Reintroducing charismatic species to Scotland: the rhetoric and politics of a 21st century agenda

Little attention is generally paid to how experts involved in species reintroductions argue, and how this relates to political decision-making. On the basis of text analysis of expert documents and in-depths interviews with key players in the Scottish reintroduction scene, this article provides insight into these matters.

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Reintroductions, defined by the IUCN as "an attempt to establish a species in an area which was once part of its historical range, but from which it has been extirpated or become extinct"[1], have become an important nature conservation tool, globally, in Europe and in the UK. Reintroductions are often presented as a component of broader ecological restoration enterprises, and seen as an indispensable element of 'rewilding'. But regardless of their precise motivation or justification, reintroductions frequently induce controversy. Such controversy may be related to damage claims, perceived danger to human safety, or to local land owners' sense of losing authority over their land.

Studies on understanding and mitigating reintroduction conflicts are conducted by experts who are often sympathetic to reintroductions, and thus could be called proponents. Such studies are vital but it is important to bear in mind that they have a blind spot too. Opposing views may not only concern the topic of reintroduction itself, but may also be the result of the behaviour and power position of proponents.

Instead of studying opposition, we provide a resume of our recent studies [2,3,4] in which proponents' behaviour, and decision-making procedures surrounding the politics of reintroductions are analysed. Our focus is on charismatic species such as birds of prey and larger mammals. From that group we choose three species that are the subject of current reintroductions debates in Scotland: the white-tailed eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*), the beaver (*Castor fiber*) and as a potential future candidate, the Eurasian lynx (*Lynx lynx*).

Scottish reintroductions: white-tailed eagle, beaver and lynx

Scotland is geographically isolated from mainland Europe, making reintroduction schemes for many former native species the only way of re-establishment. Because

Scotland is relatively sparsely populated by humans and contains many large semi-natural areas, its potential for reintroduction is often regarded as high. As a result of the process towards Scottish devolution that started in the late 1990s, the Scottish Minister for Environment is now empowered to grant licences for reintroductions to Scottish territory. With respect to state actors in the Scottish reintroduction arena, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) is the single most important actor. It is a public body that advises Scottish Government about sustainable use and conservation of the natural environment. The main non-governmental organisations in favour of certain reintroductions are the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland and the Scottish Wildlife Trust.

The white-tailed eagle is a bird of prey that became extinct in Scotland in 1918, supposedly as a result of prolonged human persecution. In 1975, the predecessor of SNH embarked on what turned out to be a triple-phased programme (1975-1985 Isle of Rum; 1993-1998 Wester Ross; 2007-2012 eastern Scottish mainland) in which more than 150 juveniles were released in total.

The beaver probably disappeared from Scotland in the 16th century. Early debate about a possible reintroduction dates from the late 1970s, but only in 1995 did SNH start investigating the feasibility and desirability of a beaver reintroduction. This resulted in a license request by SNH for a trial reintroduction in 2001, which was rejected in 2005. In 2007, the Scottish Wildlife Trust and the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland submitted a new proposal, which was approved in 2008 by Scotland's Minister for Environment. After a period of quarantine, three Norwegian beaver families were released at Argyll's Knapdale Forest in May 2009 for a trial period of five years. In 2014, the Minister is expected to decide on the future of beaver reintroductions to Scotland.

The lynx was believed to have disappeared from Great Britain long Before Christ. But a re-analysis of skull samples in 1997 questioned this assumption, and gradually the idea took hold that the lynx had been present until the early Middle Ages. In 2005 it was concluded that a reintroduction to Scotland was feasible from an ecological perspective, which allowed the debate to expand.[5] Other than that, no further concrete steps have yet been taken. Still, the lynx is regularly singled out as the most suitable mammalian predator to be reintroduced to Scotland.

Rhetoric and argument in expert documents

The first part of our analysis is a text analysis of expert documents in support of Scottish reintroductions. Our collection of policy documents, commissioned reports, scientific papers and essays resulted in 43 white-tailed eagle, 48 beaver and 20 lynx documents. The main authors of the studied texts are representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), researchers and individuals with a strong interest in the topic. As the main tool for our text analysis, we used the 'storyline' method. A storyline is a central idea that summarises complex debates.[6] It is designed to capture both the main arguments and the rhetorical nuances of a collection of texts. Table 1 shows the storylines and sub-storylines (the latter feed into the main storylines) we identified in the documents on a potential lynx reintroduction to Scotland.

The iconic White tailed eagle
Photo: Jens Fischer

Table 1. **Storylines and sub-storylines identified in expert documents on lynx reintroduction**

Storylines	Sub-storylines	
Because the lynx became extinct due to human causes, it qualifies as a reintroduction candidate	(i)	No Mesolithic extinction (due to climate change) as originally asumed
	(ii)	Because extinction was medieval, humans were responsible
	(iii)	Following IUCN criteria is crucial
	(iv)	Extinction factors not operating anymore
Minor livestock problems compared to major ecological benefits	(i)	Reintroduction will be a success from a population viability perspective (estimation of 450 lynx)
	(ii)	Beneficial impact of top predator on deer densities and ecosystems as a whole
	(iii)	Some sheep predation expected, but of minimal levels and well manageable as European examples show
Every aspect of the reintroduction needs thorough study and alignment with both the law and public acceptance	(i)	Openness towards, and support of, stakeholders and general public is crucial
	(ii)	Being a non-wolf, the lynx is an ideal first top predator for reintroduction
	(iii)	Return of the lynx symbolises a culturally richer life
	(iv)	International formal guidelines have to be followed

Our analysis shows that although storylines tend to be presented as indisputable facts by proponents, they bring together beliefs, narratives and rhetoric into poignant expressions. That may explain their appeal, and the common tendency of authors to uncritically reproduce them.

The study reveals clear similarities across the three species at the level of storylines. First, there are historical and ethical justifications for the intervention itself. This is normally followed by strong emphasis on the positive economic and ecological benefits of a reintroduction. This pattern can, to a large degree, be explained by the IUCN guidelines that underpin reintroduction practices. Likewise, the debates on the beaver and the lynx show a primacy of 'biodiversity', which reflects the importance of that notion in the policy arena since the 1990s. Second, a key characteristic of the identified storylines is that they present reintroductions as beneficial to a variety of stakeholders. As such, the pro-reintroduction discourse is very similar to other environmental discourses.[7]

A crucial finding is that, over time, storylines increase in argumentative complexity (i.e. the last storyline of the lynx; also found for the beaver). More specifically, this phenomenon could be called 'reflexivity': recent (sub)storylines often adjust their own position in relation to arguments of opponents (e.g. Table 1, sub-storyline C-ii: a lynx reintroduction is presented as less harmful than a potential wolf reintroduction). Furthermore, these reflexive storylines are 'self-aware' of their role in the process of advancing the cause of reintroduction: through cross-references and the anticipation of future research, a goal-oriented chain of publications is created. These reflexive storylines suggest that the debate is no longer only about the species, but increasingly about the reintroduction process.

Analysis of politics through interviews

Our document analysis shows the rhetoric and arguments used by proponents. However, the studied texts give little away as to what goes on behind the scenes of the formal texts. To gain a more complete picture, we conducted a complementary analysis of proponents' perceptions on political decision-making. In-depth interviews were held with 16 key actors, all involved in the reintroduction process of at least one of the three focal species. These actors can be seen as political coordinators, either managing (generally those from the NGOs) or monitoring (governmental organisations – GOs). In particular, our focus is on the democratic content of decision-making in relation to key governance shifts of the last two decades. With these shifts we refer to a changing political landscape in European countries in which new steering mechanisms develop, and boundaries between state, market and civil society blur.[8] The question we pose is whether decision-making on reintroductions has become more democratic as a result of these governance shifts.

As main democratic principles we use:

Accountability – political actors have an obligation to explain their behaviour;

Legality – the correctness of decision-making procedures according to the law;

Legitimacy – the acceptance of the decision-making process by stakeholders;

Democratic procedures – decision-making on the basis of a majority principle while safeguarding political equality.

Our study highlights that political coordinators of reintroductions have indeed been making efforts to reform decision-making processes. This can be seen in the rise of steering and management groups, numerous consultation reports, and increasing NGO involvement. However, in our interviews with experts, issues with all four democratic principles became visible.

Accountability
Profuse expert documentation surrounding reintroductions has become the norm. While this provides a thorough account of the issues at stake, interviewees also pointed out that it leads to long delays and a lack of efficiency. In the worst case, this documentation may actually conceal political motives. This seems to have been the case with the initial beaver application submitted in 2001, and rejected three and a half years later. Scottish Government required more documentation from the applicant, SNH. But, according to the interviewees, there was a discrepancy between the formal and informal reasons for the rejection, pointing at a lack of accountability regarding the Scottish Government's own decisions.

Legality
The current legal framework for reintroductions was generally approved of by the interviewees. However, some grey areas were identified that would benefit from clearer formal guidance, namely: the decision-making procedures concerning licensing, the jurisdiction of the National Species Reintroduction Forum, and the relative influence stakeholders should have in decision-making. Our findings suggest that the lack of clear formal guidance helps to sustain the political power of Scottish Government and SNH. A more precise specification of political procedures could thus be an important step towards a more democratic decision-making process.

Legitimacy
Legitimacy issues came to the fore when discussing white-tailed eagle post-release management schemes. In the view of a number of interviewees, these schemes were partly used as a tool to increase sheep farmers' acceptance of the reintroduction by compensating for white-tailed eagle predation of lambs. Such an approach seems precarious as it can backfire when farmers start communicating their alleged losses, for instance through the media, in order to be included in the scheme. In other words, using compensation schemes as a political tool may actually harm the reintroduction by undermining rather than strengthening its legitimacy. There was a different, positive, legitimacy aspect is SNH's changing role from applying (beaver licence 2001) to monitoring (notably from 2007 onwards, when two NGOs applied for a beaver trial licence). As a result, a wider range of societal groups got involved, a more independent monitoring body came into play and, in the words of one interviewee, the objectivity of this part of the decision-making increased.

Democratic procedures
The National Species Reintroduction Forum could be regarded as part of SNH's approach to achieve a more democratic and inclusive decision-making process. It has been pointed out, however, that SNH's control remains extensive in that it decides on membership invitations and acts as chair. In terms of the forum's actual

An eagle watch security sign on Isle of Mull
for the White-tailed eagle.
Photo: Koen Arts

functioning, most interviewees think that early involvement of many stakeholders is, in principle, a good thing. But when assessing the interviewees' comments on the forum against its own terms of reference – e.g. having a proactive role – there seems to be ample room for improvement. For example, there is much uncertainty about who should take the next step in a potential lynx reintroduction.[9] It seems also unlikely that the forum will change the 'established' political rules of the game. The main issue here is not whether SNH is intentionally creating an "old-boy network" (as one of the interviewees called it), but whether new forms of governance endorse old political power structures.

Conclusion: an agenda for the 21st century
Recent storylines and findings from our political analysis show an increased awareness of the need for public support and transparent communication between decision-makers and other stakeholders. This is in many ways a positive development, and in line with for instance the Aarhus Convention which promotes information access, justice and public participation in environmental decision-making.[10] Yet, there is also a flip side of the coin. First, there is a danger that reflexive storylines conceal a discrepancy between 'good language' and 'good practice'. This point is also underpinned by our interview findings: the new governance mechanisms promise more democratic decision-making; yet, their implementation may cause severe delays, prevent political action, and in the worst case even keep old 'top-down' power structures in place.

Second, as storylines become rhetorically advanced and increasingly aim to pre-empt anticipated problems, debates could get frozen at an early stage. Ironically, opposing voices or critical consideration may subsequently be given less attention. The political process surrounding the document production is then likely to harden as well.

Third, reflexive storylines may narrow scientific knowledge production. This is particularly harmful when bearing in mind that the majority of expert documents feeding into the policy arena are in favour of reintroductions, which already creates an imbalance in decision-making. It is conceivable that, as a result, opponents are further alienated from 'knowledge based' policy making, and invest more in lobbying for example. Then, the gap further increases between the dominant 'managerial' side, representing a science-based technocratic worldview, and its 'populist' counterpart that portrays local actors as the victims of external intervention.

Unfortunately, there are many 20th century reintroduction examples in which a proper democratic decision-making process was given insufficient consideration. For reintroductions to be a sound 21st century agenda – especially when it involves charismatic species – communication will need to go beyond politically correct rhetoric, and those involved need to be truly open to any outcome of a democratic decision-making process. This will ensure that if a reintroduction receives a green light from politicians and society, the context is set for a story of success.

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