Common-sense Discourses of Nature: A Gramscian Analysis of Conservation Designations in the Scottish Highlands

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Introduction

There is no singular "nature" simply out there waiting to be conserved[1] and meanings of nature are multiple, biased, and contradictory.[2] Despite arguments for contextually-specific ways of knowing nature, there remains a persistent nature–culture dichotomy underpinning nature conservation,[3] problematically separating human action from the natural environment. Scotland has a complex and layered framework of statutory nature conservation designations used to protect and conserve nature; in fact, over a quarter of Scottish land is covered by such designations.[4] This paper examines the discourses of nature produced through such conservation designations and the implications for human–environment interaction. The research is based on a critical documentary analysis of nature conservation designations over time, using the Gramscian concept of "common sense" to critique the nature–culture dichotomy. The first section introduces contextual literature on neo-liberal conservation and the Myth of the Highlands. The next explains the methodological approach taken before the main findings are presented. It is argued that as elsewhere, nature conservation designations in Scotland

1   Phil McNaughten and John Urry, *Contested Natures*, London 1998.

2   R. Bruce Hull and David Robertson, "The Language of Nature Matters: We Need a More Public Ecology," [in:] *Restoring Nature: Perspectives from the Social Sciences and Humanities*, Paul Gobster and R. Bruce Hull (eds.), Washington 2000, p. 97 (97–118).

3   Sandra Wall-Reinius et al., "Everyday Life in a Magnificent Landscape: Making Sense of the Nature/Culture Dichotomy in the Mountains of Jämtland, Sweden," [in:] *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, vol. 2 no. 1 (2019), pp. 3–22.

4   Charles Warren, *Managing Scotland's Environment*, 2nd ed., Edinburgh 2009.

have reproduced the nature–culture dichotomy through prescribing desirable levels and forms of human–environment interaction. Additionally, common-sense discourses of nature are shown to emerge from within notions of natural heritage as a national asset tied to the Scottish state. Finally, there is a discussion of alternative nature–cultures and suggestions are made for directing future research in this area.

Neoliberal nature conservation and the Myth of the Highlands

Framing this critical study of nature conservation designations from a social, historical, and political perspective are two main areas of study: neoliberal conservation and the Myth of the Highlands. The first arises from the broader context of studies concerning the "neoliberalisation of nature" within contemporary capitalism[5] and is based on the argument that nature protection and capitalism go hand-in-hand, with conservation as a site of capitalist accumulation.[6] Specifically, natures are subject to processes of commodification, marketisation, financialisation, and transformation into natural capital as well as payments for ecosystem services through nature conservation and eco-tourism initiatives.[7]

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5 See Noel Castree, "Neoliberalism and the Biophysical Environment: A Synthesis and Evaluation of the Research," [in:] *Environment and Society: Advances in Research*, vol. 1 no. 1 (2010), pp. 5-45; Nik Heynen (ed.), *Neoliberal Environments: False Promises and Unnatural Consequences*, London 2007; James McCarthy and Scott Prudham, "Neoliberal Nature and the Nature of Neoliberalism," [in:] *Geoforum*, vol. 35 no. 3 (2004), pp. 275–283.

6 Murat Arsel and Bram Büscher, "Nature™ Inc.: Changes and Continuities in Neoliberal Conservation and Market-based Environmental Policy," [in:] *Development and Change*, vol. 43 no. 1 (2012), pp. 53–78; Dan Brockington and Rosaleen Duffy, "Capitalism and Conservation: The Production and Reproduction of Biodiversity Conservation," [in:] *Antipode*, vol. 42 no. 3 (2010), pp. 469–484.

7 See: Tor Benjaminsen and Ian Bryceson, "Conservation, Green/Blue Grabbing and Accumulation by Dispossession in Tanzania," [in:] *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 39 no. 2 (2012), pp. 335–355; Dan Brockington, "Ecosystem Services and Fictious Commodities," [in:] *Environmental Conservation*, vol. 38 no. 4 (2011), pp. 367–369; Bram Büscher et al., "Towards a Synthesized Critique of Neoliberal Biodiversity Conservation," [in:] *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, vol. 23 no. 2 (2012), pp. 4–30; Nik Heynen and Paul Robbins, "The Neoliberalization of Nature: Governance, Privatization, Enclosure and Valuation," [in:] *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, vol. 16 no. 1 (2005), pp. 5–8; William Holden et al., "Exemplifying Accumulation by Dispossession: Mining and Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines," [in:] *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, vol. 93 no. 2 (2011), pp. 141–161; Katja Neves, "Cashing in on Cetourism: A Critical Ecological Engagement with Dominant e-ngo Discourses on Whaling, Cetacean Conservation, and Whale Watching," [in:] *Antipode*, vol. 42 no. 3 (2010), pp. 719–741; Diana Ojeda,

The notion of accumulation by dispossession,[8] a feature of neoliberalism, reiterates how accumulation occurs via enclosures of land through conservation as an ongoing process[9] causing displacement. The enclosures of land (including to create protected areas) fence off physical space, displacing people in the process,[10] but also create new ways of seeing and being in the world.[11] For example, central to neoliberal conservation is the idea that nature can only be "saved" by its submission to capital.[12] In Gramscian terms, neoliberal conservation is a hegemonic practice where elite interests are universalised, and alternatives suppressed.[13] Gramsci's ideas have been used in analyses of nature–society relations[14] and his concepts of the historical bloc and hegemony have been utilised to examine biodiversity conservation and capitalist expansion, sustainable

Green Pretexts: Ecotourism, Neoliberal Conservation and Land Grabbing in Tayrona National Natural Park, Colombia," [in:] *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 39 no. 2 (2012), pp. 357–337.

8   David Harvey, "Accumulation by Dispossession," [in:] *The Socialist Register* (2004), pp. 63–87.

9   See: Bram Büscher, "Enabling Primitive Accumulation through Neoliberal Conservation," [in:] *Human Geography*, vol. 2 no. 3, (2009) pp. 91–94; Alice Kelly, "Conservation Practice as Primitive Accumulation," [in:] *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 38 no. 4 (2011), pp. 683–701; Jim Glassman, "Primitive Accumulation, Accumulation by Dispossession, Accumulation by 'Extra-economic' Means," [in:] *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 30 no. 5 (2006), pp. 608–625; Tom Perreault, *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology*, 1st ed., London 2015.

10   Arun Agrawal and Kent Redford, "Conservation and Displacement: An Overview," [in:] *Conservation and Society*, vol. 7 no. 1 (2009), pp. 1–10.

11   Paige West et al., "Parks and Peoples: The Social Impact of Protected Areas," [in:] *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 35 (2006), pp. 251–277.

12   Bram Büscher et al., "Towards a Synthesized...," op. cit., p. 4.

13   Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen, "Crisis and Continuity of Capitalist Society–Nature Relationships: The Imperial Mode of Living and the Limits to Environmental Governance," [in:] *Review of International Political Economy*, vol. 20 no. 4 (2013), pp.687–711.

14   See: Michael Ekers et al. (eds.), *Gramsci: Space, Nature, Politics*, West Sussex 2013; Michael Ekers, Alex Loftus, and Geoff Mann, "Gramsci Lives!," [in:] *Geoforum*, vol. 40 no. 3 (2009), pp. 287–291; Benedetto Fontana, "The Concept of Nature in Gramsci," [in:] *The Philosophical Forum*, vol. 27 no. 3 (1996), pp. 220–243; Antonio Ioris, "Theorizing State–Environment Relationships: Antinomies of Flexibility and Legitimacy," [in:] *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 39 no. 2 (2015), pp. 167–184; Geoff Mann, "Should Political Ecology Be Marxist? A Case for Gramsci's Historical Materialism," [in:] *Geoforum*, vol. 40 no. 3 (2009), pp. 335–344; Nancy Peluso, "What's Nature Got to Do with It? A Situated Historical Perspective on Socio-natural Commodities. Socio-natural Commodities: Situated Histories," [in:] *Development and Change*, vol. 43 no. 1 (2012), pp. 79–104.

development, and conservation governance.[15] Few studies have applied Gramscian theory in the Scottish context, however, despite its relevance to the "Myth of the Highlands."

The Myth of the Highlands is a phrase that captures the essence of the nature–culture dichotomy. It refers to the ideological representations of Scottish Highland landscapes as natural and wild, which have been taken as reality rather than myth.[16] This social construction of the Highlands as untouched nature emerged throughout the historic periods of economic and social "improvements," romanticisation, and Balmoralisation, each denying the actual conditions of existence, specifically the landscapes' social and cultural history, and the lives of inhabitants.[17] In contemporary Scotland the conservation of seemingly natural or wild landscapes occurs extensively in the *Gàidhealtachd*[18] in the same areas where the Highland Clearances dispossessed people of their lands. Hence, for some, nature conservation is understood through the lenses

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15   See: Jim Igoe et al., "A Spectacular Eco-tour around the Historic Bloc: Theorising the Convergence of Biodiversity Conservation and Capitalist Expansion," [in:] *Antipode*, vol. 42 no. 3 (2010), pp. 486–512; Kiran Asher and Diana Ojeda, "Producing Nature and Making the State: Ordenamiento Territorial in the Pacific Lowlands of Colombia," [in:] *Geoforum*, vol. 40 no. 3 (2009), pp. 292–302; Evangelia Apostolopoulou et al., "Governance Rescaling and the Neoliberalization of Nature: The Case of Biodiversity Conservation in Four EU Countries," [in:] *International Journal of Sustainable Development & World Ecology*, vol. 21 no. 6 (2014), pp. 481–494.

16   Fraser MacDonald, "Viewing Highland Scotland: Ideology, Representation and the 'Natural Heritage,'" [in:] *Area*, vol. 30 no. 3 (1998), pp. 237–244; Patricia Macdonald and Angus Macdonald, "Marginal Lands? An Overview of the Environmental Contexts of Cultural Landscapes in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland," [in:] *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 15 no. 2–3 (2009), pp. 108–141; Jill Payne, "Constructing a 'Wild Land' Cultural Heritage for Britain: 'Water,' 'Wilderness' and Development in the Highlands of Scotland," [in:] *Perceptions of Water in Britain from Early Modern Times to the Present: An Introduction*, Karen Syse and Terje Oestigarrd (eds.), Bergen 2010. pp. 117–145; Mark Toogood, "Representing Ecology and Highland Tradition," [in:] *Area*. vol. 27 no. 2 (1995), pp. 102–109; Charles Withers, "Contested Visions: Nature, Culture and the Morality of Landscape in the Scottish Highlands," [in:] *Nature and Identity in Cross-cultural Perspective*, Anne Buttimer and Luke Wallin (eds.), Dordrecht – Boston – London 1999, pp. 271–286; Peter Womack, *Improvement and Romance: Constructing the Myth of the Highlands*, Basingstoke – London 1989.

17   Peter Womack, *Improvement...*, op. cit.

18   The *Gàidhealtachd* denotes the territory where the culture and language was predominantly Gaelic. For a contemporary discussion of this term and the identity of Gaels see: Frank Bechhofer and David McCrone, "What Makes a Gael? Identity, Language and Ancestry in the Scottish Gàidhealtachd," [in] *Identities*, vol. 21 no. 2 (2014), pp. 113–133.

of internal colonialism and capitalist expansion,[19] while for others it is considered an abuse towards Gaelic heritage and culture.[20] This situation is not unique to Scotland, as evident in the neoliberal conservation literature, but also the broader critique of the ideology of wilderness[21] and fortress conservation, the latter separating people from nature through protected areas and viewing human use of nature as a threat to conservation efforts.[22] Hence resulting conflicts over rights to nature, for example in Scotland the struggle between crofters and conservationists over the right to use "wild" land.[23] This can be contextualised by different attitudes towards land use. Traditional views position land as a resource to make a living via agriculture (such as crofting), whereas post-romantic views perceive land as a refuge for nature, worthy of protection for its own sake.[24] The former tends to originate with those living in the Highlands and the latter from outsiders and visitors to the region.[25] This draws attention to the dynamics of conflict between Gaelic cultural heritage and the romanticised "back-to-nature" sensibilities of modern environmentalism held by outsiders and incomers to the Highlands.[26]

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19 See: William Adams and Martin Mulligan (eds.), *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-colonial Era*, London 2003.

20 James Hunter, *On the Other Side of Sorrow: Nature and People in the Scottish Highlands*, Edinburgh 2014.

21 William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," [in] *Environmental History*, vol. 1 no. 1 (1996), pp. 7–28.

22 See: Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, "Fortress Conservation, Wildlife Legislation and the Baka Pygmies of Southeast Cameroon," [in:] *GeoJournal*, vol. 84 no. 4 (2019), pp. 1035–1055; Hanna Siurua, "Nature above People: Rolston and 'Fortress' Conservation in the South," [in:] *Ethics and the Environment*, vol. 11 no. 1 (2006), pp. 71–96; Joel Hartter and Abraham Goldman, "Local Responses to a Forest Park in Western Uganda: Alternate Narratives on Fortress Conservation," [in:] *Oryx*, vol. 45 no. 1 (2011), pp. 60–68; Jim Igoe and Dan Brockington, "Neoliberal Conservation: A Brief Introduction," [in:] *Conservation & Society*, vol. 5 no. 4 (2007), pp. 432–449; Dan Brockington, *Fortress Conservation: The Preservation of the Mkomazi Game Reserve, Tanzania*, Oxford – Bloomington 2002.

23 Fraser MacDonald, "Viewing Highland...," op. cit.

24 Christopher Smout, *Environmental History: Selected Essays*, Edinburgh 2009.

25 Ibidem.

26 Charles Jedrej and Mark Nuttall, *White Settlers: The Impact of Rural Repopulation in Scotland*, London 1996; Milsoslav Lapka and Eva Cudlinova, "Changing Landscapes, Changing Landscape's Story," [in:] *Landscape Research*, vol. 28 no. 3 (2003), pp. 323–328.

From the basis of the above literatures, nature–culture relations can be viewed as involving the continual social construction of both nature and culture within broader capitalist processes. There is a need for further analysis of the ways in which natures are being shaped ideologically through conservation and dominant discourses in the Scottish context. Thus, the paper herein aims to understand discourses of nature produced through conservation by drawing on a Gramscian political ecology contextualised historically by the Myth of the Highlands.

Research context and methodology

Whilst considering national policies, with relevance to the Scottish Highlands, a further regional focus on the North-West Highlands was adopted. The Wester Ross region is an excellent case study for exploring themes identified in the literature, given the multitude of designations in the area. It has the largest National Scenic Area (NSA) in Scotland, the first National Nature Reserve (NNR) designated in the UK, and many Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), which are mapped for Scotland in Fig. 1. It also has numerous Wild Land Areas (WLA), which are mapped for Scotland in Fig. 2, a Marine Protected Area (MPA), and UNESCO Biosphere Reserve (BR), the latter shown in Fig. 3.

Additionally, there are other European designations, and national park status has been discussed for the area, but never designated. Alongside nature conservation, the region has a history of crofting,[27] Gaelic culture, and a large estate termed "the last great wilderness" of Scotland – all being important features in the context of the Myth of the Highlands.

Documentary analysis was carried out using a critical qualitative approach, focusing on language and discourse in the social construction of nature, informed by a Gramscian epistemology and ontology.[28] The first step in the process was creating a corpus of primary materials for analysis. This was done using online keyword search methods to generate a list of relevant organisations and publications. A timeline of legislation

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27 Crofting is a form of land tenure traditional to the Highlands and Islands which emerged in the 1800s following the clearances. It is a form of small-scale, low-intensity agriculture; crofting townships comprise of individual crofts and common grazings. Crofting has been described as a way of life and is viewed as an important part of the cultural landscape and linked to the future of rural stewardship.

28 Kaela Jubas, "Reading Antonio Gramsci as a Methodologist," [in:] *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, vol. 9 no. 2 (2010), pp. 224-239.
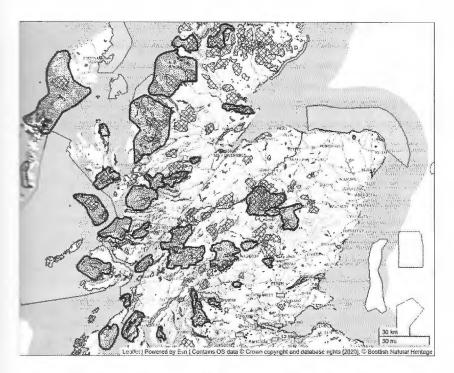
Fig. 1. Map of NSA, NNR, and SSSI in Scotland, contains public sector information licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0. Source: NatureScot, https://sitelink.nature.scot/map

pertaining to nature conservation policies in Scotland and the UK was created and relevant organisations identified covering the period 1945–2016 to ensure adequate historical context. Subsequently, through purposive sampling a corpus was created consisting predominantly of policy documents produced by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), concerning five nature conservation designations[29] between 1990–2016. Consultation documents, project reports, parliamentary debates, organisational webpages, and local government plans were also included from a range of authors.[30] These gave a broader contextual background to policies, their implementation,

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29 SSSI, NNR, NSA, WLA, BR.

30 The Applecross Trust, Assist Social Capital, The Crofting Commission, Countryside Commission for Scotland, Highland Council, Letterewe Estate, The John Muir Trust, Scottish Crofting Federation, Scottish Executive, Scottish Government, National Trust for Scotland, UNESCO.
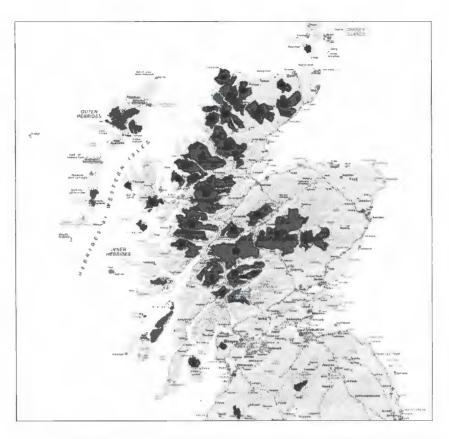
Fig. 2. Map of Wild Land Areas in Scotland, containing public sector information licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0. Source: NatureScot, https://www.nature.scot/wild-land-areas-2014-map

and interpretation of nature conservation discourses over time. Alongside online sources, publications were accessed through the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh. The corpus was analysed using thematic analysis, which enables the understanding of what is being said in a field of discourse and which can be combined with further theoretical analysis.[31] This was done both manually and digitally to create a set of themes comprising data excerpts from the different publications that could be subject to further interpretation informed by Gramscian theory.

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31 Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," [in:] *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 3 no. 2 (2006), pp. 77–101.

Fig. 3. Wester Ross UNESCO Biosphere Reserve outer boundaries. Map data © 2019 Google. Created by biosphere staff and reproduced with permission.

Gramsci is useful for critical qualitative research, given his emphasis on the historicity of language and operations of power. Pre-empting post-structuralism, he argued that "history and historical residues within language are fundamental in operations of power, prestige and hegemony [with] meaning created by language in its metaphorical development with respect to previous meanings."[32] Applied to this research context, language is key to how nature is understood by policymakers and shapes the possibilities for how to manage it.[33] To operationalise the critical Gramscian theory of discourse for analysis, data was interpreted through the key concept of "common sense," which is rooted in historical materialism and the politics of hegemony. Common sense refers specifically to the reproduction of elite and dominant ideologies in everyday life.[34] In the production of common sense, consent is garnered

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32 Peter Ives, *Language and Hegemony in Gramsci*, London 2004, p. 88.

33 R. Bruce Hull and David Robertson, "The Language...," op. cit.

34 Stuart Hall and Alan O'Shea, "Common-sense Neoliberalism," [in:] *Soundings*, no. 55 (2013), pp. 9–25.

for elite interests and the "proper" ways of organising the social and material world, which become naturalised. As explained,

> this is consent, not simply to the interests and purposes [e.g. nature conservation] but also to the interpretations and representations of social reality [e.g. nature as wild] generated by those who control the mental, as well as the material, means of social reproduction [e.g. state and conservation actors].[35]

Common sense, though incomplete and often contradictory, is deeply rooted in folklore and influenced by philosophy, religion, and science.[36] The Gramscian notion of common sense draws attention to ideology and the importance of myth, which "operates on the level of the accepted, on the level of common sense."[37] Myths hold power, embedded as they are within history and encapsulated in language, and demythologising involves rejecting the meaning of myths to create space to unmask how cultural practices, texts, and institutions are socially constructed.[38] Given the richness of qualitative data, the findings herein are only a partial account focused around discourses of nature–culture dichotomy and natural heritage.

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35 Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, London 2013, p. 219.

36 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare, London 1971.

37 Roberta Garner and Black Hawk Hancock (eds.), *Social Theory Volume II: From Modern to Contemporary Theory*, Toronto 2014, p. 606.

38 Ibidem.

Common-sense discourses: nature–culture and natural heritage

The findings of the analysis suggest that all designations but the biosphere reserve reproduce the nature–culture dichotomy, invoking sentiments more aligned with fortress conservation than sustainable development. The designations occur on a scale between viewing human interaction with nature as desirable or undesirable. The SSSI, NNR, and NSA all prioritise nature or landscape over human use at the level of designation, but in management each constructs the particular forms of human–environment interaction that are considered desirable. Without space to present the full mapping of designations here, suffice it to mention that each encourages forms that do not threaten the integrity of the site, thus legitimising particular nature–culture relations. For example, this includes: the attempt to limit "potentially damaging operations" within the SSSI; the reserve manager as (paradoxically) restoring an idealised nature free from human influence in the NNR; the protection of wild land from development and human intrusion in the WLA; and the NSA as a place for appreciation of nature in a natural state without human activity. Overall, the construction of particular levels and forms of desirable human–environment interaction communicates the message that the best use of nature is no use at all[39] and where human use is described, this is to be a controlled human intervention, justified through a core conservation value of restoring the "natural."

The WLA was constructed as a space in which human–environment interaction is considered to be undesirable where the form of interaction is associated with development and modernity. It therefore reproduces a binary between wild/rural space and modern/urban space with wild land defined as "free of man-made intrusions" and showing minimal signs of modern development."[40] Wild land was seen by SNH as distinct from wilderness, recognising to some extent that all of Scotland's landscapes are cultural. The WLA is about conservation of space for experiencing the "quality of wildness" rather than accessing an absolute state of wilderness where nature reigns and human influence is absent. Despite this distinction, the WLA still overwhelmingly constructs certain forms and levels of human interaction with wild nature as unacceptable,

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39 Alexander Smith Mather, *Land Use*, London 1986.

40 John Muir Trust, "Wild Land Policy," 2010, https://www.johnmuirtrust.org (access: 14 May 2020).

particularly related to socio-economic development, considered a threat to the integrity of the WLA. But even where the forms of human–environment interaction do not take the form of obviously exploitative, extractive industrial activity, contemporary human presence in the landscape is denied and nature–culture relations are reproduced through the binaries of human/modern/urban and nature/wild/rural. Within this construction is the suppression of an alternative basis for nature–culture relations, as seen in the antagonism over the meaning of wild land between those for whom the WLA is a living, working landscape and those that seek to conserve and protect it from humans.

During the consultation process, which was carried out for mapping the core areas of wild land, the Scottish Crofting Federation and the Crofting Commission criticised the premise of wild land areas. The former stated:

> The SNH map of core areas of "wild land" suggests that vast areas of the crofting common grazings are seen as areas of "wild land" in SNH's eyes. In fact, most of these "wild" areas mapped are found within the Crofting Counties. The reason for wanting to call this land "wild" is unclear and disturbing" [...] the bulk of this land is not "wildness", whatever that may be [...] these areas have been managed and sustained by generations of crofters and their families over centuries, often creating land of High Nature Value because of the human activity [...] the idea of a great untouched "wildness" being good for us is nonsense.[41]

This challenges the idea that wild land is special because it is free from human interaction, rather, this occurs as a result of human interaction. From this perspective, landscapes of value are not to be found in the absence of any form of human–environment interaction, and to deny the existence of human influence erases the history and politics of these alternative nature–culture relations. In resisting the notion of wild land, the concept of *duthchas* was introduced to demonstrate an alternative way to understand human-environment interactions:

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41 Scottish Crofting Federation, "SNH Core Areas of Wild Land 2013 Map Response Form," 2013, https://www.nature.scot (access: 14 May 2020).

Duthchas – a Gaelic word which describes man's relationship with and love and knowledge of an area, its landscape, soil, natural environment and everything that it contains.[42]

This demonstrates how the dominant common sense is always open to challenge from alternative discourses. In this case, the notion of "wild" land does not resonate with the cultural understandings of those that live and work in the landscapes in question.

Common sense occurs not only in the reproduction of the nature–culture dichotomy, but through the unifying processes needed to legitimise conservation of nature nationally. Designations were embedded in a broader discourse of protecting Scotland's natural heritage. Not only does the concept of natural heritage give power to the conservationist project in the Highlands, but it also underpins the national approach to understanding nature in Scotland. The importance of "natural heritage" for nature and landscape conservation is in the first instance evident in the choice of the name Scottish Natural Heritage;[43] natural heritage is central to the operation of the state and the project of conservation is tied to the notions of Scotland itself. The Scottish Executive in 2001 stated: "Scotland's exceptional natural heritage is at the core of what makes this country special."[44] Natural heritage is described as a "common wealth," something that we all share and which we have inherited from past generations. It is valuable to all of Scotland, according to SNH, as both a "great national asset" and as heritage that is central to national identity. Understanding natural heritage as a national asset and as part of national identity gives nature and landscape conservation an appeal to all who live in Scotland, as it can be done through harnessing the "pride and commitment of the Scottish nation."[45]

The value of the natural heritage to the nation is also considered in economic terms and is fundamental to how nature and economy are

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42 Crofting Commission, "SNH Core Areas of Wild Land 2013 Map Response Form," 2013, https://www.nature.scot (access: 14 May 2020).

43 Although now, at the time of publication, SNH are changing name to NatureScot.

44 Scottish Executive, "The Nature of Scotland: A Policy Statement," Edinburgh 2001, https://www.thenbs.com/PublicationIndex (access: 14 May 2020).

45 Countryside Commission for Scotland, *The Mountain Areas of Scotland: Conservation and Management*, Perth 1990.

reconciled by the state, with the former considered to be a valuable economic asset.[46] Since the emergence of discourses of sustainable development, it has been argued increasingly that natural heritage is an asset and not a hindrance to the nation, demonstrating that it is possible to attain the traditional state economic objectives (economic growth, market growth, investment, job creation), whilst committing to the conservation of natural resources. This feeds into ideas about the neo-liberalisation of nature, wherein nature comes to be defined and valued through economics and the appeal to the market. Moreover, the integration of natural heritage and economy allows the state to continue the project of nation building, with nature conservation becoming no different than any other aspect of how states use territorial sovereignty and make claims over the use of the nation's resources for the national interest. Henceforth, through the use of natural heritage to claim resources for the national interest, other claims to resources and framings of natural heritage are marginalised.

This is evident in the notion that nature conservation in the Highlands is imposed on the region by policymakers from the urban central belt, who are supposedly working for the national interest, but actually suppressing alternative claims to land use based on regional, historic nature–culture relations. The Scottish Crofting Federation, for example, said: "Perhaps if the mandarins had bothered to lift their sights above short-term budgets and patchwork policy, we might actually have a thriving landscape."[47] A mandarin is a bureaucrat scholar of the Chinese imperial government; a term used satirically in the UK to refer to senior civil servants distant from the people and ruling as a central imposing force. Hence, at the heart of the issues of natural heritage definition are the processes of governance that determine who has the power to make decisions about land and how it is understood. Beyond the issues of governance, natural heritage as part of the authorised national discourse erases the history of social struggle that exists within the Scottish nation (for instance, the clearances and their contemporary consequences)

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46   Ibidem; Highland Council, "Wester Ross National Scenic Area: Revised Draft Management Strategy," 2000, https://www.highland.gov.uk (access: 14 May 2020); Scottish Natural Heritage, "Wildness in Scotland's Countryside: Policy Statement," *Policy Note Series*, 2002, https://www.nature.scot (access: 14 May 2020).

47   Scottish Crofting Federation, "SNH Core Areas...," op. cit.

and constructs national identity as homogeneous, devoid of conflict or difference, and united behind the nation state as envisioned by modern interests.

This narrows the scope for alternative readings of Scottish history and posits inheritance of natural heritage from past generations as worthy of being cherished rather than challenged. The romantic history that is embodied in the idea of a nation proud of its natural heritage contradicts the perception of the Highlands as a devastated landscape[48] expelled of its forests and inhabitants, but fundamentally still a cultural landscape. Natural heritage, it seems, aligns more with the efforts to re-wild but not re-people these emptied landscapes. Moreover, protecting the national natural heritage fails to incorporate Scotland's history prior to modern environmentalist and conservationist thinking, nor does it include alternative Gaelic culture and heritage, which was actively eradicated and remains fragile today. Subsequently, nature–culture relations that exist as a part of Gaelic cultural systems, such as crofting based on *duthchas*, are forms of human–environment interactions excluded from national conservation efforts. These nature–culture relations are suppressed because they do not conform to the dominant common sense of the nature–culture dichotomy, and because they challenge the modern vision of Scotland as a country proud of its history and united in the protection of natural heritage as a valued national asset. Alternatives are evidence of the conflict, historical and contemporary, between those that make claim to the land for the purposes of conservation (generally from outside of the area) and those that live and work there. Hence the antagonism within natural heritage plays out across the local/regional and the national, with the former subject to the impositions of the latter, to the detriment of the former's understanding of nature–culture relations. Thus, natural heritage is a common-sense discourse because it takes for granted and naturalises a particular ideological reading of Scotland's history that has been captured by elite interests and modern conceptions of nature, as well as reproducing dualisms and masking conflict.

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48 Frank Fraser Darling, *West Highland Survey: An Essay in Human Ecology*, Oxford 1955.

Discussion: alternative nature–cultures

Alternatives to the hegemonic common sense are always possible and the resistance to dominant discourses of nature–culture in the Highlands was especially evident in crofting and biosphere reserves. Drawing on the concept of *duthchas*, originating from the Gaelic culture, is one of the ways that crofting can be viewed as a counter-hegemonic movement against the dominant nature discourses. This is part of the struggle between crofters and conservationists over the rights to use "wild land"[49] but also concerns ideas of heritage from below, relating to the practices of the crofting taskscape.[50] The concept of *duthchas* has had some recent attention,[51] but moving forward, there could be more consideration of how Gaelic cultural understandings and concepts such as *duthchas* are mobilised in relation to environmental policy and whether/how they might be negotiated as part of an alternative nature-cultures.

The biosphere reserve designation, with its emphasis on human–environment interaction, raises new possibilities with regards to the discourses surrounding nature and heritage. The Seville Strategy contextualises BR designations, arguing:

> Not only will they be a means for the people who live and work within and around them to attain a balanced relational with the natural world, they will also contribute to the needs of society as a whole by showing a way to a more sustainable future.[52]

During this research the biosphere reserve in the Highlands had been only recently re-designated to follow the Seville Strategy. However, the consultation documents suggested that community involvement could produce alternative discourses to those emerging from top-down

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49   Fraser MacDonald, "Viewing Highland…," op. cit.

50   Iain James McPherson Robertson, "Hardscrabble Heritage: The Ruined Blackhouse and Crofting Landscape as Heritage from Below," *Landscape Research*, vol. 40 no. 8 (2015), pp. 993–1009.

51   See: Iain MacKinnon, "Decommonising the Mind: Historical Impacts of British Imperialism on Indigenous Tenure Systems and Self-understanding in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland," [in:] *International Journal of the Commons*, vol. 12 no. 1 (2018), pp. 278–300.

52   UNESCO, "The Seville Strategy for Biosphere Reserves," [in:] *Nature and Resources*, vol. 31 no. 2 (1995), pp. 2–17.

implementation of statutory nature conservation designations. Consultees, for example, expressed a desire to engage with the designation if it was not about restrictions on land use but about opportunities, many of which related to human–environment interactions and socio-economic development. Beyond this, there is evidence of an openness of communities in Scotland to conservation where nature is not placed above people.[53] However, research is needed to further explore biospheres in Scotland, especially using approaches linking heritage, culture, and sustainable development.[54] Questions remain over the extent to which biosphere designation will lead to pro-active engagement with marginalised forms of cultural heritage at local and regional levels. That aside, there is more that could be done to encourage policymakers to be explicit in their rejection of approaches to nature that deny the existence of the human species as an integral part of nature, which is always culturally produced. The main aim, then, should be to promote possibilities for people and nature to coexist in mutually beneficial ways in the Scottish Highlands.[55]

Throughout the nature conservation discourse, the process of creating distinct entities for conservation is common sense, by way of drawing uncritically upon disjointed past traditions and conceptions including nature as wild,[56] scientifically knowable,[57] controllable through rational management and restoration of nature to an idealised state in time; each of which is contradictory in itself and excludes historical and socio-political conditions. These common-sense discourses of nature reproduce the hegemony of nature conservation as the dominating practice, separating nature and culture, with humans conceived as acting upon rather than from within nature.[58] Human influence is construed as a one-way, non-relational process based on viewing human activity as a negative

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53 Chris Dalglish, *Community Empowerment and Landscape Research Report*, Glasgow 2018.

54 Elizabeth Auclair and Graham Fairclough (eds.), *Theory and Practice in Heritage and Sustainability: Between Past and Future*, London 2015.

55 James Hunter, *On the Other…*, op. cit.

56 William Cronon, "The Trouble…," op. cit.

57 Phil McNaughten, *Contested Natures*, op. cit.

58 Tim Ingold, "Globes and Spheres: The Topology of Environmentalism," [in:] *Environmentalism: The View from Anthropology*, Kay Milton (ed.), London – New York 1993, p. 31 (31-42).

force that impacts upon what would otherwise be pristine nature. This is problematic in the context of trying to move beyond the common sense of the nature–culture dichotomy and conceptualise the world as simultaneously social and natural.[59] The findings reinforce concerns that significant value is being placed upon the "natural" in the policy, which is not value-free, defined as the absence of human modifications, referring to a time before human "spoliation," and associated with a slower pace of change.[60] This is especially evident in the construction of "wild" nature, the designation of certain forms of "special" nature, and discourses surrounding the value of Scotland's natural heritage.

The construction of a national natural heritage, based on the homogenising of Scottish identity, operates ideologically as common sense by erasing social struggle, and a history of exploitation and legitimising the domination imposed upon the *Gàidhealtachd*, where natural heritage has different connotations. This finding relates to more critical theories of heritage as a socio-political process,[61] which could usefully contextualise future research. It can also be linked to existing theories of tourism and the commodification of place,[62] for example, how Highland scenery is positioned as a popular image of Scotland in ways that romanticise landscapes as natural. Touristic images are used to portray Scotland as a unique country with privileged access to pristine and beautiful nature in ways that are uncritical of the actual conditions and history of said landscapes. By conveying images that suppress historical processes such as the degradation of lands for sheep farming, deforestation, and expulsions of people from their ancestral homelands, heritage and place are made in highly selective ways, excluding all that cannot be assimilated.[63] Such interpretations, it is also said, tend to leave out the fact that the same landscapes in the North-West and across the Highlands, now revered for their beauty, were in the past described as repellent, gloomy, dismal,

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59 Tim Ingold, *Perceptions of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, London 2000.

60 R. Bruce Hull and David Robertson, "The Language…," op. cit., p. 104.

61 Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, London 2006.

62 Martin Young and Francis Markham, "Tourism, Capital, and the Commodification of Place," [in:] *Progress in Human Geography*, 2019, pp. 1–21.

63 Fraser MacDonald, "The Scottish Highlands as Spectacle," [in:] *Tourism: Between Place and Performance*, Mike Crang and Simon Coleman (eds.), Oxford 2002, pp. 54–75.

and sterile.[64] Thus, the social construction of the Highlands is continually changing, and "the apparent emptiness" of the region is shaped by historical legacy and does not represent a "fact of nature," as evident in the contested characterisation of Highland landscapes as "wild."[65] Future research could beneficially explore the interconnections then between discourses of nature and discourses of heritage. Moving forwards, policies need to reject common-sense notions, transcending the nature–culture dichotomy, but this may prove challenging in the Scottish context where there are separate bodies for the conservation of natural and cultural heritage.[66] Another important direction for future work would be to explore the intersection of heritage and environmental policies produced by these organisations.

Conclusion

Drawing on Gramscian-influenced political ecology and the Myth of the Highlands, this article examined the discourses of nature produced through nature conservation designations in Scotland. Using discourse analysis within a qualitative methodology, it was argued that conservation designations in Scotland, particularly SSSIS, NNRS, NSAS, and WLAS, reinforce the nature–culture dichotomy. Despite their different aims, these designations are all arguably part of the construction of dominant common-sense discourses about the level of human–environment interaction that is desirable and the specific forms that interaction should take. They ultimately separate nature from people for the purpose of protection, promoting only certain kinds of human intervention related to conserving or enhancing the "natural," sending the message that the best use of nature is no use at all. In such discourses, there is limited space for the understandings of Gaelic crofting communities of the Highlands, particularly the notion that land cannot and should not be understood as wild. Thus, the hegemonic common sense of the dominant discourses are suppressing conflict and alternative ways of seeing and being in the Highlands. That being said, all hegemonic discourses

64 Charles Warren, *Managing...*, op. cit.

65 Karly Kehoe and Chris Dalglish, "History, Heritage and Sustainable Development: A Position Statement on the Scottish Highlands," [in:] *Northern Scotland*, vol. 9 no. 1 (2018), p. 3 (1–16).

66 Chris Dalglish, *Community Empowerment...*, op. cit.

and common-sense understandings are negotiable, in a continual state of reproduction, and amenable to change – for example, through mobilisation of Gaelic heritage and culture, which has the potential to re-shape discourse and practice. Additionally, alternative nature–culture relations may be finding more space to flourish in the context of UNESCO biosphere reserve designation. As a non-statutory designation, based on the principles of sustainable development and participatory governance, the biosphere is more openly welcomed by those who view nature conservation as restrictive. Whilst the model for biospheres tries to accommodate multiple objectives and interests to benefit both people and nature in theory, whether this works in the Highlands in practice is the subject of further research. Humans cannot be considered separate from their environments and are as much a part of nature as nature is itself cultural. Moving forward, it is essential to surpass the dominant common-sense discourses of nature which deny this reciprocity, including both the neoliberal ideologies that commodify natures and the colonial, mythologising discourses that deny the social in the pursuit of protecting the natural.