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Delegitimizing Large Carnivore Conservation through Discourse

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ABSTRACT

The legitimacy of large carnivore institutions to exercise truth-making power is assumed by constituents and other audiences. This study examines the power of language in shaping resistance to hegemonic truths about red wolf recovery in North Carolina. We conducted a critical discourse analysis of seven corpora produced by a discourse coalition comprising local, state, and federal actors. We demonstrate that these actors held seven cognitive interpretive repertoires in common (positioning; causality; contrariety; fatalist; falsifiability; victim; and big bad wolf). Findings indicate that repertoires influenced red wolf governance processes, reversed the risk narrative concerning recovery, split cognitive authority over red wolves in the public sphere, and set new, paradoxical limits for scientific inquiry. This study reinforces that language is power and, therefore, language is also legitimation. We conclude that researchers, citizens, and decision makers must attend to the ways in which language control contributes to legitimacy deficits through coordinated resistance.

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Introduction

One of the salient debates of modern conservation concerns whether humans can sustainably live with large mammalian carnivores (hereafter carnivores). If everyone believed carnivores to be “fragile natural works of art that must be preserved at all costs” (Hart 2005, xviii) we might expect humans would also show global social acceptance for institutions and procedures authorizing carnivore protection. We might also expect struggles over construction of the ideal landscape to be rarer than they are currently (Figari and Skogen 2011). In this idealized landscape, socially constructed realities about coexistence and co-adaptation would be aligned and conflict diminished. Undeniably, however, societies around the world do not universally believe that wild carnivores have a right to exist wherever they are found. This social fact threatens the hegemonic power of proposed coexistence strategies (López-Bao, Bruskotter, and Chapron 2017).

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Operationalizing coexistence is an exercise in power that needs to be mobilized and legitimized. Legitimation is often achieved through language (Fairclough 1989). Language underpins truth production by constructing and bridging legitimacy and social realities (Hillier 2003). Discourse mechanizes policy language, mobilizes bias and secures advantages in non-neutral policy arenas (Schattschneider 1960). A widely recognized global biodiversity conservation discourse supports large carnivore recovery and acknowledges species are hard to protect and proliferate, but their social and ecological values obligate preventing their extinction.

Discourse is equally vital to delegitimizing recovery. Dominant discourses may be interrogated and undermined, often producing a counter-discourse (Gismondi and Richardson 1991). For instance, researchers conclude that if a dominant cultural reality (e.g., humans sharing space with carnivores) is ill-fitting for the intended population then resistance can form (Skogen 2003). Resistance to carnivore recovery is often local, where direct impacts of living with carnivores are most intense, but can also come from power elites (Nie 2003). These efforts attempt to exercise power and delegitimize carnivore governance – confronting policy perceived to unfairly assign locals the duty of living with or managing carnivores.

The overarching charge of this paper is to examine how language mediates truth about carnivore conservation. We focus on ways a network of counter-power delegitimizes red wolf recovery in North Carolina, and how counter-discourse resists democratic dominance to delegitimize red wolf recovery, gain social acceptance, and legitimize a wolf-free northeastern North Carolina (NENC) landscape.

Theoretical Framing of Red Wolf Recovery Discourse

Gramsci's (1992) concept of hegemony is regularly used to frame and examine biodiversity conservation discourse. Hegemony is the prevalent form of social power used to increase societal subscription to uncritically, historically, and democratically reified norms and values that authorize existence of carnivores. Hegemony is germane to the red wolf case because hegemonic representations coming from civil institutions, such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), legitimize red wolf recovery. They do so as a function of democratic control by demonstrating "moral and intellectual leadership" to gain consent in the public sphere (Fontana 2008, 28) and render carnivore recovery common sense (e.g., McLaughlin, Primm, and Rutherford 2005; Wilson, Neudecker, and Jonkel 2014). Realities, or worldviews, about human-carnivore coexistence are organized through accepted and expected or hegemonic practices (e.g., collective policy [Epstein 2006, Endangered Species Act (ESA)]); legal response (consistent rulings of the United States District Court for the Eastern District of North Carolina favoring red wolf recovery); or arguments (e.g., ecological, scientific [von Essen 2015]). When functioning well, they are ideally suited for explaining social acceptance and consent. Hegemony may also explain how reality gaps produce legitimacy deficits about carnivore conservation governance. When hegemonic practices are not operating optimally (e.g., failing to address asymmetrical impacts), ever-present subaltern or subordinate groups can deploy a counter-hegemony to erode ideological unity among the governed (Stoddart 2007).

Discourses are mechanisms of social power that are embedded within a language constructed; they are a medium oriented toward action and function (Elliot 1996; Foucault 2000). Discourse is a powerful tool to analyze red wolf recovery because a discourse can prescribe descriptions of wolves, knowledge about them, their history, meaning, or value. A discourse can concurrently dismiss other representations and inspire groups of people to visualize landscapes with or without wolves. Definitions and origins of discourse vary systematically (Potter et al. 1990), and determining how they influence the nature of social change is much like debating our universe's origins. However, we abide by common assumptions that discourse is a collection of ideas, conceptions, and categories that serve discussions about social life, shape perceptions, ideologies, realities, and imaginaries (representations of the way things could be), and influence behavior (Fairclough 1989; Hajer and Versteeg 2005; Smith 2006). Further, it is our view that a dominant discourse about red wolves exists and reflects a position of power that is enabled by democratic processes. Domination of dissenting groups in this context is a form of democratic domination at the national scale, whereby majority preferences overpower those of the minority (Marcuse 1991[1964]). We consider this type of domination to be inherently hegemonic.

Utility of Critical Discourse Analysis in the Red Wolf Case

We analyze language-in-use and employ critical discourse analysis (CDA) to trace how discursive construction and representations of illegitimate red wolf recovery across scales of influence were crucial in shaping the ways rural and political interests engage with red wolf recovery. Critical discourse analysis focuses on producers of language who influence or control the power-knowledge nexus as well as language strategies used by dissenters to achieve a new governance order. The approach makes visible discourse structure effects on social representations to sustain dominance, embeddedness within broader contexts, advancement and reproduction strategies, and consent-making processes that harden discourse within social life (van Dijk 2001).

Critical discourse analysis has several advantages for the study of red wolf recovery efforts. First, we can identify changes to a discourse considered common sensical (i.e., discursive events). Changes can be innovative in defying normative discursive practices and triggering culturally-derived ideological dilemmas that create “more than one possible ideal world and more than one hierarchical arrangement of power, value, and interest” (Billig et al. 1988, 163). Second, we can analyze social-ecological conditions producing discursive changes. For example, human-wolf interactions within the red wolf recovery area (RWRA) created conditions for a scaling up of counter-discourse and communicative events that reached larger audiences. Third, we can examine how discourse coalitions, or a group of actors that organize around a discourse, situate a counter-discourse and replicate it vertically and horizontally through social networks. Fourth, we can improve our understanding of power-based decisions in environmental politics and policy-making (Howarth 2010). Questioning convention, subverting dominant discourses, and asserting counter-discourses are highly political acts (Gismondi and Richardson 1991). Further, termination of a carnivore recovery program is a policy preference and, therefore, how actions are represented in language is crucial to an

understanding of policy making and possible impacts (Chaderopa 2013). Additionally, we can address criticism that CDA often ignores productive power (Luke 2002). Focusing on unwillingness of a dissident group to receive or propagate a carnivore on private lands, we can explore how nonconforming policy positions take root and are sustained through language to achieve more inclusive and deliberative spaces (Ockwell and Rydin 2010).

Materials and Methods

Case Study Context

Red wolf (*Canis rufus*) populations, originally found across the southeastern U.S., declined in response to anthropogenic mortality and habitat loss. The species was listed as critically endangered in 1967. The last known remaining wolves were trapped in Louisiana and Texas to start a captive breeding program in the 1970s. The species was declared extinct in the wild by 1980. In 1987, the reintroduction of a “non-essential experimental population” of red wolves to Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge in NENC was the first attempt at recovering an apex predator after being declared extinct in the wild. Red wolves recolonized habitat across the Albemarle Peninsula to establish the RWRA, consisting of Beaufort, Dare, Hyde, Tyrrell, and Washington Counties. Within a decade of reintroduction to RWRA the program was lauded a success and the population peaked at approximately 120–130 wolves in 2006. Anthropogenic mortality and resultant hybridization with coyotes (*C. latrans*) once again threaten recovery. The current wild population is estimated at 40 wolves.

Analysis

We focus on actors who plainly exhibit discursive properties (an institutionalized aspect of discourse that differentiates a speech or text from another) of counter-discourse and counter-power exercises (van Dijk 1993). We chose corpora from five discursive actors across three levels of wolf governance who a) agree on the nature of the problem and how to solve it (Clark, Rutherford, and Casey 2005), b) use the same tool in the “resistance toolbox” (language, Skogen and Thrane 2007) to combat the problem, and c) have expressed their views regularly through “communicative events” (Van Dijk 2006). Communicative events are used to express viewpoints and persuade specific, large audiences (Van Dijk 1993; Chaderopa 2013). Agency leaders and politicians are power elites with privileged access to communicative events (Domhoff 1978). At the local level, certain discursive actors overtly disseminated their views to broad audiences through op-eds, emails, letters, online and public forums, and radio shows (Table 1). We selected corpora from individuals we labeled as *Program Critic* and *Landowner* who were both “spearheading the effort to delist the wolf” (Lajeunesse 2016).

Description of text and speech was followed by interpretation of the context in which the discourse was “thinkable” and “sayable”, delimiting policy options and influencing policy outcomes (Fairclough 1989; Hall 1997; Hajer and Versteeg 2005). Formal analysis of corpora began with a detailed reading, then employed the constant comparative method of open coding (Strauss and Corbin 2008). We prioritized an emic read of the

Table 1. Corpora.

Level	Actor	Corpus Used
FEDERAL	Jesse Helms, former Senator, North Carolina	Department of the Interior Appropriations statement, 8/9/96
	Tom Tillis, Senator, North Carolina	Press Release on the Senate Appropriations Committee request to end the program (drafted by Tillis's office), 11/29/17 Response to testimony of Gordon Myers, House Committee on Natural Resources, 9/21/16
STATE	Gordon Myers, Executive Director, North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC)	Letter from NCWRC to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 6/2/14 Oversight hearing before the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, 9/21/16 Comment on FWS-R4-ES-2018-0035 Proposed Replacement of the Regulations for the Nonessential Experimental Population of Red Wolves in Northeastern North Carolina, 7/30/18
LOCAL	Program Critic (PC); Landowner (LO)	<i>Chad Adams Show</i> transcript (episode 101), interview with PC, 9/21/16 LO-authored article in <i>County Compass</i> , 7/10/14; content is consistent with Red Wolf Recovery Team report (Group Solutions, 2016)

data but also noted concepts found in broader literature on the knowledge-power nexus, conservation resistance, and carnivore recovery.

We used NVivo software (version 12) and pen-to-paper/corpora approaches to identify patterns in how practitioners expressed views about red wolves and organized sentiments into interpretive repertoires. To delegitimize recovery, the discourse coalition used “relatively internally consistent, bounded language units”, or common “building blocks... for constructing (personalized) versions of actions, cognitive processes, and other phenomena” during communication events (Wetherell and Potter 1988, 171–172). With epistemological development in the foreground, interpretive repertoires “construct (actor) accounts and structure them to appear factual” (McKenzie 2005, 2). Interpretive repertoires allow us to examine the intentional and artful ways resistance is constructed through language and more clearly articulate how people use discourse and how discourse constrains them (Potter et al. 1990). Repertoires are not mutually exclusive, can overlap (e.g., Rennoldson et al. 2013), and actors can shift between repertoires depending on the context (Crowley, Hinchliffe, and McDonald 2018).

We coded repertoires aimed at delegitimizing justifications for recovery and legitimizing claims that countered the dominant recovery discourse. Following Fairclough (1989) and Gee and Handford (2013), we read and re-read the corpora to identify dominant features within and across accounts and developed a question bank derived from the interpretive repertoire literature to guide analysis (see Appendix A). We coded consistent patterns of explanation, justification, and terminology that discursive actors held in common (Crowley, Hinchliffe, and McDonald 2018). During this iterative process, code/repertoire labels were separated, combined, redefined, or excluded (Scott and Trethewey 2008). Elliot (1996) explained that the next and final step is to explore contextual influences upon repertoires by hypothesizing about function and effects “that

each account seems to be achieving in the discursive context” because the direct study of function is often impracticable (66).

Results

We identified seven repertoires commonly used and weaved together to create a counter-discourse (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000). A chief aim of these repertoires was to render the dominant recovery discourse inert and take control of outcomes by increasing power and influence. For clarity, we assign quotes to discursive actors’ unique identifiers, present repertoires in the sequence actors most often invoked them (i.e., one was invoked, then another was invoked, etc.), and use italics to highlight key words to orient the reader. Positioning and causality repertoires were typically invoked first. We demonstrate repertoires altered red wolf governance processes and the dominant risk narrative concerning recovery (one of several stories used to support self-interest or demean opponents), split cognitive authority over red wolves in the public sphere, and set new, paradoxical limits for scientific inquiry.

Positioning repertoire. A resource of productive power, discourses can be used by subjects to act upon the self to achieve a desired or preferred judgement from others. Subject positioning was a primary discursive actor strategy, and helped them demonstrate credibility, levelheadedness, compassion, concern, and cognitive authority. In some cases, actors summoned additional repertoires, such as falsifiability or contrariety, to achieve the positioning they desired. It was key to demonstrate actors’ *sense of authority* about red wolf recovery and stand on equal footing with recovery’s authoritative but perceived tenuous scientific foundation. Language conveyed the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission’s (NCWRC) certainty that scaling recovery back to public lands, which “do not and will not” provide adequate resources for red wolves, was infeasible. Local level actors used language to also *assert their legitimacy as challengers* to recovery decision-makers and scientists. Local level corpora comprised affirming, negative phrases such as “absolutely invented,” “exactly right,” “there is nothing sustainable about red wolf recovery,” “can never be achieved,” “simply cannot succeed” or “not possible” to validate their claims. Actors appealed to validated sources of knowledge to anchor their arguments. For example, claiming to quote part of a study, PC affirmed, “I’m quoting here” and “in my research.” Likewise, the NCWRC referred to state-generated statistics and a suggested surfeit of data on large canids to bolster or precede claims such as “coyotes trapped statewide increased 2600%,” or “as evidenced by research” and “this well-documented persistence” (GM). At the federal level, Senator Helms held a newspaper, announcing, “I have in hand” a New York Times “report.” Mentioning interactions with people connected to recovery also helped construct positions of privileged access to and intimate understandings of recovery doings as well as an *impression of amiability*. Tillis remarked that he “has personally met with property owners who have been harmed by the [USFWS]’s mismanagement of the Red Wolf Recovery Program” as well as the NCWRC. This technique was also used at the local level, referencing a “helpful” and “wonderful friendship” (PC) with a legendary red wolf trapper.

Subjects represented themselves in a manner that *demonstrated logic and sensibility* to differentiate their arguments from the USFWS and frame their unpopular policy position in a positive light. Discursive actors at the local level described a straight arrow image and solidarity with the audience, communicating they “know better” than what the USFWS communicated, were “law abiding”, a “landowner,” and a “normal citizen.” Decision-making actors used discursive strategies to represent themselves as rational. Senator Helms rebuked recovery as “a bad idea period.” Mr. Myers positioned the NCWRC as measured, reasonable, collaborative, and consistent with federal recovery rules to contend that termination was “the most reasonable and achievable alternative” and “the best decision.” Further reinforcing this position was the NCWRC’s commitment to illustrating the USFWS’s procedural inconsistencies, while also providing management recommendations “consistent with” current federal rules. Senator Tillis employed language to exhibit his confusion over the USFWS’s decision to confine motile red wolves to public lands rather than terminate the program, uttering, “it’s odd to me.” Despite the illegality of halting recovery, he ordered, “before we do anything more” the USFWS must “shut it down,” hit the “reset” button, and “do [recovery] right,” suggesting those pulling the levers of recovery were unreasoning.

Finally, actors positioned themselves as *compassionate* toward wolves and wanted to see them survive, but not in NENC. For instance, LO’s text expressed that he was “not wanting to kill a wolf” and deployed a crisis narrative conveying that “wolves and coyotes are breeding at an alarming rate.” The only possible outcome is for the USFWS to trap and relocate “the remaining pure wolves” to do what is “in the best interest of NC’s wildlife” and “save the red wolf from hybridization.” Additionally, PC alluded to a noble recovery program turned ignoble, commenting that “as worthy as this reintroduction effort may have once been” it is no longer. Suggesting taxpayer funds for recovery were wasted, he expressed his concern that “there are many, many endangered species out there that have no available funding.” By refuting recovery, PC also positioned himself as a *wildlife steward* atop an elevated moral ground: “we need to be good stewards of the land, good stewards of the resource, and we need to know and trust the U.S. Fish and Wildlife as good stewards of the funds that are appropriated by Congress.” The NCWRC (GM) emphasized an “urgent concern” and, thus, a need to expedite termination by declaring there is a “clear and present danger of losing the Species Survival Program” (SSP). During the 2016 budget hearing, Tillis positioned himself as a red wolf *advocate*, stating, “It’s not that I’m opposed – I’d love to find a credible way to sustain a wild population of red wolves,” contradicting his 2017 press release employing the big bad wolf repertoire.

Causality repertoire. Critics of red wolf recovery used language near the beginning and then throughout corpora to describe expressions of causality to legitimize their claims and illustrate the root of problems and how to solve them. Causality repertoires directed the use of other, consequential repertoires, such as victim or contrariety repertoires. Causal relations, often displayed as proof by assertion, constructed programmatic failure as an inevitable fact resulting from maladministration, external stimuli, or ecological processes. Maladministration was represented in several ways. First, organizational pathologies led to failure. A popular claim was that the USFWS misinterpreted “its science” (i.e., data used to support recovery). This deliberate strategy linked, for

example, hybrids becoming prevalent on the landscape (LO). Second, minimal active habitat management on federal lands, as required by the SSP, led to wolves using private lands (GM). A similar argument was made at the local level, claiming the USFWS made a wetland landscape already unsuitable for red wolf recovery further unfit by pursuing a hydrological restoration project (to prevent wildfire and create healthy wildlife habitat): “The Feds have flooded their land and forced the wolves onto private land” (LO). Other claims asserted the USFWS maladministration or its impacts (e.g., red wolves preferring private lands) reduced USFWS credibility with landowners (e.g., “this agency has no credibility based on the lack of respect for the landowners” [TT]; “failure to comply” with 1995 rules has “completely undermined local support” [LO & PC]).

The causality repertoire was also invoked with claims that external stimuli caused certain human behaviors and negative impacts. Citing the judicial nighttime ban on coyote hunting in the RWRA (to avoid misidentification incidences and protect red wolves), the NCWRC claimed “current legal circumstances” prevented the agency from authorizing sterilization of coyotes (required to test placeholder theory). It was added that the NCWRC could, however, authorize a permit if “coyotes are euthanized.” Further, judicial rulings favoring red wolf recovery increased the likelihood that landowners were “violating a law” (i.e., accidentally or purposely shooting a red wolf) to protect property from perceived threats from large canids (LO).

Discursive actors described causality in terms of ecological influences that centered on the increased number of coyotes and their impacts on state trust wildlife. A popular claim was that as “coyote and hybrid populations continue to increase... wildlife has been decimated,” suffered “damage,” or faced “a potentially devastating unknown” impact (LO). Similarly, one NCWRC resolution declared that red wolves’ preference for private lands “continues to increasingly impact land-use options for these landowners.”

Contrariety repertoire. This repertoire underscored a criterion for the intelligibility of process, often immediately following the use of a causality repertoire. Discursive actors often highlighted contrastive actions and statements by the USFWS to construct that contrariety epitomized the existing governance regime. For example, local discursive actors claimed the USFWS “wildlife biologists have admitted” that controlling the impact of coyotes “is not physically possible” (LO). Arguing that the USFWS ignored these signals, PC claimed that “it is unbelievable what [the USFWS] has done” to continue recovery. A seminal claim was the USFWS had abused authority by acting contrary to federal red wolf recovery rules. Discursive actors stated the agency had “not obeyed their own rules” and “place[d] itself above the law” to administer recovery (LO). Discursive actors uniformly referenced “unauthorized releases” of red wolves onto private property. The NCWRC maintained that the “stated goal(s)” of the program and rules governing them were “clear,” emphasizing that recovery goals cannot be accomplished even by breaking rules. Outlining various forms of bureaucratic abuse, Tillis proclaimed recovery a “bureaucratic failure.” Another tactic was to highlight details that the USFWS already recognized. For example, emphasizing captive wolf numbers were “far short of the identified needs,” the NCWRC stated that “the Service identified [this issue] as the highest priority” (i.e., wild releases should be secondary to securing the captive population). Similarly, Tillis also appealed to USFWS-generated reports and

data, explaining that “even by their own estimate, a report that was issued September of this year, says it’s a failure.”

Fatalist repertoire. Discursive actors used speech or text to describe an untamable setting, concentrating on deficiencies of recovery governance. This repertoire was often invoked after appealing to subject positioning or causality repertoires. The threat of and emphasis on hybridization between coyotes and red wolves created an ecological context “unable to be monitored or controlled” (LO). Several claims and insinuations breathed life into this repertoire. First, at the local level, criticality was linked to a coyote-free landscape as an alleged “critical success factor” that “no longer exists on the Albemarle Peninsula” (LO). Second, language signified that coyotes outnumbered red wolves by a margin of “3 to 1” (LO). Tillis, at the federal level, used rough population estimates to suggest the USFWS could not combat the influx of coyotes to the RWRA. He employed an intensifier to suggest red wolf governance does not and may never have solutions: “How on Earth can you ever overcome those numbers and think that the [USFWS] has a credible strategy to prevent hybridization?” Lastly, actors employed retrospective determinism (i.e., reasoning that asserts because an event happened it was destined to occur) to appeal to collective memory. Actors often used a case comparison approach to articulate that “this exact situation” under the “exact same conditions” (LO) occurred along the Gulf Coast in the mid-20th Century and Great Smoky Mountain National Park in 1998. The NCWRC scaled up the local level argument that the USFWS declared wild red wolves extinct in the 1970s due to “extensive hybridization with coyotes” yielding an “immediate and significant threat of inter-specific breeding with coyotes” on the Albemarle Peninsula (GM).

Falsifiability repertoire. Discursive actors used this repertoire when they referred to their interpretation of scientific facts to set limits of scientific inquiry. It was critical to achieve a well-informed subject position before enlisting this repertoire. One tactic exploited the program’s non-essential experimental legalese, often citing a “failed experiment” to decry the existing research program paradigm in favor of a falsifiability paradigm (GM/LO). Distorting the words of recovery biologist Mike Phillips, Senator Helms expressed the “useless[ness]” of an iterative recovery approach. At the time, Helms claimed he was quoting Phillips: “Most things we have tried to orchestrate in the wild have not worked” (Dold 1993). Phillips’s remarks actually referenced the unpredictability of wild red wolf movement to survive the North Carolina landscape in which they were placed: “our vision of the environment is so different from theirs that we can’t anticipate what they will do.” Referring to testing placeholder theory, the NCWRC diminished the USFWS’s scientific prowess stating that “it is assumed,” rather than theorized, “that sterilized coyotes released into the wild as placeholders within the red wolf population will occupy the same habitats as red wolves (i.e., private lands) and present the same risks to landowners and native wildlife” (GM). This is a notable change from 2016 Congressional testimony language expressing no consternation over the existing research program paradigm where the RWRA harbored a “living laboratory” operating under “testable goals.”¹

A second tactic characterized placeholder theory as being offered as a “silver bullet” and “end all, save all” but “a documented failure” in the end (LO). Constructing an ineffectiveness over a lengthy temporal period and referring to population trends,

criticism of placeholder theory noted that “after 13 years [red wolf populations] declined 67%” (LO). It was concluded that a single individual using a “simple trapping exercise” can “destroy the placeholder theory” and that “continued reliance” on this theory to recover wolves undermined the USFWS and recovery program credibility with landowners (LO).

A third tactic emphasized empirical findings that supported termination and disregarded contrary findings. Population viability analysis (PVA) was privileged among discursive actors because it suggested that a) the wild wolf population was and would continue crashing and b) “80 to 90 percent genetic integrity can never be achieved in the wild” (LO). The PVA provided opportune means to instruct the USFWS to abandon recovery and safeguard captive wolves instead. The PVA, referenced by the USFWS in a decision memorandum, “states the wild red wolf population is projected to crash in as few as 8 years” and that “the recent PVA report indicates the Non-Essential Population has a 2.38 times higher risk of mortality than the Species Survival Plan” delineates (GM). The PVA was invoked to activate retrospective determinism as population decline was “predicted in 1999” (LO). Further, it was suggested that federal judicial authority discounted PVA importance in court, consistently ruling in favor of recovery and “ignoring all current science” (LO).

Victim repertoire. Discursive actors appealed to victimhood, articulating that restrictions undermined bureaucratic prudence and prevented them from reaching certain goals. With one exception among all corpora (LO), actors usually appealed to this repertoire in the middle of their communications to articulate an undesirable outcome or at the end to beseech justice (TT). Taxpayers (“you and I” [PC]) and the USFWS were both depicted as victims. Blame was assigned to “a few” pro-wolf non-governmental organizations (NGOs) motivated by revenue: “[The USFWS] has been hijacked by very far left, rogue NGOs (Chad Adams interjects: “like third party environmental groups”) that are more concerned about profiteering off the public trust assets” (PC). Additionally, the USFWS was portrayed as beholden to wolf politics, obstructing a “noble,” moral (authors’ summary of views on stewardship), or “right” outcome: “Fish and Wildlife, in my mind, knows exactly what I’m sitting here telling you, but they do not have the political will to end the program, and that’s a shame” (PC).

Victimhood was intrinsic where actors made accusations of government takings or “erosion” of landowner “rights.” According to the NCWRC and both U.S. senators from North Carolina, “attempting to anchor the RWRA on inadequate federal lands is unrealistic and will put the burden on private land owners” (GM). The NCWRC “strongly believes all private landowners should be allowed to use lethal control methods, such as responsible hunting to manage coyotes, including sterilized ‘placeholder’ coyotes.”

Big bad wolf repertoire. Language herein invoked a fear appeal by portraying an eventual outcome as a horrifying, avoidable tragedy. Without documented cases to support this narrative, Senator Helms employed this repertoire early in his communications, and then persistently represented red wolves as a danger to human safety and property. Using jurisdictional deference to his advantage, he claimed recovery area residents “do not want these predators roaming their property, attacking their farm animals and livestock, and being a peril to their children.” The senator repeated “dangerous” and

“predatory animals” three times in his testimony. He added that red wolves were “an enormous problem,” “exceedingly dangerous,” “hazardous” and a “menace” to residents. Helms also used language to help his audience visualize the threat. Wolves “slink onto private property” and “attack and feed on farm animals and livestock.” Helms painted a mental picture of a landscape teeming with wolves, mentioning “at least 170 wolves, an increase of 100% in less than 8 years.” He also declared, “we have reports that at least one child has been bitten by a red wolf and had to undergo tetanus treatment” – a claim refuted by the USFWS (Price 2019). Senator Tillis appealed to fear in a 2017 press release, asserting that red wolves were “terrorizing” citizens and “causing damage.” Other actors used this repertoire sparingly, but did so when they invoked a crisis narrative that game animal populations have been or would be destroyed by red wolves and the coyotes and “coywolves” (hybrids) that red wolf laws are alleged to protect. According to local and state actors, “native” wildlife (i.e., state trust game animals) “has been decimated,” “damage(d)” (LO), and are at “risk” of decline (GM).

Logics of Discourse (Context)

Actions by subordinate groups questioning convention, subverting dominant discourse, and asserting a counter-discourse occur in the midst of complex social and historical processes (Gismondi and Richardson 1991). Hajer and Versteeg (2005) assert that researchers must attend to specific situational logics in which truth arises. In this section, we interpret our findings within a logics of discourse framework to describe the context producing text or speech (Howarth 2010). There are three logics - social, political, and fantasmic. We simplify and abridge their illustration and add a fourth, ecological, that accounts for the social-ecological system in which red wolf governance operates.

Social. The conflict between humans over red wolf recovery may be characterized by a logic of “irreconcilable negativity” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, 14). The social logic resisting recovery expresses that certain societal segments and wolves can never coexist because negative impacts will far outweigh positive ones. Intractable social antagonisms exist in wolf recovery cases because policy contestants cannot achieve their desired identities and interests. Numerous interests involved in recovery encompass a multifaceted socio-political context and questions linger about how to address moral, political, and cultural differences between policy contestants (Serenari, Cobb, and Peroff 2018). These differences continue to direct who will and how to live with wolves in NENC and other fragmented normative landscapes.

Political. Discursive actors employed logics of equivalence and difference to contest exclusionary practices within the institution of red wolf governance. The former split policy contestants into two groups. Discursive actors positioned themselves through an equivalence logic as credible or legitimate and struggling against illegitimate ones to overcome subjugation by an urban majority favoring wolf recovery (Deblinger, Woytek, and Zwick 1999). The difference logic endeavored to unite dissidents across scales of governance by demanding structural change initiatives to address negative impacts caused by democratic domination (Marcuse 1991; Nie 2004).

A principal subordinate logic at the root of political inequalities was the USFWS's privileging scientific, technical, and moral interests of the majority, or those who have political resources to design, administer, and replicate wolf recovery projects. The resultant privileged discourse has been critical to securing legitimacy of wolf recovery and other large carnivores in the public sphere (Bell, Hampshire, and Tonder 2008; Lynn 2010). Similar to gray wolves, challenges to recovery have been vocalized in forums that were generally uncontested by wolf advocates, open to anti-wolf views, or comprising an audience of decision-makers with power to alter scope, structure, and process of red wolf recovery (Nie 2003; Serenari, Cobb, and Peroff 2018). This practice was critical for discursive actors who needed to construct an antagonism that exerted sufficient force to situate alternative rationalities, opportunities, and communicative processes closer to rather than farther from the public sphere (von Essen 2015; von Essen and Hansen 2015).

Fantasmic. Subjects of a termination discourse rallied around at least two imaginaries that stimulated ideological conflict. The first comprised the idea that after several decades and a high of 130–150 wild wolves there could be once again a wolf-less landscape in NENC. Narratives of illegitimate governance influenced decision makers' and citizens' views of recovery. Studies chronicling these resistance efforts provide evidence of a shift from seeking authorization for lethal removal of red wolves occupying private property to termination of the program (Serenari, Cobb, and Peroff 2018; Serenari and Taub 2019). The second was the formation of a “chains of equivalence” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, 17) imaginary by which discursive actors aspired to alter the hierarchical structure of red wolf governance to a horizontal network configuration. States are at the behest of federal government's constitutional powers and supremacy when it comes to endangered wildlife, but states' conservation obligations remain in question (Nie et al. 2017). Resistance to hegemonic red wolf recovery under a horizontal structure challenges the intent and mandates of the ESA and, by extension, the deployment of typical conflict mitigation instruments (e.g., pay-for-presence programs).

Ecological. A logic of competition for resources between wolves, coyotes, hybrids, and humans supports a stewardship hegemony defined as human mastery of wildlife systems to safeguard state trust resources. Styling an ecological logic in this way is juxtaposed to ESA rationale representing wild wolves as a symbol of harmony with and human dependence on nature. This antagonism stifles achieving common ground in carnivore management contexts. Validation of a termination discourse is supported by a wildlife management paradigm that sets management goals, justifies management decisions, and informs policy positions based on assurances about the status of and impacts to certain valued state trust resources (e.g., deer) over others.

Social Practice of Repertoires (Action Orientation)

Next, we focus on implications of actors' interpretive repertoires describing the same event – failure of red wolf recovery – to better understand broader struggles over ideological dominance and truth-making. We investigate how counter-discourse supports institutions or transforms power relations and policy outcomes through structural revisions or subject-making (Fairclough 1989; Hajer 1995).

Structural Implications

Our findings support the notion that repertoires, particularly contrariety, causality, and victim, encouraged the USFWS to enhance their democratic legitimacy. Discursive actors attempted to exert power and influence over hegemonic governance and strong forces behind wolf recovery, though they did not (yet) achieve complete termination. Conceding that critics to recovery seized upon organizational inconsistencies and mistakes and organizational reflexivity was necessary to keep wild wolves on the ground, the USFWS engaged in a formal evaluation of the Red Wolf Recovery Program,² reformed the Red Wolf Recovery Team with landowner representation,³ investigated at least 405 backlogged landowner complaints about red wolves (P. Benjamin, *personal communication*, October 2014), held public meetings and forums,⁴ issued unprecedented red wolf take permits, modified existing federal rules to reduce the RWRA to public lands, and marshaled a \$400,000 Congressional study to confirm red wolves' species status (Fears 2019).

These pursuits were intended to improve participation, deliberation, and decentralization among policy contestants to construct a shared discourse (Hansson-Forman et al. 2018). Consensus models attempt to meet the goals of perpetual economic growth, environmental protection, and human development. In wildlife conservation, consensus-based approaches engender “win-win” rhetoric, community inclusion, empowerment, and development, and also prioritize educational schemes and partnerships (Noe et al. 2017). These normative governance strategies are indeed effective in cases where landowners are willing to, for instance, shoulder some of the burden of having endangered wildlife on their land, accept empirical findings, and resources are available to perpetuate hegemonic practices at the individual or local level (e.g., Raymond and Olive 2008). They can also result in policy shifts in carnivore management (Yochim and Lowry 2016). Inescapable details are that many critically necessary landowners will never want wolves on their property and that current institutions are not designed to accommodate their reality or change their minds (Serenari and Taub 2019). Theoretical debates about the weaknesses of consensus models are ongoing (e.g., Peterson, Peterson, and Peterson 2005, Noe et al. 2017) and it is beyond the scope of this paper to engage these debates; but, our CDA project suggests that increased attention should be given to how social and political institutions might be altered to carve a discursive space for publics who seek to liberate themselves from perceived illegitimate carnivore governance that embeds the normative dismissal of “unfamiliar ideas, actors, positions, practices, and parties” (Phillips 1996; Tampio 2010, 912). Systemic privileging of public sphere views about red wolf recovery (e.g., essential, virtuous, a benefit to U.S. commerce and society) and, hence, governance for the majority often leaves dissidents with few options other than abandoning their interests, norms, or values, or facing exclusion from deliberative activities (Phillips 1996). We revealed that formation of a discursive network to form a counter hegemony is a third tool that minority publics invoke to resist this process. These critical insights are particularly problematic for landscape scale conservation projects. The implications of a systematic unwelcoming or disrepute of “minority-becomings” (Tampio 2010, 912) include perpetual political conflict with potentially broad social-ecological consequences. A glaring example is the current, enduring bureaucratic paralysis that threatens extinction of wild red wolves. If resistance, a by-

product of diversity, is an attempt at expressing difference through conflict to achieve sameness/equity and recognition of difference (Mouffe 2005), then embracing a politics of difference would mitigate political struggles over recovery by encouraging the transformation of normative recovery processes to yield coexistence and interpenetration of worldviews (Tampio 2010). There are several ideas circulating about how to resolve the aforementioned shortcomings to better incorporate difference. A few examples include argument-based models (Peterson, Peterson, and Peterson 2005), post-capitalist conservation (Büscher and Fletcher 2019), and ontological redesign (Escobar 2018). Empirical studies can help evaluate the merits of such projects, but society will have to determine what should be done.

Repertoire language conveyed a conceived truth that wild wolves are insignificant and expendable in NENC. Repertoires, particularly, fatalist and falsifiability, subtly underscored an alternative rationality to make a “better” argument (Habermas 1984). As this analysis suggests, they embedded representations of unsubstantiated and failed recovery into institutional governance practices. Manifestations included Congressional testimony in support of a wolf-less landscape in NENC (this study), denying coyote sterilization permits necessary to execute placeholder theory (Serenari et al. 2018), and obtaining support from Congressional representatives (this study). At least three implications arise from these findings. First, claims that wild red wolves are unimportant to ecosystem health ignore empirical support for wild wolf existence (Bruskotter et al. 2014). Anti-recovery language gives credence to these claims, which are mainly supported by subordinate, contested claims that coyotes and humans fill red wolves’ niche in NENC. Second, repertoires set the precedent that when a species’ historic range is limited to mainly private lands, this unsuitable habitat renders recovery inviable. This notion is, without a Congressional modification, incompatible with ESA mandates. It is also impractical for several reasons including the notion that captive breeding facilities operate with the goal of helping achieve wild recovery. Species falling in this category, such as red wolves, would be predestined for extinction. Finally, given that the majority of lands in the United States are privately held, repertoires outlined here diminish the potential of state agencies and landowners to lead in the arena of endangered carnivore conservation. Their use may discourage other states from helping recover wolves.

Repertoires encouraged a latent splitting of cognitive authority over recovery. This rupture was enabled by a discourse coalition of powerful actors who could combat any attempt to override development of a counter-discourse (Dryzek 1997). Repertoire language directed audiences to alternative rationalities that discursive actors believed were most likely to lead to legitimate recovery decisions. Like-minded actors used language to form an “epistemic community” (Haas 1992, 3) and challenge technocratic and instrumental rationalities of the dominant discourse (Eden 1999). The impression of causality is an effective tool to shape consent to alternative rationalities in the era of post-truth politics (Bilgin 2017). This era is characterized in part by the power of the unsaid and populations that increasingly gravitate toward “felt-truth” over objective facts (Bluemle 2018). Causality is elemental to comprehension of recovery actions and outcomes; the representation of causal relations helps humans manifest some control over recovery phenomenon (León and Peñalba 2002). Peh’s (2018) commentary on the importance of empirical facts guiding deliberation and implementation of conservation

plans in this era is critical for carnivores because they are arguably the most vulnerable to alternative rationalizations based on “barstool biology” (Robbins 2006), myth-making (Dickman and Hazzah 2016), political expediency (Bruskotter et al. 2014), and other social processes that underscore legitimacy deficits. Given this context, a legitimate democratic arrangement may at least require that legislative bodies, administrative agencies, and appointed experts explain how their logics, recommendations, and demands can complement or strengthen an array of epistemic communities (King 2003).

Actor-Specific Implications

There are at least five actor-level implications worth mentioning. First, actors are critical to discourse development via agentic positioning (Hajer and Versteeg 2005). Through positioning, actors in our study used language to “limit how much of what is logically possible” to “say and do” (Harré and Moghaddam 2003, 5). Hegemony makes it nonsensical to think wild red wolves should not exist in NENC or that barstool biology or armchair research should have as much weight as empirical science. Yet, our study demonstrated that involvement in a discourse coalition connecting locals and political elites empowers the use of positioning repertoires which can improve the chances of receiving desirable policy outcomes. Second, a counter-discourse emphasized that discursive actors or their constituents reside within a perceived undemocratic system or structural disadvantage (Gismondi and Richardson 1991). Actors established that there will be winners and losers in red wolf recovery, and losers cannot be made winners under any circumstance outside of program termination. Highlighting the deficiencies of democratic, technocratic, and idyllic representations of wolf governance can breed public mistrust in political, epistemological, and civic processes that are needed by actors to mitigate conflict (Skogen, Mauz, and Krange 2008; von Essen 2015). A third implication, discursive actors used language to represent oneself, constituents, and wildlife agencies as victimized by wolf recovery. Actors who take this approach could more strongly argue that political institutions governing wolf recovery disregard their interests and require reform, while sewing moral divisions among the public (von Essen and Allen 2017). Fourth, using discourse to mediate incessant individual and group suffering resulting from social and political alienation may have implications for future generations growing up in large carnivore country. Victimhood, real or perceived, can be transferred from one generation to another and accumulate collectively (Varvin, 2005). Wolves and human indignity become linked, negative portrayals of policy opponents are made normative, and landscape-scale coexistence becomes fantasmic. Fifth, we must not ignore the implications for political elites who occupy discursive networks that openly resist wolf recovery. Because they may be viewed as neglecting scientific and political integrity to achieve political ends, their in/actions may contribute to morale declines within their organizations (Doremus 2007).

Finally, perceived risks to humans and domestic and game species are the epicenter of counter-hegemonic understandings about wolves. Across repertoires, language helped discursive actors heighten an established common sense understanding of recovery-related risk and pressure policy changes that reverse wolf protections. These findings are consistent with other studies on how language can shape how we view and frame

the nature of policy problems and influence changes in environmental governance (Hajer and Versteeg 2005; Hiedanpää, Pellikka, and Ojalampi 2016). Repertoires emphasized the notion that “when people talk (or think) about things, they invariably do so in terms already provided for them by history” (Edley 2001, 198). The big bad wolf repertoire, for example, positioned actors as rational risk managers to strengthen the case for termination. A risk manager positioning means human welfare becomes “an object of legitimate interest” (Willig 2003, 154) to some policy contestants and may be compromised by wolf recovery. Despite an absence of confirmed attacks on humans, sub-discourse evolved from fear of aggressive wolves to a defense of economic and cultural facets of rural life, and welfare of game and other endangered populations were deemed more worthy than red wolves (Serenari, Cobb, and Peroff 2018). This research demonstrates the importance of considering how discourse evolves rather than entrenches subject positionings to articulate and replicate new understandings of risk that more powerfully destabilize and delegitimize recovery.

Conclusion

This study explored how language as a social power functioned in the RWRA case to delegitimize endangered species recovery. We reveal the understudied micropolitics of language by exploring the moments in red wolf recovery when less democratically powerful groups subverted the dominant discourse and, in the process, constructed a counter-discourse to pursue a new wildlife governance order. A collective drawing from the seven described repertoires by local, state, and federal discursive actors who comprise a discourse coalition advanced a representation of red wolf recovery as failing, and talked illegitimacy into new, real actions and prescriptions. A delegitimization discourse posed a challenge to the credible and authoritative voice of USFWS, red wolf advocates, and the scientific management paradigm. Given the success of delegitimization discourse in this case, researchers, citizens and decision-makers should further consider ways in which language control contributes to legitimacy deficits through resistance to recovery programs. Ignoring language is to ignore powerful social forces that can positively or negatively alter recovery goals and outcomes.

We also sought to illuminate contestations over causes of and solutions for growing inequalities of endangered species conservation. As we see in numerous large carnivore cases, emancipatory struggles against conservation occur when risks and benefits are distributed asymmetrically across society whilst conservation groups speak of building tolerance among alienated groups. Tolerance is shorthand for living with democratic approaches that intensify reliance upon hegemonic practices and inherently may not and often do not serve everyone. Large carnivore conservation is a *res publica* and society must do more to develop governing structures that see through the eyes of an array of interests and use this novel framing to synthesize a new suite of repertoires. The hard part is reconciling that there can only be one contested landscape. Governance innovations that harness the networks of power-knowledge within which resistance movements function may be able to inform policy through cooperative, rather than resistance, discourse.

Notes

1. <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/II/II15/20160921/105396/HHRG-114-II15-Wstate-MyersG-20160921.pdf>
2. <https://www.ncwildlife.org/Portals/0/News/documents/letter%20to%20usfws.pdf>
3. <https://www.fws.gov/southeast/pdf/report/red-wolf-recovery-team-recommendations-facilitated-by-group-solutions-inc.pdf>
4. <https://www.fws.gov/southeast/pdf/report/wmi-red-wolf-review.pdf>

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