warden attending the program overheard my conversations and gave me the names of two land management supervisors and three game wardens from other counties in Pennsylvania to contact. In addition, I made an appointment to accompany him for several hours visiting a local forested area where he shared his beliefs about, and experiences with, managing local wilderness areas.

Between 1999 and 2003, I expanded my research to include other seminars presented by the Environmental Studies Program. The guest lecturers included activists from The Nature Conservancy, promoters of tourism and developers promoting corporate retreats, owners of logging companies, and a lawyer representing private landowners. These speakers were brought in to discuss how to use the wilderness to bring money to the area because there is declining industry and few jobs. I interviewed each of these speakers and attended three additional deer management seminars where I interviewed four newly hired officers.

I reviewed literature on conservation issues circulated by the various speakers. I also read articles written about or by game wardens and conservation officers in areas across the country, such as Florida, Maine, Mississippi, Massachusetts, and Montana, to broaden my understanding of the attitudes and values of wilderness officers in other parts of the United States.

In January 2001, I was contacted by a student attending the College of Natural Resources at the University of Minnesota. He had been a corrections officer and was pursuing a new career in wildlife conservation. We began correspondence that gave me additional insight into the narratives of the professionals involved with managing wilderness.

I also enlisted the aid of two University of Pittsburgh students who interviewed in depth three game wardens, and I accompanied one of these students on a hunting expedition. One student invited me to his home to meet his mother, a retired game warden, who operates a horse farm. During four hunting seasons, I spent time observing at a local inn—approximately 12 evenings over 3 seasons. Sometimes I was included in hunters’ conversations and got to listen to their concerns about loss of habitat and stock, which they blamed on poor game management practices.

In total, I conducted in-depth interviews with 2 land management supervisors, 15 wilderness officers, 8 hunters, and 3 environmentalists. I had casual
conversations with approximately 10 residents who attended these seminars as well as 30 hunters I met in the hotel bar. I recorded the interviews, transcribed and coded them, and took notes following the casual conversations.

**Job Descriptions of Wilderness Officers**

In Pennsylvania, there are two types of wilderness officers: conservation officers and game wardens. Conservation officers and game wardens are the creations of the law requiring management and protection of forests and wilderness areas. Conservation officers in Pennsylvania differ from game wardens in that their job generally requires a degree in ecology as well as law enforcement. The job of conservation officer varies with the type of area patrolled and the needs of that area as well as the specialization and education of the officer. These agents patrol wildlife areas to prevent “game” law violations, investigate reports of damage to property—including damage to crops by wildlife—and compile biological data. They report the condition of fish and wildlife in their habitat, the availability of food and cover, and the suspected pollution of waterways. Agents recommend changes in hunting and trapping seasons and the relocation of animals out of overpopulated areas to obtain balance of wildlife and habitat. They also implement approved control measures, such as trapping beavers, dynamiting beaver dams, and tranquilizing and relocating deer, bear, cougar and other nonhuman animals. They survey area populations and record hunters’ total “bag” counts to determine the effectiveness of their control measures.

Game wardens mostly serve as police or law enforcement agents. They guard against violations in hunting such as killing more than the allowed quota, hunting without a license, hunting out of season, or using improper weapons. Literature written by or about game wardens focuses mainly on the excitement, adventure, and danger they face when stalking other humans, such as poachers in the wilderness (Curtis, 1998; Graham, Jr., 1987; Palmer & Bryant, 1985; Parker, 1983). Palmer and Bryant conclude that game wardens are “strikingly similar in attitudes, demeanor and dramaturgical skills to city police officers” because both consider their work to be professional and dangerous (p. 133). Law enforcement degrees are generally required.

Both game wardens and conservation officers enlist the aid of sporting groups in such programs as lake and stream rehabilitation and game habitat improve-
ment. They assist in promoting hunter safety training by arranging for material and instructors. They give talks to civic groups, school assemblies, and sports organizations to disseminate information about wildlife and department policies (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 1991).

**Occupational Ideologies**

The cultural approach to studying work as developed by Hughes can be used to examine the careers of wilderness officers. In order to study careers, according to Hughes, we need to search for the sequence of the career as experienced by the worker (Hughes, 1997). The beginnings of the career are in the childhood socialization toward it. This is followed by the training and experience of the profession. Pennsylvania wilderness officers share a common ideology, which emerges through their upbringing, training, and work experience. Concepts of wilderness, wildlife, and the value of nature as heritage are central to this ideology.

**Wilderness and Wildlife**

Defining the term “wilderness” is difficult because virgin territory does not exist and “wilderness” is thus an ideal left to the imagination. Legally, the Federal definition of wilderness is that of the Wilderness Act (Public Law 88-577, 1964). It states, “A wilderness . . . is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain”. It is an extension of the concept of National Forest. The Wilderness Act recognizes the definitions of resources as provided in the Organic Act of 1897 and The Multiple Use Sustained Yield Act of 1960 (Public Law 86-517). These specify minerals, timber, and wildlife as among the lawfully consumable resources of the wilderness. Conservation officers manage wilderness areas. A “wilderness area” is defined by the Wilderness Act as “an area of undeveloped . . . land retaining its primeval character and influence . . . which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which . . . appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature . . .”

The definition of a “wilderness area” states that it exists to be managed and that successful management conserves its appearance of being “unimpaired”
and thus forever the same. Thus, ironically, Cronon (1995) describes wilderness as “the place where, symbolically at least, we [humans] try to withhold our power to dominate” (p. 87). But hunters and conservationists alike insist the government needs to control and police wilderness areas to protect them. Although there actually may be some withholding of human domination, Nibert (2002), Helford (2000), Kahn (1999), Clow (1995), Harpley and Milne (1995), Starkloff (1995), and Schnaiberg and Gould (1994) decry this human domination of wilderness and wildlife: Only specific people get to define which land is to be developed, which is not, which animals are killed and in what numbers.

Finding a definition of “wildlife” is also not easy. The U.S. Code (2003) defines “wildlife” as “any wild member of the animal kingdom whether alive or dead and regardless of whether the member was bred, hatched, or born in captivity . . .” Thus, by the definitions of law, wild, nonhuman species are held on a level with minerals as constituents of the land existing to serve the needs of humans as sources of aesthetic enjoyment, sport, and food. Although wilderness is defined legally as containing “a community of life,” U.S. culture does not consider wild, nonhuman animals equal to humans; it has traditionally excluded them from human communities. There are thus two kinds of communities, both of which are significantly self-regulating: the human community and the biological community. Animal-rights advocates such as Jeffrey Masson and Susan McCarthy find that “humans often behave as if something like us were more worthy of respect than something not like us” (1995, p. 86). They argue that animals are subjects who feel pain, love, and anger and are violated by being treated as objects. Thus, through the agency of the wilderness officer, the human community regulates that of the animals, so that they may be protected and thereby provide a sustained yield. Wilderness and wildlife are seen as contributing to human welfare. It is the responsibility of wilderness officer to see that this contribution is not denigrated.

Preserving the Quality of Life for Humans

Wanting to improve the quality of life for both humans and animals is what those I interviewed and read about say motivated them to become wilderness officers. What, in their minds, constitutes “quality” and “improvement” depends on their system of values. Kempton (1999) groups environmental
values into three broad categories: (a) religious, (b) anthropocentric, and (c) biocentric. Religious bases contain specific religious teachings, including a God-given right to kill or the attribution of a spiritual force to nature. Anthropocentric values include preserving the environment for descendants, the utility of wilderness, and the beauty of wilderness.

Biocentric values range from a vague feeling of oneness between humanity and wilderness to the idea that wilderness has rights and deserves justice. However, even informants with militant biocentric views also argue using anthropocentric utilitarian language. There are different foci but no sharp dividing lines between the categories. Most wilderness officers in my study have strong anthropocentric values based on tradition and the preservation of wilderness areas for their descendants. More specifically, the anthropocentric value of preserving the wilderness for descendants unifies the wildlife management community and links their interests with groups as diverse as hunters and animal-rights activists.

According to my respondents, the preservation of the wilderness for hunting activities is a way of improving the lives of humans. Hunting experiences in the wilderness are said to bring family members closer together and provide lasting memories. Larry, a Pennsylvania land management officer, said:

I took up this work to save my children’s heritage. I have always hunted with family. It’s tradition. It’s our children’s heritage. The country was settled this way. This is Appalachia after all! It’s part of our history. It is a wonderful experience we must continue to share with our children.

Field and Stream journalist Curtis (1998) agrees that most conservation officers would not trade their job for any other line of work because their work contributes to the preservation of tradition and “the joy that comes from helping a kid get his first deer, the satisfaction that comes from protecting natural resources for their kids and grandkids” (p. 56).

Mary, a commissioner for a Pennsylvania state game agency, also feels hunting with family and friends is an asset to human life:

There is more than just the killing part to the hunting experience. It is challenging because you are putting yourself up against “Mother Nature.” But the whole [hunting] experience is being outside and bonding with family...
and friends. This type of bonding experience is unique and cannot be easily replicated by interactions in other types of activities.

Asked why she didn’t just go for a walk if being outside with family and friends is the primary experience, Mary explained:

It is not the same as being on a walk. It is very hard to compare to anything else. I find that when we are hunting or trapping, we are more observant of wildlife signs. Hunting involves much more preparation and cooperation. Reliving the experience afterward with family and friends is an entire spiritual experience.

This shared appreciation serves to unify the community of conservation officers despite differences in duties or locale.

Preserving the Quality of Wildlife

Another important aspect of the jobs and shared motivation for choosing this type of work, according to wilderness officers, is to improve the lives of wild animals. These officers say that humans have the right and moral obligation to control the wilderness, so they work to preserve certain species by helping to improve their habitat and to control what they argue to be overpopulation. They argue that whenever the population of prey animals, such as deer, gets too large, the animals starve to death. Formerly, predators regulated numbers, but since humans have eradicated many predatory species, conservation officers believe that humans must now take the place of the disappearing predators in order to maintain wildlife habitat.

Wilderness officers thus connect preservation with hunting. Though laypersons might expect the duties of wildlife preservation to conflict with hunting, conservation officers make plain the vital link between the two and, thereby, further solidify their community identity. Roy, a veteran Pennsylvania conservation officer, explained:

We are not against deer. We love ’em. We do care about these animals. We want to balance the population. There are no predators left. We are the predators now. Hunters are needed to replace the predator. Whitetail deer and beaver compete for food, so do snowshoe hare. People get real emotional when they see deer starved to death. We check road kills. We open
her up and check the insides. I have been doing this for 21 years and never saw triplets, or even one-year-olds having babies. The deer population is not getting enough to eat. We are trying to help. There is not an effective means of birth control. If you put [birth control] drugs in deer and they die and other animals eat them they will absorb these drugs.

His confidence in using “we” to represent all conservation officers is plain here. Sue agreed that hunting enhances life for wild animals, sharing Roy’s perspective precisely:

Hunting has an extreme impact on population and habitat. Deer destroy raspberries, blackberries, wildflowers and other plants that are essential to the deer and other wildlife. Because the deer can reach six feet up to trees and other vegetation, the land becomes over-browsed, leaving nothing for the other animals. Deer also impact themselves and other species. Hunting is the only way to manage the deer herd.

When asked what would happen if hunting were not allowed, Mary argued:

Well, you can let Mother Nature run its course, but then you’ll have a mass die-off or big peaks and low peaks characterizing the deer population. Hunting allows the deer population to be more of a straight line. It is to the benefit of some wildlife that we hunt. Wildlife is a renewable resource that will continue to exist if we hunt responsibly.

Many outside the field of wildlife management disagree with this rationale, arguing that hunting is ineffective. They assert that hunting hinders conservation or that there is not really an overpopulation problem. In addition, because there also are other stakeholders, such as logging, oil, and tourism industries that vie for control of wilderness areas and drive out wildlife, there is great concern from many citizens that wildlife is not a renewable resource (Bell, 1998).

Thus, law and order, in the eyes of wilderness officers, is the solution to differing opinions. For experienced respondents, the area of conflict was how to keep hunters happy so they would continue to hunt, bringing in revenue to secure the jobs of conservation officers, while getting the hunters to follow the rules and laws made by these management officials.

“Fair” laws, Dave argued, will better animals’ lives. “If hunting and fishing are done in the spirit of fair chase and within the confines of the laws, wildlife
will be enhanced” (Reed, 1991, p. 87). Jim, a warden who works for Montana’s Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, also believes more hunters need to follow the laws. “I don’t think there was anywhere near the waste or the abuse of the resource that there is today . . . poachers are attacking our trophy gene pool” (Curtis, 1998, pp. 54-56).

The Career of the Wilderness Officer

Childhood Socialization and Education

One enters a job with a set of ideas that have developed through one’s social class, family, and education. My interviews, consistent with the biographies of officers from other areas of the country, find that wilderness officers are men and women who generally come from geographical and cultural backgrounds that are rural and involve a tradition of hunting and fishing. Their work augments and enlarges the hunting experiences already a part of their lives. Bob, the undergraduate from Minnesota studying fish and wildlife, commented that city people without a hunting background do not like to work in rugged outdoor conditions:

I hunt and fish. I like the food. It is how I was brought up on the farm. My father is an avid hunter. . . . I attribute my ethics to him. Most of the law enforcement graduates that come out of the Metro area will not work in rural areas for long. A young man at work used to be a c.o. [conservation officer] on Mille Lacs Lake. He quit after a year because he said he didn’t like being on the lake all the time, being wet and cold, and smelling like fish. He grew up in the city. He quit to move back.

Dave, a warden who grew up in Jackson, Mississippi, said his parents taught him to hunt and fish when he was quite small. As a boy, he “sold bullfrogs to local restaurants for pocket money.” Later on, he learned decoy carving, bird calling, and taxidermy (Reed, 1991, p. 88). Tim, a land management officer in northwestern Pennsylvania, also went hunting and fishing at a young age. He said he accompanied his father and brothers to their camp each hunting season. “When I was little dad took me up there to teach me about hunting. When I was older, we met all the guys, drank beer and told
last year’s hunting stories.” Rod, a game warden in Florida’s Kissimmee Prairie, where hunting is not allowed, still has a deep knowledge of the prairie and its “‘wild things’ that can be traced to a boyhood spent hunting [and] trapping . . .” (Graham, 1987, p. 107).

Female officers also come from rural areas and have hunted game. Reflecting traditional hunting society standards in the United States, usually their mothers did not hunt; in most cases, they had to persuade their fathers or brothers to take them along. Maine’s first female game warden said her “father taught her to shoot and occasionally took her hunting with him” (Graham, 1989, p. 18). Sue, one of the first female game wardens in Pennsylvania, also stressed the importance of hunting in her youth, “obviously for food, but also as a recreational activity.” Although her mother did not take an active part in the kill, she too accompanied the family on the hunt.

Bob commented on his experience in training to be a conservation officer. Bob acknowledged that teaching people about wildlife is complicated:

> A professor here is on an international committee of scientists to decide if fish have feelings, i.e. can they feel pain? It would seem easy at first, but after discussing it in class it is a very complicated process. My professor says that the current theory is that ‘no they don’t feel pain, but do perceive damage.’ It is an ongoing discourse that will not see an end soon. There is just so little known about our brethren. With the more I learn, the more I realize what is not known . . . I could be a leader, educator, role model and then, if need be, a cop as a game warden/conservation officer . . . But, I’m not sure I know enough yet.

What to do about this causes conflict for newer wilderness officers who are uncertain about how to take all these interests into account. Bob said:

> I have grappled with the whole environmental crisis for quite a few years now. How do I do my part? There is a newly emerging field in Field and Wildlife called “Human Dimensions of Natural Resources.” Basically it takes a holistic view of the issue and asks stakeholders’ views and tries to include them in the planning process. It is a melding of social and resource issues. I didn’t realize it was such a big deal until we started to discuss values. Boy, is there a difference in views!
Bob’s reader in his Hunting and Fishing Traditions class, *A Hunter’s Heart: Honest Essays on Blood Sport* (Petersen, 1996), acknowledges that conservation officers will have conflicting emotions in their daily life on the job.

The Daily Life of the Boundary Protector

The protection of the wilderness is accomplished through establishing facilitating boundaries between rightful use and wrongful change of forests and wilderness. Licensed hunting, cutting of timber, collecting of stone, and mining are considered potentially rightful uses. The existence of forest fires, poaching, or the harboring of wild animals is deemed potentially wrongful change to the wilderness. Excessive or insufficient numbers of certain species can be deemed wrongful, even if this results naturally. Wilderness officers set up physical boundaries such as fences to control deer. They enforce legal boundaries to prevent unlawful use of the wilderness. When sentiment would interfere with the lawful harvesting of animals, they work to enforce a psychological boundary between humanity and animal nature.

The boundary between human and nonhuman animals is envisioned as based in the latter’s inferiority on a “sociozoological scale” (Arluke & Sanders, 1996). Traditionally, the gap between the status of humans and the lesser animals on this scale grew out of the influence of the ancient “chain of being concept” (Arluke & Sanders, p. 168)—having its origins in the religious belief that God placed man to have dominion over the animals of the earth. This boundary is functional for the wilderness officer.

Interaction with the Public: Hunters

Much of the work of wilderness officers involves negotiating conflict over boundaries. Deer management seminars are held to promote acceptance (by hunters) of policy decisions. Many recent conflicts between hunters and conservation officers in the Pennsylvania area center on harvesting female deer. Hunters say doe should not be killed because they are the breeders and preserve the species. Land management experts believe they should be killed to control over-population and over-browsing. Researchers who write about wildlife management, such as Dizard (1994) and Wright (1992), discuss such
conflicting views between hunters, conservationists, and protection agents. Some suggest hunters may have an additional motive for resisting the directive to shoot doe. Arluke and Sanders (1996), Baker (1993) and others say hunters want wild animals as trophies to display on their walls to symbolize human domination over nature. Antlerless doe do not provide trophy antlers. Wilderness officers know this. During a seminar, Tom, an experienced Pennsylvania game warden, asserted:

I wish I could promise you all [hunters] you’d get deer like these [shows slides of large antlered buck], but we have an over-browsed deer range. Hunters are partly to blame because they won’t harvest doe is the problem. Older guys won’t kill if they see only three deer all day. They are afraid they will use up the deer population. And young kids don’t want to sit on a stump all day waiting for a large buck. They want a fast kill . . . like in computer games.

Conflicts between hunters and conservation officers also exist over methods of land management such as fencing and burning, which are blamed by hunters for the migration and loss of deer population. Hunters consider the number of allowable days for hunting too few to accommodate the hunting community. In fact, the Pennsylvania Game Commission recently announced that it is changing the traditional deer season to better accommodate all hunters, especially young ones. According to Drakula (2000), a Pennsylvania sports journalist:

The commissioners approved a series of proposals that recognize changes in today’s hunting society. Foremost is establishing Saturdays as opening days for an early three-day muzzleloader antler-less hunt in October and the regular, statewide antler-less season in December. This change in opening day will enable many sportsmen and sportswomen to have more time to hunt and lessen the days taken off of work. For the younger hunters, this extra day will enable them to hunt with a parent or guardian. (p. 15)

In my visits to local motels where hunters congregated, they complained that there were “just not enough buck left for an enjoyable hunt” and “they did not want to kill doe.” Despite these negotiations fewer people overall are hunting (McCombie, 1999).
**Interaction with the Public: the General Populace**

Game management seminars for hunters and fishers are not the only public relations activity of wilderness officers. Experienced conservation officers give seminars to educate the public on ecology and the value of natural heritage. These seminars tended to focus on hunting. Seminar topics included gun safety and the needs of wildlife. School seminars like these evidently are not unique to the area because Nibert provides a general description for them on a national scale:

State government exercise of its ideological power also can be seen by a further look at some of the policies of state departments of “wildlife.” Wildlife officers, in official state uniforms, make regular visits to schools and libraries to teach children about “wildlife and “nature” in presentations that are laden with anthropocentric and speciesist ideas. Recently, such agencies have adopted an aggressive public policy created to turn children into gun-toting killers (Nibert, 2002, pp. 222, 223).

Frank, a Pennsylvania land management officer, enjoyed teaching: “With my job now, I really enjoy educating kids about wildlife. It is nice to speak to people about wildlife and give them an accurate picture of how animals in their environment interact.”

Another boundary is that between the expertise of the management officials and the comparative ignorance of laymen. As discussed by Gieryn (1999) professionals seek to convince others that their knowledge is more valid than that of others. This process of establishing authority and delegitimizing the claims of those outside the profession is a recognized form of boundary work. As a consequence, local residents often feel marginalized and alienated at wilderness seminars. A local 45-year old woman, who describes herself as an environmentalist, said,

Conservation officers recommended people to plant honeysuckle for bird cover and habitat. They planted some on game lands. This was an error. The plant has escaped and is invasive and chokes out natural vegetation. So, now they’re telling us to eradicate it. They determined their ideas through observation and private landowners consulted them. And, they were wrong.

A local 38-year old man who owns forested land said,
They [conservation officers] don’t want to talk about new ideas. They have spokespersons. Most of their job is enforcement. They’re way into titles. They don’t create anything new. People are roping off private lands. They don’t want deer on it. They don’t want people shooting pregnant doe on their land.

A 50-year old man who is an environmental activist said,

The ecologists are here and the environmentalists are here. [stretches both arms wide apart] The conservation officers will not talk to me as an environmentalist. Deer is out of control in Pennsylvania. They killed the predators. I’m concerned with roads and land management, drilling and acid rain and clear-cutting. Leopold (1969) is who you can hang out with and have it safe to be green.

A 28-year old male said,

The conservation officers are PR kinds of guys as well as managers. Here the area is so vast, and there’s no money. Here there is political maneuvering. “Conservation officer” sounds good, but for what? They don’t follow their own rules. No one has challenged them for 100 years.

At every seminar I attended, I brought up the topic of animal rights and the need to find ways to manage wilderness without hunting. Recently, I mentioned a surgical sterilization program being used on Illinois doe as a possible “answer to overpopulation problems” (Pearsall 2002, p. 16). Conservation officers responded to my comments with remarks, including: “Oh, one of those! A tree-hugger! We knew there would be one here [laughing].” Others said, “I love animals too” and “our methods are the only ones that work.”

Officers at these presentations reacted to audience objections saying that they were “used to them” because, as one officer put it, “people are ignorant about scientific land management procedures.”

Interaction with the Animals

“What is our connection to Nature? Is Nature just there, available to us to experience immediately and unmediated? Or is it not already the case that Nature is not so universally agreed upon, that it is a formidable task to create and maintain a particular Nature?” (Scarce, 1999). We have already seen
conflict between wilderness officers and the public over what it means to love animals. Describing the process of socially constructing salmon, Scarce affirms,

At some level nature must be a social creation. Today, Nature . . . is being remade by us, sometimes through intense conflict, such as seen in efforts to “save the whales,” “save the rain forests,” and even “save the native peoples.” We see our Pennsylvania wilderness officers in conflict over how best to save the trophy-antlered deer.

Arluke and Sanders (1996) argue that “although animals have a physical being, once in contact with humans, they are given a cultural identity as people try to make sense of them, understand them, use them, or communicate with them.” (p. 9). Conservation officers do construct meanings for the wild animals they control: they define these animals as resources (game) for humans to use as recreation, decoration, or food. Thus, Art, a newly hired conservation officer, believes:

Animals do not have rights. Rights are man-made sets of rules. Animals do not have that man-made set of rules, but that does not mean that an animal should suffer. Killing an animal should be done quickly and effectively for the fastest kill possible. They don’t have rights, but they are entitled to humane treatment.

Art’s view is typical of conservation officers I interviewed; the community of conservation officers is cohesive and shares this common view.

I observed that wildlife management officers rated animals according to the kind and level of enjoyment hunters got from killing them. Large antlered buck are trophy quality and greatly valued. Short-lived abundant species such as doves do not have much value, except as recreation (target practice). All the descriptive phrases and labels (“game totals,” “calculated harvest,” and “huge allocation”) used by the Pennsylvania Game Commission in a 1997 bulletin about how to manage deer might be used to describe edible crops. Mark, a Pennsylvania conservation officer, rationalized killing doves by labeling them “short lived and easily replaceable,” and, therefore, of lesser value:

In the case of doves, hunting is not used to manage the species, but it does not impact on the species and it provides recreation. The large majority of
the dove population dies each year. Whether they are hunted or not, they will be removed from the population anyway.

Similarly, despite the fact that Rod works in a sanctuary where hunting is prohibited, he used trivializing language to describe animals while reaffirming the role of law in protecting even these degraded life forms:

If you kill a little something to eat once in a while that’s not so bad, but don’t start wasting nothing, and don’t start killing other stuff and telling people about it because if you do I’m going to have to come and put you under arrest. That sort of makes it bad, because like these sand hill cranes here, that’s a federal matter. (Graham, Jr., 1987, p. 112)

George spoke of overcoming his irrational feelings about animal sentience:

On many occasions I have had to pick up dead deer along the road, and I feel especially bad when I have to shoot an injured deer, but this is my job, and I have to stay realistic and not attach human emotions to the animals I work with. I never see these animals as just objects. They are a living and breathing animal that I have much respect for. I know they feel pain.

Arluke and Sanders (1996) agree that institutions that deal with animal control expect workers to be able to make and carry out life-and-death decisions concerning the animals in a rational manner.

Interaction with Self and Other Officers

In the face of these and other conflicts, conservation officers exhibit the collective consciousness and social solidarity described by Durkheim (1964). Although they work mostly alone rather than in teams, Pennsylvania wilderness officers appear to belong to an exceptionally cohesive community sharing a remarkably uniform common sentiment and tradition. For instance, they all regard animal life as a forest product. According to Durkheim, the collective consciousness of a society (or here a particular part of it) is comprised of a body of shared beliefs that give members a sense of belonging and a feeling of moral obligation to the society’s demands and values. Wilderness officers fit this description well since they exist to uphold their society’s laws, which express lawmakers’ values and opinions about wildlife.

Rick, a Pennsylvania conservation officer, placed the human-law value of the right to recreate over animal suffering. He clarified:
We recognize that archers wound deer they sometimes do not kill, but rifle hunters do, too. The law says the surplus animals in the breeding population are to be harvested in the method known as hunting and archery is a type of recreation. A lot of people enjoy it. An archer goes out and hunts 20 or 30 hours and if he doesn’t get the buck he wanted, that buck provided 20 or 30 hours of recreation.

Sue focused on the rational details of a clean kill. She agreed that bow hunting is not cruel and inhumane, “but I say that with some qualification. A bow hunter should practice frequently and become proficient. To do this the bow hunter must shoot the area where it will bleed, leading to hemorrhaging.”

Greg, a newly hired Pennsylvania game warden, said that usually rehabilitation of injured animals was “not feasible financially.”

The only conflict I observed within the wildlife management community was over what policy would be best in individual cases. Matthew, a Pennsylvania game warden, expressed sympathy for a law-breaking hunter: “I had this one individual who I arrested many times for poaching deer. He just couldn’t help himself while hunting. He was obsessive, compulsive. Kind of hooked on game.”

Given the problematic nature of their work, it is surprising that conservation officers do not see themselves as performing emotional labor.

Discussion

Pennsylvania wilderness officers share a common work culture, which we have just sampled. This culture revolves around hunting, because hunting is economically the most significant use of the wilderness apart from logging, over which officers have little jurisdiction. Culture consists of categories made by people who see the world in similar ways and agree upon a common language to describe these categories. The language of wilderness officers derives from the statutes protecting the wilderness for lawful use that created their jobs. They are boundary workers between the human community and the wilderness. They regulate the interactions between humans and animals primarily through policing the boundary between the legitimate and illegitimate kill. In the process of doing this through reasoned decision-making,
they establish a boundary between the wildlife management professional and the layperson. Since they are paid from the proceeds of hunting and fishing licenses, they have a stake in perpetuating these activities as well as in promoting an abundance of trophy-quality wildlife. Thus, they are part of a process that is tending to make the protection of the forest wildlife into scientific animal husbandry analogous to the one that created fish hatcheries to support fishing (Scarce, 2000).

The work culture of wilderness officers has evolved its own ideology in which the wilderness is a resource to be protected, managed, and—most important—used by humans. Their concept of management is in concord with what the Bible tells us: Nature and her animals exist for the benefit of humans who have dominion over all. It follows that the quality of animal life that they support is based on a combination of biologists’ constructions of what a statutory primeval forest should be, coupled with what wildlife managers, including themselves, believe would be of greatest benefit to the hunters, fishermen, and trappers, the legitimate harvesters of wildlife. They manage the interactions between humans and wildlife in the way they have been socialized and educated to consider most advantageous from the viewpoint of those who use wildlife. In fact, since they typically share a hunting background, their position as regulators of both animals and their human predators is almost serendipitous from the standpoint of the interests that enacted the government statutes.

Wilderness officers are sincere in what they do. They do this work to help animals and humans and to preserve wilderness because they “love” the wilderness and wild animals. They do not speak of needing or making large sums of money or a desire for great power. Wilderness officers are close to wild animals and “by virtue of placing themselves at the ‘frontier’ between two different domains . . . have a better opportunity to combine perspectives” (Krupat, 1992).

Despite their motivation to help animals, wilderness officers are a long way from recognizing them as partners in the wilderness. Rather, in their culture, animals are categorized as almost mindless. Yet, the animals are stakeholders in the wilderness as well as the hunters and the governmental agencies that own the land. But, they exist on the other side of the boundary of human community. In the view of Tönnies (1988), a community has solidarity through
tradition and sentiment on one hand and impersonal contracts on the other. Law represents a general type of social contract that exists within communities. Wild animals are not regarded as part of our community; yet, as subjects of our sentiment, we legally regulate them by fixing their numbers and specifying where they may live and what they may eat. They could get along quite well without us, but we have made them objects of our protection without the possibility of legal representation.

After discarding the animals, those who remain at the negotiating table would seem to be the hunters and the public. However, only those hunters and members of the public who favor “scientific land management” win recognition at meetings and seminars. Instead, the wilderness officers themselves appear to hold the key stake and be at the social center of the community. Yet, they report to land management officials, planners, and politicians who are not in direct view and outside this study.

I began this study in order to understand the world of wilderness officers. I hoped to find some kindred souls who held the same beliefs and values about wildlife and conservation as I did. I was saddened to find that they were mostly concerned with hunting, policing, and how to make the wilderness profitable. My study demonstrated how their solidarity as a work group mitigates the conflicts they face at the price of narrowing their perspective. Only the young conservation student, Bob, not yet fully socialized into the job, who contacted me questioning his relationship with his “wild brethren,” was open to possibilities of including nonhuman animals into the human community.

Notes

1 Correspondence should be sent to Helene Lawson Department of Sociology, University of Pittsburgh, Bradford, Bradford, PA 16701, (814) 362-7585 E-mail: lawson@pitt.edu
2 A bibliography of Hughes treatment of the culture of work is given in Harper and Lawson (in press).
3 Jennifer Wallace and Ben Grice assisted with interviewing, shared personal experiences, and contributed valuable insight into the world of Pennsylvania conservation officers.
References


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