The Small British Cat Debate: Conservation Non-Issues And The (Im)mobility Of Wildlife Controversies

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Abstract

This article examines why cat predation is not on the agenda for most UK-focused conservation NGOs. Drawing on interviews and an analysis of scientific literatures and social media, I show that there are genuine epistemic uncertainties about whether cat predation presents a widespread conservation problem in the UK. This means that characterising NGOs’ position as science denialism is unjustified. However, I argue that NGOs may wish to avoid looking into the issue too closely, due to a belief that the matter is irresolvable: a view founded on assumptions about what the British public thinks, and what politicians think the public thinks. Finally, I show that while there is little fighting about cats between conservationists and cat advocates, cats are readily ‘grafted’ onto existing disagreements about gamekeeping and predator control. I conclude that the small British cat debate is unlikely to get any bigger in future, and that the case illustrates the importance of bringing together social science literatures on NGO politics, science and technology, and human-animal relationships when seeking to understand ‘issue creation’ by conservation NGOs. Furthermore, it highlights the need to attend to local cultures, practices, and ecologies rather than assuming that issues will translate across contexts.

Keywords

domestic animals; ignorance; invasive species; issue creation; non-governmental organisations; science denialism; wildlife

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Declaration of competing/conflicting interests

The author declares no competing interests in the conduct of this research.

Research ethics approval

The project was approved by The University of Oxford’s Central University Research Ethics Committee (SOGE 1A 2020-40).

1 ‘Feral’ is an emotive and hard-to-define term, given that dependence on humans and other relevant factors fall along gradients rather than being binary; see Crowley et al., 2020b. Still, because the term is widely used colloquially and in relevant literatures, I use it throughout this article.
Introduction

In their provocative book *Cat Wars*, American conservationists Peter Marra and Chris Santella (2016: 141) single out leading UK-based bird conservation group the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) for being insufficiently anti-cat. The authors argue that evidence shows a clear impact of free-ranging domestic cats on wildlife and therefore an urgent need to keep cats indoors. Yet the RSPB “goes so far as to dismiss the impact of cats on birds as largely irrelevant, and refuses to advocate for keeping cats inside,” instead claiming that “free-ranging cats are not causing a problem and that their impacts represent compensatory mortality.” Marra and Santella detect a political motive driving this message: the RSPB “have avoided this issue for fear of alienating a portion of their member base.” Furthermore, the authors observe a particular tendency amongst the British to let their cats roam freely outdoors. This argument is supported by social science research showing that British cat owners don’t tend to agree with the idea that cats have a population-level impact on wildlife, and tend to prioritise cats’ outdoor access over concerns about wildlife predation (McDonald et al. 2015; Hall et al. 2016; Crowley et al. 2019, 2020a).

Marra and Santella argue that in the battle between cat- and bird-lovers, cat-lovers have the upper hand, perhaps especially so in the UK. If Australia—where authorities support a plan to kill all feral cats living in wild areas (Bunyak 2019)—sits at the most anti-cat end of the spectrum, the UK is at the other end: cat management is little-discussed and not perceived as an important problem by most conservation groups and authorities, with the exception of managing domestic-wildcat hybridisation in Scotland (Rowan et al. 2019). It is perhaps unsurprising that cats are less controversial in the UK than elsewhere; unlike places like Aotearoa/New Zealand, feline predators (namely wildcats and lynx) are native to Britain, and domestic cats have been present since at least the Iron Age (Kitchener and O’Connor 2010). The UK also has a unique history of conservation. Domestically (i.e., not in colonial settings), British conservation has arguably focused less on separating nature and culture than elsewhere, as early conservation efforts aimed to preserve ‘semi-natural’ agricultural landscapes (e.g., the Lake District)—though this approach is at odds with some modern forms of biodiversity conservation (Lowe et al. 1986).

This article aims to explain why the UK’s ‘cat war’ is not really a war at all, with a particular interest in why cats are not on the agenda for UK conservation non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Following the work of Keck and Sikkink (1998), there has been a growing interest in what Carpenter (2007, 2014) calls issue creation, i.e., how NGOs decide which issues to campaign about. This work has resulted in a set of hypotheses about which factors shape NGO agendas, as outlined in Table 1. However, as Carpenter (2007, 2014) argues, we still lack empirical detail on issue creation, and in particular on issue non-adoption, i.e., how and why seemingly credible issues fail to be taken up by advocacy organisations. I would add that further studies on issue creation are needed in the realm of conservation specifically. While some studies have considered issue adoption by environmental NGOs (e.g., Keck and Sikkink 1998, Shibaike 2020), more have examined humanitarian and international relations issues, for example, studies drawing on the frequently cited work of Carpenter (2007, 2014). With the proliferation of conservation problems in the Anthropocene, the now-numerous conservation NGOs face an
ever-expanding list of potential conservation issues to take on, making issue creation all the more challenging and important.

Studying non-issues would additionally represent a break away from the typical focus on conservation and wildlife controversies within environmental humanities and social sciences. For example, a great deal of attention has been devoted to conflicts (human-animal or human-human) over non-native species, dangerous or ‘pest’ animals, and other animals viewed as ‘social problems’ (Best 2018). In this vein, social science research on cat management has typically focused on conflict and controversy, such as efforts to cull or manage feral cats in Australia (Bunya 2019) and North America (Wald and Peterson 2020), and extinction and hybridisation of wildcats in Scotland (Wrigley 2020). It is understandable that controversies attract the most attention; such issues are perhaps most obviously in need of resolution. However, I propose that understanding non-issues can offer lessons in how to prevent conflict escalation, and the mobility (or lack thereof) of conservation issues across contexts.

Studying non-issues is methodologically challenging, since we can never know exactly which and how many issues advocacy groups considered but failed to campaign on (Carpenter 2014). However, in the case of cat predation we have a particularly striking situation in which certain conservationists (e.g., Marra and Santella) seemingly want UK conservation NGOs to take up the cat cause. UK media stories also often appear aimed at stirring up controversy, for example, focusing on anti-cat statements made by prominent figures (e.g., Chris Packham: Davis 2015). Yet despite these efforts, cats are still not a priority issue for most UK-focused conservation groups. The cat case is, therefore, a perfect example for exploring how certain pressures are ignored by conservation NGOs, and the importance of considering local contexts in which NGOs operate. I further demonstrate that the cat case simultaneously illustrates the importance of many previously acknowledged factors shaping issue creation (see Table 1), and the need to expand the scope of analysis beyond the realm of NGO politics. When it comes to conservation, I demonstrate that local ecologies, scientific debates, cultural histories, and human-animal relationships are all crucial for understanding NGOs’ choices. Understanding conservation NGO issue creation therefore requires bringing together social science literatures on NGO politics, science and technology, and human-animal relationships.

To make this case, I examine three key features of the UK cat debate: 1) epistemological uncertainties; 2) perceptions of what donors, members of the public, and politicians think; and 3) debates over hunting and land use. I conclude by reflecting on the likely future of the UK’s cat debate, and what the case can tell us about conservation non-issues and the movement of conservation controversies across contexts.

**Methods**

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 22 participants between August 2020 and March 2021, via phone or video calls due to COVID-19-related restrictions. Potential participants were identified through snowballing, or via directly contacting researchers and UK-based organisations focusing on cats, hunting and gamekeeping, animal welfare/
rights, and conservation (including of wildcats, and involving cat eradication offshore). Most participants were researchers, or in leadership or management roles within central or local branches of advocacy organisations; more detail on roles is provided in Table 2. Questions were tailored to participants’ expertise, and covered issues such as: personal and organisational views on the effects of cat predation on wildlife conservation; perceived areas of dis/agreement with other organisations; and what participants would like to see happen around cat management in the UK. Interviewees provided written consent, and the project was approved by Oxford’s Central University Research Ethics Committee (SOGE 1A 2020-40). In addition to interviews, I collected emailed responses to questions (similar to those asked in interviews) from two respondents. I conducted inductive thematic analysis of interview transcripts and written responses, identifying overarching themes relating to topics such as scientific uncertainty, ecological impacts, public attitudes, and cat politics.

I also conducted searches on Facebook and Twitter for discussions related to cat predation in the UK, by searching for terms such as ‘cat’, ‘bird’, and ‘wildlife’ on relevant UK-based organisations’ pages (e.g., RSPB). I collected relevant posts, and have used them as examples throughout the article, particularly to illustrate the views of members of cat and bird advocacy groups (rather than the views of upper management).

Finally, I conducted a non-systematic review of the scientific literature on cat predation in the UK. I identified relevant peer-reviewed texts, grey literature, conference presentations, and theses using: searches of relevant terms (e.g., ‘cat predation’, ‘wildlife’, ‘UK’) and the ‘cited by’ function in Google Scholar; recommendations from participants; and texts’ bibliographies. Of particular relevance were a handful of studies examining cat predation in specific UK cities or towns (Churcher and Lawton 1987; Baker et al. 2008; Thomas et al. 2012) or across the country (Woods et al. 2003), and one study of correlations between cat and prey density in urban areas (Sims et al. 2008). Alongside interviews with scientists, I have used texts identified in this search to describe key areas of uncertainty in the scientific literature (section below). Together, I use these materials to understand why the cat issue has not been adopted by most UK-based conservation NGOs, with the goal of using and expanding on the factors identified in Table 1.

**It’s a lot, but is it too much?**

Marra and Santella accuse the RSPB and other conservation groups of keeping quiet about cats for financial reasons, the idea being that speaking out would alienate members and, therefore, reduce donations. The accusation is that conservationists misrepresent or ignore evidence on cats, in a social context where doing so is likely to hinder effective cat control policies. In short, they accuse the RSPB of science denialism (see Frank 2019). As STS scholars working in the field of ‘ignorance studies’ have observed, large corporations often use such tactics—along with other subtler methods such as failing to investigate outstanding uncertainties—as a way of remaining strategically ignorant about issues affecting their profits (Gross and McGoey 2015). While wildlife NGOs might be less concerned with profit, the accusation is that they bow to pressure from donors (Factor 4, Table 1) in order to ensure steady income. However, as I show in this section, the evidence of cats being a
conservation problem for British wildlife is rather equivocal. Uncertainty is therefore both a key issue attribute (Factor 1, Table 1), and useful politically.

The most common method for examining cats’ effects on wildlife has been to recruit cat owners and ask them to record the prey their cat brings home, or even to collect carcasses of victims (Baker et al. 2008). These data are then used to calculate an average kill rate per cat per year, which is sometimes then extrapolated to estimate predation rates across a larger area (Churcher and Lawton 1987; Woods et al. 2003; Baker et al. 2008; Thomas et al. 2012). For example, a study in Reading used this approach to estimate that 180 million animals are killed by cats each year in the UK, including 55 million birds and 119 million mammals (Thomas et al. 2012; Hanmer et al. 2017). However, there is considerable room for uncertainty around such estimates. Interviews and a review of the literature suggested six key sources of uncertainty.

**Detection**

Free-ranging cats don’t bring everything home; some prey items are eaten or left at the scene. Little research employing direct observations and collar-mounted devices has been conducted, but current results suggest only 23–30% of prey items arrive on the doorstep (Loyd et al. 2013). However, new research suggests that birds killed are more easily detected than mammals, suggesting that taxon-specific multipliers are needed (Lockwood 2021). This may mean that predation of birds, which are typically of most public concern in the UK, is overestimated. Meanwhile, the predation of mammals, which are typically of less public concern in the UK (with some exceptions, e.g., bats) is underestimated. Echoing a commonly expressed view, one participant reflected that “if my cat brings home rats, I think apart from the rats and myself, nobody is too sorry about it. But it’s the birds that people are concerned about” (I13, December 21, 2020).

**Indirect mortality**

Cats may injure but not kill animals, which owners then release, though survival may be poor. For example, 78% of cat-attacked birds delivered to the four Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) centres died or required euthanasia (Baker et al. 2018). There is variation in how this is incorporated into mortality estimates. A study in Bristol only counted animals returned home dead (Baker et al. 2008), while one in Reading incorporated injured prey into estimates (Thomas et al. 2012). Mere presence of cats can also affect wildlife, e.g., reducing parental provisioning (Bonnington et al. 2013).

**Extrapolation**

Recent studies have indicated that predation is highest in summer (Baker et al. 2008; Thomas et al. 2012); seasonal effects are therefore nowadays incorporated into predation estimates. Individual cats also vary widely in how many animals they kill. While in theory this variation is accounted for in sufficiently large studies, there are potential sources of bias. For example, studies aimed at testing the efficacy of collar-mounted predation deterrents (e.g., bells, electronic sonic devices) deliberately recruit cats with a known tendency to hunt. Yet such studies may be used to inform mortality estimates; for example, Nelson et al. (2006) informed a model of US cat predation by Loss et al. (2013: see Supplement).
Population estimates

Estimates of the UK’s owned cat population vary, e.g., Murray et al. (2015) estimated 10.1 million in 2011, while the Pet Food Manufacturers’ Association (2015) estimated 7.8 million cats in a similar period (2011-2012). Even more uncertain are the numbers of feral cats, with a 1995 estimate (based on local surveys and extrapolation) of at least 813,000 in Britain still widely cited (Harris et al. 1995). While the total is unclear, feral cats are estimated to account for less than 10% of the UK’s cat population, and to be less common than in some other countries, e.g., the USA, and Australia (Sims et al. 2008). Estimating prey population density also faces challenges, e.g., distance sampling (counting animals along transects) is difficult for urban birds as available habitat may be out of sight behind buildings (Baker et al. 2008).

General ecological trends

General ecology may be invoked to guess whether cats affect wildlife populations in a context of uncertainty, e.g., the 60% decline of house sparrows from 1994 to 2004 has been attributed to increases in cat numbers (Marra and Santella 2016), or to agricultural intensification in that period (Nelson et al. 2006). Some participants also speculated that the co-evolution of British wildlife alongside native predators like the wildcat is reason to expect little impact. Other interviewees countered that domestic cats live at much higher densities than wildcats, though based on some preliminary research, one ecologist estimated that each domestic cat kills 2% of the prey killed by a wildcat.

Compensatory or additive mortality

Key from a conservation perspective is whether cat predation results in population decline (additive mortality), or if cats kill animals that likely would have died anyway (compensatory), or suppress population size without causing decline. One study found that birds killed by window strike had greater body mass than those killed by cats, suggesting compensatory mortality, though this is complicated because breeding birds may reduce fat reserves to improve flight performance (Baker et al. 2008). Others have examined correlations between cat densities or kill rates and prey diversity or breeding rate. These have suggested that some populations may be significantly affected by cats, e.g., house sparrows in Bedfordshire (Churcher and Lawton 1987); dunnocks, robins, and wrens in Bristol (Baker et al. 2008). However, a study across UK urban areas found that where there were more cats, there were fewer bird species breeding (especially in groups vulnerable to predation), but that there were more birds overall (Sims et al. 2008). These studies are correlative so have trouble establishing causality, but field experiments where cats are kept out of a study area are difficult and hence very rare (I13 December 21, 2020; McDonald et al., 2015).

This sixth source of uncertainty was of greatest concern. As one researcher summarised, “you can say cats kill millions or billions of prey a year, but it’s all relative. It’s like, does that matter? Is that too much? It’s a lot, but is it too much?” (I5, October 13, 2020). Studies to date are somewhat “equivocal” in their answers to this question (Baker et al. 2018 312). There is a consensus that “mortality caused by free-ranging pet cats can be substantial for some prey species in some circumstances” (Thomas et al. 2012 11; see
also Baker et al. 2008: 96). Ecologists mentioned various species they are familiar with that cats are probably affecting, ranging from rare seabirds on islands, to slow worms, to (most commonly mentioned) ground-nesting birds like the Dartford warbler *Sylvia undata*. Interviewees also talked about particular problems arising from houses directly abutting nature reserves, and the particular problems this could pose for efforts to encourage rapid development amidst a housing crisis. Yet local problems do not necessarily translate to a national concern, or to conservation groups and government calling for serious measures to curb cat predation. As one government ecologist summarised:

“It’s hard to believe they don’t have some localised effect. But whether it’s significant on a national scale, given all the other problems faced by wildlife, I don’t know and we’re certainly not calling for them to be banned, we just say people be responsible about it.” (I15, January 12, 2021)

There are therefore genuine outstanding questions about whether cats have significant effects on wildlife in the UK, beyond localised cases. It would be a mischaracterisation to say that the neutral stance on cats commonly adopted by UK-focused conservation NGOs amounts to science denialism or strategic ignorance inspired by donor pressure. However, it is also worth noting that equivocal evidence does not in itself prevent the cat issue from being taken up. As Wald and Peterson (2020) have argued, in the USA there is uncertainty around the extent to which outdoor cats negatively affect conservation, and the efficacy of trap-neuter-release (TNR). Yet both cat and bird advocates tend to mask this uncertainty and claim that science is exclusively on their side. For UK-based conservation NGOs, however, the uncertainty around cats’ impact on wildlife conservation is typically not ignored, but rather cited as justification for issue non-adoption, in a context where taking up the cat cause is perceived as politically challenging. In the next section, I examine reasons for this political difficulty: the perceived (though not necessarily real) attitudes of donors, members of the public, and politicians.

**Playing to the bunny huggers?**

Individual ecologists sometimes expressed concern about cats, despite the uncertainties. Some identified internal disagreements within conservation organisations (e.g., “I’ve got one work colleague who doesn’t particularly agree with domestic cats” (I17, February 17, 2021)) and flare-ups on social media between conservationists who like and dislike cats. At an individual level then, there is disagreement. Much like in the USA, individual members or local branches of cat and wildlife advocacy organisations might adopt stronger stances than the central NGO (Wald and Peterson 2020). However, I only came across one UK-focused conservation NGO that at an organisational level expressed concern about cats. An interviewee involved with this organisation described a typical conversation about cats with less anti-cat conservation groups as:

“They are obviously paranoid about losing lots of members and all that—not paranoid, but… And you’ll get the stock line, ‘there’s no evidence that…’ So, you could say to them, ‘Well, presumably, if there’s no evidence, you’re now researching it to provide evidence.’ To which they’ll say, ‘Ah now, we’ve got bigger fish to fry.’” (I2, September 3, 2020)
This interviewee reiterates the *Cat Wars* argument that conservationists are concerned about losing members. They additionally suggest that conservationists explain their lack of attention to cats with reference to uncertainty and the need to focus on more significant conservation issues. ‘Ethical boundary-work’—i.e., ethical defence of one’s own activities with reference to another, more problematic yet less contentious domain (e.g., laboratory scientists’ defence of their work with reference to farming: Hobson-West 2012)—did indeed commonly arise in interviews. Dogs were sometimes raised as a more problematic companion species, with interviewees affiliated with three different nature reserves identifying off-lead dogs as a bigger problem than cats, especially for ground-nesting birds. However, boundary-work typically focused on habitat destruction, e.g., from agricultural intensification, which was raised by eight interviewees as a bigger problem than cats (two cat/animal welfare advocates, six ecologists/conservationists).

Even an ecologist who was somewhat concerned about cats and thought perhaps “fear of loss of revenue” underpins NGOs’ inattention to cats, acknowledged that habitat is “sensibly” most conservationists’ primary focus (I16, January 21, 2021). In this context, “picking on people’s cats” (I15) was sometimes viewed as a form of easy, politically expedient scapegoating: “there’s lots of stuff going on with the environment which could affect wildlife populations but sometimes it’s easier to point to that evil black cat” (I10, December 1, 2020), since “it’s easy to say, keep your cats inside. It’s easier than to say, keep your hedgerows and don’t chop down your trees” (I5, October 13, 2020). This argument formed the basis of a counter-argument made against the most anti-cat of the conservation NGOs: that they avoid the “elephant in the room” of habitat destruction and instead focus on predators (I11, December 2, 2020), in much the same way (though perhaps for different reasons) as done by pro-hunting advocates. Adopting the cat issue, by this reasoning, would represent a capitulation to the pressure to selectively adopt issues that can be easily blamed on identifiable individuals (i.e. cats or cat owners) rather than being irredeemably structural (Factor 1, Table 1).

Yet NGO staff did sometimes acknowledge that their sanguine approach to cats is also politically expedient, for the very reason critics claim: it may affect support and donations. Perceived pressure from donors (Factor 4, Table 1) was therefore acknowledged as relevant for shaping issue adoption. For example, representatives from one wildlife group acknowledged that “we couldn’t come out with a sort of anti-cat message at all because we would immediately alienate probably at least 35% of our supporters in one fell swoop, if not more,” whereas “If you’re not a membership organisation you can afford to be a little bit more stronger on some issues where you’re not at risk of upsetting your supporters, and I think we’re always very mindful of that” (I18, March 22, 2021). Similarly, representatives from an animal welfare charity observed that groups that are “dependent on public donations would really have a difficult time if they took a stance of we need to massively reduce the numbers of cats in the UK” (I9, December 1, 2020). These quotes acknowledge that cats to some extent are a structural issue themselves, since any proposal to keep them indoors or discourage cat ownership would require a fundamental change in human-animal relationships, and potentially between the state and citizens. Two narratives about Britishness were commonly invoked in explaining why doing anything about cats would be fraught, relating to 1) attitudes towards animals and 2) freedom.
On human-animal relations, participants commonly cited the idea that the UK is “famously a nation of animal lovers” (I7, November 25, 2020; Message 2019): a sentiment viewed as applying to both companion and wild animals, albeit with animal welfare coming first, as demonstrated by the founding of the RSPCA decades prior to the RSPB (I15, October 13, 2020; Cassidy 2019). This joint interest in both welfare and conservation was often thought to mean that “cat and dog lovers are often people who are funding nature conservation” (I12, December 16, 2020); “many […] bird feeders are cat owners and lovers, you know, it all comes together” (I3, October 2, 2020). So too with those working for conservation NGOs: nine ecologists/conservationists mentioned that they have cats (and one more admitted to adopting a stray cat while acting as a wildlife reserve warden), which was widely viewed as a common situation in the UK. Relating to such connections, participants sometimes spoke of a “blurring between animal welfare and nature conservation” (I18, March 22, 2021). As one conservationist argued, wildlife advocates were often viewed as “bunny huggers” who readily conflate conservation and animal welfare issues (I21, March 23, 2021).

This ’muddling’ of conservation and welfare is not unique to Britain or UK-based conservationists; for example, conservation and animal welfare justifications are deeply entwined for many orangutan conservationists and their supporters (Palmer 2020). Yet there is also a particular history in the UK of convergences between conservation and animal advocacy. Cassidy (2019) observes that there was a somewhat distanced relationship between conservation and animal advocacy in the UK until the mid-twentieth century. This began to change with new wild animal welfare laws (e.g., the banning of gin traps in 1954). Opposition to killing certain animals (most prominently badgers) also involved the “convergence of conservation, natural history, environmental and animal protection agendas” to push for political changes (ibid: 181), though there were still conflicts between these communities. The contemporary British cat debate aligns with this recent trend in that conservationists, animal advocates, and ecologists are often allies on this issue, with their opponents being those involved in farming, hunting, and gamekeeping (section below).

A second narrative invoked in explaining the difficulty of controlling cats was the freedom and ungovernability of both cats and British people. Regarding cats, one participant described “[t]he perception is that a cat, unlike a dog, is one tiny half step from being freely wild, and it’s therefore cruel to restrict their ability to roam in any way” (I4, October 5, 2020)—a view which Crowley et al. (2019) confirmed is common among British cat owners. This narrative of cats as wild and uncontrollable in turn relates to the history of cat domestication, whereby they ’self-domesticated’ by taking advantage of hunting and scavenging opportunities in human settlements, which humans valued for pest control. Cats thus maintain a double identity as autonomous, efficient hunters, and as domestic animals closely associated with humans (Crowley et al. 2020b: 477).

In explaining the challenge of controlling cats, an anti-cat conservationist (I2) argued that “we’re Brits and we believe in the right to do what we want. You know, if it’s not enshrined in law then it’s not illegal. That’s just the British nature.” As Message (2019) argues, freedom has often been viewed as a sign of British virtuousness and humanity, which in turn is closely linked to the notion of Britons as a ‘nation of animal lovers’ uniquely concerned about humane treatment of non-humans (compared with less virtuous others such
as continental Europeans). Message (2019) demonstrates that these narratives of freedom and kindness to animals were entwined to great effect in the invocation of animal welfare in the Brexit campaign, particularly by Vote Leave. A similar argument is made here: cat control is presented as difficult (just as Brexit was necessary, according to Vote Leave) because of a uniquely British love of both animals and freedom.

Those involved in politics were also sometimes seen as buying into this vision of the British as ungovernable animal lovers. For example, a campaigner seeking to introduce a legal requirement to neuter domestic cats in Scotland (in a bid to prevent hybridisation with the Scottish wildcat) indicated that politicians and civil servants “do not want to know,” in part because of a view that “people don’t like to be told.” They further reflected:

“I think a lot of politicians think the public are all cat-loving, doting, not-very-clever people who would rebel if the government said, ‘Actually, cat welfare would be improved by neutering all pet cats,’ but, you know, they-, politicians seem to work by perceived reactions in the public which aren’t always based on reality.”

(111, December 2, 2020)

Thus, conservationists’ perceptions of what the public thinks, and of what politicians think the public thinks, create a situation in which any significant cat control measures are viewed as difficult at best, if not impossible. While participants nearly universally supported the idea of encouraging people to be responsible cat owners—e.g., through neutering, attaching bells to collars, providing enrichment (which might decrease cats’ incentive to hunt), and potentially keeping cats indoors at night—there was more equivocation about the feasibility or ethics of making substantial legal demands, e.g., that all cats be kept indoors, or that cats be banned from certain areas or developments.

In this context, there was little motivation to iron out remaining uncertainties about whether cats are a significant conservation problem. Several participants made arguments along the lines of “what would you do about it [cat predation], even if it was [a conservation problem]?” (I22, March 26, 2021). One ecologist reflected that while “academically I’d be interested to know if we had a real problem […] it’s probably better to spend the money on something that can ultimately lead to some sort of change” (I15, 1 December, 2020). While some wanted to see more research done—e.g., a researcher argued that “trying to establish whether there is actually an effect on populations, even at a relatively local level, would be quite valuable” (I6, October 22, 2020)—there were also hints that some NGOs may find it easier not to know. For example, a university-based researcher described struggling to get both cat and wildlife charities involved in their research project (e.g., via using NGOs’ data or promoting the project in membership magazines), leading to an impression that “they just don’t want to know at all” (I5, October 13, 2020). Accusing NGOs of denialism is a step too far, yet to some extent population-level effects of cat predation are a form of ‘forbidden knowledge,’ viewed as inappropriate to pursue because it may threaten the natural or social order (Gross and McGoe 2015). Researchers’ continued interest suggests that there is little self-censorship at play amongst scientists, but there are hints that NGOs may prefer not to actively pursue research in this area. It is therefore clear that while there are genuine epistemic uncertainties, there are also political pressures (or, rather, perceived pressures) incentivising NGOs to not talk about cats, relating to the attitudes of donors, members of
the public, and politicians. I therefore propose that while science is easily invoked to justify why cats are a non-issue for UK conservation NGOs, politics, culture, and human-animal relations may intervene to set a high threshold for evidence.

However, conservationists did sometimes defend their neutral stance on cats in the UK by referring to places where ecologically cats clearly are a problem, such as Australia, New Zealand, and various islands. One conservationist even used their involvement in feral cat eradication overseas to argue that “where there’s a problem, we’re not afraid to act and will do” (I1, August 7, 2020). Interestingly, in this case of overseas cat eradication another conservationist involved noted that animal and cat advocacy groups “didn’t rat us out to the press” and thereby helped to maintain a low profile on what could have been a controversial project in the UK (I7, November 11, 2020). Thus, evidence may be sufficiently compelling to prompt conservation NGOs to take action against cats—though this may also be easier when the action takes place overseas and receives little media attention.

Adding to the list of Evils

It is notable that where cats are raised in debates in the UK, they typically serve as a source of supplementary evidence to support a broader argument rather than a key concern in themselves. There is little fighting between wildlife and cat advocacy NGOs in the UK, largely because there is little conversation about cats at all. However, cats do sometimes feature in heated debates between hunters, gamekeepers, and farmers on the one ‘side’, and conservation and welfare advocates on the other. Cats are not the main focus of this particular debate, which is ultimately about fundamental questions around land use, ownership, and governance (Swan et al. 2020). This debate also reflects a history in which, despite some initial alignments (e.g., the view of farmers as stewards of ‘countryside preservation’), conservation and agricultural interests in the UK have diverged with the rise of industrial agriculture and changing norms of conservation (Lowe et al. 1986). However, cats are readily thrown into this debate because they are easily ‘grafted’ onto pre-existing moral standards about predator control (Factor 5, Table 1).

The hunting of game has a long history in the UK. Yet this remains controversial, opposed not only by animal welfarists but also some conservationists (though some groups combine support for conservation and game hunting, e.g., the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust). Such anti-game hunting conservation groups take issue with game bird releases and other activities associated with game management such as predator control. For example, it has been illegal to kill or harm birds of prey since the 1950s, yet conservationist allege that gamekeepers continue to kill raptors (e.g., hen harriers *Circus cyaneus*) on grouse moors as a way of protecting game birds. Gamekeepers, in defence, argue that predators have a negative effect not only on game species but also on wildlife, and complain of conservationists being ‘against’ the shooting industry and targeting their way of life. This debate rages on today, including on social media (Hodgson et al. 2018). One conservationist went so far as to refer to pro-hunting groups as “the forces of darkness” (I8, November 26, 2020), while a gamekeeper summarised the situation as “basically all but armed war” (I14, December 22, 2020).
In this context, cats were described by a gamekeeper as just one representative of an “ever-growing suite of predators which we see as doing damage,” with predators viewed as a more significant problem for rare birds than habitat loss (I14). Echoing the argument made in Cat Wars, the keeper accused conservationists of ignoring cats for financial reasons: “They know the damage that cats do, yet they get bequeathed large sums of money by—Mrs Smith the widow, when she dies, gives money to [a conservation organisation]. So we see the entire thing as an utter hypocrisy.”

Thus, certain anti-cat conservationists may find allies in gamekeepers and pro-hunting groups, against an opposition of cat-neutral conservation groups like the RSPB, animal welfarists, and cat advocates. This is not to say that gamekeepers and anti-cat conservationists have identical reasons for being concerned about cats. Rather, wildlife enthusiasts may become concerned about predators that harm their favoured species or individuals, which are admired for non-financial reasons like aesthetics (I20, March 23, 2021). Such a view is expressed, for example, in a tweet from a bird enthusiast responding to a discussion about blue tit predation in nest boxes: “Problem here is cats and magpies [angry face]” (May 23, 2020).

Just as the gamekeeper accused cat-neutral conservationists of ignoring inconvenient facts for financial reasons, conservationists sometimes accused gamekeepers of disingenuously casting predators (rather than habitat) as the key conservation issue due to predators’ impact on game birds: “although they might say it’s [predator control] to protect wildlife, a lot of that is around protecting game birds” (I15, 1 December, 2020). Thus, game and hunting groups were accused of disguising their true agenda because they “cannot be seen to be saying” what they really mean (I18, March 22, 2021). Accusations of hypocrisy and scapegoating therefore go both ways, in much the same way that cat and bird advocates in the USA mutually accuse one another of misrepresenting the facts (Wald and Peterson 2020). Meanwhile, cats are also invoked on social media in welfare-related arguments against gamekeepers, e.g., the idea that pets are killed in gamekeepers’ traps (or by hunters or fox hounds), or horror at gamekeepers’ (perfectly legal) killing of feral cats.

Yet this divide over predators can also raise problems for conservationists, who may sometimes find predator control necessary. As one conservationist noted, “we do have to kill things,” such as grey squirrels, but

“we’re also very mindful that the language we have to use on that is often not as honest as it could be because we have members to keep happy and they join us because they think we would never kill anything […] But I think we’re a lot more honest about it than some of the sporting fraternity, because I don’t think that […] we actively enjoy killing things so it’s done often as a last resort…”(I18, March 22, 2021)

Conservationists and gamekeepers, in some circumstances, find themselves in agreement about the need for predator control; as in the USA, public rhetoric about cats is often more polarised than the more nuanced views of individuals involved (Wald and Peterson 2020). Yet the entrenchment of these two opposing ‘sides’, and a perception that the general public dislikes killing, may make acknowledgement of such agreement difficult and drive
conservationists to find other ways of re-establishing the moral high ground (e.g., asserting that they, unlike gamekeepers, are honest and dislike killing).

To summarise, in a context where both animal welfare and some conservation groups have a history of opposing game-keeping and sport hunting, cats are readily ‘grafted’ onto existing moral norms (Table 1, Factor 5). As one conservationist articulated, cats are readily introduced as yet another item “adding to the list of evils” (I4, October 5, 2020) committed by gamekeepers. Meanwhile, gamekeepers add conservationists’ unwillingness to talk about cats to their own corresponding ‘list of evils,’ even though in reality these two ‘sides’ may agree on some matters (including, occasionally, predator control).

**Will the cats issue just keep going away?**

Looking to the future, social and ecological changes could make the British cat debate grow. Cat ownership appeared to increase in response to COVID-19 lockdowns, with the Pet Food Manufacturers’ Association estimating that there were 12.2 million pet cats in 2021, up from just 7.5 million in 2019. If this increase were to persist (which is unclear given the possibility of high rates of pet abandonment: Cawley and Shepka 2020), cat predation could become a more prominent conservation issue. Interviewees also observed that new developments aimed at addressing housing shortages could cause problems. However, these problems might be addressed through the creation of buffer zones around nature reserves, as recently introduced around the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area (a move which was in part aimed at preventing cats from entering the SPA: Surrey Heath Borough Council 2015).

Changes could also arise from the reintroduction of wildcats to England and Wales (Thurston 2021). The Scottish wildcat *Felis silvestris silvestris* was once widespread across the UK, with the population decimated primarily due to habitat loss and persecution (Kitchener and O’Connor 2010). Until very recently wildcats were still found in the Scottish Highlands, but the population is now fully hybridised with the domestic cat (*Felis catus*) and is functionally extinct in the wild (Langridge 2021). While it might be more a consequence of habitat loss than the primary cause of the wildcat’s demise (ibid.), hybridisation is perceived as a significant issue in wildcat conservation and a threat to reintroduction efforts, leading to campaigns to make neutering of pet cats mandatory in Scotland. Thus, while cat predation is not perceived as a significant issue by conservation groups across the UK, managing cat populations to prevent hybridisation with wildcats is a concern (Rowan et al. 2019).

Reintroducing wildcats into England and Wales would also bring with it further tensions between conservationists and gamekeepers. Keepers are still often blamed for driving the wildcat to extinction (Wrigley 2020). Furthermore, disagreements may arise about how best to prevent hybridisation between wildcats and feral domestic cats, echoing arguments about TNR efficacy for controlling outdoor cat populations in the USA (Wald and Peterson 2020). A gamekeeper argued that killing feral cats is more effective than the trap-neuter-vaccinate-release approach taken by the wildcat conservation project led by government agency Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) (Rowan et al. 2019): an approach adopted because...
“it would have been a bit more difficult” in terms of public image to carry out lethal control, according to one individual involved. This divergence of views has led to tensions, with some gamekeepers reluctant to let conservationists onto their land to trap and re-release feral cats (I14).

Yet while wildcat-specific arguments are likely to expand in future, participants saw little prospect of the UK’s cat debate otherwise changing. Many wanted more discussions around responsible ownership and efforts “just to get people thinking about it” (I5, October 15, 2020). However, one conservationist jokingly concluded that “I’d quite like it just to keep going away [both laugh] and not get too high profile” (I8, November 25, 2020). Some wanted more science, though others didn’t see the point, such as one scientist who cynically concluded that “when you have very polar debates like this science doesn’t necessarily help” since “each side takes the science that suits it and will espouse it: see, we’re right, the science says we’re right. But they exert the opposite argument—if science opposes their view they will always try to unpick it” (I7, November 25, 2020).

One possibility is that the welfare of cats’ victims could mobilise concern. In a study aimed at seeking expert consensus on the most pressing issues for wild animal welfare, cat predation emerged as the sixth-greatest problem for individuals’ suffering, and the tenth-most in terms of how many animals suffer (Dwyer 2021). This was also widely acknowledged as something cat owners are concerned about (Crowley et al. 2019), and as something that prompted many cat-owning interviewees to express a sense of distaste or “guilt” (I17) about their cats’ predatory behaviour. However, there are good reasons for thinking that this issue will struggle to gain traction. With the exception of the RSPCA, few animal welfare NGOs focus simultaneously on the welfare of pets and wildlife. Furthermore, cat advocates may express concern about the negative welfare impacts of anti-predation measures like keeping cats indoors. Representatives from two of the three animal welfare/protection groups I contacted indicated that they do not advocate for keeping cats indoors, on the grounds that they view outdoor access as important for cat welfare in most cases (see also Rowan et al., 2019). There are therefore likely to be few NGOs interested in advocating for the welfare of wild animals at the expense of cats. The British cat debate will therefore most likely, for better or worse, remain small for the foreseeable future.

**Conclusion**

I have put forward three main arguments for why cats have not been selected as an issue for most UK-focused conservation NGOs. First, the evidence that cats present a conservation problem, beyond a few localised cases, is equivocal, and NGOs acknowledge that there are more pressing issues facing wildlife such as habitat destruction. These genuine epistemic uncertainties suggest that describing NGOs’ position as science denialism, inspired by pressure from donors, would be unjustified. With that said, I also demonstrated that NGOs may wish to avoid looking into the issue too closely, due to a belief that the matter would be irresolvable even if there turned out to be a genuine conservation problem. Notions of the British public as having a unique love of animals and (much like the cats themselves) freedom were invoked to explain why the cats issue is a non-starter. On this, there is agreement between animal welfare advocates and most (but not all) conservation NGOs.
This suggests that to the extent that there is a ‘cat war’ in the UK, it is not between the same two ‘sides’ as in the USA (cat and bird lovers: Wald and Peterson 2020) but rather between game and sport hunting groups on the one hand, and anti-hunting conservationists and welfarists on the other. This is not to say that the two ‘sides’ always disagree with one another. However, long-standing tensions mean that such agreements may be difficult to acknowledge, and that cats are readily ‘grafted’ onto moral norms about predator control and land use. Finally, I speculated as to how the small British cat debate will evolve in future, concluding that it is unlikely to change much, with the caveat that arguments about neutering and feral cat control could extend beyond their Scotland-specific context with further wildcat reintroductions.

We can learn several key lessons from the small British cat debate. First, the case suggests that at least some of the factors shaping NGO issue creation already identified (e.g., grafting onto existing debates, pressure) have value, and are readily applied to conservation—as well as humanitarian-focused NGOs. Yet the case adds some further nuances to this discussion, for example, highlighting that pressure from members of the public and donors need only be perceived, not necessarily real. It is enough that NGOs think that the public love animals and freedom, or that they think politicians think this way, even if this is not true (see Hobson-West and Davies 2018 for a related discussion of how policy-makers act on their assumptions about how members of the public understand animal sentience).

The case further highlights that when considering NGO issue creation in the realm of biodiversity conservation, epistemological uncertainties and scientific debates are important to comprehend, as are cultural histories of human-animal relationships. It is therefore important to connect up literature on NGO politics and issue creation with STS and human-animal studies literatures. Finally, the UK’s cat debate highlights the need to attend to local cultures, practices, and ecologies rather than assuming that issues will translate across contexts. This lesson potentially applies beyond wildlife debates, for example, to questions around whether and how USA-style ‘culture wars’ translate to other contexts.

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Data availability

Due to the sensitive nature of the material, data are unable to be released publicly.

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### Table 1
Factors proposed to affect NGO issue creation

| Factor                        | Explanation and examples                                                                                                                                                                                                 | References                      |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Issue attributes              | NGOs may perceive some issues as more likely to gain traction, e.g., those involving bodily harm or legal inequality, or are easily blamed on identifiable individuals rather than being irredeemably structural. | Carpenter 2007; Keck and Sikkink 1998 |
| Actors                        | NGO characteristics (e.g., small vs large, organisational structure), availability of an interested audience or ‘issue public’, and the work of key individuals (e.g., ‘political entrepreneurs’) may be important. | Keck and Sikkink 1998; Shibaike 2020 |
| Networks                      | ‘Network density’ may be less important than first theorised for making certain issues appealing, but network features may be important, e.g., desire to steer clear of other NGOs’ remits, and the preferences of key gatekeepers. | Carpenter 2007, 2014             |
| Pressure                      | Focus is often on how donors shape NGO agendas (though NGOs are not powerless or necessarily subordinate in such relationships). Pressure can also come from other sources, e.g., members of the public, media. | Reith 2010; Shibaike 2020        |
| Pre-existing moral standards  | Issues may be selected based on how readily they ‘resonate’ and can be ‘grafted’ onto pre-existing moral norms and taboos.                                                                                               | Keck and Sikkink 1998; Carpenter 2007 |
| Local contexts                | Literature typically focuses on transnational advocacy networks (TANs), but national- and local-level factors can be important, e.g., nationally specific conventions about the role of NGOs. | Stroup 2012                     |
Table 2

Participants by role

| Role                      | Interviewees            |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| Conservation NGO/campaigner | I1, I2, I8, I11, I12, I17, I18 & I19, I21, W2 |
| Wildlife/conservation researcher | I5, I6, I7, I13, I20 |
| Government ecologist      | I4, I15, I16, I22      |
| Animal welfare/cat NGO    | I3, I9 & I10, W1        |
| Gamekeeper                | I14                     |

Notes: I=interviewee, W=written respondent; and ‘&’ indicates joint interviews.