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The political culture of poaching: a case study from northern Greece

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Abstract. Poaching has deep social and cultural roots and its meanings are multi-layered. This article explores the meanings attached to the practice of illegal hunting and fishing around Lake Kerkini in northern Greece. Here poaching must be considered in the context of a disordered ecosystem, where the dominance of locally maligned fish and bird species results from economic and environmental policy designed to benefit distant farmers. We conclude that poaching cannot be understood only as an individual action, but as one where collective and personal identities are defended in the face of seemingly irrevocable economic and social decline. The discussion shows that poachers identify different kinds of poaching. Some of the most apparent forms of poaching, done by local inhabitants, may be less damaging than other commercially oriented forms, including by outsiders. Poaching is motivated through a complex mix of factors. Our data lead us to discuss two manifestations of poaching (a) poaching as a form of collective resistance; and (b) poaching as a violation of culturally valued types of human-nature interaction. Some people who admit undertaking what they perceive as least detrimental forms of poaching are antagonistic towards what they construe to be truly harmful forms. Such people appear willing to act and to support actions against types of poaching they agree to be threatening. This is a message with potential importance for environmental management strategy.

Introduction

Poaching, the illegal taking of wildlife, is an issue that has received relatively little attention from social scientists until recently (Muth 1998). However, recent studies have begun to explore the social context and meanings of poaching. It has become clear that motivations for poaching are extremely diverse. In certain contexts, where resources are scarce and livelihoods uncertain, subsistence needs might be the primary motive (Hampshire et al. 2004; Pratt et al. 2004). However, the reasons why people poach exceed economic necessity. Curcione (1992) describes illegal angling in Southern California as a source of 'delight', while Forsyth et al. (1998) suggests that illegal hunting in Louisiana represents resistance to perceived impositions of alien cultural values. Muth and Bowe (1998) identify 10 categories of motives for poaching, ranging from household consumption and commercial gain, to poaching as a

recreational pursuit, as an act of rebellion, or as an exercise of traditional rights. (For other studies that have looked at multiple types and motivations of poachers, see Gregorich 1992; Forsyth and Marckese 1993; Musgrave et al. 1993; Forsyth et al. 1998). Moreover, the categories are not mutually exclusive: a single poacher may have multiple motivations, simultaneously or at different times in his/her poaching career (Forsyth et al. 1998).

The predominant view of poaching in the ecological literature is that it is unequivocally detrimental in terms of its impacts on biodiversity (Kenney et al. 1995; Cohen 1997; Blom et al. 2004), a view that is echoed in a WWF report on illegal fishing in Lake Kerkini, the geographical focus of this paper (Maragou and Mantziou 2000). However, such analyses often fail to differentiate between different forms and scales of poaching, which might have varying impacts on the natural environment and biodiversity. This is in contrast to poachers themselves, who are widely reported to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable forms of poaching. Among recreational fishers in California, Curcione (1992) found some forms of poaching, notably exceeding quotas, were considered acceptable and harmless to fish stocks. By contrast, taking under-sized fish was widely condemned. Poaching is thus rarely seen as unambiguously good or bad: Hampshire et al. (2004) found that attitudes towards illegal fishing in Lithuania are best represented by a multi-dimensional spectrum of acceptability, based not only on perceived threat to fish stocks, but also on a sense of cultural aesthetics, fairness, and identity. Similarly, Pendleton (1998) identified a spectrum of 'deviance' for tree theft in a North American forest.

Most work on explanatory models for poaching operates at an individual level. Eliason (2003) develops a model based on 'neutralisation theory' as a way to understand the psychology of poaching. While individual poachers are generally committed to the 'rules and laws of society' (ibid), they deploy rationalisations to except themselves from the rule of law when it comes to poaching. Various neutralisation techniques are used to excuse or justify behaviour that deviates from normative standards. These include telling oneself that poaching was accidental, harmless or necessary; justification of poaching through higher loyalties to friends or family, or justification through a belief that particular laws are unjust and enforced by spiteful hypocrites.

McCay (1984) takes a different approach by adopting a cultural perspective to explain illegal fish and shellfish capture in New Jersey as: 'A public and powerful symbol of the community of Shoal Harbour'. McCay interprets poaching as a public symbol of Shoal Harbour folk's notion of 'community' and also as an expression of their relationship to 'other social groups that would carve away the right of piscary' (ibid: 23). Normative behaviour refers not to 'the rules and laws of society', but to the assertion of local values and behaviours over those of a state-wide governing apparatus that is deemed to have signally failed the citizens of a particular locality. Muth and Bowe also allude to the cultural nature of poaching: 'Poaching often is embedded in

subcultural webs of meaning that involve tradition, ethnic heritage, individual and social identities, and other socio-cultural factors' (1998: 10).

Another perspective for understanding the motivations of poachers, and their relationship with 'authorities' comes from the work of Stoll-Kleeman (2001), who uses theories derived from social psychology to explain widespread opposition to conservation strategies in Germany. Based on Brehm's (1966) theory of psychological reaction, Stoll-Kleeman identifies a number of 'emotional drivers' and 'cultural drivers' that might precipitate reactance against conservation measures, among which she identifies 'expectation of free behaviour' as being particularly important in the German context. Stoll-Kleeman also brings Social Identity Theory, as understood by social psychologists (Tajfel 1978; Tajfell and Turner 1979), to bear on the German situation, arguing that people align themselves and others with ingroup or outgroup membership, leading to the creation of stereotypes whereby all sides firmly misrepresent the other. While not specifically about poaching, these theoretical insights provide a useful framework within which to understand how different stakeholders and users (including poachers) react to each other over issues concerning environmental management.

The aim of this paper is to develop our understandings of the complex, and often contradictory nature of poaching through a case study – the perceptions and practice of illegal hunting and fishing in a protected area in Northern Greece: Lake Kerkini. We argue that poaching in and around Kerkini must be understood within the context of a disordered ecosystem, where the dominance of locally maligned fish and bird species results from economic and environmental policy designed to benefit distant farmers, rather than local fishermen and land-users. Here attitudes to poaching appear deeply contradictory and can only be understood alongside the despair attendant on alterations to an ecosystem on which people once confidently relied for their living. In this context, poaching becomes emblematic of lost livelihoods and identities and a token of resistance and rebellion.

Lake Kerkini: ecological degradation and uncertain regulation

Kerkini is an artificial lake created in 1932 by the building of a dam close to the village of Lithotopos. The name Kerkini also refers to a town to the Southwest of the lake, and more generally to the whole lake area and its surroundings (see Figure 1).

The lake was initially intended for flood protection and was later used for irrigating increasingly intensive agricultural production some 50 km to the east on the Serres Plain. A thriving commercial fishery emerged so that fishing for carp, catfish and eel became a characteristic occupation among men in the villages, sometimes mixed with farming. At its peak, fish production in Lake Kerkini was among the highest of the Greek inland lakes: more than

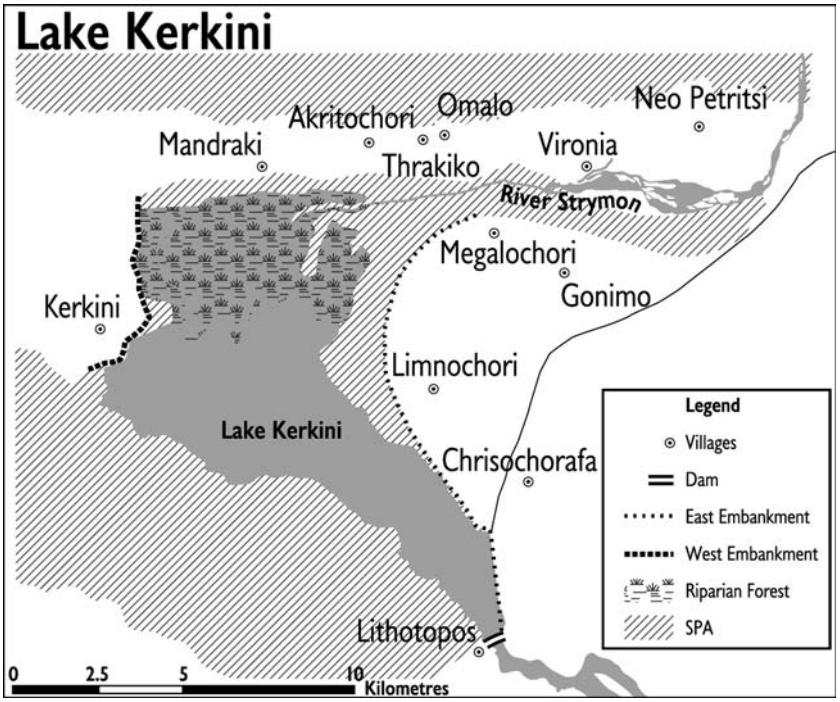

Figure 1. Map of Lake Kerkini.

150 kg/ha/year, resulting in annual catches of 1000–1500 tonnes (Skinner and Zalewski 1995).

Later, further hydrological works were carried out in response to silting from organic materials deposited by the Strymonas River. They provoked changes that led to tension between the lake's multiple users. In 1982 a new, higher dam was built. The eastern dyke was raised and the western dyke constructed. These alterations in hydrological conditions contributed to a declining financial value of the fishery. Numbers of carp reduced and eel became extinct. Other factors affecting the fishery included over-fishing or illegal fishing methods (Maragou and Matziou 2000), although the relative importance of these factors is contested. In 1992, the closure of the dam caused water levels to rise by a further half metre, which resulted in the deepening of shallow marshes and reed beds in the northern part of the lake, an important breeding ground for carp. By 1994, there was a noticeable decline in carp yield, which has not recovered, as the lake has become established at the new level (Bell 2004: 94). Other fish species, notably the goldfish, have been less affected: the goldfish thrives in almost all Greek lakes due to its ability to live under environmental conditions that are unfavourable to other fish species.

Ecological changes have also had a serious impact on many of the 300 local bird species (Crivelli et al. 1995). By contrast, numbers of Great Cormorants

grew dramatically since 1990 from 500 pairs to 3500 pairs in 2002. Nesting in trees cormorants are relatively unaffected by the loss of reed beds and their ability to dive deeply is advantageous with the rising water levels. According to Carss et al. (2003), cormorants are often attracted by factors associated with degraded wetland ecosystems. The recent growth in cormorant numbers is seen by fishermen as signalling a threat to the fishery.

The loss of fishing livelihoods is of great concern to local people in Kerkini (Bell 2004). People say that young men and women are leaving the area, unable to eke out an existence from fishing or farming. Although there is a generic hope that tourism in Kerkini can be developed, none of our informants envisaged themselves gaining income from tourism locally (ibid). Social and economic degradation in this part of Greece is evident in the lack of infrastructure development and investment in housing, education and tourism policies (Catsadorakis and Malakou 1997:195).

In addition to conflicts over changes in water levels, and their impacts on fish yields and biodiversity, Lake Kerkini's protected status is a further source of local dispute. Kerkini has Special Protected Area Status (EEC 79/409), so is subject to the EC Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds and the Habitats Directive. It is also protected under the Ramsar Convention, as a site of outstanding biodiversity, and the Greek Ministry of Agriculture also accords birds 'species of high protection'. Implementation of protective status measures, though, has been far from straightforward. Only in 2003 did the long-awaited Management Body (required under the Habitats Directive) start operating, with limited financial resources, to enforce protection measures.

Nevertheless hunting and fishing in the area have long been subject to restrictions. Fishing regulations prohibit the use of certain methods, the most damaging of which are electro-fishing (passing a strong electric current through the water, killing almost all fish), harpoon fishing at night (using strong lamps to attract the fish), and the use of chemicals. Regulations also govern minimum sizes of fish caught, permissible types of nets and traps, and there is a total ban on fishing for 40–50 days during the spawning season. Hunting regulations govern areas where hunting is permitted, species caught and hunting seasons. Roe deer are highly protected, and may only be hunted one day a week, in a 'Wildlife Preserve', for a high fee. Hunting birds is banned from the end of February to mid-August, and seasonal restrictions apply to the hunting of hare and boar. Hunting is prohibited altogether around the lake itself, and further regulations limit the maximum number of bullets permissible in a rifle to three.

However, implementation of these regulations is complex and patchy, due partly to the large number of organisations involved. Fishing licenses, required by the Ministry of Agriculture for all but shore-side anglers, are issued by the local post office and checked by the Police Department. The prefectoral level Fishery Department, together with local Fishing Associations and staff from the Kerkini Environmental Information Centre decide the dates of the fishing ban. Information Centre staff patrol the lake, but with limited powers: they may confiscate fishing gear temporarily, but only the police have the authority

to prosecute offenders. Hunting also comes under the remit of the Ministry of Agriculture, as well as the prefectoral level Forestry Office. Local Hunting Associations, answerable to the Ministry, issue hunting licences and hire guards to patrol hunting areas.

The confused picture sketched above sends out an equally confusing message to those seeking to capture wildlife at Kerkini for livelihood, subsistence and recreation. The system is hard to fathom and overly bureaucratic adding to temptations to ignore regulations altogether. The opaque nature of Kerkini's conservation status enables people to render their own interpretations.

Methods

This paper draws on one component of a 3 year multi-disciplinary study of the Kerkini wetland area. Nine months of intensive fieldwork were carried out in 2003 by one of the authors (ST) in nine villages around the lake, with smaller amounts of additional fieldwork by the other authors. The nine months, February–September, included the closed season for both fishing and hunting that coincides with the majority of illegal angling and other forms of poaching.

In order to obtain rich narrative and ethnographic data, qualitative methods were used: semi-structured interviews, focus groups and participant observation. The multiple method approach enabled triangulation of data. Sampling was designed to cover the full range of local stakeholders and interest groups. Almost all men in Kerkini fish and hunt for subsistence, with smaller numbers involved in commercial fishery, so these groups were strongly represented in our sample.

Thirty semi-structured interviews (SSIs) were conducted with local people, including 18 commercial and amateur fishermen, as well as hunters, local farmers, plus scientists and wardens employed at the Information Centre and representatives from local Fishing and Hunting Associations. The interview guide was modified according to the particularities of each individual, and the interviewer maintained discretion to follow leads and alter the ways in which questions were asked Drever 1995; Pretty et al. 1995).

Seven focus groups (FGs) were conducted with a total of 32 participants in four of the main fishing villages. All but one of the focus group participants were male, and the age range was from 28 to 70 years, with most between 30 and 50. Half were commercial fishermen, the others representing a range of livelihood and local interest groups (e.g. hunters, farmers, loggers, restaurant owners, personnel of the Kerkini Information Centre). Groups were relatively homogeneous in composition, but with sufficient variation to bring out different opinions and encourage debate of contested or controversial issues (Morgan 1997; Bloor 2001; Stewart and Shamdasani 1990; Fern 2001).

In addition, participant observation was undertaken. The cornerstone of anthropological enquiry, this involves spending an extended period of time in a community and observing the details of everyday life (Geertz 1973; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). During fieldwork, ST engaged in local

daily life and activities, including angling, fishing and hunting. All relevant information was recorded in an ethnographic diary, including informal encounters and conversations and direct observations (Sanjek 1990).

All FGs and SSIs were digitally recorded and, along with ethnographic diary entries, these were transcribed, translated into English, and coded for topics (cf. Miles and Huberman 1994). Subsequent analysis used grounded theory: theory generated from the data rather than imposed on it (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The coded data were searched for emergent patterns, using a series of validity checks (Miles and Huberman op cit).

It is important to note that poaching was not originally scheduled as an interview topic for either FGs or SSIs, but it emerged consistently as an important issue for the majority of local people. In other words, the importance placed on poaching in the data is not an artefact of the questioning procedures, but something very prominent in local discourses. This is surprising at first sight, since one might expect people to be reluctant to discuss illegal activities with an outside researcher. However, as we argue later in the paper, our respondents regarded most transgressions of fishing and hunting rules as an everyday reality, embedded in local cultural values, rather than ethically wrong or a source of shame. People's openness in discussing poaching was facilitated by the informal settings and congenial atmosphere of the interviews and focus group discussions, and the good relationships developed with the researcher. By contrast, none of our respondents admitted to being involved in any of the forms of poaching widely condemned by locals, which may not reflect reality. However, this does not compromise the validity of our data, as our aim was to explore perceptions and evaluations of different forms of poaching, rather than implicating individuals.

The significance of fishing and hunting at Kerkini

Our informants express fierce pride in their landscape through a rhetorical device whereby appreciation of its beauty becomes an aspect of natural resource use (Ingold 2000: 13–26). A fisherman told us '*Do you know how beautiful it is to listen to the birds in the morning? That's why we fish, because we love nature*'. Another said: '*The thing I enjoy most is when I go to the lake before sunrise. I start fishing and then the sun comes out. This thing drives me crazy. Or when I am fishing when the sun sets. This is even more beautiful. I can't explain it very well. I know the lake as well as I know my own hands. I know it better than myself*'. Similarly, hunters frequently talk about how they value the opportunity to roam and enjoy nature. Some explain it as a chance to come into contact with their 'real self' or to feel a mystical connection to the landscape. An official of the local Hunting Association says '*Going to nature you take the mask off, the mask that we use in our everyday lives. You are left bare; you become primitive…. For some the peace and quite of the mountain is a way to unite*

with God. In my opinion you become yourself, the way you were when you were first created'.

Fishing and hunting in Kerkini take a number of different forms. Almost all men are involved in one or the other, and the majority do both (commercial fishermen today number about 200, the rest are amateur, subsistence fishermen). Commercial fishermen fish mostly from boats, using long-lines and fyke nets, for carp and wells, while amateurs typically fish from the shore with rod and reel, catching predominantly butterfly fish (goldfish). The main hunting areas are uplands next to the lake, and the most common quarry are wild boar, hare and roe deer, along with game birds: geese, ducks, pheasant, partridge, woodcock, quail and wood pigeon.

However, all those who fish or hunt express valorisation of the natural world through their practice. Even those who rarely bag a quarry continue to hunt and fish because, in addition to the ritualised connection to nature that both activities signify, there are important social dimensions. With very few exceptions, only men hunt and fish, and these activities represent means of transmitting masculine values between generations, in the face of considerable social change and upheaval. The president of a local Hunting Association told us, '*My relationship with hunting started within the family… It's part of a tradition that is transferred from father to son*'. Similarly, an elderly commercial fisherman explained, '*I started fishing with my father, and then continued on my own. My children started fishing with me and then became fishermen themselves*'.

Hunting is a way of being with friends and gaining a reputation among fellows. It is a point of contact for men in the villages, providing engrossing topics of conversation to fill long hours in the *kafeneia* (coffee shops). One hunter said: '*You can't talk to people about your work all day long. Petros* (his friend) *talks to me about his job, but I don't understand much. If it weren't for hunting we wouldn't know what to talk about*'. Hunting also cements wider social relationships through the distribution of meat to relatives, friends and patrons. For example, hares are considered a delicacy, and are highly regarded as gifts for politicians, doctors, officials or anyone else who has conferred a favour. Wild boar meat is similarly regarded. Nature is thus a medium for situating oneself in a publicly constructed male culture Franklin 1999: 107). A hunter belongs to a community of knowledge and practice. He relates to the natural world in a way that extends beyond mundane, daily realities and transforms his experience of danger and excitement into narratives to be traded in the fraternal surroundings of the *kafeneio*. Furthermore, the hunter stacks up favours and boosts the strength of his social networks through transactions with meat.

Fishing is most often undertaken alone and is less significant for the accumulation of masculine reputation than hunting. However, despite the relatively recent history of fishing in Kerkini (as the lake was only established in 1932), fishermen value it as a central part of their identity. Although often described as a '*useless*' job because of its poor economic return, the most experienced fishermen proclaim they would go fishing even if no fish remained. This

powerful identification with fishing extends to the lake itself, even among younger fisherman, such as one who says: '*The lake forms part of myself*, *half of myself is the lake*.' Others explain '*our life is the lake*' and maintain when they are fishing all weariness and problems disappear. This idealisation of fishing helps to justify the hard work it entails against the current slender contribution of fishing to household income, and demonstrates that fishing is something which integrates people and nature, via a shared 'aesthetic standard', defined by (Carrithers 1992: 174) as '… a sense of what is more or less appropriate or expected in one circumstance or another'.

Threats facing fishing and hunting

The passionate attachment of local people to the wetland eco-system is accompanied by distress over recent environmental change. Echoing a view widely held among both local people and ecologists, an elderly retired fisherman told us: '*The lake has become a sea. Fish used to hide among the reed beds and the forest. This all perished since the new dam was built. There is nothing left. Since then the lake has been left bare and we have lost what we had in the past*'. Similar views were expressed regarding the future of hunting, in the face of increasingly restrictive regulations.

There is general agreement, among both local people and ecologists, that the management of water levels is the major factor responsible for the demise of the fishery (Crivelli et al. 1995; Maragou and Matziou 2000), creating a situation that fosters resentment and a certain amount of defeatism among local people who perceive the management processes as way beyond their control. A focus group consisting of farmers and fishermen demonstrates the prevalence of the view that water management decisions are taken by, and for, the benefit of non-local people. One man said, '*The lake is only a water reservoir now*, *and not even for us. We can't have any of its water*'. The others have heard rumours of plans to raise the embankment by another two metres, which they agree would be disastrous for local livelihoods. '*We'll have to abandon the village*', says one. '*Fishing would die*', agrees another. '*Complete destruction*'.

Local fishermen also point to other causes for the decline in fish stocks including predation by protected species such as cormorants, although the importance of this threat is disputed by ecologists at the Information Centre. Cormorants are an easy target because their numbers have visibly increased and they are regarded as voracious feeders (Bell 2004). Over-fishing and poaching are also blamed by some (both local fishermen and ecologists) for declining fish stock, but fishermen tend to downplay the importance of this compared with other threats, such as the changing ecology of the lake. One self-confessed poacher compared the 100 or so carp he saw caught by his fellow villagers during the closed season to the numbers he imagined to be eaten by the 15,000 cormorants he estimated to be living on the lake.

The practice of illegal fishing and hunting in Kerkini

The practice of hunting and fishing in Kerkini spans the blurred boundaries of legality and illegality. Poaching is widespread and takes various forms. Many people occupy an ambiguous relationship with poaching, at the same time condemning certain forms, while practising others.

Illegal fishing

Illegal fishing is openly acknowledged by fishermen to be extremely widespread. A commercial fishermen readily admitted in a focus group, '*We all fish illegally, since we use nylon nets, which are forbidden*'. Another divulged that '*more money is made from fishing during the fishing ban than at any other time of year*', which corresponds with the widely expressed views of other fishermen. '*Illegal fishing never stops*', said one, while another reported that '*There are many poachers – they are endless*'. Enforcement of regulations is typically so weak, that people readily admit to illegal fishing, even in the presence of Information Centre staff.

However, the blanket term 'illegal fishing' covers a range of practices, viewed very differently by local people. Most reviled are electro-fishing and harpoon fishing (at night with strong lights). According to fishermen, these forms of large-scale poaching, practised by both locals and outsiders, have grown substantially over the last fifteen years. Some informants estimate daily catches using these methods to reach 300 kg, but this is difficult to corroborate. Electro-fishing is despised by regular fishermen who agree with local ecologists in believing it to be one reason for the decline of the carp population. It also offends a consensual view of the cultural aesthetics of fishing, which includes pride in skill and joy in the relationship that fishing creates between the fisherman and his environment. Harpoon fishing is also condemned, because it is thought too easy to catch large amounts of carp in this way during the spawning season.

At the other end of the scale are anglers, who typically fish during the closed spawning season – the only time of year when fish come to the shallower areas at the shore. Angling represents a 'fair' match between fish and fisherman, as opposed to harpoon and electro-fishing, in which the odds are unfairly stacked against the fish. Moreover, anglers' catches are believed to be small and to consist mainly of the non-commercial butterfly fish, thus posing little threat to commercial fish stocks. As one commercial fisherman said, '*The ones doing rod fishing don't do much damage – anyway, they only catch butterfly fish*'. Illegal angling is visibly widespread: we counted around fifty anglers fishing from Mandraki pier one weekend day in May (during the fishing ban). Indeed, angling during the ban season has become so normalised that many do not regard it is being an infringement of regulations. One man explained, while angling illegally, '*The fishing ban is for boats on the lake. It doesn't matter to fish by rod. Anyway, there isn't a problem with the fish that we catch here – there are so many*'.

Other contraventions of fishing regulations, such as the use of certain fish traps or illegal nets, also receive little stigma. To catch small amounts of fish for subsistence is rarely considered wrong, so long as the methods do not contravene a sense of aesthetics and fairness. Local people, therefore, see no contradiction in practising certain forms of poaching, while denouncing others. One self-confessed illegal fisherman said in a focus group, '*Well, (electro-fishing) happens sometimes, but we go after these people. We have told them before that if we catch them, we will report them to the authorities*'.

Illegal hunting

The practice of illegal hunting is also widespread, and the values attached to it are complex and contingent. Hunting regulations are frequently flouted, and most people, such as those in the following focus group exchange, were happy to talk openly about their illegal hunting:

P1: I hunt a lot. I shoot a lot of birds.

P2: We hunt illegally – we can't hide that.

In another focus group, one man claimed that he hunted birds illegally every day, a claim supported by his confederates. In other cases, people obey the letter of the law. One man recounted having chased geese from one side of the road (within the restricted area) to the other side, where he was allowed to shoot them. There is resentment of excessive regulation of hunting, and particularly of having to pay for animals shot in the hunting preserves.

Most illegal hunting, particularly that regarded as traditional hunting practice, is regarded by those who practise it to inflict no harm on game species. This includes hunting in restricted areas, catching certain protected species, and exceeding the maximum number of permissible bullets. Regulations prohibiting the hunting of ducks and geese around the lake are openly flouted. The use of such regulations to protect wildlife is considered unjust and unnecessary, particularly in comparison to the damage to habitats and breeding grounds caused by the dam and rising water levels. One hunter explained, '*In my opinion, killing a few animals does no harm. The problem is that the fish and birds cannot reproduce*'. However, hunting non-edible species is reviled, and can destroy a hunter's reputation. Worse still is hunting that threatens the ability of game species to survive and reproduce. '*It's a crime to kill mother boars in February, during reproduction*', one keen hunter told us in an interview. Similarly, using crude or unfair hunting techniques is poorly regarded.

The social face of poaching

In much of the literature, poaching is represented as something that people regard as a necessary evil (e.g. Hampshire et al. 2004; Pratt et al. 2004), and may try to justify in the kinds of ways described by Eliason (2003). Contrary to

this, poaching in Kerkini, or at least *certain forms* of poaching, are a source of pride and defiance, clear from the words of one well-known illegal hunter: '*I will go hunting even if they file a million charges against me. I was born to hunt. I am a hunter and this will never change*'. Another declared proudly, '*I was the greatest illegal hunter and fisherman of them all*'.

Indeed, the pride and satisfaction derived from the procurement of natural resources through illegal fishing and hunting extends across wide social networks and is not reserved to the individuals who actually take the fish or game. This is apparent in the way that fish or game caught illegally is conferred with a special status through the kinds of transactions by which it is distributed and consumed. Friends and relatives gather to share the bounty. Dining on fish acquired during the fishing ban period takes on a special character whereby the illegal status of the fish contributes a distinctive, celebratory ambience. Sharing illicit fish signals local independence and solidarity against the controlling forces of the State. People derive enjoyment from the shared assertion of what they regard as rightful and unimpeded access to edible wildlife. One poacher said about fishing for carp during the closed season: '*I caught 15 fish one day. I didn't eat even one of them. I offered them to my friends during a dinner I organised for them. I didn't sell even one of them. We catch carp in order to consume it among our group of friends*'. Another described fishing for carp during the ban, in order to prepare a dinner to fête members of a local football team who had won an important game.

Similar values attach to the sharing of poached game. In an interview, one hunter described an occasion in which he illegally caught six wild boar. Despite needing the money, he refused to countenance selling any of them, instead sharing the meat with to family and friends. '*Giving to my friends is very important*', he explained. '*It's something you cannot buy or sell. I feel ashamed to tell them I don't have meat to give them*'. Sharing a meal of illegal game constitutes a celebration and a symbol of solidarity and shared identity as hunters.

In the villages to the East of the lake, people take a particular pride in defying the authorities, and engaging in practices that they see as being part of their way of life. Far from needing to make excuses for what they see as normal behaviour, and part of local traditions, they regard those who try to regulate them as beyond the pale. More widely around the lake, hunting is regarded as being a right of local people, and important to maintain in the face of external threats: '*I am local. I have the right to hunt. People from Thessaloniki or Kalamata have no right to do so*', said a focus group participant.

By continuing to practise illegal hunting and fishing, local people say they are maintaining a 'proper' relationship with the natural environment. Indeed, some who openly admit to illegal hunting assert their environmental responsibility by eschewing poor hunting practices, by contributing to the Hunting Association's programmes for restocking and by restricting the hunting of birds to edible species. Fishermen claim their own environmental credentials by

pointing to the fact that they live in peace with pelicans, which during winter they feed with unwanted species and undersize fish from their nets.

The darker side of poaching

While much poaching is widely regarded as acceptable, and even positive, by local people, certain forms of poaching, practised by fewer people, are deplored. These include the use of 'unfair', indiscriminate fishing methods and the hunting of inedible species and reproducing animals, or using questionable hunting techniques.

Why are these forms of poaching, particularly certain fishing methods, so despised? Partly, it is believed that electro-fishing and harpoon fishing constitute a more serious threat to commercial fish stocks than do other kinds of illegal fishing. A commercial fisherman told us, '*The people who use electricity to kill fish, the damage they do is enormous. They kill fry as well, and adult fish also die from electricity*'. He regards electro-fishing as the only form of 'real' poaching: '*There are no other (forms of poaching). If you fish with normal tools (even during the fishing ban) the fish don't disappear*'. However, the vilification of electro-fishing was shared by others, who disagreed that it had a serious impact on fish stocks.

Perhaps more important was the idea that electro-fishing and harpoon fishing violated a sense of aesthetic standards, tradition and fairness associated with how fishing should be done. One elderly fisherman described how in the past, fishermen relied on skills passed down from father to son: '*The entire family was busy making the nets from cotton thread*'. Now, he claimed, '*anyone can just buy a few metres of nylon nets and become a fisherman*', and fishing methods have changed to include crude techniques like electro-fishing, which clearly offends the skill and ideals of 'real' fishermen. Those that violate those ideals, by using ugly, unfair and indiscriminate fishing practices, are seen to be undermining the very essence of what it means to be a fisherman in Kerkini.

Similar values attach to hunting practice, in which aesthetic standards are emphasised. In a focus group of men, many of whom admitted to illegal hunting, several members claimed to report people who hunt hares at night by blinding them with bright lights, because they are not 'real hunters'. One of them explained, '*To be a real hunter, you have to own a couple of dogs, and spend time and effort on them. What is the point in killing a hare in that way? I might as well buy one*'. This view was echoed by other hunters. '*Going after an animal is an adventure. I don't go to the mountain to catch an animal the easy way. (Those who do that) are not hunters: they don't want to hunt, they just want to execute animals*', explained one renowned hunter, while others emphasised the importance of a fair match of man against the natural world.

The fact that 'bad' forms of illegal fishing and hunting violate an important aspect of local tradition and identity intensifies some of the complexities and ambiguities surrounding poaching in Kerkini. Unlike some other situations (cf. Hampshire et al. 2004), these unacceptable forms of poaching are not blamed

on mythical outsiders. Discovering the identity of the 'bad' poachers is a game of distorting mirrors, but all our informants acknowledge that poachers are largely drawn from the ranks of local people, and most people claim to know who they are, albeit cagily. Everyone blames another, but these 'others' derive from the multiple forms of identity of fishermen and hunters in Kerkini. Most commercial fishermen say that poachers are all amateur fishermen, because commercial fishermen would not risk jeopardising their already depleted source of livelihood. Others are less certain. Those from the western and southern edges of the lake point the finger of blame squarely at the inhabitants of the eastern villages, such as Megalochori. Those from the eastern villages are defiantly unshamed by their reputation, claiming that they are merely defending their traditional rights of access to natural resources, rather than engaging in bad forms of poaching, for which they too blame others: '*[They come] from places away from here. They come with their friends and bring their boats*', said an elderly fisherman from Megalochori.

Relationships between poachers and the authorities

Despite Kerkini's multiple protected status, due to the failure, until very recently, to constitute a proper Management Body, local implementation has in practice been left to a mishmash of local bodies from state, private and voluntary sectors. Local enforcers (Information Centre staff, local police, Forest Guards, officers of Fishing and Hunting Associations) find themselves caught in the middle. On one hand, they represent 'the authorities' to local people, charged with implementing regulations, and having the power to confiscate gear or report offenders to higher authorities. On the other hand, most enforcers are themselves local people, and are also fishermen and hunters.

Local enforcers share with their compatriots a strong connection to the locality and natural environment, expressed often through their own hunting and fishing practice. Some admit incomprehension at the regulations they are meant to enforce, such as the ban on angling during the closed season. Even the president of a local Hunting Association opposed the creation of paying hunting reserves. Indeed, some local enforcers are themselves widely known to be poachers. As one retired commercial fisherman put it, '*When the wardens themselves go into the lake in the night and catch fish (illegally), what more is there to say?*'

This position of being caught between higher-level authorities and local people leads to ambiguity in the relationship between enforcers and poachers. Local people do recognise the important role of local environmental organisations in protecting the natural environment they hold so dearly. Staffs from the Information Centre, for example, are respected for their work in protecting sick and injured wild animals. Local people actively support 'ecologists' in these kinds of activities, as one fisherman explained in a focus group: '*Now I help people from the (Information) Centre. If I see a bird with a ring on its leg, I*

try to see the number and report back to (the head of the Centre)'. Local fishermen and hunters also support the local authorities in their bid to tackle large-scale, 'unacceptable' forms of poaching. '*We are willing to help, and we do help each year. We often call to say we've caught someone fishing illegally, but no one responds. That's why (serious) poaching still exists*', said the president of a Fishing Association, who berated the authorities for not doing more to catch serious offenders.

However, when the authorities are seen to castigate local people involved in small-scale, acceptable/positive forms of poaching, the relationship becomes characterised by ill-feeling and confrontation. A typical example was supplied by an informant, who is a hunter, fisher and logger. He described how he was driving along the top of the embankment that surrounds part of the lake when he was approached by an 'ecologist'. A few days later he spotted the 'ecologist' and grabbed him by the shirt. '*Does the fact that I am a fisherman and a hunter mean that I am necessarily a bad guy? I don't think so. How dare he treat me like this without knowing what kind of a person I am? I exaggerated a bit that day. I shouldn't have talked to him that way, but I was really upset. If he had any problem with us being on the embankment at that time he could have told us in a nice way. He doesn't talk to me any more when we see each other on the embankment. That is why our relationship with these people is not good*'. The man was being interviewed in a *kafeneio* and the conversation gradually attracted others to join in, until the discussion included six like-minded men, all of whom expressed the view that they are unfairly persecuted through purportedly insensitive implementation of unacceptable regulations: '*One of them saw me fishing with a baskia* (prohibited fish trap) *and started yelling at me. Who does he think he is telling me how to fish?*'

Whenever local authorities apparently fail to differentiate between the 'real' poachers and local people doing what they have always done, they become the subject of intense resentment. This has been described in a number of other poaching situations (Acheson 1984; McCay 1984; Curcione 1992; Paolisso 2002). In the case of Lake Kerkini, the anger is heightened because by penalising local hunters and fishermen, enforcers are seen to be violating a tradition of local knowledge and skill, embodied in years of hunting and fishing practice. Perhaps even worse than this, they seem to be contravening an important sense of local community identity and cohesion, by informing on their neighbours. This was a very common theme in interviews and focus groups. '*How can I go against another fisherman?*' asked a commercial fisherman in an interview, '*We are colleagues – he will think I'm joking*'. A member of a Hunting Guard said in a focus group that people quickly acquire a bad reputation if they report on others: '*Nobody wants to be a roufianos*' – this is a great insult in Greece, referring to someone who will place the interests of authority before that of their neighbours.

The stigma of *roufianos* carries such weight around Kerkini precisely because of the perceived threats to the stability of communities, which seem to originate from outside and which leave many local people feeling powerless. Enforcers of

wildlife regulations find themselves in a complicated position. One one hand, they can protect wildlife against the incursions of outsiders, in which case they represent the interests of the local community. On the other hand, when they act on local information against local poachers, they are seen as *roufianos*, and to be threatening local traditions and social solidarity. These ambivalent attitudes exist because the enforcers are themselves local people. Even in their role as representatives of authority they are subject to the same social and economic tensions that inhere around declining levels of livelihoods based on the acquisition of natural resources. They are implicated in the same game as the poachers, in which seemingly arbitrary regulations are imposed, while the real problems lie outwith their control.

Discussion and conclusions

As in other contexts (e.g. Pendleton 1998; Hampshire et al. 2004), poaching in Kerkini is clearly not a single phenomenon. Illegal hunting and fishing span the boundary of legality and illegality, but are not clear-cut categories. They are fraught with ambiguities, deriving from: (i) perceived threat to the ecology, biodiversity and stocks of fish and game; (ii) subsistence needs versus greed; (iii) a sense of aesthetic standards; (iv) a sense of history, tradition and local identity; (v) the creation and maintenance of social networks and accumulation of symbolic capital; and (vi) transmission of masculine values. The ambiguities are intensified by the fact that the majority of poachers are known to be local people, and the process of 'othering' becomes more complicated, based around multiple identities of those involved.

Two manifestations of poaching in Kerkini are presented below, although these are clearly not discrete categories, and the same people may be implicated in both.

(a) Poaching as resistance

Poaching in Kerkini can be seen as part of a discourse of collective resistance by people confronted with a degrading ecosystem. Poaching as a form of resistance has been described elsewhere (Forsyth et al. 1998; Muth and Bowe 1998; Pendleton 1998). In Kerkini, there is a strong consensus among all parties that the fishery can no longer provide a reliable livelihood. Even though it is widely accepted, this fact is very difficult for local people to come to terms with largely because comparable alternatives do not exist.

In this context, poachers and enforcers are playing an absurd game. Both believe, to a greater or lesser extent, that what they do makes little difference in the face of lack of control over wider decisions with more serious impacts on local environment and livelihoods. It is not surprising that poaching manifests itself as a systematic form of resistance against a style of environmental management that on the one hand permits a hydrological regime destructive to

what was, within living memory, a highly diverse wetland eco-system, while on the other imposing restrictions on wildlife capture in the name of conservation.

(b) Poaching as a violation of the cultural aesthetics of human–nature interaction

It is also because of this sense of helplessness in the face of the rapid undermining of local livelihoods that certain forms of poaching become particularly vilified. In a situation where there is serious loss of livelihoods, as well as migration of young people, it become even more important than usual for people to maintain some sense of who they are (or were), through a sense of shared identity and collective memory, often about an idealised relationship between humans and the natural world. Those that violate this ideal through their fishing or hunting practice therefore are seen to undermine the most important aspects of fishing and hunting that remain in Kerkini.

Poaching as a social discourse

These observations lead us to challenge individual level theories, such as Eliason's (2003) neutralisation model, as being a fully adequate explanation for phenomenon of poaching around Lake Kerkini. According to Eliason's model, the psychology of poaching is understood in terms of personal justifications of apparently deviant behaviour. There are certainly some resonances of this in our interview and observation material. Conversations with poachers at Kerkini reveal the full range of the types of justifications at a personal level identified by Eliason, from perceived harmlessness of the activity, through to necessity, and reasonable action in the face of unjust laws. In this sense poachers at Kerkini are engaged in what Eliason describes as 'a cognitive dissonance reduction strategy' whereby individuals can 'alleviate guilt that would normally be associated with law-violating behaviour by neutralising any definition of themselves as criminals' (ibid 239).

However, our findings also suggest that individual-level explanations, such as neutralisation theory, fail to explain patterns of poaching that are as widespread, persistent and systematic as is the case at Kerkini. An explanation for this style of poaching requires examination of social and cultural dimensions. It leads us to adopt a similar perspective to that of McCay (1984) and Muth and Bowe (1998), in seeing poachers as social actors, with group solidarity forming an important component of poaching behaviour. From our earlier discussion, it is clear that the capture of wildlife is inextricably bound up with social intercourse and cultural meanings.

In this sense, our work emphasises the linkages between the individual level 'emotional drivers' and group/societal-level 'cultural drivers', described by Stoll-Kleeman (2001). For example, one of Brehm's 'emotional drivers', 'the importance of threatened free behaviours' (Brehm 1966, cited in Stoll-Kleeman

2001: 8), is clearly very important in precipitating the 'reactance' of some of our informants to legislation governing the practice of hunting and fishing. But the importance of these 'free behaviours' (i.e. fishing and hunting practice) derives in large part from the embedded meanings these have for negotiating social life in Kerkini. Our work also demonstrates that what Stoll-Kleeman refers to as 'cultural drivers' of reactance are malleable, slippery, highly localised and less amenable to categorisation and direction than policy makers, or environmental managers, might wish.

Similarly, although stereotyping based on in- or out-group membership was commonplace in Kerkini, as predicted by Stoll-Kleeman's (op cit) Social Identity Theory model, these stereotypes were far from stable and uniform. While local people were often heard referring to Information Centre staff and wardens as 'the ecologists' in a manner that represented them as an undesirable breed apart, *those others*, the same speakers could also be heard talking warmly and inclusively of the same people in a different conversational frame, for example after being granted assistance with a wounded animal. The way that people at Kerkini identify and represent themselves and others is contingent and fluid – for example, the self confessed 'poachers' who claim to be active contributors to conservation and the identification of wardens as 'poachers'. In some contexts, such as when villagers mention professionals deemed to control the hydrology of the lake (Bell 2004), strong delineation of *ingroups* and *outgroups* appear; but in others they become opaque.

Clearly, then, poaching cannot be understood simply as an individual action. While individual motivations are certainly important, in the context of Kerkini, these feed into, and are supported by, an underlying cultural logic. This cultural logic is itself flexible and responsive to the changing situation in which local fishermen and hunters, as well as environmental managers and enforcers, find themselves. While Stoll-Kleeman (2001) traces how this manifests itself in individuals, we venture towards a societal perspective, in which poaching provides an arena for the working out of collective, as well as personal, identities in the face of rapid social and economic change.

Implications for environmental management

Poachers in Kerkini identify a range of different kinds of poaching. According to them, some of the most apparent forms of poaching practised by local inhabitants may pose very little threat to biodiversity, compared with larger-scale, commercially-oriented forms (or indeed the ecological changes brought about the hydrological management). We would encourage environmental managers to distinguish between different forms of poaching, and perhaps to direct research efforts into investigating the differential ecological impacts of different forms of poaching, rather than regarding them all as environmentally destructive. A striking feature of the situation in Kerkini is that people who admit undertaking what they perceive as least detrimental forms of poaching

are antagonistic towards what they construe to be truly harmful forms. Indeed, the fact that they appear willing to act and to support actions against types of poaching they agree to be threatening is a message of potentially great significance for environmental management strategy. However, these efforts can be undermined by the perceived injustice of a system of environmental management that appears indiscriminate in its treatment of offenders.

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