

Flagships or Battleships

Deconstructing the Relationship between Social Conflict and Conservation Flagship Species

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■ **ABSTRACT:** Flagship species, common components of conservation programs, are frequently implicated in social conflicts. This article examines the multiple roles of flagships in conflicts including their part in human-wildlife conflicts and as symbols of broader sociopolitical disputes. The article shows that the relationship between the co-occurrence of conflict and flagship species, while complex, illuminates important patterns and lessons that require further attention. The article focuses on the most iconic flagships globally and discusses why they are commonly shrouded in controversy in which their meaning, value, and place are contested. It argues that the process of socially constructing animals as iconic symbols often entangles them in conflict, and saturates them with conflict agency. The article recommends that any program that involves the deployment of flagships should institutionalize analyses of their symbolic meaning as an essential conflict-management approach.

■ **KEYWORDS:** charismatic megafauna, flagship species, human-wildlife conflict, political symbolism, social marketing

Conflicts involving wildlife are a central concern within conservation efforts, both globally and locally (Knight 2000). These conflicts are inherently complex because they frequently involve both disputes between groups of people about wild animals and undesirable interactions between people and the animals. The species, landscapes, and ecosystems that conservation aims to conserve are themselves routinely socially constructed to be used as marketing and communication tools to advance conservation's objectives (Feldhamer et al. 2002; Veríssimo et al. 2011). While these processes of creating more positive meanings and attitudes frequently extend to entire biomes (Wilson 1997), the phenomenon is epitomized by the use of a select few species as conservation flagships. Flagships are chosen specifically as icons or symbols, unlike other conservation surrogates like keystone or umbrella species that are selected for their ecological function. Flagships are defined as "popular, charismatic species that serve as symbols and rallying points to stimulate conservation awareness and action" (Heywood 1995: 491). Wildlife advocates and conservation organizations agree widely that the flagship approach so defined is a valuable conservation tool (Butler 1995; Caro and O'Doherthy 1999).

The flagship approach is particularly valuable because of its potential to change citizen behavior, including participation in conservation and support of fundraising (Leader-Williams and Dublin 2000). Some researchers have suggested that given the wide-scale reliance on charis-



matic megafauna, the future of all biodiversity conservation could become dependent on the success of flagships (Kontoleon and Swanson 2003). In the United States alone, over 50 percent of wildlife funding is leveraged for the conservation of fewer than 2 percent of those species listed as endangered (Metrick and Weitzman 1996). The top 10 species by total spending are overwhelmingly the most well-known conservation flagships of the United States, including the Florida Panther (*Felis concolor coryi*), California Condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*), and Northern Spotted Owl (*Strix occidentalis caurina*). These flagship species are primarily supported for their possession of one or more traits that appeal to the target audience (Verissimo et al. 2011) or for the roles that they play in the social group(s) that employ them (Metrick and Weitzman 1996). Flagships such as polar bears (*Ursus maritimus*), giant pandas (*Ailuropoda melanoleuca*), and mountain gorillas (*Gorilla berengei*) also illustrate the strength of the approach to generate international conservation attention and support (Clucas et al. 2008). Understandably, recent initiatives have sought to apply the flagship model even more widely, including determining what animal characteristics resonate with the public (Verissimo et al. 2009; Barua et al. 2012; Takahashi et al. 2012), developing systematic frameworks for identifying flagships (Verissimo et al. 2011), identifying “Cinderella species” (species that are similar to current flagships, but do not fulfill that role; Smith et al. 2012), and generating a fleet of global flagships to represent the threat of climate change (Barua et al. 2010).

Despite the pre-eminence of the approach, conservation practitioners may have been less than forthright in acknowledging the value-laden, agenda-driven nature of the conservation process. This includes whether and how charismatic megafauna used to rally the public can also encourage conflict among local stakeholders or represent what some identify as socially undesirable and discriminatory policies and programs (Frazier 2005a; Macdonald 2004; Peluso 1993; West et al. 2006). Some further suggest that flagships have even been developed not for biodiversity priorities at all, but as rallying devices and public relations tools for objectives that can be tangential or even contradictory to biodiversity conservation (Frazier 2005a).

Flagships are by all definitions symbols. As we discuss later, symbolic meaning mediates the way all societies understand and interact with the natural world (Csikszentmihalyi and Halton 1981; Ruesch 1967). Yet we know relatively little about what conservation’s symbols mean to people. This article is not the first to discuss flagship species as symbols (see, e.g., Clark 2000; Frazier 2005b; Moore 1993; Wilson 1997), but we go beyond identification of species’ symbolic nature to deconstruct why, and with what effect such symbolism is central to the workings of flagships and, more specifically, to a relationship between flagships and social conflicts. We believe that this latter relationship is rarely discussed (e.g., Clark 2000; Frazier 2005a). We further argue that the concept of symbol (and the “symbolic form”) is neither clearly defined nor is its relationship and significance to the flagship species concept adequately explained—much less understood—in the conservation literature. Using the sociological, marketing, and political science literatures, we discuss the characteristics of symbols that permit their effective use within conservation as flagships, and what we believe are their common association with social conflicts. By so doing, we offer a valuable perspective on conflict about wildlife conservation and a deeper understanding of the strengths, caveats, values, vulnerabilities, and potentially insidious consequences of the conservation flagship model.

We argue in the tradition of Knight (2000) and Herda-Rapp and Goedeke (2005) that real or perceived unfavorable interaction with and about wildlife must be understood not just within the context of their physical/objective conditions, events, and as things, but also as subjective, socially constructed realities. Social constructionist theory contends that the things we believe and know as facts (the existence of Bigfoot, what is appropriate dinner attire, or notions about private property) are often meanings and knowledge we have acquired from our culture. Con-

structs are developed and spread within a society through social interactions, such as discourse and symbolic representations (film, pictures, events, text, etc.). Our society's social constructs are important because, once successfully established they shape the attitudes (our evaluations of goodness or worth) that influence individual behaviors (Bryman 2004). We argue that all symbols, and, by extension conservation flagships, are social constructs.

We structure this article around the following questions: What characteristics of flagships and symbols in general predispose their association with social conflicts? In what forms does a relationship between conservation flagships and social conflict exist? How might we preempt the potentially negative consequences of conflicts for both people and the flagships themselves? First, we introduce the concepts of symbols and the symbolic form. We explain the key concepts in some detail as studies of the conservation flagship approach have overwhelmingly been the domain of the biological literature despite the fact that the process is sociopolitical at its core (Frazier 2005b). We then review the various mechanisms through which flagships may become part of conflicts with humans and situate our review of conservation flagships within the symbolism literature. We suggest that there are three main mechanisms through which this occurs; namely, (1) choice of symbol "prone" to conflict, (2) choice as symbol facilitates social conflict, and (3) deployment as symbol into spaces of social conflict and issue politics. While these three conceptual mechanisms may operate in isolation, they may also occur as a continuum, or complex system of mechanisms that ultimately produce what we observe as social conflict with or about wildlife. Finally, we relate our arguments to the conflict theory literature to discuss ways in which we believe greater cross-disciplinary learning is possible and provide direction for managing the consequences of such conflicts.

Symbols and the Symbolic Form

Symbols are essentially things that stand in for other things. Humanity comprehends and communicates beliefs and interests symbolically (Csikszentmihalyi and Halton 1981). Symbolic thinking is therefore fundamental to human consciousness, and forms the basis for language, religion, art, and "even" science (Mach 1993). Culture is constructed and shared through symbolic systems and some scholars argue that culture as a whole is symbolic (Carbaugh 1990). Together signs and symbols allow people to send and receive complex messages and, by extension, make possible the cultural interactions and socially constructed realities that allow societies to function and individuals to learn and survive (Csikszentmihalyi and Halton 1981; Mach 1993). However, symbols are not just a kind of sign. Unlike signs, symbols are emotionally laden and associated with ideology, particularly those that are the most difficult to communicate and understand. According to Mach (1993: 34), quoting Clifford Geertz, symbols are "tangible formations of notions, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible forms, concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgments, longings and beliefs." Firth (1973) emphasized that there are two aspects of symbols: "emotional-load" and "arbitrariness." In Firth's view, contrary to the routine forms of communication that are predominantly based on signs with conventionally understood meanings devoid of emotional involvement, symbols inspire thought and facilitate emotional arousal, as in religious, artistic forms and the contemplation of identity. Symbols thus signify more than what Firth described as the primary literal translation/purpose of the signified to reveal a secondary meaning/purpose. These secondary meanings are more nebulous, and their comprehension is found in analogy and metaphor giving symbols a "profoundity and inexhaustible depth" not captured by signs (Firth 1973). By extension, symbols such as the flag of a nation, shrine of a martyr, or religious object (Crescent Moon, Cross of Christ, or Star of

David) are important types of social constructions in that they are essential for the embodiment and communication of complicated meanings and emotional experiences (Csikszentmihalyi and Halton 1981; Mach 1993). The “arbitrariness” of a symbol exists because what the symbolized means is not universal, but can vary culturally and may vary considerably even in one place at the same time. Thus, the same symbol frequently represents multiple, sometimes competing meanings, ideologies, and emotions in a way that its specific meaning can only be understood within a cultural context (Cobb and Elder 1973). This arbitrariness gives symbols their plasticity, making them amenable to multiple interpretations and uses. The arbitrariness of symbols is a powerful and vital characteristic within conflict, where meaning making is dynamic and where parties in conflict will seek out and appropriate culturally relevant symbols and symbolic interpretations best able to represent and communicate their interests and agendas. Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands, for example, a collection of small (approximately 3 square miles) largely uninhabitable islands and rocky outcrops northeast of Taiwan continue to be an important symbol of China-Japan contentious relations. Scholars note that the focus on these islands, that have brought these nations to the brink of war in recent years, “seems incredible” given the island’s unlikely economic or residential value (Blanchard 2000). Nevertheless this islands dispute has captured and channeled deep feelings of nationalism and deep rooted myths based on perceptions of mutual threat and historical wrongs (He 2007).

Firth (1973) identifies four closely related functions of symbols that make them essential components of human social relationships, as summarized below.

1. *Communication*: The major and most obvious function of symbols is for communication (Mach 1993). Symbols are powerful communication tools because of their easily distinguishable, memorable, ceremonial nature, and frequently high visual aesthetic value. Bodies, images, colors, sounds etc. can all function as powerful representations to communicate complex cultural nuances or ideological principles.
2. *Knowledge*: Symbols function to organize social realities through their ability to reduce complexity and easily representing what is known in a given culture. To do this they conceal some relationships while revealing others, and direct society towards certain ways of knowing, being and performing. By extension they provide important cues for behavior within a given cultural context, and “relieve the individual of the burdens of the search for information and deliberative decision-making” (Cobb and Elder 1973: 306).
3. *Social control*: Symbols also function as repositories of morality and social values, thereby playing an important role in representing the social order and status quo. According to Mach (1993: 37), “this function makes symbolic forms (mascots, banners, slogans, etc.) present in political events whenever social conflict is expressed or solved, and when social identity is confirmed.” This status quo representational characteristic of symbols places them at the heart of political processes where they mediate relationships between individuals, groups, and the political order, while establishing a basis for group identification within that political system (Cobb and Elder 1973). It should not be surprising that symbols are closely associated with the communication of social status (the rarity or high cost of our possessions) in almost all cultures.
4. *Expression*: To fulfill the above three functions, symbols must enrich otherwise neutral or dry ideology with emotion. This influence enables the blending of facts with feeling, and, by so doing, engages those exposed to them in both conscious and subconscious associations. By extension, symbols are pervasive aspects of politics and religion, where the objective is to inspire people to care and act via symbolic forms that appeal to their sense of morality, identity and values (Cobb and Elder 1973).

Mechanisms through which Flagships Become Part of Conflict

We now discuss how these four functions of symbols link flagship species to conflict. We start by suggesting that conservationists have disproportionately and inadvertently chosen flagship species that have been, or may be particularly likely to interact “unfavorably” with people. We then discuss how easily the very process of socially constructing any species as an iconic symbol can produce conflict. Finally, we argue that because conflicts are inherent to conservation practice, flagships may quickly become focal points around which new or historical disputes coalesce.

Type 1: Choice of Symbols Prone to Conflict

Conservation flagships are most commonly single species chosen as surrogates for broader conservation concerns. Traditionally, these flagships are almost exclusively animals, primarily large species of mammals and birds (Caro and O’Doherty 1999). Among these, the most well-known flagships, as Clucas and colleagues (2008: 1518) put it, “tend to be large memorable mammals easily recognized by dint of their shape, coloration, or weaponry.” The flagship approach has been biased overall toward the charismatic mega-vertebrates. These large, commonly apex consumers usually have life history traits characterized by long generation times and large home ranges; and many, including mega herbivores such as African Elephants (*Loxodonta africana*) and mega carnivores such as Bengal Tigers (*Panthera tigris tigris*), roam widely potentially influencing spatial scales of hundreds of square kilometers.

While a taxonomically diverse array of vertebrates damage crops, eat or injure livestock and outdoor pets, compete with us for wild prey and may also injure or kill people, globally the most reported human-wildlife conflict cases are also biased towards larger species (Woodroffe et al. 2005). A recent review, for example, shows that for animal groups such as felids, the severity of conflict with human interests increases with body mass (Inskip and Zimmermann 2009). Not surprisingly, therefore, the most emotive, publicized, and recognizable forms of conflict between people and wildlife (crop and livestock depredation and the loss of human life) are closely linked to flagships and their closest relatives (Thirgood and Woodroffe 2005). By the time many species are designated as flagships there is frequently already a history of “unfavorable” interaction, sometimes for millennia. The literature is rife with studies of species such as wolves, bears, elephants, dolphins, large felids, nonhuman primates, avian raptors, and parrots as sources of human-wildlife conflict (Fascione et al. 2004; Inskip and Zimmermann 2009; Woodroffe et al. 2005). In essence conservationists have inadvertently selected for conflict by virtue of flagship animals’ life history requirements, guild membership, size, cultural visibility, and use of the landscape. Leader-Williams and Dublin (2000: 69) therefore question “to whom are they (flagships) charismatic,” thus uncovering the constructionist core of the “charismatic” flagship concept. These authors argue that the very qualities that might entice Western audiences may make these species “very uncharismatic” to the people living among them.

Wildlife populations frequently increase in response to conservation programs and to the criminalization of destructive human use of wildlife and their habitats (Messmer 2000). With effective conservation, human-suppressed wildlife populations have re-occupied parts of their historic ranges, including now human-dominated lands (McGregor 2005; Messmer 2000). In the Caribbean, for example, island endemic threatened parrot populations decimated by hunting increased substantially in response to their successful promotion as popular conservation flagships (Wiley et al. 2004). Some of these species then became implicated as agricultural pests as their numbers rebounded. Similarly, after the 1991 passage of the Mountain Lion Protection

Act in California, the lion (*Felis concolor*) population increased several fold (Clifford 1998). This rise contributed to an increase in human-lion encounters, some fatal.

In addition, conservation has disproportionately focused on the restoration of large-bodied animals to regions where they had disappeared (Metrick and Weitzman 1996; Sarrazin and Barbault 1996). As Sarranin and Barbault (1996: 476) point out, despite the rapid declines of diverse taxa it is the flagship species that are usually chosen as targets of conservation action, with the result that “most reintroduction efforts concern ‘charismatic’ megafauna: for example, Przewalski’s horse (*Equus przewalskii*), white rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simum*), or orangutan (*Pongo pygmaeus*).” Given that some of these species declined in large part due to anthropogenic factors, including past human-wildlife conflict, such conservation efforts may set the stage for new or intensified conflicts (Campbell-Smith et al. 2010; Kaczensky et al. 2007). For example, zoo-born Przewalski’s horses were reintroduced into Mongolia’s Great Gobi Strictly Protected Area beginning in 1992. This species went extinct in the wild in the 1960s. Over the past decades, however, local herder-Przewalski’s horse conflict is increasing (Kaczensky et al. 2007).

Type 2: Choice as Symbol Creates Social Conflict

While the loss of life and material damage of property attributable to wildlife is undeniable, whether and how human-animal interactions are perceived as positives or negatives are social processes. By the time any species is designated a flagship there is frequently long-standing history involving a mixture of utilitarian, adversarial, veneration, and/or other roles that these species occupy in local cultures. This might be particularly true of the larger animals that may comprise substantive resources, formidable foes, or notable aspects of a landscape. The meanings, cultural beliefs, and practices produced through this history of interactions are the social constructions of local cultures.

It is common for conservation organizations to develop programs to construct, or reconstruct, species as flagships because of the recognized advantages that successful flagships can create among the key stakeholder groups such as local residents, donors, policymakers, and politicians (Butler 1995; Clucas et al. 2008). Quite often significant resources are invested by conservationists to market species as flagships with the expectation that, over time, the emotional attachment and positive beliefs associated with these species will be leveraged to promote conservation goals (Barua et al. 2010).

Exposure to messages promoting the conservation of flagships can substantially influence stakeholder attitudes and willingness to support conservation (Butler 1992; Dietz et al. 1994; Smith and Sutton 2008). To become an effective conservation flagship, however, a species must first be socially constructed so that its favored iconic status becomes more widely accepted and collectively understood. Similar to commercial brand use and development in the field of marketing, the process of constructing a flagship frequently involves ritualized campaigns and public symbolic representations (Butler 1995). Rituals are a particularly elaborate symbolic form that usually appeals to multiple senses simultaneously. Through a process of ritualization, sounds, images, objects, and bodies can become perceptible representations of issues, programs, and abstract ideas (Mach 1993). In conservation these ritualized campaigns frequently include outreach programs involving posters, mascots, musical jingles, media campaigns, and the production of a positive conservation ethos. Social scientists suggest that the ritualization of symbols in contemporary Western society is particularly engaging and visual in nature, thanks to the Internet, television, and digital photography. These researchers note that the representations so delivered to the public are never random, but offer particular views of what the world, including wildlife, is like (Rose 2007). Similar to the findings of Rose’s (2007) analysis of the wider con-

temporary symbolic visual culture, Clucas et al. (2008) report that conservation organizations have selectively exposed the public to a chosen “upper gentry” of large, charismatic megafauna. They suggest that public knowledge and emotional attachment to certain wildlife, including the public’s understanding of living with wildlife, has been biased by this rendering.

Once conservation campaigns raise the profile of certain wildlife, stakeholders frequently become more conscious of their existence, local presence, and behavior. This might be particularly true of flagships because these species are intrinsically memorable. What might have been a rarely observed, little considered species might, overnight, become prominent in the local consciousness, a household name, and a renowned social reference point (Vivanco 2001). With greater awareness also comes the potential for new ways of valuing a species, over sensitivity, and/or metaphorical use of these species as indirect ways of communicating ideas, knowledge, and social experiences. For example, after intensive parrot flagship programs disproportionately directed at the Imperial Parrot (*Amazona imperialis*) on Dominica, the more threatened of that island’s two endemic parrots, farmers began ascribing crop damage to this species (Douglas 2011). This occurred despite the fact that the Imperial Parrot never ate crops. In the battle for compensation, however, disgruntled farmers seized on the iconic status of their island’s highly publicized flagship of forest conservation to draw public attention to their lobby for government support in the media.

As another example, the Florida Panther (*Felis concolor coryi*) is a quintessential symbol of conservation in the state of Florida (Simberloff 1998). Highly successful flagship campaigns transformed the critically endangered subspecies, historically perceived as a threat to human life and property, into a symbol of state pride and identity. The identity-based veneration of the panther has produced cultural conflicts on, for example, how its rapid population decline should be addressed. There were some 40 surviving animals in the wild by the early 1990s, a majority with signs of severe inbreeding defects. Both state and federal biologists had long insisted on the genetic uniqueness of the Florida Panther, and through a diversity of awareness campaigns had effectively related the importance of this symbolism to Floridian identity. This knowledge and emotional attachment to a genetically “pure” Florida Panther meant that interventions to introduce new animals from other genetic populations, to avoid inbreeding, fueled disputes at many levels (Roman 2011).

Another unique way in which choice as symbol may produce social conflict is when two or more conservation programs, or the behavior of two or more flagships, clash. An example of this is predation of marine turtles by jaguars (*Panthera onca*), since both are flagships thereby posing a potential management conundrum (Veríssimo et al. 2012a). Management of this ecological interaction would invariably disfavor one of the flagships. There are also important implications for marketing and communications, since both species are supported by large and committed constituencies (including donors, NGOs and academics) that are emotionally and financially invested. Conflict in this context could lead to competing and confusing messaging that could affect the meaning and “credibility” of either flagship and those involved in its conservation in the eyes of other stakeholders, jeopardizing effective biodiversity conservation overall. Another example of similar conflict is the drastic decline in the population of Island Fox (*Urocyon littoralis*) due to predation by the Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) (Coonan et al. 2005).

Type 3: Deployment as Symbols into Spaces of Social Conflict and Issue Politics

Several authors discuss the symbolism of individual flagship species or species groups in social conflicts. Prominent examples include the Marbled Murrelet (*Brachyramphus marmoratus*; Taylor and Reporter 1991), marine dolphins (Hall and Noguchi 1993), gray wolves (*Canis lupus*;

Wilson 1997), the Spotted Owl (*Strix occidentalis*; Moore 1993), Polar Bears (*Ursus maritimus*; Clark et al. 2010), marine turtles (Kinan and Dalzell 2005), and the Snail Darter (*Percina tanasi*; Abramson 1977). These cases make clear that iconic species are frequently deployed within high-stakes political conflicts involving competition for resources; contentious histories of unresolved grievances; territorial disputes; shifting balances of power that challenge economic interests, social prestige and influence; and divergent beliefs about the “appropriate” relationship between people and the “natural” world (Daniels and Walker 1995).

The scholars cited in the previous paragraph document the ability of flagships to act as potent metaphors for parties in conflict. For example, wolves in Yellowstone National Park provided a metaphor for competing social movements involving shifting federal land use policies of the American West (Wilson 1997). The Spotted Owl metaphorically represents conflicting representations of old-growth forest in the Pacific Northwest (Lange 1993). Marine turtles in the Pacific Islands region embody contradictory views held by contesting sectors—primarily local islanders, pelagic longline fishers, and turtle conservation organizations (Kinan and Dalzell 2005). Labeled within different disciplines and theoretical perspectives as “biopolitical pawns”—wolves (Wilson 1997), “divergent synecdochic constructions”—Spotted Owls (Moore 1993), “material-semiotic boundary objects”—polar bears (Slocum 2004), these case studies are part of a growing multidisciplinary literature that illustrates that social meanings are neither fixed nor inherent to the flagships that are deployed into spaces of social conflict and issue politics. As the Snail Darter case illustrates, flagships used as symbols within these complex social conflicts need not be large, or either a “charismatic” large mammal or bird (Abramson 1977). Neither do they need to be associated with any form of direct “unfavorable” behavior with humans as with nuisance species or agricultural pests.

Within these arenas, flagships may act as what Victor Turner calls “dominant (or key) symbols.” Turner’s (1967) work on symbols revealed that some types of symbols were particularly potent for their roles within “a web of signification.” Here, dominant symbols simultaneously connect several different meanings into singular condensed vivid material representations, while concurrently exhibiting the ability to metaphorically represent multiple meanings enhancing what is described as the “multivocality” of these symbols. By multivocality is meant the ability of these symbols to speak to different groups in radically different ways (Turner 1967). Flagships may act as dominant symbols insofar as they are not only memorable condensations of a particularly rich variety of meanings in their own right, but are also frequently wrapped within other important (accessory) symbolic meanings. Wilson (1997), for example, notes that the most potent symbol of environmental policy today is the endangered species. Many studies indicate that status as threatened, endemic or restricted-range is particularly useful towards securing public and governmental interest in flagships (Caro and O’Doherthy 1999; Frazier 2005b; Meuser et al. 2009; Veríssimo et al. 2009). Additionally, it is common for flagships to be simultaneously (though sometimes unjustifiably) promoted as keystone, indicator, or umbrella species to enhance their ecological value and importance as conservation surrogates (Veríssimo et al. 2012b). Some authors argue that these value-added strategies are embellishments that confuse and confound the definition and actual purpose of a flagship (Frazier 2005a; Veríssimo et al. 2011). The cultural values of flagships are also frequently wrapped in other powerful symbolism such as state or national identity. Several nations have conservation flagships as their state symbols, including tigers (Bangladesh), oryxes (Jordan), snow leopards (Afghanistan), jaguars (Mexico), and Imperial Parrots (Dominica).

Species deployed as conservation flagships, therefore, have much greater symbolic value than other species (Frazier 2005a: 287). By heightening the symbolic importance thorough this “web of signification,” flagships may become entangled in what Clifford (1998) describes as “contro-

versy amid controversy” as illustrated in her analysis of the relationship between attitudes of stakeholders toward the Endangered Species Act and wildlife conservation. Clifford notes that criminal penalties for the taking of wildlife, concerns about gun rights, and lands designated as critical habitat outraged many groups and electrified identity-based and political conflict webs within which several flagships (mountain lions, black-footed ferrets, northern spotted owls, and wolves) became mired.

Relating Flagship Symbols to the Conflict Theory Literature

Whose Symbol?

Environmental conflicts frequently involve multiple protagonists, parties, or groups seeking to influence what species, landscapes, nature, mean for society (Hannigan 1995). These multiple meanings become important factors in disputes, and frequently emerge as lenses through which conservation issues are framed by different groups as either positive or problematic (Hannigan 1995; Herda-Rapp and Goedeke 2005: 7). An important aspect of the use of flagships as sources of conflict is the often public nature of these disputes (Daniels and Walker 1995). Flagships make for emotive framing in the arenas of the media, town-hall/community meetings, and court cases (Barua 2010; DiFrancesco and Young 2011). Barua (2011) argues that because the public’s interest in large “charismatic” animals is already engaged, sensationalized media stories or issues of controversy involving them become headline-grabbers. By extension, the decision to deploy, adopt, or counter-deploy a flagship within these public spaces may be an important political strategy. As explained above, flagships deployed as symbols within spaces of conflict are neither neutral nor innocent given their sociopolitical uses. Additionally, they may quickly become objects of disparate meanings as parties in conflict search for “objects that count” (Haraway 1991: 195) rich with pre-existing “name-recognition” and metaphorical associations to serve as the foundation for communication, knowledge, social control, and expression, via Firth’s (1973) four functions of symbols. Cobb and Elder (1973: 334) indicate that groups seeking to expand their influence and fortify their social status will tend to use either more or identify dominant symbols toward (re)defining social relationships to their advantage. Flagships may accordingly be appropriated by parties in conflict to express the deeper causes and identity issues that fuel conflict. These political strategies may produce what we term “flagship capture.”

Symbols of What?

According to Bartos and Wehr (2002), social conflicts develop when different parties have:¹ (1) incompatible goals, (2) feelings of hostility either toward each other or toward the groups or ideologies they represent, (3) organization or mobility for conflict, and/or (4) an interest in resources, present or future, that encourages conflict behavior. We propose that the majority of conflicts involving conservation flagships are underpinned by varying relative contributions of these causes or contributing factors, which flagships may come to represent (Figure 1).

Symbol of Incompatible Goals

Parties in conflict believe that their goals are incompatible when what the involved parties desire cannot be achieved simultaneously. While there may be any number of reasons why parties in conflict may have incompatible goals, in most public disputes about wildlife we suggest that there are two particularly important reasons: incompatible values and contested resources.

Figure 1: Different drivers that result in situations of conflict with regard to conservation flagships.

The relative influence of these will vary in different cases, and may also vary with time with a single case of conflict. (Adapted from Bartos and Wehr 2002.)



Incompatible values exist because the cultural standards of groups who have largely existed separately differ. These standards, central to social/cultural cohesion, govern what is “good” and “right.”

Bartos and Wehr (2002: 30) state that contested resources are overwhelmingly about wealth, power, and prestige. In most parts of the world supporting megafauna, land is a key form of wealth, and also an important crucible of power and prestige. Land is generally itself a dominant symbol and an important source of many forms of serious conflicts globally (e.g., the Israeli-Palestinian war). Conflict involving wildlife frequently becomes conjoined with issues of land and the management of other natural resources. Considerable attention is devoted to the nexus of land, charismatic megafauna, and conflict (Peluso 1993; West et al. 2006). The dispute surrounding gray wolves, Marbled Murrelet, and Spotted Owl conservation in the United States has been concurrently a dispute about conflicting notions of private property, identity, and differential access to social power and prestige tied to land and livelihoods (Dietrich 1989; Wilson 1997). Similarly, in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, hegemonic colonial legacies produced preferential access to wildlife that is inextricably tied to an unequal access to land. Thus attitudes toward wildlife, such as elephants, in these areas must be understood within the context of these land- and resource-based conflict histories (Naughton-Treves 1999; Peluso 1993).

Symbol of Hostility

Hostility toward “the enemy” is the most important emotion in any conflict (Bartos and Wehr 2002). With a history of unresolved grievances, members of groups who believe that they have been treated unjustly or will be prevented from achieving their goals may develop deep feelings of hostility. The precursor of the “wolf conflict” in the Greater Yellowstone area was an earlier, decade-old public policy program designed to modify federal land management in the region. These efforts, however, fueled long-standing fears about restrictions to personal free-

doms as these relate to the threat of “big government” limiting private property rights. These policy interventions also inflamed concerns about the changing social demographics of rural America. Wolf reintroduction emerged as an effective symbol for these feelings of hostility condensing and ordering a complex set of issues into a “tangible blamable object” (Askins 1995). Because of the strong emotional connection between hostility and conflict, their co-occurrence increases the chances that rational behaviors will be transformed into irrational acrimonious actions. This intensifies the potential for destructive outcomes (Scott 1985). As hostilities intensify, emotions as opposed to facts tend to control debates (Wilson 1997). Askins (1995), for example, notes that emotions have smothered the facts in the Yellowstone wolf debate. Similarly Mooallem (2013) discusses how the “assassinations” of Hawaiian Monk Seals reflect an emotive history of social grievances and mistrust by local Hawaiian residents of their government and conservation organizations. Conflict and peace researchers have noted that when disputants become consumed by hostility the destruction of the symbol of the despised other may become a basic need. That is, rather than fulfilling the originally desired goals, it becomes a priority to destroy the symbol perceived as expressing the power, social control or identity of “the enemy” (Csikszentmihalyi and Halton 1981). Scott (1985) suggests that such behaviors are particularly likely and important in local “peasant rebellions.” Here those with little social power use, for example, the covert killing of protected wildlife and sabotage to express their discontentment with their marginalization and disenfranchisement (e.g., Mooallem 2013; Society for Conservation Biology 2012).

Symbol of Solidarity, Organization, and Mobilization for Conflict

Open conflict may also develop because at least one of the parties involved is prepared for conflict. Any group solidarity and organization may be mobilized to realize group goals by dominating opponents (Bartos and Wehr 2002). This is particularly likely where there are resources in the form of social or political capital or powerful allies such as the media (Barua 2010), corporate industry, or financially supportive interest groups (Johnson 2012; Wilson 1997). Within this context, a suitable symbol may provide a platform or focal point around which these groups can find common cause. In the Spotted Owl and Marbled Murrelet disputes, loggers and related industries in the United States achieved solidarity, organization, and mobilization around the threat to job security posed by these flagships. Alternatively, the Owl/Murrelet’s threatened status was appropriated by conservationists as the ultimate rallying call of the imperiled status of old-growth forest. Invocations of the grizzly bear as symbol is “often used successfully to mobilize public support for key conservation policy actions” in the United States (Clark 2000: 297). Similarly, beginning in the 1990s Greenpeace campaigns mobilized around their choice of the polar bear as a symbol of climate change (Slocum 2004). Fishermen have claimed that conservation NGOs unjustifiably tried to close local Pacific fisheries using declarations of threats to marine turtles (Kinan and Dalzell 2005). Both formal and informal conservation and non-conservation organizations routinely deploy flagships as symbols to support a common vision and to mobilize collective action.

Symbol of Resources

Fund-raising is a core aspect of the sociopolitical role of the conservation flagships (Smith et al. 2012). If flagships act as either ideological or material resources, as in other natural resource-based conflicts, they may potentially have important influences on the emergence, duration, and trajectory of conflict. For example oil, diamonds, and high-value timber are all described as “high-value natural resources” as they are important sources of income for regional and national economies (Lujala and Rustad 2011; Ross 2004; Webersik 2008). Considerable attention has been

devoted to such resources by conflict theorists who argue that there is often an important relationship between the co-occurrence of these forms of natural resource wealth and overt social conflict through a variety of mechanisms. These include the “resource curse,” greed and grievance mechanisms, and the use of high-value natural resources to finance of overt social conflict including insurgencies (Lujala and Rustad 2011). The mere presence of these resources can have a powerful symbolic effect on conflict, by heightening tension and feelings of disenfranchisement. Charismatic megafauna used as flagships in several regions display the characteristics of high-value resources in that they are socially and economically valuable, are relatively scarce globally, and may become linked to either legal or illegal income generation ventures including the trade in wildlife and their products (tiger parts, rhino horn, elephant ivory, snow leopards skins, etc.). This link makes it possible for flagships to contribute socioeconomically to conflict, from local community to civil and international wars (Christy 2012; Liddick 2011).

The illegal trade in wildlife is estimated at US\$20 billion annually (Wyler and Sheikh 2008). With such figures, this trade trails only the global illegal weapons and narcotics markets as important financial sources of conflict (Liddick 2011). The street value of rhino horn can exceed the per kilogram price of gold (UNODC 2012). Such high market value has driven the extinction of local rhino populations. With strong market demand other megafauna including whales, Snow Leopards, and elephants all have the potential to attract those seeking to appropriate their value violently. In Central Africa, for example, because of gorilla (*Gorilla berengei*) flagship conservation programs and high-end tourism, gorillas are important national economic resources. Seizing on the economic value of this flagship Congolese rebels captured and started their own gorilla tourism operations to fund insurgency (Jones 2012).

The symbolism of flagships as high-value resources and the “protected private property” of a detached government or elite may also fuel perceptions of corruption and inequality (Lujala and Rustad 2011). For example, lions in Kenya have been killed not only in retaliation for livestock losses but also symbolically to protest persistent joblessness (SCB 2012). Socially constructing wildlife as celebrated global flagships may enhance the economic and social value even for species and wildlife products that have been of high value possibly for millennia, for example ivory. The iconification of wildlife may enhance the potential that these animals will be commodified, perceived as potential resources for conflict financing or objectified in destructive ways to communicate political messages (Butt 2012). Similar to the public burning of the national flag of “the enemy” state, wildlife may be persecuted, sometimes accompanied by the public display of their remains. Examples include arrow-pierced effigies of Spotted Owl in bars of timber towns (Moore 1993), bludgeoned monk seals on Hawaiian beaches (Mooallem 2013) and bullet-ridden Amazona parrot on the steps of a forestry officer in Dominica (Douglas 2011).

There is no question that conservation practitioners deploy flagships with the expectation that the constructs associated with them will be leveraged to conservation’s advantage, including financially. Some authors have further indicated that organizations both within and outside of conservation may directly benefit from, and even encourage social conflict over flagships (Daniels and Walker 1995; Frazier 2005a). Daniels and Walker (1995: 291) suggest that within the field of natural resource management there exists a “cadre of professional advocates—on all sides of the issue—whose job security and professional status depends on the quality of their fight.” Daniels and Walker (1995: 291) quoted Brock Evans, vice president of the National Audubon Society as stating: “we may have gridlock, but in our business that’s not that bad.” As a result, these authors report that natural resource disputes are frequently promoted and nurtured by an “entrenched conflict industry” that benefits from the maintenance of social conflict (Daniels and Walker 1995: 291) and for this reason the conflicts themselves may resist resolution (Moore 1993). Some, therefore, argue that the deployment of flagships can often symbolize the

emergence of conflict, and may be the forerunner of attempts at coercion and social control around which conflict industries achieve solidarity and mobilization (Frazier 2005a). It is not surprising that while iconic species are promoted as indispensable conservation tools they are simultaneously perceived by some as Trojan horses or as “gunboats” rather than innocent flagships (Frazier 2005b: 25).

Conclusions

While a focus on flagships limited to human-wildlife conflicts (e.g., crop damage, livestock losses, and the injury and killing of people) would have been a simpler, more conventional approach, we believe that such a limited focus would have missed much of the deeper, more systemic nature of the relationship between animals used as conservation flagships and the occurrence of forms of social conflicts.

Here we reviewed cases illustrating the symbolic nature of conservation flagships with a focus on the central role that flagships as symbols can play in conflict with and about animals. We argued that flagship species, like other types of important symbols, are vivid condensations and organizers of social realities, that they become repositories of social values, and possess emotionally appealing qualities. By extension they function easily as forms of cultural expression, knowledge, social control, and communication. This makes them effective vehicles through which conservation has engaged, influenced, and involved diverse stakeholders to various ends. For these reasons flagships are effective in motivating the public to care about and prioritize biodiversity conservation. This is important because, in practice, biodiversity conservation involved many technical and abstract subjects (ecosystems services, trophic relationships, climate change, etc.) that are difficult for most individuals to understand (Leader-Williams and Dublin 2000: 55). Conservationists, therefore, continue to take advantage of the powerful symbolic roles of the flagship approach (Butler 1992; Dietz et al. 1994; Eckert and Hemphill 2005; Zhi et al. 2000).

We contend that conservation must seek to more fully recognize the complex, often disparate, symbolic roles of flagships. At the most basic level, recognizing opposing symbolic meanings may flag the existence of important social dynamics and political framing that, while not often obvious, may hold the potential to complicate or derail biodiversity conservation programs. Beyond this level, we argue that conservationists frequently construct iconic flagships: (a) oblivious to the fact that their symbolic (emotional and arbitrary) nature makes them not only powerful conservation tools, but also vulnerable to reinterpretation, “attack,” “capture,” and redeployment as “battleships”; (b) with the intention to benefit from conflict² (the publicity and funding); or (c) ignoring the conflicts that the deployment of these flagships may facilitate or reveal. For related reasons, Frazier (2005a: 286) recommends that “practitioners who wish to use flagships as a motivating symbol must have clarity about who they are trying to attract and inspire, with what message, and for what end result.” Similarly Barua (2010: 431) remarks that “critical attention now needs to turn towards how flagships actually work, e.g. how they are deployed within and perceived by different societies and cultures, and whether this produces the desired conservation outcome.” Conservation flagship programs generally fail to explicitly acknowledge the more identity-based, value-laden components of their interventions and, by extension, do not acknowledge the sociopolitical issues and consequences that these approaches may generate or be consumed by.

We encourage conservation practitioners using the flagship species approach to act more vigilantly and anticipate conflict mechanisms, including the three discussed in this article,

whenever flagships are selected, developed, and deployed. We especially emphasize type 2 and 3 conflicts because of the complexity of their social dimensions. Once opposing symbolic meanings of a conservation flagship are successfully established within society they may be exceedingly challenging to change. Conservationists rarely acknowledge or seek to address the early signs of opposing symbolic framing of conservation flagships (Wilson 1997), frequently waiting until vitriolic disputes erupt in public arenas before recognizing the conflicting meanings and attitudes among stakeholders. Peterson et al. (2002: 962) suggest that wildlife managers wary of negative confrontations with other stakeholders frequently choose “passive neutrality” as the preferred management option. That is, conflict management by “staying out of it and simply going about mandated business in a ‘neutral’ fashion.” These and other authors note that such approaches may encourage protracted symbolic conflicts and favor the normalization of hostility among stakeholders in which “the conflict” may become symbolic in and of itself (Moore 1993).

As in commercial brand development and deployment we recommend that conservation practitioners institutionalize monitoring and early warning mechanisms. Flagship programs should continually evaluate “brand value” and meanings, and develop indices of brand acceptance among the target stakeholders (Keller et al. 2011). Early interventions could prevent or minimize the escalation of hostility and the solidarity and mobilization that now characterizes the conflict-ridden histories of so many flagship species programs across the United States and elsewhere (Clark 2000; Moore 1993; Wilson et al. 2006).

In any analysis and monitoring of the symbolic meanings of species we encourage researchers to be methodologically savvy, since what animals mean in any society can be rife with complexity. We therefore advocate for the use of research designs that can significantly enrich our understandings and foster new ways of thinking. We argue for more studies that combine the advantages of both qualitative and quantitative social science approaches in wildlife-related research. Proponents of constructionist approaches argue that quantitative survey methods alone are frequently insufficient to determine more nuanced characteristics of people-wildlife related value-orientations, including the more subtle symbolic meanings and ideologies stakeholders hold that could significantly inform conflict management interventions, if understood (Herda-Rapp and Goedeke 2005; Peterson et al. 2002). The application of iterative research designs using approaches such as grounded theory, mixed-methods sequential explanatory designs, social network analysis, and ethnographic methods hold significant promise in this regard (Bryman 2004). We believe that the immense value of these approaches will become apparent as more conservation practitioners study and apply these concepts (Johnson and Anthony 2004; Peterson et al. 2002). We therefore support calls for deeper cross-disciplinary engagement surrounding the use of flagship species including the inclusion of appropriate disciplinary specialists into teams to provide the professional leadership needed to understand and adequately respond to the complex ways in which different social groups may react to the introduction of conservation flagships (Barua et al. 2010; Macdonald 2004).

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■ NOTES

1. These may also be largely perception-based.
2. Metrick and Weitzman (1996) quantitatively demonstrated that endangered species affected by conflict generated extra political interest that then translated into increases in funding allocated for their conservation.

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