

*Once Absent, Now Returned: Narratives of Endangerment and the Reemergence of Charismatic Predators across Polish-German Boundaries*

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In March of 2018 Dorota Arciszewska of the ruling ‘Law and Justice’ (PiS) party in Poland made the following statement,

*The seal is an obvious pest, and the Baltic Sea is not its natural environment. Before the war, fishermen were paid for killing seals. Its appearance in Poland is a move by the WWF and ecologists, who are mainly Germans, who would like to move the reserves to Poland. We have to start doing something. There is no other way* (cited in Wieliński 2018).

Her comments are significant for a number of reasons. Grey seals are a protected species in the Baltic and by labeling the seal a “pest” and an instrument of foreign actors, she constructed a narrative in which seals (and by extension environmental groups) were presented as decidedly “un-Polish” and undeserving of consideration. Moreover, in the months that followed numerous seal carcasses washed up on Polish beaches, many of which were determined to be deliberately killed by humans. Some observers presume that these were the acts of angry fishermen who blame seals for diminishing their catches and that they may have felt emboldened by the MPs comments.

Since the 1990s many politicians, religious leaders, and media in Poland have depicted environmental organizations as “eco-fascists,” working on behalf of alien interests. The incident described above highlights one dilemma of transnational efforts to enhance biodiversity regarding seemingly successful conservation campaigns, namely that in some cases species recovery is experienced by certain groups as problematic and even threatening.

In this project, I examine debates surrounding two predators: Baltic grey seals in Poland and wolves in Germany. Disputes about the return of these species are entangled with broader narratives that reveal ambivalence toward open borders, migration, as well as cultural and biological fluidity. Here I reflect on the complex linkages between Germany and Poland and their relationships to other contested mobilities. Discussions of wildlife also appear entwined with the fraught matter of migration, human reproduction, and anxieties about demographic shifts. For example, in Saxony, a 2019 campaign poster for the far-right National Democratic party of Germany (NPD) declared “Species protection also for Germans” (*Artenschutz auch für Deutschen*).

This study is innovative in its attention to the convergence of conservation debates and populist discussions of migration and reproduction. It also addresses discourse on conservation and extinction in another way, insofar as resistant communities often articulate narratives of endangerment regarding their own futures. In the global south, scholars underscore the contradictory impacts that have followed the implementation of wildlife conservation regimes, including a preponderance for the negative consequences of increases in wildlife populations to be foisted unfairly onto more marginalized and poorer communities. However, more research is needed to reveal the dynamics of conservation policy in central European contexts. Analyzing these contested conservation success stories and the processes through which they are linked to legitimate fears and grievances can advance future attempts to save other species.