

Land as private property and species conservation

Last week, I attended a workshop for the development of a conservation strategy and action plan for the wildcat *Felis silvestris* in Scotland. The rescue of the wildcat faces huge challenges, not at least because of the omnipresence of feral cats and hybrids, which is particularly problematic for the reintroduction of cats in the frame of the Saving Wildcats LIFE project (<https://www.savingwildcats.org.uk/>).

But this remarkable project will be the topic for a later issue of Cat News. What I want to bring up here is a particular challenge I was not really aware of: access to private land for species conservation purposes.

We discussed also monitoring, e.g. the set-up of a grid for camera-trapping, or trapping (wild) cats for radio-collaring or just following the tagged cats (Fig. 1). And very often, the colleagues working in Scotland mentioned that they have no right to do such works on private land (Fig. 2). Although there is a law granting access to private land within Scotland, with only some restrictions, many private landowners do not want people wandering over their land or conducting activities, so they deny or heavily restrict access. This is a restriction that I have never experienced. I have been working for decades on the controversial issue of (large) carnivores, have been confronted with the fear of hunters for their prey, farmers for their livestock, and people for their safety. But I have been working in a country where nobody has the right to deny access to their fields or forests or forbid me from working on their private land. Obviously, this has given me the freedom to work, which I only now, retrospectively, appreciate as not to be self-evident.

Land as private property is an amazingly recent concept in the history of human culture, and was generally not known to indigenous people with subsistence cultures. The historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz dedicates a short chapter to this phenomenon in her recommendable book “An indigenous peoples’ history of the United States”. Private landownership developed in Europe in the late Medieval Age, and has then been exported to many regions across the globe with the European expansion. Local people have often signed – or have been forced to sign – contracts over land transfer as private property, a concept that they did not understand because it was so strange to their own cultures and traditions. Ironically, many of the settlers e.g. in the United States were peasants and crofters who left Europe because they were pushed out from their farms by large landowners – not least of which were from Scotland.

It is not my intention to review the history of private landownership here or to address social and cultural consequences. But it came to my mind that I had never been thinking about how private landownership might hamper conservation. There are examples for the benefit of large-scale private land purchase for conservation, but I’m not aware of concepts on how to integrate traditional landowners into large-scale conservation approaches if they feel that such projects are not in their interest.

I remember that the colleagues who have taken me out to their Iberian lynx work in the Sierra Morena in southern Spain have carried impressive bunches of keys to open the gates shielding private properties in their project sites. My friends told me that they need arrangements with each land-owner to do their work. I found this awfully complicated, but at least they found a way to have such agreements at large scale and, as far as I know, with all land-owners. The Iberian lynx was declared a national symbol, and supporting its conservation is considered to be a societal duty and a solemn obligation and honour. The *Pacto Ibérico por el Lince* was promoted by the governments at various levels and even the royal family. This pact is an informal societal consensus to cooperate for the rescue of the lynx. I wish such a pact would also be made for the Highland tiger, the Scottish wildcat.

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Fig. 1. One of the first reintroduced wildcats (with GPS collar) in the Cairngorms National Park, Scotland (Photo Saving Wildcats).



Fig. 2. The Cairngorms Connect landscape in the Highlands of Scotland, a national park with a mosaic of private and public land (Photo Saving Wildcats).