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Managing wild emotions: Wildlife managers as intermediaries at the conflictual boundaries of access relations

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ABSTRACT

This study uses Ribot and Peluso's access analysis to examine conflicts over elk and elk management in Greater Yellowstone USA, a region where emerging patterns of privatization and commodification have profound influence over the micropolitics of hunting access, and by extension resource governance. In North America, wildlife management via hunting has long relied on social relations and mutual obligations between rural hunters and landowners to facilitate access to game species like elk that frequent private land. However, transformations in the political economy of land use in and around Greater Yellowstone characterized by opportunities to commodify elk and access to them has influenced the region's access regime, resulting in widespread declines in public hunting access on private lands. Intense conflict over elk and elk management has ensued. Drawing on ethnographic engagement with wildlife managers in rural working landscapes of Wyoming and Montana in and around Greater Yellowstone, our study reveals that facilitating social relations at the crossfires of elk access conflict requires a deftness for navigating interpersonal dynamics, a learned expertise manifested as affective and emotional labor. In the eyes of wildlife managers, these affective and emotional strategies are critical to fostering the social conditions for effective wildlife management and, more specifically, to *gaining* and *maintaining* access to privately held wildlife habitat. Our analysis emphasizes the responsibilities and burdens carried by intermediaries in struggles over access and resource management and highlights the threshold dynamics and normative questions that these burdens pose.

1. Introduction

A valuable game species with devoted public constituents, wild elk (Wapiti, *cervus canadensis*) are synonymous with Yellowstone National Park and its iconic status as a refuge for free-roaming large mammals (Middleton et al. 2020). Elk are also a persistent source of social and political conflict, particularly with regards to their dependence on private land for habitat and the control that gives private landowners over access to them. Over the last several decades, in and around the Greater Yellowstone region[1] and neighboring states of Wyoming and Montana USA, an emerging political economy of land use focused on new opportunities to commodify elk and access to them has corresponded to widespread decline in public hunting access on private lands (Johnson 2006, Eliason 2016, WGFD 2019, FWP 2020, Eliason 2021). Intense conflict over elk and elk management has ensued, and with it, growing public concerns about the privatization of wildlife and the states' ability to manage wildlife effectively (Haggerty and Travis 2006, Robbins 2006, Sun 2022, Lundquist 2022). This paper examines how conflict linked with an increasingly privatized landscape in and around the Greater Yellowstone informs the ways wildlife managers do and experience their jobs.

Elk management and access issues in Greater Yellowstone are among

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[1] Yellowstone National Park shares administrative borders with three western states: Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho. The park's influence as a protected core of a larger wildland complex has endowed the surrounding landscape with the moniker Greater Yellowstone. Though the boundaries are inherently fluid, Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem is often used to refer to an ecological region, defined initially by the range of Yellowstone grizzly bear (Johnson & Rasker 1995; Hansen et al. 2002; Gude et al. 2007). We use the term Greater Yellowstone to acknowledge the outsized influence the park and its social-ecological dynamics have on the resource governance dynamics of nearby states, in this case, Wyoming and Montana.

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the most pernicious issues faced by the state wildlife agencies. At the close of 2021, the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks released a series of new proposed strategies to improve the state's elk management policies. The suggested policy changes generated a "firestorm" of response from all sides—forcing the agencies back to the table to "rethink" their proposal (Eggert 2021). State-led elk management in Wyoming has strong parallels. In 2021, several regional and national environmental groups filed the latest in a suite of lawsuits focused on closing the state's controversial elk feeding grounds concurrent to the Wyoming legislature passing a bill *reducing* the authority of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department to close them (Thuermer 2021a, Wuerthner 2021). The intractable, no-win nature of elk management for Greater Yellowstone's state wildlife decision-makers aligns with challenges in resource governance beyond the region (Dillon et al. 2019, Dempsey and Suarez 2016). However, the tensions of elk management are no less demanding for state game wardens and biologists in the field, who spend significant amounts of time responding to and addressing landowner and hunter concerns (Eliason 2014, 2016). When wildlife managers encounter social conflicts in their work—arresting poachers or negotiating the fractious politics of hunting quotas—it is clear that their profession, traditionally characterized as a scientific and regulatory endeavor requiring expertise in biology and policy (Organ et al. 2012, Artelle et al. 2018), actually depends on robust "people skills." While this fact makes intuitive sense to observers of wildlife politics, the dynamics of wildlife managers' interpersonal capacities and strategies have received little attention in *critical* scholarship on wildlife conflict. This is a notable oversight given the persistence and amplification of social and political conflicts over wildlife as a function of political-economic change (Thompson 1975)—and that interest in this functional relationship is a distinguishing feature of critical approaches in geography and political ecology (Martin et al. 2019).

Because the dominant challenge with regards to elk facing state wildlife managers in Montana and Wyoming is the need to secure and maintain access for the public to hunt wild elk, our study is broadly a case in access: i.e., who has access to a resource and under what conditions—well-known as the root of many environmental conflicts (Blaikie 1987, Fortmann 1990, Sikor and Lund 2009). Leveraging Ribot and Peluso's (2003)'s concept of access mechanisms toward critical observations on the changing nature of the work of wildlife management due to conflicts related to privatization, we put ideas from "access analysis" into conversation with the "emotional turn" in studies of human-environment relations. This literature stresses that affect and emotion shape human-environment relations and influence the trajectory of environmental conflicts (Singh 2018, González-Hidalgo and Zografos 2020). Through in-depth interviews with wildlife managers about their everyday work and related participant observation of elk management politics over four years, our study offers a novel perspective on access mechanisms by revealing the importance of affective and emotional labor in the work of contemporary wildlife managers in Greater Yellowstone.

The following sections describe conflicts over elk access and management and locate affect and emotion as valuable concepts for investigating environmental subjectivities. After a brief discussion of methods, we turn to the work of wildlife managers, particularly how they perceive their everyday practices in the context of expanding elk populations, declining access, and an increasingly conflictual social landscape. Finally, we position affective and emotional labor as obligatory responses to intractable governance problems and question the longevity of institutional structures that rely on individuals to absorb the emotional energies of environmental conflicts.

2. Managing elk on private land: A politics of access

According to the US's legal framework, wildlife is a public trust, the collective property of the people. Wildlife scholars describe the so-called Public Trust Doctrine as a democratic ideal that advocates for access to wildlife as a public right; it implies that wildlife should be available to everyone, regardless of social background or status (Posewitz 1999). It also anchors what many call the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, a set of principles that inform the general approach and philosophies taken up by various state wildlife agencies charged with managing wildlife within their state borders (Organ et al. 2012). Theoretically, access per the Public Trust Doctrine legitimates a broad set of user values; however, state-led wildlife management practice in the US is most intertwined with consumptive users—hunters, fishers, and trappers (Peterson and Nelson 2017). This is, in part, due to the history of conservation in North America. The devestation of North American wildlife populations in the 19th and 20th centuries following settler colonization prompted wildlife conservation efforts and policies, many of which were deeply influenced by sporting groups who advocated for restoring game species (among others) as an investment in hunting activities (Robbins and Luginbuhl, 2005, Heffelfinger et al., 2013, Mahoney and Geist 2019). Indeed, hunting advocates frequently state that "hunting is conservation" (RMEF 2019). The contemporary relationship between hunters and state wildlife agencies reflects this history and has also influenced the structural characteristics of wildlife management institutions.

State-level wildlife commissions direct state wildlife agencies to use a model known as "user pays, user benefits." The bulk of funding for management activities comes from the sale of hunting and fishing licenses and revenue generated through a federal excise tax on sporting goods (Organ et al. 2012). Public hunting is, therefore, both a motivation for and tool of state wildlife agencies (Heffelfinger et al. 2013). Access is central to this mutual arrangement as hunters' populist ideologies about hunting access and broader claims to nature are interwoven with wildlife conservation strategies to maintain wildlife populations across the landscape (Robbins and Luginbuhl 2005, Larson et al. 2014).

A fundamental tension in the legal frameworks of wildlife management constrains state wildlife agencies' power to manage migratory game species like elk. Though the wild animals themselves belong to the public, a large portion of their habitat is privately owned by landowners whose property rights include the power to dictate access (Freyfogle 2003, Pincetl 2006, Watson, 2013). Wildlife management via hunting on private lands hence highlights a meaningful difference in having property rights over, versus access to, resources. This distinction forms the crux of Ribot and Peluso's "theory of access" (2003), in which property involves rights and "enforceable claims" to resources (MacPherson 1978 cited in Ribot and Peluso 2003, p. 155), whereas access concerns one's *ability* to access resources. In the case of elk management, even though the public may have collective property rights to the animals, private land use can exclude public elk hunters. Thus, per "access theory," geographies of elk management can take on a type of access "grey zone," in which people's rights differ from their access (Sikor and Lund 2009, p. 2).

Whether and how social actors come to benefit from resources beyond property rights and relations have become central questions in access scholarship. Access studies have identified a multitude of access mechanisms, or ways in which individuals and collectives gain and maintain access, for example, markets, knowledge and information, or violent force (Ginger et al. 2012, Agyei et al. 2020, Peluso and Ribot 2020, Myers and Hansen 2020). This work emphasizes how social relationships can determine how individuals and collectives secure benefits from resources. Because social actors can shape and influence pathways of access for others, access mechanisms also concern power relations. In Wyoming and Montana, as in the US more generally, landowners can exercise "access control" over public hunting and other management-related activities (Ribot and Peluso 2003, p. 159). State wildlife agencies, conversely, have limited regulatory power to compel public access for hunters on private property. Instead, the region's state wildlife agencies—the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MT FWP) and the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD)—have

relied on other social pathways to secure access. These have historically arisen from two interconnected sets of mutual obligations between rural hunters and landowners.

The first set relates to the ecological and economic implications of hosting migratory wildlife in agricultural landscapes. While many rural residents value and enjoy wildlife (Western Landowners Alliance 2018), ek on private land can compete with livestock for forage, damage fences, spread disease, and attract predators, making them notoriously costly for landowners (especially agricultural operators) (Beck and Peek 2005, Metcalf et al. 2017, Hanbury-Brown et al. 2021). Historically, rural landowners often welcomed hunters, or more specifically, hunting pressure, to move high densities of animals and reduce and redistribute resident herds. In this way, public hunters' access to private property was associated with economic and ecological services; it simultaneously reduced wildlife's consumption of agricultural forage and assisted in managing populations. The second mutual obligation between landowners and public hunters reflects a commitment to collective ownership of wildlife and the embeddedness of landowners as members of rural communities that include hunters. Here, regional hunting traditions informed a kind of moral economy where rural residents considered the provisioning of hunting access to be a "community social obligation" (Yung and Belsky 2007, p. 698, Metcalf et al. 2017).

In the language of access theory, these services, social norms, and obligations linking landowners and hunters were a *mechanism* for access, a pathway for hunters to access resources—in this case, wildlife—on private lands. They also reflect the particulars of a political-economic moment and a mutualistic opportunity for land use dominated by the commodification of agricultural products as a primary economy. Access scholarship has also established that access mechanisms are mutable, subject to structural shifts and transformations (Milgroom and Ribot 2020, Spierenburg 2020). What follows is a description of how political-economic and ecological change increasingly undermines the social-relational underpinnings of existing access mechanisms in Greater Yellowstone, establishing this case's relevance vis-à-vis the foundational notion that the functionality of access mechanisms depends on the particulars of given political-economic moments (Ribot and Peluso 2003).

2.1. More elk, less access

Serious cracks in the access relations described above emerged in the latter half of the 20th century as convergent economic and societal forces led to a region-wide decrease in access opportunities for the public on private lands (Johnson 2006, Eliason 2021, Swensson and Knight 2001). Starting in the late 1970s, rural geographies across the Western US began a shift away from primary industry economies (timber, mining, and agriculture) towards more consumptive land uses such as tourism, recreation, and other amenity-oriented activities (Travis 2007). On private lands in Montana and Wyoming, this "New West" transition ushered in a cohort of landowners generally more tolerant of elk than elk hunters. This economic shift also encouraged new opportunities to commodify agricultural landscapes through exclusive hunting, guiding, and outfitting—uses which are largely incompatible with public access (Gosnell et al. 2006, Haggerty and Travis 2006, Haggerty et al. 2018a). Public participation in hunting has also stagnated nationwide (Enck et al. 2000, Rott 2018), and the burdens and liabilities of hosting the public on private property are a growing concern among rural landowners (Burcham et al. 1999, Swensson and Knight 2001, Eliason 2016). Together these forces have produced a new calculus for social relationships underpinning public access to private lands. Whereas past conditions built on alignment in the needs of agricultural producers, public hunters and state wildlife managers, contemporary access relations start from a set of inherent and often intractable conflicts.

Transformation of the region's access relations instigated several conflict dynamics that serve as the context for this study. First, like hunting access arrangements for hunters on private land, many of the region's rural landowners traditionally allowed members of the public to cross private lands for recreational opportunities on adjacent public lands and waterways. However, land ownership change as well as changes in the numbers and types of recreational activity have chipped away at existing social contracts linking private lands and the public (Haggerty and Travis 2006, Murphy 2017). As locked gates and closed access roads and fishing sites have become an established feature of the landscape, intense public debate has emerged over what some see as the elite capture of the region's environmental services. These transformations have made public access a centerpiece of popular discourse and state politics across the region (Turkewitz 2019, Van Middendorp 2020, Thuermer 2021b).

Coincident with the changes in economic and social contracts underlying public access (hunting or otherwise) are shifts in the population ecology of regional elk herds themselves. While regional elk populations were nearly extinct at the start of the last century, they have grown substantially in recent decades, resulting in a significant surplus, at least from a management perspective. In 2020, populations exceeded the state agencies' objectives by 30% in Wyoming and as much as 800% in parts of Montana (Brennan et al. 2017, Thuermer 2019, French 2019, FWP 2020). The region's growing elk populations increasingly rely on private land resources, albeit unevenly. In places with limited hunting access and good forage, elk have tended to congregate for a portion of the hunting season, and in some instances, as year-round resident herds (Proffitt et al. 2013, Barker 2018). These de-facto wildlife sanctuaries have raised concerns from neighboring property owners and ostensibly put elk out of the administrative control of state wildlife agencies, making management—particularly achieving population objectives—increasingly difficult (Haggerty and Travis 2006). Altogether, more elk and less access are producing, in the words of the local *Billings Gazette,* serious "heartburn" for landowners, hunters, and state wildlife agencies (French 2021).

In response to the region's access challenges, state wildlife agencies have initiated public access programs, referred to as Block Management in Montana and "Access Yes" in Wyoming, that provide compensation and organizational capacity to monitor and control the number of hunters on a property at any one time. However, critics of the programs argue that they can fail to provide quality experiences for hunters (given increased competition within a limited stock of private land opportunities) and do not provide comprehensive financial reimbursement for landowners who bear the costs of wildlife (Eliason 2016).

Ultimately, frustration with the institution of wildlife management itself pervades sentiments on both ends of the necessary access relations, as landowners and hunters voice serious grievances about the inefficacy of state wildlife management (Milstein 1997, French 2020, Capra 2020). Caught in the middle are wildlife managers, employees of government institutions who face a professional responsibility to deliver access in a system bereft of regulatory power. We use these empirics of place to explore the evolving strategies and practices of wildlife managers, in this case, the emotional and affective labor required to gain and maintain access. This effort merges a politics of the relational with that of the structural, drawing from work that brings access theory in line with critical social science's growing interest in affects and emotions.

3. Affective and emotional dimensions of resource governance and access conflicts

Scholars of human-environment relations increasingly look towards affect and emotion in analyses of environmental conflict and resource governance (Nightingale 2011, Singh 2013, Haggerty et al. 2018b), including studies of non-human animals (Lorimer 2015, Barua 2017, Dashper 2020). Leaning heavily on post-structural and feminist thinking on the making of subjects and the situatedness of knowledge (Haraway 1988, Butler 1997, Rocheleau et al. 2013), much of this literature grounds resource struggles in direct experiences in and with the

environment (i.e., informal governance) (Nightingale 2012, Sultana 2015). While the conceptual differences between affects and emotion have generated lively discussion amongst geographers (see Pile 2010, Bondi and Davidson, 2016), this study engages their shared features as concepts relevant to processes of environmental subjectivity(-ies) in resource management and environmental conflicts (Vasile 2019, González-Hidalgo and Zografos 2020). This line of thinking makes emotions and affects central to considerations of access. As Sultana argues, the social configurations that mediate access are a "negotiated reality," involving "multiple claims, identities, relations, and emotions" (Sultana 2011, p. 166). We draw on these insights to sketch out the interpersonal contours that characterize conflicts over elk and elk management and the actions and strategies that wildlife managers take on to facilitate access. Specifically, our analysis posits that wildlife managers' tactics to secure and strengthen access relations, i.e., the tools of access mechanisms, require two kinds of labor, emotional and affective.

Emotional labor, described by Arlie Hochschild in her study on flight attendants, is "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" (Hochschild 2012, p. 12). Identifying labor as emotional clarifies how social rules and structures of power in an organizational context produce specific emotional experiences. We use emotional labor to describe how wildlife managers manage their physical displays in moments of intense feeling and conflict. Doing so emphasizes the role of emotions, or perhaps more aptly, control over emotions, in facilitating the access relations required for wildlife management and in environmental governance.

The second concept leveraged in this analysis is affective labor. In *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) argue that the post-Fordist economy privileges affective, "immaterial" labors such as services, information, and communication over factory goods. Such products generate "feeling[s] of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion" (Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 292). In this context, Hardt and Negri argue that affective labor is work that animates and draws upon affects to create new "social networks, forms of community, [and] biopower" (Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 293), where affect is the body's capacity to affect and be affected (Spinoza 2006, Gregg and Seigworth 2009). Geographers have used affective labor to identify how different types of work bring about particular natural resource management subjectivities related to, for example, forest stewardship or human-animal relations (Singh 2013, 2018, Nygren and Jokinen, 2013). We find these generative qualities of affective labor useful to explain the outward-facing efforts of wildlife managers, including their strategic work to secure and maintain access by engaging with those who control access (i.e., landowners).

Whitney (2018, pg. 656) argues that like affect and emotion, affective and emotional labor sometimes live in separate intellectual worlds, with the former prominent in post-Marxist critiques of the capitalist economy and emotional labor as part of more established discussions about the sociology and feminization of work. At the same time, scholars have critiqued both terms for an implicit binary opposing public and private spheres of labor and their reinforcement of mind–body dualisms (Knights and Thanem 2017, Federici 2008). Our goal here is not to unpack these ambiguities, but to mobilize affective and emotional labor heuristically. We group wildlife managers' work into two loose categories: first, affective strategies and practices that aim to shift the interpersonal dynamics between wildlife managers and others (e.g., landowners); and second, the emotional dimensions of labor in which wildlife managers address their own embodied positionalities in elk-related conflicts. In this way, affective and emotional strategies are at odds not so much with the private homelife or other care work of managers, but with their explicit duties (and training) as science and law enforcement professionals. Reading elk conflict through the work of wildlife managers also extends the focus of this analysis beyond the identification of access mechanisms to the role of emotion and affect as tools relevant to access *mechanics*. Plainly stated, in the view of wildlife managers, maintaining access relations involves engaging with emotions and affects.

The political-economic context of this work is also critical. By exploring access conflicts in Greater Yellowstone—an exemplar of hyper-privatization of nature (Epstein et al. 2021, Haggerty et al. 2022), this study adds a new lens on the constraints that neoliberal economies place upon resource management institutions and the resulting effects (Castree 2008). We approach this case from the perspective of the wildlife managers themselves, who as agents of the state, navigate transformations in the region's access regime as an institutional necessity. Wildlife managers in this context are neither rights holders nor resource users. Instead, wildlife managers are intermediaries working to secure access; their work is in the mechanics of access. Their pursuit occurs within a fraught social terrain where people's feelings about elk are fundamental, and emotions are not only the outcomes of conflict but also dynamic forces within conflict (Ahmed 2004, González-Hidalgo and Zografos, 2017). The central concern of this study, then, is how an increasingly privatized landscape fraught with conflict informs the ways wildlife managers must work to secure and maintain access.

4. Methods

This article draws on four years of engaged participation in and data collection about elk and elk management issues in Montana and Wyoming. The lead author attended multiple regional conferences and invited workshops to speak with individuals in various wildlife management positions, including state and federal agency personnel, members of the non-profit conservation community, and scientists researching elk and other wildlife. The study also drew from peer-reviewed and popular literature related to elk ecology and management, as well as official reports from each state's respective wildlife agency (i.e., MT FWP and WGFD).

This preliminary work informed a set of focused interviews with 17 MT FWP and WGFD employees over the course of two summers (2018, 2019) conducted by the lead author. With help from contacts in these agencies, we identified participants with relevant experience (including active wildlife biologists, wardens, upper-level management personnel, and one retired biologist). Participants were asked about their roles and responsibilities, their perceptions of local wildlife conflicts, and the strategies they used to interact with landowners on wildlife issues. Most of the interviews were conducted in-person (often at the manager's field office), and two included "ride-alongs" where we gained additional insight into the daily routines that inform wildlife managers' work (Wegerif 2019).

The wardens and biologists we interviewed work in dispersed area offices and frequently interface with rural landowners about wildlife management issues on their properties. Their geographic position and relational duties make wardens and biologists the face of state wildlife agencies. They also work closely with rural constituents on many aspects of elk management, including access. Importantly, game wardens' role as wildlife law enforcement fosters different relations with local people than wildlife biologists, who often support wardens' work but operate as scientists and researchers, not officers of the law (Eliason 2011). However, in this paper, we describe them both as "wildlife managers" (shorthand: "managers") because they often work in tandem on issues related to wildlife on private lands (Lawson 2002, Eliason 2014). This terminology emphasizes their shared labors and, alongside the use of pseudonyms, protects participants' identities since there are relatively few state agency employees operating in rural communities across the region.

5. Wildlife management as people management

"Fish and wildlife biologists manage wildlife populations and the habitats that support them. Understanding wildlife physical

> characteristics, populations, behaviors, and the impacts humans have on wildlife and wildlife habitat are all important in managing wildlife. Fish and wildlife biologists have many duties including planning and conducting surveys and projects, analyzing results, evaluating development proposals and recommending methods to minimize impacts, writing reports, and preparing hunting season recommendations." *Description of a WGFD wildlife biologist position* (WGFD 2020).

Wildlife management is typically described as a scientific project (Macnab 1983, Forsyth 2004, Artelle et al. 2018). The official roles and responsibilities of state wildlife managers emphasize data collection and analysis, effective counting, accurate population estimates, and logical estimations of forage ability. Job descriptions call for preparing reports, recommending seasons and hunting quotas, and allocating tags and licenses based on established population objectives. However, in interviews, managers quickly pointed out the limits of their official duties. Jack, a manager from Montana, described the issue in his region: "Out here, [we] can only support so many elk and that comes from what's available for food…We can throw a number out there and see if it sticks all we want, but in all reality… [it's about] landowner tolerance.".

As Jack sees it, the scientific processes informing wildlife management can generate "numbers"—population objectives derived from assumptions about landscape carrying capacities. However, in regions with privately-owned wildlife habitat, wildlife managers understand that management will be circumscribed by the landowner's tolerance (i.e., how many elk a landowner wants on their property, and when). "You know we think we have more control than we do, more management control than we do, but wildlife thrives at the landowners' discretion," explained Tim, another manager from Montana. "The sooner you realize that the better for both wildlife and really your professional satisfaction. It's just different. The data is critical. To collect and disseminate that is critical, but it's not everything…especially if you want to influence conservation broadly.".

Landowners, per Tim's description, wield important power when it comes to wildlife management. Private land use decisions, such as whether to allow access for hunting or for other management activities like restoration projects, have direct influence over wildlife populations. As John, a manager from Wyoming, explained, "Access is a large part of what we do in our position, [we] try to find a way to work with landowners to allow that access. Obviously, we're an agency that does a lot of hunting-related activities for game management. If you can't get on a lot of these properties, you can't get harvest to keep numbers where they may need to be." John added, "[if] you basically want to get something done, it needs to involve private land.".

John and Tim's comments encapsulate how managers frame their agency on the landscape. Keeping wildlife "numbers where they need to be" or improving habitat conditions is more than a matter of scientific assessment and execution. To accomplish the stated goals of their position, managers develop working relationships *with* private landowners. Failure to recognize this dynamic can hinder agency effectiveness. Sarah, a manager from Wyoming, explained, "We really do bend over backward to try to keep those relationships good. If you sour a relationship with a landowner, it can really hurt us." Thus, in geographies where elk populations frequent private land, the pursuit of "good" relations with rural landowners becomes the centerpiece of managers' everyday work to manage wildlife —in the words of one manager, wildlife management is also "people management.".

5.1. Wild emotions and the pursuit of good relations

5.1.1. Affective labor and navigating the social side of the job

Managers understand that managing wildlife on private land necessitates relationships with those that control access. As one manager put it: "You're either able to… build relationships… or you don't. And you could be more or less effective depending on how well you navigate the social side of the job." These relational obligations are part of a broader set of occupational duties and tasks regularly assigned to biologists and wardens in the field. However, unlike quantifiable products (e.g., number of elk counted, poachers apprehended, or wildlife policies produced), this work strives to "navigate the social side of the job" by attending to feelings, orientations, and sentiments about managers and wildlife management institutions.

"How do you approach building relationships with landowners?" we asked George, a manager from Wyoming. "Number one with them [is] trusting me as a person. I am someone who represents an agency, [but] they don't trust the agency really. They have to trust the person first." Managers were keenly aware of their positionality in rural contexts, understanding that trust, or lack thereof, was the initial hurdle with landowners. "A lot of people…don't trust the government [and] don't like the government," explained Sarah, another manager from Wyoming. Affective efforts depended on landowners viewing managers as "a real person" and "not just some [person] with a badge.".

To this end, managers made intentional efforts to augment perceptions of them as government representatives with alternative identities more likely to engender a positive emotional response. John, for example, described approaching his constituents based on a common background in agriculture:

> "Fortunately for me, I grew up dairy farming… you know, if you can talk about cows or you can talk about hay or complain about the weather together. It goes a long way if you have something in common with them, and you're not just rolling in from…whatever metropolitan area, and you have no idea about anything out here.".

Another manager explained the importance of visual appearance:

> "There's a reason I don't wear a uniform—a state uniform— that often. It's automatically one way to get someone's guard up when you're knocking on the door. It's bad enough that I've got a pretty obvious work truck, but I try to just wear normal clothes when I'm meeting with folks.".

George also stressed a need to be invested in agricultural life: "Ride with them, brand with them, barbecue with them, do anything you can. It really helped in our program, once again it worked." For him, participating in community activities and economies contributed to the larger project of improving landowner-agency relations, and in turn, made people more willing to work with government agencies and wildlife programs. In George's words, affective labors "worked.".

Addressing wildlife conflict provides another opportunity for affective approaches. After an elk herd consumes a landowner's winter hay reserve or breaks an expensive fence, wildlife managers are often a landowner's first agency contact. These interactions can be emotionally charged. At a minimum, property damage from wildlife events poses administrative and financial burdens to landowners. For those dependent on the marginal profits of agricultural production, wildlife damage is an existential threat sometimes met with extreme emotions. However, preventing challenging wildlife interactions can often be outside the direct control of individual managers. Managers emphasized that such situations called for intentionally affective efforts. Sarah described her approach to answering a landowner call to report wildlife damage:

> "The first thing is always to try to be super responsive… even if there's not like… an emergency or whatever, yup I'll come out and even just having a talk, go visit for an hour. Even if you don't do anything, I think it's what makes it happen.".

For Sarah, the act of visiting and sitting at the table with a landowner *is* relational, affective work. Attentiveness, responsiveness – these are the feelings that Sarah sees as key to building productive relationships with landowners who share landscapes with wildlife and the struggles that come with them. In Sarah's mind, it is the affective labor that "makes it happen" – creates a good working relationship – even if she

can't do "anything" to mitigate the wildlife conflict directly.

Upon further probing about the role of visiting in her overall strategy as a wildlife manager, Sarah conceded that it required significant effort and reduced time spent in the field, conducting surveys, and collecting data. However, for Sarah, the outcomes of this type of work are meaningful, even if they are difficult to quantify:

> "But you never know, I don't know there's a lot of those times where…I visited with someone and…it's a good interaction…and you think okay I'm probably never going to talk to this person again. And come to find out that because of that positive interaction that leads to something else. They're super supportive of the department, they remember that positive interaction…There's been times where…you see them later and someone is complaining about Game and Fish at a meeting and they're there and stand up and be like, 'No, these people are awesome. [Sarah] came out to the house…and it was amazing.' Something like that I think is good for the department overall.".

Generating affect through relational strategies surfaced in other descriptions of conflict by managers. Take the case of collaborative groups, which are often used by agencies to address concerns about wildlife policies affecting private lands and access in several parts of Wyoming and Montana with extensive elk conflict. Such groups bring together sportsmen, landowners, and other stakeholders in wildlife management, with the result that conversations at meetings can be contentious and emotionally charged. Stakeholders agree that the agencies should provide "solutions" to the challenges at hand but hold different ideas about the preferred approach. Christine, a manager from Montana, shared a story about participation in a collaborative effort in which a group of landowners wanted to negotiate a shift in hunting seasons to reduce the number of elk on their property.

> "I went and tried to actually do a pretty significant season change for them. And it didn't go through, the commission denied it…and I kind of got drug through the coals a little bit by some of the local sportsman because they didn't like the idea of that season change because they thought I was kowtowing to landowners but I thought it would've been a good season change. But they [landowners] saw that effort and they felt like they were being listened to. They felt like I was trying to do something for them, so that was a big one.".

Christine's story says a lot about how managers view the role of affective labor in access conflicts. Though her suggested management changes were turned down, for Christine the real value of the work was less in resolving the acute issues, but rather generating the necessary trust to continue to work toward conflict management. The success was that landowners "saw" her efforts and felt heard. In this case, Christine's work was affective; it became more about producing a set of feelings about the agency and her investment than a particular policy product.

5.1.2. "Letting them vent": Emotional labor and the "feeling rules" of landowner relations

When social interactions about wildlife are charged with intense emotions (as they often are), managers report a need to control and manage their own emotional displays. Controlling how others see and react to facial and bodily displays is a "management of feeling," or emotional labor (Hochschild 2012, p. 7). While both emotional and affective labor seek to affect the emotional experiences of others, emotional labor requires what Hochschild (2011) calls "feeling rules," a set of implied guidelines and social norms that dictate how an individual ought to feel or appear.

Emotional labors are needed to diffuse the intense emotions engendered by wildlife and wildlife management. When talking with Christine about the particularities of wildlife conflict in her region, she was quick to note an especially potent set of emotional attachments, "I mean people go crazy over elk, whether you love them or hate them…the human brain just goes out the window and lizard brain when they see an elk kind of thing." From Christine's perspective, the emotions that permeate human-elk relations are visceral, basal, and difficult to control.

Christine's comments emphasize the intense emotions that accompany conflicts related to access and wildlife—a passionate resident might engage them at a public meeting or forum, or a property visit to assist with a game damage complaint could result in an intense discussion. Similarly, John admitted, "Once a year, I get a phone call where I just get my butt chewed about elk.".

Managers also described how attending to emotions is a core part of their everyday work. For example, Jack noted, "People that have little patience or wear their emotions out on their sleeves can struggle as management biologists." Thus, succeeding in wildlife management, according to managers, requires a deftness for managing emotional situations and conflicts. Tanya described how she responds to tense interpersonal dynamics this way:

> "A lot of times there will be an emotionally charged situation or someone will call the office, and they are all worked up. They've gotten themselves all worked up about a certain issue…[In] those situations I learned you just need to let them vent, yup, yell at me, whatever, let them vent.".

Similarly, Tom, a manager from Montana, shared this anecdote:

> "People are pretty passionate about hunting, ranching, whatever; you name it, they're passionate about it. And sometimes…they might be expressing their concerns that they have with something, and it can get a little heated, but almost always it's not directed at one person. It's directed at the department and us being the face of the department out here. Sometimes we get the brunt of that. But you just got to be like: 'Hey, I hear you!' Maybe I agree, maybe I don't, but I understand your frustration, let's work through this…You got to let them air it out, I guess.".

As Tom and Tanya's comments suggest, letting someone "vent" or "air it out" is an essential part of the wildlife managers professional toolkit. Regardless of whether the agency can solve the person's concern, wildlife managers see a need to hold space for tense moments and feelings. Doing this requires them to "take the brunt of" the individual's emotions and let them "air it out." As Tom further explained, "When the landowner or hunter or whoever starts pounding their fist on the table or yelling, swearing or whatever…don't return it…Be open-minded; be calm.".

What Tom and Tanya are describing is emotional labor. Deep emotions about wildlife and wildlife management have come to signify the region's strained access dynamics and its knock-on effects to elk management. In turn, the intensity of feeling held by rural constituents affected by these transformations necessitates intentional management of feeling on the part of wildlife managers. Careful moderation of managers' personal bodily display and otherwise normal emotional responses to tense interactions becomes part of the work of managing the emotional dynamics of the conflict at hand. Managers can't "return it," – meaning a heightened emotional response, rather the work requires managers to stay "calm." These strategies, like the affective efforts above, are also part of how managers view the work of developing effective social relations. As Sarah explained, "If you can survive that initial conversation, that's going to lead to a…pretty good working relationship down the road.".

5.2. Managing emotions and the mechanics of access

The work of wildlife managers described here illustrates how their labor is not only affective but deeply emotional. Affective components of their labor include managers' efforts to *generate* particular feelings and reactions through engagement, encounters, and aesthetics. The need to

moderate and *control* personal feelings and actions in response to intense emotional interactions underscores the emotional management required in conflict-laden governance contexts. Importantly, managers did not view these affective and emotional practices as separate, rather they both contributed to building social relations that advanced the pursuit of access. Hence, affective and emotional labor are part of the mechanics of access mechanisms.

Managers perceived that affective and emotional labors were essential to keeping opportunities for access open. In the terms of access analysis, affect and emotion are components of access *maintenance* (Ribot and Peluso 2003). As Sarah described, "Allowing hunting access is huge, so trying to maintain those positive relationships with people to keep allowing hunting is really important.".

Managers also viewed their work as a mechanism for *gaining* access. For example, Jason explained that forging "personal relationships" with landowners was an initial step that could lead to new access relations. Securing access for the public and formal engagements with the state wildlife agency was only possible after these relationships were initiated. In Jason's words:

> "I build a personal relationship with them first. [I] want them to know I'm not some kind of a three-headed monster…and then [I] work from there. [I] A lot of times [this has] worked out to where they allow the public to go hunting or fishing or whatever on their private property which in turn allows me to help them with agency dollars and time.".

As Jason suggests, access is more than just a generative outcome of improved social relations; it is the institutional axis on which wildlife management revolves. While the agencies provide damage payments and other property restitution to landowners, compensation is contingent on providing public access (Montana Legislature Audit Division 2015, Wyoming Game and Fish Commission 2018). This social constraint raises the stakes for managers attempting to pursue – perhaps idealistically – the joint goals of wildlife conservation and public access administration. Accordingly, both the potential for "contradictions" between wildlife conservation outcomes and the need for access were noted characteristics of the Montana and Wyoming state wildlife management frameworks. As John and others explained, a looming access requirement can complicate the pursuit of other wildlife management goals:

> "It's a tough discussion to have with somebody…even if they don't allow hunting…if they're supporting 500 head of elk that migrate up onto the national forest for people to enjoy in the fall, and we're telling them to suck it up when the damage is occurring in the private land in the winter.".

The contradictions were not limited to agency policy. Managers also described the personal challenge of navigating tense moments. One manager lamented:

> "On my good days, I recognize it all comes from somebody's values and emotional investment. They care about what I'm doing and that's cool. On my bad days, if people get emotional, having somebody cry is hard for me. Having somebody threaten me is hard for me…The emotions can be hard for me to process, I'm a scientist.".

Another manager noted, "It's not uncommon to be called dirty names in a public setting or get…called out within the press…there is a value in being able to not be reactionary in those moments, which is very hard to do." These comments speak to the weight of emotional and affective labor for the managers themselves. It is work that managers feel is valuable but also difficult and "hard to do." Ultimately, the challenges of their relational practices left some managers feeling conflicted about their role, citing dissonance between their initial perceptions and expectations of the job and their realized duties. As Christine from Montana quipped at the close of our conversation, "You get all these introverts that want to be wildlife biologists, and they spend their careers dealing with people.".

6. Implications at the conflictual boundaries of access relations

The previous sections have described why and under what conditions wildlife managers take on affective and emotional labor. In a landscape where declining public access for hunting occurs alongside increased conflict over elk and access to them, securing access has emerged as the centerpiece of managers' work. Without authority to compel landowners to provide access, managers pursue "good working relationships" with private landowners as a mechanism for access. This work occurs in a fraught social context where managers' professional effectiveness hinges on their ability to navigate the interpersonal dimensions of conflict by engaging with affects and emotions. In the eyes of managers, these affective and emotional strategies are critical to fostering the social conditions for effective wildlife management and, more specifically, to *gaining* and *maintaining* access to privately held wildlife habitat. In this emerging workspace, the "biological" success of wildlife management is tied not only to scientific and administrative competencies but also to aptitude in understanding and engaging with people and the interpersonal dynamics of conflicts.

6.1. Wildlife managers as intermediaries

Wildlife managers take up their work not as rights-holding resource users but on behalf of resource agencies that rely on public access as a tool for ecological management and as part of a social contract with hunters. While other studies have described wildlife managers as boundary workers negotiating between the priorities of a non-human world with that of the human (Lawson 2003), the perspective on managers offered in this paper regards them as intermediaries, brokering among and across conflicting interests to maintain a core institutional function of wildlife governance on behalf of the state and its public.

Peluso and Ribot (2019) have argued that gaining and maintaining access is a process of building "relations with those who control" (p. 301). As intermediaries in conflicts over elk and access, managers' success hinges on their capacities to build relationships with wildlife constituents. This work requires affective and emotional labor. The presence of social relations and ties linking disparate stakeholders around the management of resources is an oft-cited component of effective governance (Ostrom 1990). However, what work building relationships requires is largely underspecified, with studies emphasizing more "ideal" qualities like trust (e.g., Stern and Coleman 2015). Thus, our case lends insight into the facilitative efforts of intermediaries mediating complex resource management systems by clarifying the deliberate and embodied practices required of navigating environmental conflicts.

6.2. Affective & emotional labor as adaptive to social, political, and economic change

Another perspective on the wildlife managers' labors elucidated in this work is the influence of the political economy on the social conditions of access. While more-than-legal access mechanisms are often used by people without land to gain access to land-based resources (Ginger et al. 2012, Øian and Skogen 2016), they are also contingent upon the social, political, and ecological relations shaping resource control (Jacoby 2014). Wildlife management of elk in the Greater Yellowstone region has evolved with heavy dependence on informal, non-regulatory measures for access rooted in particular social and economic orientations between landowners and hunters. However, land use economics increasingly exclude public access through commodification of elk in private hunting enterprises and through their role as a real estate asset (Epstein et al. 2021). The transformations in the region's political economy of land use now present serious challenges to customary use

and access regimes, and by extension, the institutional structures of resource management on which they depend (Yung and Belsky 2007, Haggerty et al. 2022). As a result, wildlife institutions are highly constrained in their ability to adapt wildlife populations to their stated objectives while also meeting the demands of public hunters. Here, the challenges of resource governance play out not only in state politics but also, as Christine's experience with the working group demonstrates, in the strategic efforts of wildlife managers who must tread delicately across a social terrain riven with frustration over the agencies' inability to reach satiable policy outcomes.

Notably, an ability to navigate the "social side of the job" is not a new component of a resource manager's professional approach (Magill 1992), nor is its importance limited to conflicts over access (Kennedy and Vining 2007, Martin et al. 2021). Instead, working relationships with landowners have taken on heightened importance in the current moment, as landowners wield the power to dictate whether wildlife managers can secure informal (non-legal, not market) access to private lands. The stakes of this reality are reflected in the imperatives of "people management"—John's assumption that if you want to get something done, it must happen on private land and Sarah's warning that "souring" a relationship with landowner can really "hurt" the mission, so to speak.

However, rather than a solution to the region's access crisis, the affective and emotional labors profiled in this study serve critical and instrumental purpose, as "technologies of governance" necessary to uphold a governance paradigm that revolves around the voluntary concession of access (Agrawal 2005). While this analysis demonstrates, as other studies have, how state actors' adaptive strategies and other "situated social practices" manage public resources under increasing constraints and growing public scrutiny (Martin 2019, p. 9), it also adds another dimension to questions about how nature commodification reverberates through the resource professional (Robertson 2004). In this case, land use change associated with cultures of privacy and new elk economies refract through access politics to concentrate effects on wildlife managers and their efforts to mediate the conflictual boundaries of access relations.

6.3. *Wildlife managers work amidst social and political change: threshold dynamics and normative questions*

In surfacing affective and emotional labor as central to the work of wildlife managers, this study raises important questions about the functional and normative limits of this work as a component of access mechanics in a region where the access regime is reaching important thresholds. From the perspective of their functionality as tools of wildlife management, affective and emotional labors respond to an environmental governance paradigm that requires social relations to facilitate access. Amidst widespread conflict, the institutional necessity of access has, in turn, amplified the role of interpersonal dynamics as a feature of effective governance. Managers' work meets the demands of these conditions on an interpersonal and idiographic basis, as the affective and emotional labors of wildlife managers engage largely at the scale of individual relationships. Here, the managers' approach is one of personalization; relationships, as our interviews allude to, are made one visit around the table, one cup of coffee at a time. In this sense, individuals, and their individual capacities to navigate affects and emotions, have become a sustaining force for the social conditions of elk management and the broader trajectories of wildlife institutions.

While the relational approach to elk management described here responds deftly to the constraints and conditions of the current moment, it is also fragile. Trends in land ownership suggest that the values shaping land use in and around the Greater Yellowstone will continue to diversify, adding a layer of social complexity to the interpersonal approach, if not also a notable degree of challenge if growing cultures of privacy and exclusivity foreclose managers' existing relational strategies (Haggerty et al. 2018a). While many of the managers interviewed in this study reported feeling up to the task of affective and emotional labor, they also noted the personal challenges of the work—threats and intense, difficult-to-process emotional experiences framed as the cost of doing business. At the same time, many we spoke with were "surprised" by wildlife's social side, noting a gap between the perceived and actual duties of state wildlife employees. These findings suggest that despite growing acknowledgement of wildlife management's "human dimensions" (Bath 1998, Manfredo et al. 2009), the expectation that wildlife professionals *must* work with people has yet to become widely recognized.

From the perspective of the normative limits of this strategy, the reflections by managers about their work described here point to the tremendous burdens and responsibility they bear as individuals and as a professional community—working conditions produced by a governance system anachronized by political-economic change. A major contribution of the literature on emotional labor has been to make visible work that has otherwise gone unseen, or at least undervalued in contemporary workplace settings (Mastracci et al. 2006, Sloan 2014, Head and Harada 2017, Veldstra 2020). Drawing attention to the emotional context of managers work and the influences it has on their adaptive, situated responses provides an opening to pose ethical questions. Who is responsible for bearing the emotional burdens of environmental conflicts? What responsibilities do public institutions have to support their workforce and the communities they serve through intractable challenges of governance? This study suggests that identifying where else and under what conditions resource professionals are delivering unexpected amounts of affective and emotional work can and should be part of assessing the long-term viability of governance systems and institutional frameworks.

7. Conclusion

Who has access to a resource, and under what conditions? This question is often at the root of environmental conflicts (Blaikie 1987, Fortmann 1990, Sikor and Lund 2009). In this study, we examined a version of environmental conflict where emerging patterns of privatization and commodification have profound influence over the micropolitics of hunting access, and by extension resource governance. Transformations in the access regime underpinning the institution of wildlife management have provided an important context within which to scrutinize the implications for those working on the frontlines of struggles over resources and resource management. Following Sultana's observation that "emotions matter in resources struggles" (Sultana 2011, p. 164), our study has emphasized a version of elk conflict that is a felt experience for hunters, landowners, and the managers who negotiate between them — and thus decidedly emotional. However, our focus has been less on what the emotions surrounding access and elk *are* and more on what emotions *do* (Ahmed 2004) – how the intensity of an emotionally charged conflict context demands that wildlife managers engage intentionally with affects and emotions. Wildlife managers take on this work on behalf of state wildlife agencies as conflict intermediaries. Our analysis has emphasized how facilitating social relations at the crossfires of conflict requires a deftness for navigating interpersonal dynamics, a learned expertise manifested as affective and emotional labor. Governance paradigms that rest on the affective and emotional capacities of individuals, however, face logistical and ethical barriers. Naming and articulating this work opens the possibility for institutional recognition and support for individuals bearing the responsibility and burden of shepherding conflict relations across the workscapes of resource management. Our analysis provides an opportunity for environmental governance to take seriously the threshold dynamics and normative questions that affective and emotional labor of wildlife managers pose. We hope it also provokes discussion and debate about the affective and emotional work conflict intermediaries assume in struggles over access and resource management.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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