

Exploring the Non-Verbalizable in Conservation Grazing: The Contradictions Illuminated by a 'Go-Along' Methodology

Authors : James Ormrod

Abstract : This paper is concerned with volunteer livestock checking. Based on a pilot study consisting of 'go-along' interviews with livestock checkers, it argues that there are limitations to the insights that can be generated from approaches to 'discourse analysis' that would focus only on the verbalizable aspects of the practice. Volunteer livestock checking takes place across Europe as part of conservation projects aimed at maintaining particular habitats through the reintroduction of grazing animals. Volunteers are variously called 'urban shepherds', because these practices often take place on urban fringes, or 'lookers', as their role is to make visual checks on the animals. Pilot research that took place on the South Downs (a chalk downland habitat on the South Coast of the UK) involved researchers accompanying volunteers as they checked on livestock. They were asked to give an account of what they were doing and then answer semi-structured interview questions. Participants drew on popular discourses on conservation and biodiversity, as framed by the local council who run the programme. They also framed their relationships to the animals in respect to the more formal limitations of their role as identified through the conservation programme. And yet these discourses, significant as they are, do not adequately explain why volunteers are drawn to, and emotionally invested in, looking. The methodology employed allowed participants instead to gesture to features of the landscape and to recall memories, and for the researchers to see how volunteers interacted with the animals and the landscape in embodied and emotionally loaded ways. The paper argues that a psychosocial perspective that pays attention to the contradictions and tensions made visible through this methodology helps develop a fuller understanding of volunteer livestock checking as a social practice.

Keywords : conservation, human-animal relations, looking, volunteering

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