From nature to culture and back: following wolves in the sustainability path

My interest in the relationship between humans and nature ignited 15 years ago, when I went to live in a remote mountainous region in Western Iberia. I wanted to experience how it is to reside close to the heart of the forest, physically and metaphorically. And so I did, for 7 years. There I set myself to study the connections between that habitat and its human community, in which the forest – as the embodiment of wildness - was the key node of inquiry.
In my wanderings through the forest, there was one endangered creature I found particularly charismatic. Walking freely and unabashedly between allegorical and physical realms, it partially answers to the name of *canis lupus*, el lobo, the wolf.

Ten years later, I still survey the wolf, less from the trails of the wild Iberian peaks but more from the rugged road of sustainability science, a field of research concerned with the challenges of a changing Earth. Irrespective of the settings, I found that wolves are key teachers in the sustainability path, as I hope the following text might convey. Wolves can inspire connections, integration and reconciliation between nature and culture while challenging us to inquiry and to deepen our notions of wildlife management and biodiversity conservation. They embody the wonderful, terrifying qualities of wildness with which civilizations have struggled and have grown with. And like all things wild, wolves pay the extraordinary service of mirroring society: in its contradictions, choices and ethos.

Once endowed with the task of looking at wolves in Europe from a socio-ecological perspective, my inquiry sparkled upon finding that, according to state-of-the art scientific assessment, "biodiversity and human well-being are inextricably linked". From my readings in conservation biology, I've learned that large carnivores such as wolves play a crucial role in maintaining biodiversity. Plain logic took me to extend the reasoning that if biodiversity and human well-being are inextricably linked, ergo the existence of wolves and human well-being is inextricably linked. Can we make a case out of this – I wondered?
Yes would be the sustainable answer. However, we have to embrace complexity and depth if we want to find more than ecological rationality, which cannot cover or indeed hold the full spectrum of what human well-being means and - specifically to the point – it hasn't been able to ignite the human transformations urgently needed.
How to bring about a full yes has been the task that sets me tracking wolves through the trails of sustainability.

II.
It's useful to have in mind an overview of the *social history of wolves* in order to clarify the present. Considering Europe, after extended persecution, by the 19th century the wolf was only to be found

in small isolated populations, prevailing in the Carpathians, Russian and Iberian regions. In the latter half of the 20th century the European territory underwent big transformations by way of rural migrations, changes in agrarian land structures and in many cases increased areas of forested land, an assortment of factors that has favoured the reappearance of certain wildlife, like wolves.

Along such tangible transformations, history also accounts for the development of a new social attitude towards wildlife, which resulted in the legal protection of wolves across European territories. This social will to protect became institutionalized and crystalized in regulations and actions that today rule wildlife management or, more to the point, the governance of wolves. The challenges of such governance are manifold. If, for instance, restraining the impact of the sprawling urbanization and its impact on habitat is a standard concern, the conflicting attitudes towards wolves is the consistent centrepiece of the governance dilemma.

Such dilemma can be better understood considering how the presence of wolves poses deep cultural novelties. In some European contexts, having wolves back in territories drastically "tamed" is a dramatic change, pushing people to resort to forgotten and less than comfortable practices like fencing and managing sheepdogs. Essentially, the traditional binary in which the wolf is perceived as threatening versus the peasant, thoroughly assumed as victim, becomes by decree overturned, in what often is felt by country dwellers as a perverted and malicious state of affairs. In Europe, protests and reactions against wolves are far from new; however, what constitutes a true innovation, particularly in most rural contexts, is being able to have a voice and effect policy at local level, an element that affects governance and places pressure on the process of learning democracy-in-action.

In modern societies wolves are not only perceived as usurpers of food; they're also strong symbolic providers when it comes to feeding the human psyche. The rendering of such service is as old as the relationship itself, and to reduce wolves' charismatic role to the part of Little Red Riding Hood is far too shallow. We've only to consider their presence in northern mythology, for instance or their inconspicuous appearance behind names such as Ralph, Ylva or Lupe. In the realm of culture, the symbolic power of wolves continues to our present day (as a random 40,700,000 million images of wolf tattoos in google search may indicate). In relation to wolf supporters, it's interesting to consider that most are not hard-core environmentalists. The anonymous many that fund campaigns, write blogs and place the alluring wolf poster in their walls are not just defending wilderness, they're defending *wildness* translated as beauty, daring, freedom - qualities that are often as endangered in our lives as wolves are.

On the other hand, when it comes to modern wolf infatuation, we can easily get side-tracked and enter the territory of the Wolf Cyborg, a variation of what I call a Culturally Modified Organism. For many people raised in urban, digitally soaked environments, nature has become at best an organic Disneyland. Losing touch with the consequences of a direct interaction with the real animal, many a wolf fan lacks an experience such as that of finding his/her flock, so keenly tended, slaughtered by dawn. A relation with real wolves force us to face death and destruction, a factuality of our condition and our relation with nature that either makes us react in antagonism or impels us to

integrate it constructively.

The fact remains that across wolf territories, conflict abounds. A closer look at Wolf Governance shows that its main goal is protecting wolves from humans but also, and critically so, managing human dissent that comes about through wolves. Governing wolves shows to what extend it's difficult to govern...humans. Ancient Romans, seasoned in managing a whole empire, had an appropriate aphorism: *Homo homini lupus* – man is the wolf of man.

At the heart of legislation and politics lie strong and even opposing perceptions of wolves and – more to the core - unshared worldviews of what constitutes development and sustainability. Wolves therefore supply a prime case for society to clarify its commitment to effectively preserve biodiversity.

The social history of wolves tells us that biodiversity conservation is ruled by rapid changes and pressing challenges. History has given us fundamentally new relationships to wildlife and placed us in situations in which *the past can't offer us the way-out*. It´s time to reinvent our relation with nature - a distinct capacity of the human being - and call for solutions that are geared in the future. To get down to business, we need fundamentally new models and new approaches, capable of dealing with complexity and facilitators of a sustainable change.

III.

Wolf Governance is a typical case of a complex problem. It involves multiple aspects of a given reality but also a web of relationships and possible combinations between its parts. We can picture this through the metaphor of a theatre play. In its stage, the "Wolf conservation" story unfolds through the meeting of many social performers, such as cattle-owners, rangers, environmentalists, policy-makers, to name a few. Each of these has their own way of understanding and intervening in meaningful ways and acts accordingly. And of course, there is the occasional appearance of the wolf, dispassionately crossing borders and creating unrest. Such dynamic script develops through all manner of relevant events, such as the issuing of regulations, the stealth killing by poison or by fang, angry demonstrations here and there, along with the pursuit of wildlife tourism. The fluctuating qualities of tragedy, comedy or farce are part and parcel of the play's performance.

Despite such complexity, wildlife management - the appointed stage director - has been mainly concerned with the most tangible, literal aspects of the play, what otherwise might be called the 'outside of the story'. Typically it's centred in examining the *behaviour* of wolves, but also includes that of systems, ranging from ecosystems to human institutions. These perspectives typically align with scientific knowledge with which Wolf Governance is intimately associated. For instance, the justification why wolves should be protected in the first place is often and primarily based on criteria derived from biophysical science. In other words, ecological arguments become the only legitimate language to express *any kind* of benefits and value.

In Wolf Governance it's obviously relevant to know wolves' behaviour and its relation to their habitat in order to understand crucial aspects of biodiversity and sustainability. In the terrain of systems, it's important to identify the various social, economic and political structures involved, like laws, subsidies, and participatory procedures. Such structures are instrumental in allowing or inhibiting changes at all levels.

Valuable as it is, the outside of the story neither delivers a full understanding of the Human-Wolf relationship nor does it necessarily provide change. Moreover, its objectivity doesn't offer a solid anchorage of human convergence and therefore it hasn't been able to placate the main Governance dilemma: the conflicting interests of its actors. As illustration, in wolf debates it's common to find the same 'objective, reliable data' being used to back-up opposing arguments, revealing that such knowledge cannot exert, on its own, the so called 'Solomon´s justice'. Unable to escape the complexities of communication, scientific knowledge is a field open to social interpretation, moreover, a key political weapon in the governance arena.

There are, however, additional perspectives to take into account in a model that wishes to embrace complexity and depth. Such perspectives spring from the subjective realm or the inner side of the story. Collectively, this is the domain of *culture*, where we can appreciate how values and meanings might actually encourage or discourage wolf conservation and indeed frame individuals' sense of well-being in relation to nature at large.

Taking in the cultural perspective is a fundamental addition in resolving conflicts as it lays the grounds for developing mutual understanding between individuals and their worldviews. However, before envisioning some idyllic converging destination, it's crucial to deal with conflicts straight on. Wolf participatory assemblies are ideal for this touchdown, because they're capable of raising the voltage of human reactive behaviour to surprising levels, as any seasoned expert may attest. The fact remains that in human systems, divergence is an inevitable aspect of plurality. Without working through it, no convergence is sustainable.

The possibility of using conflicts and tension constructively largely depends upon the quality of communication that can be enacted, which is critical in a full participatory process. In other words, serious communication skills need to be learned in order that Wolf Governance becomes, essentially, a learning process.

The last vital perspective from this inner-side of the story comes from the interior condition of the actor, commonly known as the stakeholder - the individual self. Through the many interviews I've conducted, it's remarkable how, again and again, wolves bring about vivid expressions of fear, greed, intelligence and tolerance. These are nutrients of the inner fields of the human psyche and imply qualities that are at the heart of our relationship with each other and the world. Working through them, it becomes clear that 'people's attitudes towards wolves' can lead to many layers of being in the world. Should this inner dimension inform Governance? Intangible and unquantifiable as it may be, states of consciousness and mental conditioning are highly relevant in shaping our attitudes about all manner of issues, including wolf conservation. So far, wildlife management has been focused on results and more recently at its own modus operandi; it's time, however, to look at

the source of enactment. In other words, Wolf Governance has to include the individual self, not reducible to the collective, as a defining feature of its approach.

Having made a case for the need to include the inner-side of the story it becomes crucial to gain an understanding of how inner and outer perspectives relate and get to be integrated in the whole. In our approach, this comes under the heading of *social learning* or the art of creating social reality.

IV.

By social learning I mean the process in which individuals go through a change in understanding a certain problem. Such change may happen at a more superficial level or it can penetrate deeper stages, as demonstrated by a renovation in world-views and attitudes in which habitual judgments, reactive behaviours and quick fixes can be replaced by creativity, openness and sustainable transformation.

In wildlife management, like in many other enterprises, when addressing the issue of change, people often refer to making changes in 'them' or in the 'system' – seldom on how 'I' or 'we' must change in order to allow the larger situation to change. This self-effacing habit is actually highly eloquent of the severance between the inner and the outer sides of the story, negating the fact that the qualities of objective social institutions as well as environmental state-of-affairs are naturally *reflecting the invisible interior realms*. Hence, there's an urgent need to promote a type of learning that ignites the awareness of people as agents or co-creators of the world we live in.

The good news is that things are on their way. New social technologies - backed by broad-minded models and using increasingly sophisticated participatory methods - have been focussing on the individual as a central node of transformation. The challenge now is to identify, reflect and shift the inner place from which we operate. Although such task must be carried on individually – it's essentially a free, emancipatory achievement - the interesting fact is that it's not a call for individuality. On the contrary, such emerging movements are telling us that this process is being done with and through the other. In fact, it's a multi-scale affair, capable of integrating the micro level (individual consciousness), the meso-community level (in dialogue, communication) but also addressing the macro institutional structures. This becomes truly a multi-dimensional type of governance.

In other areas of the world, conservation of species poses dilemmas (tigers in Asia, elephants in Africa, amongst several others). Nevertheless, it's interesting to note that the burning wolf controversy springs from the home-grounds of key promoters of biodiversity conservation - the 'privileged' hemisphere, as it were. Besides carrying the more obvious note that here too, homework must be done; it's suggesting that conservation is, at root, a *universal human challenge* which nevertheless bears a variety of trials according to different contexts. This recognition is inspiring for opening international dialogue in new ways beyond the agreements and disagreements of the outside-of-the story when seeking common ground.

V.

Wolves are revealing a crack, which is also a threshold of choice.
Steering into new models and approaches may lead to profound transformations in both the actors and the systems that concern biodiversity conservation. For this to happen, however, many old patterns must die and deep-seated blind spots be met. The buzz in the word *change* should not deafen us to its actual difficulties so that we can soundly appreciate its resistances. Nevertheless, in dealing with biodiversity as well as with our neighbours – be they the human other or the wolf – time is ripe for us to fully assume our power and responsibility.

Once, an aboriginal woman was asked what distinguishes the human species from the other creatures on the planet to which she promptly replied: 'we are the ones telling the stories about everybody else'. These narratives that make the world intelligible, productive and meaningful are co-evolving and co-creating, binding the play and the play-writer, the planet and humans, in what sustainability science likes to call an evolving, coupled social-ecological system, better known as *Earth*. Insofar as wildlife conservation is concerned, we need models that derive knowledge from all manner of human capabilities: reasoning, feeling, willing, and systematically harness them into a fruitful dialogue. With this comes a new language, capable of accommodating polarities such as fear and attraction, death and regeneration - including its paradoxes; one in which biodiversity can be experientially understood as *life*.
No law enforcement, economic solution, or even the glare of some new ideology will bring about sustainable change; we're finally in a position, historically speaking, to know that. Ultimately, models are just models. As products of human creativity, they must be allowed to die in order to be reborn anew. This aspect is particularly relevant when it comes to biodiversity conservation because in the challenges of a changing Earth, the models of the past are of little help. The best solutions seem to twinkle from the future, through the threshold of choice, were we may sense our highest potential.

Is the existence of wolves and human well-being inextricably linked? The question should not carry a truth or false statement. At best, like sustainability itself, it's an expectant *yes*. But it's not a finished answer because the fate of wolves is being created, debated, enforced, and contested by 7 billion of us. Sustainability is a learning process and ultimately an act of freedom. How can we achieve a sustainable integration between biodiversity and well-being? We can't develop the world without developing ourselves because parts and whole are inextricably linked. Co-creating and co-evolving, the ties between biodiversity and human well-being are not just an abstract given principle but can become a full, living realization. This is vital to our planet sustainability and this is what wolves have taught me.