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Contextualizing negative attitudes to wildlife and wildlife governance in the moral economy of Swedish farmers

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Conflicts over managing large carnivores have been prominent in Sweden in recent decades. The most significant controversies are related to wolves, but the bear, lynx, and wolverine are also included. While the state and environmental organizations make efforts to guarantee a viable population of the large protected carnivores, farmers generally have a negative attitude towards large carnivores and a low level of trust in wildlife governance. Based on 22 in-depth interviews, 37 telephone questionnaires with Swedish farmers, and an analysis of 111 applications for protective hunting, this paper aims to demonstrate how these farmers' perspectives on large carnivores can be explained by moral (sense of right and wrong) and moral economy (a system of obligations related to values and relations intervening with political views and financial decisions). The paper argues that farming, in addition to being an economic activity, is integrated with values, heritage, and relations to other human beings and animals. Farmers understand these values to be threatened by large carnivores, especially by wolves. The paper contextualizes negative sentiments, conflicts, protests, and also illegal hunting of large carnivores in relation to a sense of morals, sense of fairness, meanings, traditions, and mechanisms of daily life. We argue that this perspective provides a lens through which to interpret the conflict between farmers on the one side and the state and animal rights activists on the other. Such interpretation has consequences for understanding the legitimacy of government, shifting the focus from the processes of political governance (predominant in liberal political philosophy) to legitimacy tied to collective notions of social goods.

KEYWORDS

wildlife governance, moral economy, legitimacy, conflict, farmers

Introduction

Over the last three decades, the presence of large carnivores in Sweden has incited a clash of interests and perspectives. There is a heated debate regarding optimal measures for securing the gray wolf (*Canis lupus lupus*), the lynx (*Lynx lynx*), the brown bear (*Ursus arctos*), the wolverine (*Gulo gulo*), and the golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) as endangered species while simultaneously maintaining local livelihood opportunities, human well-being, and good quality of life for people living in carnivore-inhabited areas (Sjölander-Lindqvist et al., 2018; Sjölander-Lindqvist et al., 2021). Various stakeholders such as animal rights organizations, farmer organizations, hunter organizations, and political parties currently engage in campaigns and public debate for reducing or increasing the numbers of carnivores. On the one hand, many farmers in areas populated by large carnivores view them as threatening their livelihood and way of life. Generally, they want decreased populations and an increased right to protect themselves and their animals (Sjölander-Lindqvist et al., 2021). On the other hand, organizations and activists working for environmental protection and animal rights want to improve the protection of large carnivores. As stipulated by Swedish regulations and international agreements, the Swedish government works towards the sustainable preservation of large carnivores. However, the law simultaneously states that conservation must consider local perspectives and concerns, which means that they must try to find ways to mediate and accommodate the demands of various stakeholders (Sjölander-Lindqvist et al., 2021).

Sweden is not unique in having wildlife conservation creating conflicts between stakeholder interests, especially in the governance of large carnivores (e.g., Redpath et al., 2013; van Eeden et al., 2018). Studies from around the world have demonstrated that the conservation of large carnivores might conflict with the interests of residents, livestock owners, and farmers (e.g., Lamarque et al., 2009; Tamrat et al., 2020; Rode et al., 2021). In public debate, farmers, hunters, and local populations resisting conservation efforts are often considered opponents of progressive values for their personal interests and economic gain (e.g., Lambrechts and Goga, 2016; Steen, 2019). The conflict is often portrayed as one with backward and conservative people in the countryside opposing progressive values and preservation of nature (e.g., Westerstad, 2021). Hence, local populations are often described as hindering conservation efforts and therefore being an obstacle to the successful protection of endangered species (e.g., Lambrechts and Goga, 2016). In recent research on the human dimensions of wildlife, social scientists have tried to understand the underlying reasons and perspectives of the local population affected by conservation, recognizing the problems that wildlife causes, such as financial loss and distress (e.g., Skogen and Haaland, 2001; Sjölander-Lindqvist et al., 2021). Scholars have also emphasized the importance of including the perspectives of local community members and stakeholders in wildlife governance to make conservation efforts socially sustainable (e.g., Hackel, 1999; Ancrenaz et al., 2007).

This article is based on a case study of Swedish farmers, inquiring into their understanding of how large carnivores influence their business and everyday life. The empirical data were collected through 22 in-depth interviews and 37 telephone questionnaires.¹ Furthermore, 111 applications for protective hunting were analyzed. Relying on the concept of moral economy, the paper sets out to conceptualize the discontent with and protests against wildlife governance and management. It aims to contextualize the negative attitudes of farmers toward wolves and large carnivore management in relation to morality (a sense of right and wrong) and moral economy (a system of obligations related to values and relations intersecting with political views and financial decisions). More specifically it inquires into the financial rationals in relation to values and lived experiences of rural livelihood. The paper is aligned with the view of moral economy as related to specific “social goods” (Arnold, 2001) rather than an essentialist view of a clash between cultures. However, the paper also relies on insights from James C. Scott, an early moral economist studying the moral economy of peasants in emerging modern society (1976). As such, the paper will relate aspects of farmers’ economic rationale, values, and way of life in contemporary western society to those of subsistence farmers in pre-modern or emerging modern societies.

In the section that follows, an overview of the scholarly debate on moral economy is presented, providing the paper’s theoretical framework. The subsequent Methods and Materials section explains how data were collected and analyzed. Next follows a brief background covering the perspectives of the various stakeholders to contextualize the data and analysis. The Results section follows, covering these subtopics: i) how farmers are affected financially by large carnivores, ii) how farmers’ livelihood is connected to place and social relations, iii) how animal husbandry involves a concern for the farm animals’ well-being, and iv) how farmers understand their role in taking care of nature. In the Discussion section, the themes of the Results sections are discussed in relation to the theoretical framework. After that follows a brief summary of the central points of the paper.

Theoretical framework

The concept of moral economy was introduced into contemporary academic discourse through Thompson’s work on the food riots of the English working class in the 18th century (1971; 1977). Thompson’s conceptualization shares basic features with

¹ Within the larger project an additional 90 interviews were conducted with Swedish hunters and 12 interviews were conducted with regional agency representatives working with wildlife management in the County Administrative Board. The results of these other interviews are published in Sjölander-Lindqvist et al. (2021).

Polanyi's theoretical concept of *embedded economy* in his seminal work *The Great Transformation* (Polanyi, 1957). Similar to embedded economy, moral economy is often employed to demonstrate how people's subsistence and societal obligations relate to morality and norms (Sayer, 2000). It is often used to highlight the differences between pre-modern systems of exchange (moral economies) and market systems of exchange (autonomous economies in Thompson's terminology). In the words of Arnold, moral economy commonly refers to "the various, essentially noneconomic norms and obligations (e.g., reciprocity) that mediate the central social, political, and/or economic relations of a given (almost always pre- or nonmarket) people" (2001, 85).

The concept is not neutral but entangled in the epistemological assumption that cultural values play an essential role in interpreting human behavior. As such, it opposes "the assumptions and approaches of rational-choice forms of inquiry" (2001, 85); that is, it questions the notion that self-interest is the primary lens through which to interpret social phenomena. Moral economy not only offers a positioning against the epistemology of rational choice but also against classic Marxist interpretations, as it emphasizes that social conflicts relate to what people value rather than having their primary cause in disputes over economic resources (c.f., Fourcade and Healy, 2007; Rogan, 2018).

Since its introduction in the social sciences, the concept of moral economy has become a popular framework for scholarly studies. A search in Google Scholar with the search string "moral economy" results in more than 136,000 hits. The concept has been used in analyzing and explaining social phenomena as diverse as conflicts over water in the American West (Arnold, 2001), contemporary worker protests in Egypt (Posusney, 1993), and adult webcam modeling (van Doorn and Velthuis, 2018). Some of these studies use the concept in a similar fashion as Thompson, namely, to analyze conflicts between clashes that may arise between what can be understood as pre-modern embedded economies and autonomous economies (e.g., in an emergent modern state or colonial/postcolonial state). However, the concept is also used in a broader sense to discuss how local social organization and values are essential for interpreting social phenomena. Although the connection between morals and economic exchange was crucial in early work on moral economy, the concept today is often used to describe a set of interrelated moral values rather than to show how morality is interconnected with economy or systems of exchange. Also, while early work, such as that of Scott (1976) and 1977; Thomson (1971), uses the concept to explain riots and confrontation with a state or colonial administration, contemporary scholarship does not always have this focus.

The moral economy of the peasant

This paper is particularly interested in how the concept of moral economy has been used to discuss rural livelihoods. James C. Scott's (1976) work on the economic rationale of small-scale

farmers in Southeast Asia during the colonial take-over in the early twentieth century is important. He discusses how their economic rationales are linked to their livelihoods and local senses of fairness and economic justice. In this work, Scott argues that peasant rebellions and resistance would seem irrational if one does not consider their sustenance and its relation to their core values, i.e., their moral economy.

Scott recognizes the many contingencies of subsistence farmers' lives, such as the uncertainties of the crop yield due to shifting weather conditions and the volatile demand for their produce. Due to the precarious nature of farming, reliable subsistence becomes central among the farmers in Scott's studies. According to Scott, these farmers do not act according to economic liberal principles of profit maximization but instead rely on risk minimization strategies since the farmers have a reliable subsistence as the primordial goal. The farmers' views, actions, and relationships with other actors should therefore be examined in terms of how they meet this goal. Scott summarizes the argument about their risk minimizing strategies well when writing that the "cost of failure for those near the subsistence margin is such that safety and reliability take precedence over long-run profit" (Scott, 1976, 13). Scott argues that one can begin understanding the peasants' sense of moral justice through this principle of the right to subsistence and the norm of reciprocity. Reciprocity is, according to Scott, in its simplest form, the idea that if someone helps you, you should help them in return. This norm is a foundational aspect of relationships and constitutes the basis for peoples' exceptions of other actors—including the state.

Starting from this point, Scott explains how the moral economy of the peasants of Southeast Asia creates a sense of resentment and open rebellion against the colonial state because it did not meet their expectations for reciprocity. According to Scott, the farmers' expectations were based on the social structures of the precolonial society where the inherent risk of farming was often carried by the "elites," for example, landowners and more prosperous farmers. In the case of a bad harvest, the precolonial state would reduce taxes and provide other forms of assistance to poor farmers. The colonial state did not consider such circumstances and imposed fixed taxes that, in times of prosperity, may have been reasonable but in times of dearth could be devastating. These types of taxes and the removal of services previously provided to peasants (for example, loaning seeds at the beginning of the season) to dampen the risks were some of the main points of enagement among the peasant farmers studied by Scott. The failure of the state to recognize the values (anchored in their livelihood and way of life) and meet the peasants' expectations led to discontent and rebellion.

Moral economy of social goods

While Scott and Thompson used the concept of moral economy to interpret social phenomena in pre-modern or

emerging modern societies, some studies have used the concept to analyze contemporary contexts (e.g., Arnold, 2001; van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018; von Essen, 2018; Andersson Cederholm & Sjöholm, 2021). Arnold (2001) elaborates on the concept of moral economy to make it applicable to contemporary societies, offering a welcome development of the concepts and their applicability in modern Western contexts. He complements the study of moral economy with the concept of *social goods* to emphasize the role of values, saying that particular things that people value can create conflicts between the state and segments of citizens in modern societies. Arnold writes: “by focusing on specific social goods, rather than on overarching economic systems, I account for politically significant (although not necessarily rebellious) moral economies where traditional moral economists would least expect to find them: within modern, market-structured communities and societies” (2001, 85).

Social goods can be objects, but they can also be more abstract entities such as “security, welfare, and membership” (Arnold, 2001, 91). Although not explicitly stated, Arnold implies that social goods are values or objects that are not fully commodified or integrated within a market system of exchange—or, in one way or another, they transcend commodification (c.f., Mauss, 2002). Social goods are objects or values that influence financial decisions and transactions. Values can thus be more important than profit maximization. However, these social goods can generally still be included in economic transactions. Among the (pre)colonial Nuer, as described by Evans-Pritchard (1940), their relation to their cattle can be described as a social good, with the cattle structuring the status, capacities, and obligations of the individual pastoralist in the society. However, cattle are still vital to the Nuer economy. Social goods are not beyond economic transactions, but the transactions are embedded in social relations, moral conceptualization, and connected to land itself. The locales occupied and used by people are embedded in experiences, hold memories, and are often an important part of their identities. Place-based identities are deep and consequential, and a sense of place—the social connection people feel to a particular locale—may be so important that it outweighs certain alternatives for action that are experienced to be in conflict with their communal and cultural frame of references (Manzo and Perkins, 2006; Jacobs & Munis, 2020).

Legitimacy

The concept of moral economy has important links to political legitimacy. As moral economy influences the fundamental views on the “right way” of doing things, it is closely tied to notions of legitimacy (Arnold, 2001, 92). Legitimacy from a moral economist standpoint is not linked to the procedure of decision-making (which is a common criterion

of legitimacy in contemporary democratic theory). As Burchell et al. (1991) write: “A major part, at least, of classical political philosophy, in its central concern with the legitimate foundations of political sovereignty and political obedience, is about ‘the best government’”; hence the legitimacy of the state is linked to the structure of government and the social contract. Legitimacy from a moral economy standpoint, in contrast, is based on the idea of reciprocity and common notions of shared values. Politicians and political decisions are acceptable if they converge with these notions and values. Although legitimacy from this perspective relates to a sense of fairness, it is still not the same as a fair distribution of economic resources (in a Marxist tradition) as there might be disagreements on what is, or should be, valued from the moral economy standpoint.

Materials and methods

This paper is based on a case study of farmers in three regions in central Sweden, which cover the area where the majority of the large carnivores reside. The empirical material has three primary sources: i) qualitative semi-structured interviews with farmers, ii) structured telephone interviews with randomly selected farmers in the same region (from the registers of the Federation of Swedish Farmers), and iii) applications and decisions on protection hunting submitted to the County Administrative Boards (CABs). The CABs are responsible for carrying out wildlife policies such as population inventory of large carnivores and inspecting reported damages as well as processing applications for protective hunting. Collecting data from diverse sources enabled a more robust analysis of farmers’ experiences with large carnivores and management. The data were collected within a project funded by the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA), the Swedish Association for Hunting and Wildlife Management (SAHWM), and the Federation of Swedish Farmers (FSF). The overarching aim of that project was to increase the knowledge of the consequences of large carnivores for Swedish hunters and farmers. The scope of this larger project was broader than the aim of this paper’s topic (Sjölander-Lindqvist et al., 2021).

The in-depth interviews with 22 farmers, who were identified through the registers of the Federation of Swedish Farmers and using the snowball method, were conducted between 2019 and 2020. All the farmers live in areas with high concentrations of large carnivores, a majority of those contacted for an in-depth interview had had farm animals or dogs killed by large carnivores. The farmers were interviewed to provide knowledge on their experiences with large carnivores and how they understood them to influence their business activity (especially animal husbandry). Questions that were posed, for example, asked about financial consequences and people’s experiences of the attack they had on their livestock or dog, if

they had contacted authorities regarding the attack, and if so, what their experience was of this process. The interviews were conducted by this paper's first, second, and third authors. Most of the in-depth interviews had to be conducted over the telephone or *via* video conference calls due to Covid-19 restrictions, but some of the interviews were in-person and on site.

In addition, telephone questionnaires with standardized questions were conducted with randomly selected members of the Federation of Swedish Farmers in counties with a high concentration of large carnivores. The telephone questionnaire was conducted by this paper's third and fourth authors in 2020. The farmers were asked questions about the socio-economic and psychosocial consequences of large carnivores and their views on the governance and management of large carnivores. Background questions about their experiences of and encounters with large carnivores were juxtaposed with their attitudes towards large carnivores and large carnivore management, as well as their will to continue with animal husbandry. The purpose was to gain knowledge unaffected by the selection bias of the in-depth interviews and to get a better overview by asking standardized questions. Through this method we were able to get the views of farmers that were not selected because of attacks on their farm animals to get a more nuanced picture of views of farmers living in areas with large carnivores.

As a supplementary source to understand farmers' views on large carnivores, applications for protective hunting submitted to the CABs within the geographical location of our study during the period 2015–2020 were analyzed. The analyzed applications for protective hunting were submitted by farmers, hunters, and interest organizations and motivate lethal removal of large carnivores. During those years, there were 111 applications in total. These applications, together with the corresponding decisions by the CABs, were analyzed. The applicants were individual farmers, hunters, and organizations. On a few occasions, the CABs granted protective hunting on their own initiative. The applications to the CABs explain the negative consequences of a large carnivore presence and are thus a basis for knowledge from the perspective of the applicants. For the purpose of this article, only financial consequences for farmers were identified and analyzed in these applications to provide additional information on their experiences of living close to large carnivores.

The data collected from interviews, questionnaires, and the applications for protective hunting were analyzed in relation to the research aim and the theoretical framework. The theoretical framework established a few areas of inquiry, e.g., their moral values, views on relationship to farm animals, financial decisions, and views of rights and obligations in society. The questions of the semi-structured interviews were designed to encourage an open discussion about farm life and how it is affected by large carnivores from the perspective of each interviewee. This means that information that could pertain to

the above areas of inquiry had to be identified when analyzing each interview. The data collected through the telephone questionnaire was analyzed by juxtaposing farmers' experiences and encounters with large carnivores in relation to their attitudes. Finally, in the applications for protective hunting we identified various financial consequences attributed to large carnivores by farmers.

Setting the scene - the contemporary discourse on large carnivores in Sweden

In Sweden, as in many places throughout the world, large carnivores spark strong emotions and conflicts. Although these conflicts have been going on for a long time, recent events indicate they are intensifying (Bennett et al., 2022). The Swedish Association for Hunting and Wildlife Management and the Federation of Swedish Farmers demand a decimation of the wolf population. In an article on their webpage, FSF writes that it is "important that the County Administrative Boards, the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, and politicians understand the absolute necessity of deciding on an extended wolf hunt this winter" (FSF, 2021). In addition to the organizations mentioned above, the Sámi Parliament (Sámidiggi), the National Sheep Association (Fåravelsförbundet), and the National Hunter Organization (Jägarnas Riksförbund) all also promote decreases in the populations and more liberal regulations for protective hunting. Resistance against wolves has also been an issue in national politics—e.g., the Christian Democrats have demanded that over half of all wolves in Sweden be killed (Grahn, 2022).

Simultaneously, illegal hunting is increasing (SLU, 2020). The slogan "Shoot, dig, and keep silent" (skjut, gräv och tig) is used to show support for the illegal hunting of wolves and printed on t-shirts and baseball caps (Andersen, 2018). A Swedish businessman, who was charged with illegal hunting (later dropped), has become (in)famous for promoting a reduction of the wolf population. This man was referred to as a martyr by some of those interviewed within this project, because they understood him to be prosecuted for a rightful cause. While outright support for illegal hunting is relatively rare, the discontent with large carnivores is widespread. Farmers living in areas with high concentrations of large carnivores generally have a negative attitude toward large carnivores and a negative view of Swedish wildlife governance and management (Sjölander-Lindqvist et al., 2021). And although often denouncing illegal hunting, many of the farmers we interviewed claimed that it is understandable and a direct consequence of the national policy for large carnivores.

Obligated by international agreements and Swedish regulation, the SEPA and the CABs work to secure a viable population of protected large carnivores. As stated in the introduction, their mission also includes taking local perspectives into account,

minimizing the damage inflicted by large carnivores, and reducing conflicts. Therefore, agencies at the national and regional levels use dialogue, damage prevention measures, and compensation for damaged private property. At the same time, non-profit nature conservation organizations such as the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation and the Swedish Carnivore Association campaign for increased protections for large carnivores. In addition, independent animal rights activists try to stop legal hunting through civil disobedience and by threatening and harassing individual farmers and hunters (Jansson, 2019), confrontations that occasionally have turned violent. Threats and harassment from animal rights activists are frequently mentioned as a problem by the farmers interviewed for this study, especially in some areas of Sweden.

This brief overview of the position of the various stakeholders shows that the resistance against large carnivores and animal rights activists creates considerable tensions and outright conflicts in Sweden. These conflicts result in distrust in government authorities, which is quite remarkable in Sweden, given that general trust in society and government is exceptionally high (Rothstein, 2018). The Results section sets out to explain this discontent and these conflicts further.

Results

Financial consequences of living next to large carnivores

A common explanation for the discontent among farmers with the management of large carnivores and the high concentrations of large carnivores, is the financial consequences for them as individual business owners. The financial consequences are predominantly related to extra work and costs for preventive measures to protect farm animals from large carnivore attacks.² In our study, this discontent was especially evident in the applications for protective hunting submitted by individuals and organizations; financial consequences were one of the most common reasons given for the need for lethal removal of large carnivores. Financial consequences of attacks were also a common explanation for the negative attitudes toward large carnivores among the people interviewed in this study.

The vast majority of the interviewed farmers stressed that they used protective measures to prevent attacks from large carnivores on their farm animals. Although farmers can get subsidies for the implementation of nonlethal methods for reducing carnivore predation on livestock, such as predator-repellent fencing, most of those interviewed did not consider the compensation to cover associated costs. For example, compensation covered only half of

the cost of the fencing, and they also require considerable maintenance to function properly. Furthermore, many used additional protective nonlethal measures that are not compensated. Some interviewees brought in their animals at night to protect them from predators, which was seen as extra work caused by large carnivore presence. Several others said they grazed their animals closer to the house where they could better keep watch over them, which entailed more work and often a need to buy more fodder. When keeping the animals close to the house, they contended that they could not use their available land in the most productive way. Several farmers who applied for protective hunting also wrote that they were affected financially by having to shorten the grazing period, which in some cases led to farmers losing their organic certification, or in other cases losing EU subsidies for maintaining biodiversity.

Additional financial consequences were reported by farmers who have had their animals attacked and/or killed by large carnivores. Most have had additional costs not covered by compensation.³ For example, stressed animals (possibly leading to lower production of milk or premature parturition) give rise to extra costs for which it is difficult to get compensation, in part because of the difficulties in proving that the animals had been negatively affected specifically by predator attacks. Several of the interviewees did not consider the compensation for damaged and killed animals adequate for individual animals that were particularly valuable for breeding. Attacks by large carnivores can have severe financial consequences for an individual farmer—especially if it is not possible to prove that it was a large carnivore attack. While this seems to be rare, it is a possibility that farm animals will be missing after an attack and that rainfall will erase pawprints so that an attack by large carnivores cannot be proven.

For some farmers, the applications for compensation were considered time-consuming and unnecessarily bureaucratic, with the result that the application process itself was perceived as additional work (c.f., Kolstrup, 2014). One informant says that they actively work to maintain a good relationship with the CAB and see it as an investment to get better help in the event of a future attack, yet another example of extra work for livestock owners. Although a thorough process for evaluating applications is a necessity, the work and time spent on applications and contacts with government authorities can be understood as an additional cost related to large carnivores.

Undoubtedly, the dissatisfaction with the presence of large carnivores can partly be explained by negative financial consequences and financial risk. But it is hard to see that these consequences would give rise to such strong sentiments and protests. Although not negligible, the risk of an attack on an

² Also, individual psychological consequences such as distress are used to explain the resistance against large carnivores in the conducted interviews; this theme is omitted from this paper.

³ Some of the interviewed farmers talked about attacks that happened a few years ago. As the rules for compensation are continuously changing, some things might have been compensated if the attack had happened more recently.

individual farmer is relatively low compared to other economic risks, such as potential damage caused by wild boars, droughts, and fluctuating grain and market prices. Additionally, government compensation for damage caused by large carnivores is generally generous and continually improving—as was recognized by several of the people interviewed.

We propose two reasons for the financial consequences and the financial risk of large carnivores stirring up such strong emotions. The first is that the farmers do not see the risk connected to large carnivores as a necessary part of negative contingencies (c.f., [Larsson and Viktorelius, 2022](#)). While farmers live with several uncertainties and contingencies in their daily life, the risk of an attack from large carnivores is often seen as forced upon them by the state. As one farmer expressed, “at the end of the day, it is the state’s wolves that are jumping into my pen”. What is expressed in the quote, that wolves are the state’s property and responsibility, is a formulation that recurs in many of the interviews, and is similarly found in other studies (c.f., [Elofsson et al., 2015](#)). The interviewees base this argument on the view that the wolves thrive in Sweden because of politics and conservation efforts. From the perspective of the farmer, the presence of large carnivores is a risk that external actors impose and as demonstrated by risk research, individuals are much less likely to find such risks acceptable ([Bouder et al., 2007](#)). Furthermore, the farmers see themselves as deprived of the possibility of protecting themselves and their animals from large carnivores, an example of “risk shifting” ([Scott, 1976](#)) in which policy creates additional risks that are transferred to the farmers.

Second, many Swedish farmers have small financial margins in their business. One farmer reported that their minimal margins meant that they could not afford to pay people who could help them after a wolf attack on their sheep. He said that they got help from pensioners and some other neighbors, assistance that he could “pay back with labor at a later time.” Small margins mean that negative contingencies such as an attack by a large carnivore can have large negative consequences. The situated cognition of these farmers inclines them to prioritize risk minimization over profit maximization.⁴ Their knowledge, skills, investments, values, and identity often connect farmers to a specific location, further feeding into a risk-minimizing perspective. This will be further discussed in the next section.

⁴ The analogy between pre-modern subsistence farmers (and farmers in emerging modern societies) only goes so far. The difference is that modern farmers do not live on the brink of starvation, but have other survival strategies, other available jobs, and also social welfare. Even if Swedish farmers do not live on the brink of starvation and there are social safety nets that may assist them if the farm is lost, there are nevertheless reasons that even Swedish farmers may prefer risk minimization over profit maximization.

Place attachment, values, and heritage in farming and husbandry

The attachment to place in farming was emphasized in many ways in the interviews. First of all, many of the interviewed farmers say that farming requires knowledge of the specificities of the area, such as the quality of the soil and local weather conditions—knowledge that is gained over time and not always transferable to a new location. Second, many small-scale farmers argue that they need the help of neighbors and other farmers in the area in many situations, not least after an attack by large carnivores. Getting this kind of assistance from neighbors requires relations that take time to establish (as they are embedded in transactions with a long track record of reciprocity). Many farmers also have significant investments and loans in the business, which further connects them to the locale of their living and farming. The investment in farming and a sense of place – the process of attaching oneself to a place and the product of this process – will generally make it hard to relocate a business or change their line of work ([Jacobs and Munis, 2020](#)). The fact that so few of those interviewed considered moving emphasizes this point, even if they had been strongly affected by attacks from large carnivores and reported high levels of distress related to large carnivores ([Sjölander-Lindqvist et al., 2021](#)).

Farmers’ attachment to place is not only related to the practical aspects of their work on the farm. Attachment to place is often emotional and connected to values, tradition, history, and legacy as well as the length of residence ([Brown and Perkins, 1992](#); [Ingold, 2000](#)). Many of the farmers have been at the same farm for a long time, in many cases over several generations, and they emphasized a desire to keep the farm of their ancestors running. Many also value things associated with the life of the countryside, such as berry picking, hunting, and horseback riding. Farming is in this sense a way of life and cultural identity, with associated social goods that in some situations are valued more than profit maximization.

In the globalized economy in which consumer goods are transported across the globe in search of markets and production is swiftly moved between locations that, for the moment, offer the cheapest labor, it is easy to forget that much production is attached to physical locations. This fact is especially easy to forget in the post-industrial global north, where most consumer goods are produced elsewhere. However, the production of crops and farm produce is necessarily tied to a specific physical location, as is animal husbandry. Although entangled in a market economy, farmers are not the capitalists that Marx and Engels talked about when they wrote: “The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere” ([Marx and Engels, 1955](#), 13). Although fully integrated with a market

economy and the produced goods are made available in an open (global) market, the farmer is indeed anchored in the soil.

The farmers' connection to place, relationships, and their trade feed into the general risk aversion or risk minimizing strategies because of a desire to continue the trade of the farmer (c.f., Scott, 1976). While recognizing differences between the peasants studied by Scott and the farmers discussed in this paper, some similarities are beneficial to our inquiry. Like Scott's farmers, the Swedish farmers can also generally not be seen as Schumpeterian entrepreneurs; that is, they do not expand into new business ventures and re-locate in search of maximizing profits. Instead, their trade is linked to a specific location and entangled in heritage, traditions, and values. What Scott writes about the peasants of Southeast Asia is also true, to some extent, of the Swedish farmers: "the central fact that the peasant is born into a society and culture that provide him a fund of moral values, a set of concrete social relationships, a pattern of expectations about the behavior of others, and a sense of how those in his culture have proceeded to similar goals in the past" (Scott, 1976, 166).

Farmers' relationship with farm animals and dogs

In popular discourse, farmers who keep animals are thought to have a commodified view of cattle and other farm animals, as they are transferred into economic value when slaughtered or sold. And while the proletarianization and industrialization of agriculture have, without a doubt, had that effect to some extent, the interviews in this project paint a more nuanced picture. The interviewees were very much concerned with the well-being of their animals and were devoted to providing a good life for their animals and minimizing their suffering. They view this as an ethical obligation and also stressed that it is required of them by regulation. One farmer who had previously had an attack and discontinued her business said with regard to the current number of wolves: "I would not recommend anyone in the world to get sheep [in this area]. Not because of finances and my worries, but for the sake of the animals [pause] it's animal cruelty." The risk of attacks by large carnivores is understood to compromise their ethical responsibility and conflict with what they understand to be legally required in terms of taking care of their livestock.

Another interviewee, who had not had an attack, speculated about the consequences an attack would have on a personal level given the close relationship with the farm animals. "It would be a disaster if you came out into the pasture one day and a wolf had killed the sheep. For me, it is not a financial disaster because it is more of a hobby, but a spiritual disaster, and it would indeed be tough to start over." Yet another interviewee said that their animals are like a small family and they have gotten to know all their peculiarities and that it is stressful with the risk of predator

attacks given the close relationships with their farm animals. Both the stress over possible financial consequences and the stress that comes with losing an animal to whom there is an attachment are consistent with previous studies (Riley, 2011; Kolstrup, 2014).

It might seem strange to an outsider that farmers are so upset by having their animals killed by large carnivores when their animals generally are slaughtered and sold as meat. However, farmers are concerned about reducing the animals' suffering and giving them a painless death. This argument is corroborated by the much more negative attitude towards wolves than lynx, although lynx kill sheep to approximately the same extent in Sweden (Sjölander-Lindqvist et al., 2021). The lynx is understood to hunt and kill to survive and to provide for its younglings. Farmers that keep animals can sympathize with the lynx as both the farmer and the lynx kill animals but do it to provide for their kin and do it as painlessly as possible. The wolf, on the other hand, is understood to be a cruel animal that kills for pleasure and not only for survival. This argument is sustained by stories of farmers finding their sheep half eaten but still alive and several animals killed or seriously wounded without being eaten. One could speculate and assume that the wolf represents a negative self-image to the farmer; the wolf kills for pleasure while they kill out of necessity, and the wolf takes joy in creating suffering for the animals it kills while they try to cause as little suffering as possible. The wolf can be described as the *vicious hunter* as opposed to the *virtuous hunter* in the dichotomy proposed by the philosopher Plato (von Essen, 2018).

Given the relationship farmers have with their farm animals, it is not far-fetched to talk about them as *social goods* (i.e., particular objects or values that influence business decisions). It is not the first time that farm animals have been discussed in terms of social goods. Using the examples of the (pre)colonial Nuer as depicted by Evans-Pritchard, Arnold (2001) talks about cattle as a social good, writing: "Among the Nuer of Africa, for instance, cattle connect people to one another in vital ways, not just as herdsman, buyer, or seller. Cattle structure the status, capacities, and obligations of individuals" (Arnold, 2001, 91). Similarly, several interviewees reported a close relation to the farm animals and expressed an obligation to take care of them. Some might argue that farm animals are the very definition of commodities as they can be slaughtered and sold. But describing farm animals as social goods does not preclude their being traded and killed. However, social goods are not unrelated to the fact that they also provide financial benefits; on the contrary, they *are* social goods because of their role in the economy, which was also the case with cattle among the Nuer.

While for the Nuer cattle were a central part of all social relations, their art, and their poetry (Evans-Pritchard, 1940), Swedish farmers do not seem to have the same type of attachment to their farm animals. While the Nuer only kept cattle, Swedish farmers can change species of livestock depending on what is most profitable or discontinue animal

husbandry if conditions change. In a Swedish context, it might be more accurate to say that the well-being of farm animals is a social good rather than the animals themselves. The value of farm animals “extends beyond their purely material or commercial properties.” (Arnold, 2001, 91). If an animal is hurt by a large carnivore, it is compromising this value. Even though the state generally compensates for a killed animal it cannot compensate for the suffering of the animal. Because such financial compensation is not the entire solution to the problem, financial loss is not the entire problem.

The stewardship of nature

Another thing intrinsically tied to farming for the interviewees was a sense of stewardship over nature. The well-being of farm animals discussed in the previous section is one aspect, but this care for nature extends beyond that. For example, they emphasize that grazing animals keep the fields open and increase biological diversity (Jordbruksverket, 2022). They also argue that they are providing locally grown food and locally produced meat and thus contribute to sustainability. This stewardship over nature is also expressed through the support of conservation by breeding endangered species, which is common among the interviewed farmers. For example, one told us that she was breeding endangered species of sheep, and asked us rhetorically why the genes of her rare sheep are less valuable than those of the wolf as the state allowed wolves to kill her sheep. The underlying logic of this statement is that wolves are protected by the state to a larger degree than farm animals. Many of the interviewed farmers hunt, and hunting is also understood to be a way of taking care of nature, for example, by controlling the population of elks and reducing the damage they cause to forests (c.f., von Essen, 2018).

The themes discussed above, namely the care of farm animals and wild animals and values, are related to a view of humans exercising ‘stewardship over nature’, i.e., that humans have a role in taking care of and managing nature. This social good associated with farming is another one understood to be compromised by large carnivores. Interviewees considered large populations of carnivores (especially wolves) as hindering their ability to take care of nature, for example, by making it difficult to keep grazing animals in open fields and in so doing promote biological diversity.

The sense of stewardship over nature among farmers brings into question a widespread understanding that the conflict regarding large carnivores is between conservationists who care about nature and want to preserve it and farmers who want to exploit it. The results in this study are at odds with such a perspective. Rather than a dichotomy between conservation and exploitation, conservationists and farmers have different views on conservation. From the conservationist side, the conservation of wolves not only benefits the wolf population

but also other species in nature such as scavengers. The argument in this article is not that one way or the other is more valuable in terms of conservation. But the argument is that conservationists and farmers alike frame their arguments within an environmentalist discourse. There is also not an opposition between conservationists that want to maintain a wild nature and farmers that want to take care of nature by human interference; farmers and conservationists alike share a view of the necessity of humans to intervene in nature. For example, conservationists understand it is necessary to relocate wolves to improve the quality of their genes.

The word ‘morality’ is closely associated with what is right and wrong. But in the context of this paper, talking about farmers’ economy as a moral is not to say that it is more ethical or better. As Fourcade has it “Morality does not refer here to some universal ethical standard; rather, it means what a society, or a group, defines as good or bad, legitimate or inappropriate” (2007, 302). The point of discussing the farmers views in terms of morals is to recognize that the views of the farmers are articulated in terms of moral values. This point becomes especially important when the perspectives of the state and of environmental organizations as well as animal rights activists are so often framed in terms of being based on moral values, but hunters and farmers are thought to be in conflict with moral values from mere economic interests. If there is one take-home message from this study, it is that farmers’ and hunters’ work include a type of morality and concern for their farm animals, wild animals, biological diversity, and cultural heritage, although sometimes with a different view of what is considered moral.

Discussion

Financial factors and risk cannot be neglected when trying to understand the resistance against large carnivores. As argued, financial risk is increased by the fact that many farmers have small profit margins and tend to prioritize risk minimizing strategies. However, the effect of large carnivores on people’s income and the risk of financial loss can only partially explain the dissatisfaction with wildlife policy and governance. The magnitude of protests and dissatisfaction, we argue, has to be understood in relation to farmers’ values. These values include the cultural heritage of farming, relation to past and future generations, the well-being of farm animals, a sense of stewardship over nature (contributing to biological diversity through grazing, producing locally produced meat, and for some of the farmers rearing rare species of sheep). Leisure activities, such as hunting, horseback riding, walking with dogs in the woods, and picking berries, are also such values (c.f., Sjölander-Lindqvist, 2009).

It is not far-fetched to talk about the values and perspectives of the farmers in terms of a moral economy. Using the

terminology from the literature on moral economy, these values have been discussed in terms of social goods—i.e., things and values that to some extent transcend economic values and are sometimes more highly valued than maximizing profit. Social goods are taken into consideration when farmers make financial decisions. For example, protecting the well-being of farm animals is taken into consideration when deciding on starting or quitting the husbandry of a particular type of livestock. Additionally, the views on traditions, relations, connection to place, and the other social goods defined above also influence financial decisions in similar ways.

Because these social goods influence financial decisions, they can sometimes be more important than maximizing profit. This is not to say that profitability is not an essential factor or that farmers would at any cost remain in their line of work. As we can see from the past centuries of urbanization, most Swedes have changed their source of income from farming to other kinds of work. And farmers will generally make adaptations to their business venture in terms of what is profitable. But for those farmers still operating, such values are often an important part of why they continue their line of work even though many have limited profitability.

These social goods are understood to be threatened by large carnivores. Some, such as the well-being of animals, are understood to be under direct threat due to potential attacks. And some leisure activities and hunting are understood to be under direct threat because of the risk of an attack on a pet dog or attacks on humans. Large carnivores are viewed as compromising the ability to keep sheep and thus also the social good of taking care of nature. Other values are entangled with animal husbandry and farming, life in the countryside, and the identity of a farmer; they are understood to be at stake because it becomes less economically viable or too stressful to continue animal husbandry with the risk of attacks. A perceived threat to the economic viability of farming and animal husbandry is thus also a perceived threat to the entangled values or social goods.

Jacobsen and Linnell (2016) argue that conflicts related to large carnivores can be linked to disagreements over how resources should be used. From the perspective of this paper, such disagreement is only one dimension of the problem. The conflicts can also be linked to diverse views on the intrinsic value of things (c.f., Larsson and Sjölander-Lindqvist, 2022). Large carnivores are not only a threat to the economy but also to the values that are attached to the trade and life of the farmer. As such, the solution to the problem is not only a matter of compensation—because the problem is not only an issue of financial loss. This argument is aligned with that of Skogen and Krangle (2003) that adaptive large carnivore governance measures do not increase legitimacy by addressing the practical and economic concerns of stakeholders, but rather need to further incorporate the cultural dimension of the conflict.

We argue that understanding these social goods in the moral economy of the Swedish farmer is key to understanding the lack of legitimacy and conflicts related to large carnivores. Legitimacy from this perspective is based on a “recognition by a community that a given state of affairs conforms to known and accepted rules and principles” (Arnold, 2001, 90). Furthermore, as Scott writes, legitimacy is also based on expectations of what the state “owes them” (Scott, 1976). So, the lack of legitimacy in the context of large carnivore management is not primarily linked to the process of decision making, transparency, and accountability but to whether or not political decisions and implementation correspond to values and expectations (c.f., von Essen and Hansen, 2015). The question of governance is only relevant to the extent that such forms of governance can provide the results that are understood as legitimate in relation to moral conceptions and the moral economy of Swedish farmers.

However, although the views of the interviewed farmers were quite similar, there were also differences. While the large majority shared the views presented in this article in terms of discontent with large carnivores and distrust in government, a few farmers did not seem to mind large carnivores and some were also neutral or positive with regard to wildlife governance. These observed differences can be related to the difference in context between contemporary society and the societies studied by the early moral economists in emerging modern societies. Current-day farmers are generally not part of only one community but potentially get their basic understandings and information from multiple sources (e.g., membership organizations, political parties, religious congregations) and their views might align with other types of identifications. For example, by belonging to a church you might have another set of nested values that constitute a different moral economy.

As discussed in the Theoretical Framework section of this paper, moral economy has traditionally been used to understand pre-modern economies as opposed to modern economies. In this paper, we have used the concept of moral economy to discuss humans that are neither pre- nor nonmarket but, in many regards, fully integrated into a liberal market economy. Using the concept of moral economy does not suggest that these farmers in any way have a pre-modern mentality but shows how collective values influence financial decisions. There is no implication that their views on economy and life are totally divergent from the rest of Swedish society. It resonates with what Arnold wrote that “the grounds for politically significant moral indignation do not lie only or even predominantly at the level of clashing economies or cultures. They lie instead at the level of specific social goods, at the intersection of nested sets of meaning and value called into question by equally specific changes in circumstance” (2001, 85). Another way of formulating this is that Swedish farmers do not reject the spirit of enterprise or the market economy but understand the spirit of enterprise to be

under attack from large carnivores and the government which is understood to promote them.

Farmers are also not unique in terms of having deeply held values connected to their trade and their financial decisions. In Ramsay's words "all economies are enmeshed in the political, social, and moral life of particular places" (1996, 9) (Ramsay, 1996). For example, small business owners might be equally connected to their trade and certain moral values. However, moral values play a part to various degrees and in various ways in different contexts. Furthermore, it can also be argued that a laissez-faire form of economic exchange is not free from values. As several scholars throughout the history of sociology and the social sciences have pointed out, the ideals of free market exchange are a normative or moral way of seeing things. Weber, for example, argues that capitalism is based on accumulation becoming a (divine) value separated from basic human needs (Weber, 2013). With Fourcade and Healy we are tempted to suggest that "markets are culture, not just because they are the products of human practice and sense making [...] but because markets are explicitly moral projects, saturated with normativity." (Fourcade and Healy, 2007, 299-300)

Finally, while we have pointed out some collective aspects of values and understanding among farmers, it is important also to stress that the way protests are articulated is not determined by these values. The views of these farmers are influenced by discourse, and organizations such as hunter organizations and farmers' organizations play an important role in influencing views of individuals in this regard. The arguments of the farmers are also formulated within a joint community of farmers in their organization, in their hunting team, and in their Facebook groups. Although we have talked about farmers' views being embedded in their values and living conditions, values are influenced by various perspectives, and the assemblage of these values (the entangled interrelated values and practices) is also discursively constructed and in principle contingent.

Conclusion

While the views and perspectives of farmers have been researched in previous studies, this paper makes a contribution to the interdisciplinary field of human-wildlife conflicts by presenting recently collected data on Swedish farmers as well as offering a theoretical framing to contextualize these findings. The article argues that the resistance against large carnivores and large carnivore management cannot be explained only, or even predominantly, in terms of financial consequences. Instead, these negative attitudes are situated in morality and the view of collective notions of certain *social goods*. These social goods are the heritage of farming and animal husbandry, the well-being of farm animals, and a sense of stewardship over nature. These collective social goods are perceived to be under attack from

large carnivores and the politics that support them. From the perspective of this paper, the lack of legitimacy and the conflicts are not based on deficiencies in the political process of decision making, nor even on a lack of fairness in the distribution of economic resources (or means of production) but are due to a threat to the entangled values of farming and animal husbandry. The paper concludes that negative sentiments, conflicts, protests, and also illegal activities cannot be understood merely in economic terms but must be linked to morals, a sense of fairness, meanings, traditions, and mechanisms of daily life.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study of human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent from the patients/participants was not required to participate in this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

Author contributions

SL, study design, data collection, coding and interpretation of data, identifying previous research and theory, and the main writer. AS-L, study design, data collection, interpretation, and contributing to previous research. JB, data collection, coding and interpretation of data, and contributing to previous research. SOL, data collection, analysis, and contributing to theory section. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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