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Mediating Human-Wolves Conflicts Through Dialogue, Joint Fact-Finding and Empowerment

*Hans Peter Hansen *, Cathrine S. Dethlefsen, Gwen Freya Fox and Annika Skarðsá Jeppesen*

Department of Ecoscience, Aarhus University, Rønde, Denmark

Within a local and national context of escalating conflicts surrounding the management of immigrating wild wolves (*Canis lupus*) spreading from Germany into Denmark, we invited a group of citizens living in and nearby a Danish wolf territory to participate in an experiment called "The Wolf Dialogue Project". The overall objective of the Wolf Dialogue Project was to explore the possibility of developing a productive alternative to the systematically distorted communication and "High conflict" that characterizes current wolf management, using a critical-utopian dialogue approach guided by Habermasian discourse ethic and a joint fact-finding process, that seeks to empower citizens to take on a shared responsibility for the commons. By purposefully not representing any strategic interests for or against wolves or the existing wolf management regime, the project offered a group of citizens the opportunity to formulate and communicate the problems and concerns they experienced, living in or nearby wolf territory. The project further offered the participating citizens the opportunity to develop counter measures and solutions to their experienced problems, through a facilitated process of social learning and empowerment. The duration of the dialogue project was two and a half years and included a demographic and political cross section of local citizens. Despite difficulties along the way, the outcome of the project was more profound than initially anticipated by the project team. Participants were initially very polarised, and some were opposed to the existing wolf management regime as well as governmental agencies, but they began taking on a collective responsibility guided by the common interest of their community, across individual differences. In addition, the process left a significant mark on the new wolf management plan recommended to the government by the Danish Wildlife Council in 2021. Far from all problems and conflicts were solved by the project, and new problems also emerged as a result of the project, but by bringing the commons of the participating citizens into focus, and applying a process of communicative rationality, joint fact-finding and the exploration of alternative futures, the project revealed the potential for social and environmental responsibility to emerge from sociopolitical empowerment.

Keywords: systematically distorted communication, discourse ethic, dialogue, commons, empowerment, interdiciplinary, wolves, wildlife conflicts

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****Correspondence:***
Hans Peter Hansen
hph@ecos.au.dk

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INTRODUCTION

Opposition to wolves and existing wolf management regimes among citizens living in or nearby wolf territories, is a well-described phenomenon in many countries (Nie, 2001; Linnel, 2013; Pohja-Mykrä and Kurki, 2014; Kaltenborn and Brainerd, 2016). The phenomenon is often exacerbated in areas where the wolf has remigrated after previous extinction, as is the case in many parts of Europe (Højberg et al., 2017; Mech, 2017; Skogen and Krange, 2020; Pettersson et al., 2021). In literature the opposition to wolves from people living in or nearby wolf territories is linked to high levels of cryptic mortality amongst wolves, indicating illegal killing (Liberg et al., 2012; Dressel et al., 2015; Kaltenborn and Brainerd, 2016; Suutarinen and Kojola, 2018; Sunde et al., 2021).

Wolf management is challenged by a lack of legitimacy, which is particularly pronounced in rural regions and communities near wolf territories. Being forced to accept wolves as a part of the environment, citizens in rural areas experience a marginalisation of their livelihood and everyday life situation in wolf management processes (Pettersson et al., 2021; Skogen and Krange, 2020; von Essen and Allen, 2017; Pohja-Mykrä and Kurki, 2014; Højberg et al., 2017). Traditional governance methods, based on the principles of liberal democracy, targeting predefined interests ("stakeholders"), such as nature conservationists, hunters, farmers, governmental agencies etc., at the expense of the common good, tend to reproduce the very problems they seek to solve (Hansen et al., 2016; von Essen and Hansen, 2015; von Essen). The wolf management conflict seems to leave behind a despair and apathy among responsible wildlife agencies, policymakers, wildlife managers and other scholars (Sonne et al., 2019; Treves and Santiago-Ávila, 2020).

Conservation and management conflicts are not restricted to wolves or other carnivores but arise in many different contexts when the conservation or management regime of a species and/or a landscape fails to recognise the existence of human interests, needs, values, and rationalities that differ from those of powerholders. While the approach taken by policymakers, agencies and other stakeholders is often determined by their strategic pre-defined objectives and by a rather instrumental approach to polity, other types of rationalities (interests, values, needs) are excluded as what has been referred to as the "blind spot of public institutions" (Hansen and Peterson, 2016; Kenter et al., 2021). Traditional governance strategies such as persuasion and consensus building via negotiations, combined with the use of legal means and–ultimately–law enforcement, may for a period of time suppress variables outside the existing power structures. Nonetheless, in certain contexts, conflicts, sociopolitical polarisation and/or violent expression may require alternative solutions (Hodgson et al., 2021; Niemiec et al., 2021).

Wolf-management is one such case where traditional governance strategies have failed or, at least seem to be insufficient to avoid escalating conflicts leading to a non-functioning and disrupted wildlife management (Gieser and von Essen, 2021; Niemiec et al., 2021). We launched the Wolf Dialogue Project (WDP) in august 2017 with the objective to explore the possibility of developing a more fruitful alternative to the systematically distorted communication, that has transformed wolf management into "High conflicts" in many places around the world (Ripley, 2021a). The project was partly funded by Aarhus University (AU), partly by a 300000 Danish Kronor grant–equivalent to approximately 45,000 USD, from the "15. Juni Fonden" (The 15th of June Fund) that supports art, nature conservation and health activities.[1] In contrast to the "pro- or con wolves"-focus of the public and social media, politicians, and interest groups engaged with the issue, we decided to focus on common direct and indirect impacts on the community resulting from wolves settling in the area, applying a critical-utopian dialogue approach based on a Habermasian discourse ethic and joint fact-finding process that empowers affected citizens. We did this by inviting citizens from a local community on the outskirts of the first wolf territory in Denmark in 200 years, giving them the opportunity to formulate and communicate the concerns and practical problems they experienced. Through the idea of "alternative futures" being possible, we further offered the participants the chance to foster and develop their own ideas for a future national wolf management plan, and to communicate concerns, problems, and ideas to responsible policymakers and governmental agencies.

In this paper we describe the context, process, and method applied in the WDP. We further present and discuss some of the internal as well as external results of the project, including the impact on the national wolf management debate, and we discuss challenges and pitfalls that we noted during the project. Finally, we conclude the paper by discussing how the approach in the WDP differed from more traditional governance approaches, what the chosen method offered, and where it did not succeed. We will not refer to the names or genders of specific local participants but will in some cases use aliases.

Background–Return of the Wolf

In 2012, the grey wolf (*Canis lupus*) returned to Denmark, approximately 200 years after the last known specimen was shot in 1813 (Trolle and Jensen, 2013; Pagh, 2018). Being a member of the European Union (EU), wolves are in Denmark, as in the rest of EU, protected by The Habitats Directive, Council Directive 92/43/EEC (European Union, 1992). In Denmark wolves belong to the annex IV which are species that require close protection.

Shortly after the wolves were first rediscovered in Denmark in 2012, researchers from Aarhus University (AU) identified 10 potential wolf habitats where wolfpacks were likely to settle (Madsen et al., 2013; Sunde and Olsen, 2018). One of these areas was the forest and heathland area of Stråsø in Western Jutland, in the vicinity of the small villages of Ulfborg, Vind and Idom. As predicted a male and female wolf established themselves in the Stråsø area during 2016 and 2017. Following the settlement of the two adult wolves, the first juveniles were observed in June 2017 (Sunde and Olsen, 2018).

[1]https://www.15junifonden.dk/.

Since 2012, at least 35 wolves have been identified in Denmark following a combination of wolves immigrating from Germany, and wolves being born in Denmark (Olsen et al., 2021). At least 10 wolves have disappeared without any trace, making Denmark the country with the highest cryptic mortality among wild wolves worldwide (Olsen et al., 2021; Sunde et al., 2021). In April 2018, the killing of one wolf was by coincidence caught on camera (The Guardian, 2018). A paper published in 2021 concluded that the only likely explanation of the high mortality rate in Denmark was illegal persecution (Sunde et al., 2021); a conclusion supported by a previously published paper documenting a high acceptance rate for illegal killings of wolves amongst landowners in rural areas (Højberg et al., 2017). Recent European studies have also identified illegal killings as a primary driver of wolf mortality (Musto et al., 2021; Nowak et al., 2021).

Within the Danish context, escalating conflict over wolves and wolf management has played out in public during the last 8–10 years, especially on social media, in newspapers, on radio and television. The conflict stems from the combination of fear for the safety of humans, especially children, and the frustrations of local hunters that they are now competing with wolves for the local population of red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) and roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*). Additionally, a relatively high level of sheep predation by wolves, and various circulating narratives about wolves in Denmark, e.g., that wolves are brought into the country by people and that the wolves are dog-wolf hybrids that are therefore not "real" wolves, drive the conflict surrounding wolf management. Several local actors, together with local and even national politicians, have expressed the viewpoint that people must now "take the law into their own hands" (Sonne et al., 2019).

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We labelled the research design developed and applied in the WDP, the "critical-utopian dialogue approach". The design is rooted in the Critical-Utopian Action Research methodology (Egmose et al., 2000; Nielsen and Nielsen, 2006; Nielsen and Nielsen, 2016; Tofteng and Bladt 2020) with roots in Robert Jungk and Norbert R. Müllert's Future Creation Workshops (Jungk and Müllert, 1981). Future Creation Workshops seeks to empower participants (citizens) on common matters, such as natural resources and future planning, through a mixture of deliberation, joint fact-finding, and the envisioning of alternative futures. In traditional participatory processes or public hearings, citizens are "invited into" a pre-defined strategic space with objectives pre-defined by various powerholders united by certain technical and instrumental ways of reasoning and–in case of conflicts–a language of systematically distorted communication (Elling, 2010). In those settings ordinary citizens rarely get the chance, to define or re-define the problems based on their own everyday life experience (Clausen, 2016).

The Future Creation Workshops attempt to create a space for the citizens themselves, not only to define the problems and the questions relevant from the perspective of their daily life and experiences, but also to imagine "alternative futures," that is alternatives to those futures anticipated as given, unless we actively try to change the present trajectory (Jungk and Müllert, 1981). Combining elements from the Future Creation Workshops with experiences from Critical-Utopian Action Research, and guided by a Habermasian discourse ethic, joint fact-finding and exploration of "alternative futures," we labeled our research design "the critical-utopian dialogue approach".

An Alternative to the "Stakeholder" Approach

Traditional participatory processes are typically designed to give precedence to those actors and representatives–labelled "stakeholders"—who somehow have the power to influence decision-making and planning processes. From the 1990s and onwards the "stakeholder-approach" has become a widely used concept on environmental issues in public governance. However, the basic notion of "stakeholders" keeps participants "locked" in predetermined, strategic positions, hence making it difficult to find common solutions to common challenges (Clausen, 2016; Hansen et al., 2016; von Essen and Hansen, 2015). Applied in certain contexts, such as in wildlife conflicts like the wolf case, one can even argue that the "stakeholder" approach often reproduces and exacerbates the very problem it is supposed to solve by preventing any deliberative progress based on the commons to take place.

Contrary to the "stakeholder approach", the critical-utopian dialogue approach encourages participants to feel empowered to accept their agency potential and act accordingly. Instead of marginalising people by inviting them as fragmented subjects "into" the agenda and rationality already defined by others, they are, as citizens, encouraged to take on a common responsibility (Habermas, 1992a). However, in order to take responsibility as citizens, they have to be "empowered," that is to reclaim their positions as citizens and to be recognised as legitimate political "equals" (Honneth and Anderson, 1995). Only then, are they able to take on responsibility for society as a whole as agents of change.

The Wolf Dialogue Project

With a few exceptions all workshops were held in the evening and always started with dinner. The purpose of the dinner was twofold. On the practical level, starting with dinner made it easier for most of the participants to participate. The majority of the participants had regular working hours and by serving dinner they did not have to bother with dinner at home before heading out for the workshop. The second purpose was to establish an informal space for socialisation before the workshop making the transition from the informal pre-workshop situation to the more formal workshop easier. The dinner created a social space for small talk and the exchange of more informal information on everyday topics about participants' family situations, work life, local events, personal experiences and the like.

On a practical level, each workshop always started by asking the participants whether they found the following three ground rules justified:

- We do not interrupt one another
- No personal attacks
- We make short comments

The three ground rules were used as the simple tool applied to enforce a discourse ethic for the deliberative space we tried to create (Habermas, 1992b). The rules became self-enforced by asking participants for their explicit support.

During the workshop all comments and reflections made by participants and occasional invited guests, were documented by facilitators on wallposters visible to all participants. This gave participants the opportunity to correct misunderstandings and to ensure that the documentation of the workshops was a common and transparent process. After each workshop the poster documentation was transformed into a document and emailed to each participant.

Following the principles of the critical-utopian action research methodology the dialogue process was divided into different stages (Egmose et al., 2000; Nielsen and Nielsen, 2006; Nielsen and Nielsen, 2016; Tofteng and Bladt 2020). The first stage included two brainstorming sessions. In the initial session people were asked only to express their critique of the present situation including their concerns and whatever problems they associate with the issue. All concerns and expressed problems were recorded as short sentences or keywords on the wall posters. Following the first brainstorming session, each participant was then asked to prioritise two or three keywords, illustrating which concerns or problems were most important on a collective level. In the second brainstorming session, participants were asked to imagine the ideal future scenario in relation to the theme of the project. Just like in the critique session, participants were then asked to prioritise the two or three most important future scenarios. Guided by the facilitators, participants went through all prioritised scenarios dividing them into various sub-themes and each participant was asked to pick a theme to work with. Based on each participant's choice of theme several working groups were formed.

In the second stage the working groups developed their sub-themes even further before they gradually started to discuss how their particular vision for the future could be implemented, acknowledging the need for support from the outside in terms of knowledge, resources and/or the change of certain determining factors such as rules and practices. This stage included a number of so-called "research workshops" for which relevant experts were invited to answer questions raised by the participating citizens and to engage in dialogue.

Critical-utopian dialogue processes are always centred around common matters/problems, of relevance to a broader public. Participants were therefore encouraged to present their visions and gathered knowledge and plans to a broader public and/or policymakers and governmental agencies during the final stage. Presenting the outcome of the critique, visions and joint fact-finding process to the public was referred to as "the public stage". In the WDP, the public stage was combined with the development of a "participants' report," expressing the situation and findings, not from the point of view of the facilitators and research team, but from the perspective of the participating citizens.

Altogether the duration of the WDP was two and half years and consisted of 14 workshops, divided into two subsequent loops described in the following (see **Table 1**). The first loop was guided by the headline: "The impact on our community," and the second process was guided by the headline: "Our proposal for a new wolf management plan". Our description of the two loops is based on written documentation, primarily workshop reports from meetings, but also the participants' reports and other reports, documents or papers/books referring to the project.[2]

Loop One—"The Impact on Our Community"

The research team from AU launched the project by contacting the local village council of the two parishes Idom and Råsted on the outskirts of the forest and heathland area of Stråsø, to ask whether the council would be interested in co-hosting a local dialogue experiment. The village council accepted the invitation and through the council an invitation was sent out to local citizens in the area to participate in an information meeting on the 17th of August 2017.

Fifty two people attended the meeting, the majority locals. The research team from AU presented the dialogue experiment idea, including the applied method. It was emphasised by the AU team that they did not represent any pro or anti wolf positions, nor any formal authority or governmental agency, but only a research interest in conflicts about common matters. Based on that interest the AU team offered participants 1) the establishment of a safe space for people to express their concerns on common matters, as well as their common visions for the future guided by four simple ground rules (described below), 2) a process of joint fact-finding based on the participants' questions, and 3) the support to make the voices of the locals heard by the public. The research teams only stated four ground-rules for the process: 1) everyone should agree to participate as citizens, not stakeholders, 2) no interruptions while someone else was speaking, 3) no personal verbal attacks were allowed, and 4) in order to give everybody a chance to speak during plenary sessions, everyone should express themselves briefly.

After having presented the idea of the experiment, and outlined the promises and rules, participants were asked to discuss two prepared questions in smaller groups during the coffee break: 1) "How does the wolf conflict impact the local community?" and 2) "Are you interested in participating in such an experiment?". Following the talk during the coffee break several participants stressed that the conflict had had a negative impact on the community and that–as expressed by

[2]Unfortunately, the majority of documentation from the work is in Danish. The main recordings of the process are workshop reports recorded at each workshop, and later transferred into electronic reports shared with all participants of the Wolf Dialogue Project.

TABLE 1 | List of activities from the Wolf Dialogue Project 2017–2020.

Activities and timeline of the project
The Wolf Dialogue Project phase I, 2017–2018
Info-meeting, Aug. 2017
"Future-creating workshop". September 2017
Meeting, October 2017
Research-workshop I, November 2017
Research-workshop II, November 2017
Conclusions and documentation, meeting, February 2018
Local, public meeting, March 2018
Meeting with authorities, April 2018
Activities between phases
"Next step"-meeting, May 2018
Excursion and meeting, August 2018
The Wolf Dialogue Project phase II, 2019–2020
Meeting, June 2019
Meeting, Aug. 2019
Meeting, September 2019
Meeting, November 2019
Meeting with authorities, February 2020

one participant - *". . ..some people do not talk to each other in the grocery store anymore . . . "* Several participants also expressed that they felt excluded from the public debate about wolves and wolf management because of the heavily polarised, hard and personal nature of the debate and by the fact that they did not want to be associated with the hard and often vulgare rhetoric of either side of the debate. Based on what was communicated about this experiment, some expressed that they felt it offered a space for those who experience mixed feelings about the situation. Out of the 52 participants at the information meeting, 41 signed up for the WDP.

The actual dialogue project started with a workshop a few weeks after the introduction meeting. The workshop focused on formulating critiques and concerns (see **Table 2**), followed by a session of working with visions for the future (see **Table 3**). The stage that followed comprised of a total of four meetings, the "research-stage," where the participants first identified existing "knowledge-gaps" and on that basis formulated questions that they needed answered in order to qualify their visions for the future. During two meetings experts were invited to answer a total of 43 various raised questions and join the dialogue with the participants on wolves and wolf management (see **Table 4**). The purpose of the final meeting of this stage was to document and integrate the knowledge from the other meetings.

The experts invited included the biologist responsible for the Danish wolf monitoring program, a wolf researcher, a zoo director with experience in wolves' behaviour in relation to humans, a law professor and a wildlife manager from the regional state forest district responsible for documentation of wolf attacks on livestock. The process and the knowledge gathered was documented and integrated into the work of the participants, and ultimately into the first participants' report (Maarbjerg et al., 2018). Having a diverse group of citizens with varying backgrounds, the majority of whom are unfamiliar with writing and/or reading academic texts, it was tricky to develop an approach that ensured a process that did not exclude or disadvantage anyone. The AU research team made a first draft based on the produced workshop reports and asked for volunteers to read and comment on the draft. As a part of a planned workshop, all comments were presented to all participants and discussed prior to a revision of the first draft, again to be discussed with participants. Gradually a final report

TABLE 2 | List of prioritized critiques and concerns, as formulated by the participants in the start-up phase of the WDP, in 2017.

List of prioritized critiques from the start-up phase of the wolf dialogue project	
Insecurity and lack of knowledge causes fear (16)	Affects normal behavior (negatively) (2)
It is no longer safe to be in the forest/in nature (10)	Fear for the safety of children (2)
The wolf preys on livestock (8)	Concern that the authorities are dishonest when it comes to number of wolves (1)
Concern/fear for slow/poor management (8)	No trust in DNA-analysis (1)
Concerns/fears become negatively self-reinforcing (6)	Difficult to assess what information can be trusted (1)
Causes dispute on both local and national level (4)	Expenses for farmers (1)
EU decides too much (3)	

TABLE 3 | List of prioritized visions for an ideal future wolf management, as formulated by the participants in the WDP start-up phase, 2017.

List of prioritized visions for future wolf management	
The wolf can be regulated/culled (16)	People before wolves—proportions in relation to e.g. punishment for shooting wolves, as compared to crimes against people. (2)
Locally focused management (10)	Respect for different positions/viewpoints on wolf (1)
More research on wolves in a Denmark (8)	Export of wolves to other countries + wolf zones in the EU (1)
The wolf is harmless (5)	Faster response from authorities and more efficient DNA-analysis (1)
No wolves in Denmark (4)	The wolf as local pride and brand—"our wolf forest" (1)
More national influence on management—less EU influence (3)	An integral part of the ecosystem (1)
Reliable and accessible knowledge about the wolf (3)	Fenced gardens (1)
More vigilantism (2)	

TABLE 4 | Types of questions raised during the two research workshops of the first loop of the WDP, 2017.

Main topics and sub-themes from project part 1- research-phase
Topic 1: Wolves, monitoring, and research in Denmark
On the first of two research-workshops in part one of the project, the participants asked questions to researchers. The questions evolved around three main categories
Questions about monitoring and research on wolves in Denmark
Questions related to wolf behavior/biology and expected population trends
Questions related to human-wolf co-existence and experience from abroad
Topic 2: "The future management of wolves in Denmark and the potential for the community level to influence it"
On the second research workshop, law-experts and researchers assisted local participants in answering questions related to two main themes
Questions related to the EU Habitats directive and the wolf
Questions related to the potential for local-scale nature management

was finalised and printed. All participants were invited to be listed as authors.

In spring 2018, the project culminated in two meetings in which the participants presented their work to a broader audience. During the first of the two meetings, participants invited all interested fellow citizens from the two parishes to a public meeting. In preparation for the meeting, a working group was organised to develop a program for the meeting and decide who would chair and present. Members of the research team facilitated the talks and served as secretaries for the working group, writing minutes and coordination meetings and follow-up activities. A total of 99 local citizens joined the meeting held on 5 March 2018. After the participants from the WDP had presented the results everyone in the audience was given the opportunity to ask participants of the WDP and two invited "experts," namely the biologist responsible for the Danish wolf monitoring program, Dr. Kent Olsen and a wolf researcher, Professor Peter Sunde, both from AU, questions. The two experts had throughout the project been available for any questions raised by the participants. Strikingly, the questions were for the most part identical to the ones that had been raised in the early "research-stage" of the project. The public meeting caught the interest of several local as well as national newspapers, radio and television stations, broadcasting live from the meeting and several local participants and members of the research team was interviewed.

After the local public meeting, the WDP participants prepared a meeting for the members of the working group appointed under the Danish Wildlife Council (DWC)[3] to revise the existing national wolf management, as well as for officials from the Danish Environmental Protection Agency (DEPA) and the Danish Nature Agency (DNA). The point of this meeting was to present the outcome of the WDP and to have a dialogue. The invitation was initially met with silence and reluctance by the governmental agencies, but eventually both agencies, as well as the working group from the DWC accepted the invitation, and the meeting was held on 3 April 2018.

Both of these meetings were considered by the participating citizens of the WDP, to be very successful. The fact that both meetings offered the participants in the WDP a possibility to take responsibility for their own common situation, across internal differences, was likely the primary reason for the experienced success. Likewise, the invited representatives of the DWC and the officials representing the DEPA and the DNA were pleasantly surprised by the commitment of the locals, and at the meeting they expressed a strong admiration for the work done by the locals. The officials and the representatives from the DWC promised to take the local perspectives into consideration in the future wolf management and the DWC chairman expressed an interest in continuing the dialogue with the local participants in the years to come.

The meeting with representatives of the DWC, the DEPA and the DNA, and the completion of the participant report (Maarbjerg et al., 2018) concluded the first loop of the WDP.

In Between Loop One and Two—"What to do Next?"

When the first loop of the project had officially come to an end, approximately 20 participants expressed their interest in continuing the work in some form. Between the end of the first part of the project, and the beginning of the second loop, there was a gap of approximately 13 months. The timespan reflects uncertainties about the exact purpose of a second project part. A few meetings were held, including an excursion to the campus of the project team from AU[4] and the nearby Kalø castle ruin from 1313. The meetings attempted to clarify the possible content and ambition of a second loop, including discussions of whether to open the group to new participants or not. The question of opening up the project to new participants however was met with resistance amongst several participants, who were afraid that the trust established amongst the existing participant group would be compromised, if new participants joined. There was also a concern, that inviting new participants

[3]The Danish Wildlife Council is an advisory board to the government on issues related to wildlife management. The members of the council are representatives from some of the most significant interest groups in Denmark, including farmers, forest owners, hunters, nature conservationists, bird watchers, animal rights actors.

[4]The project team is located at the historical research campus at Kalø from where wildlife research has been made since the late 1940ties. The place is well known especially by hunters.

into the project would mean starting all over again, repeating much of the work already done in the first loop.

The opening for jumpstarting part two came, when in March 2019 it was announced, that the work on a revised national wolf management plan had been discarded altogether. The reason was that the working group on wolf management under the DWC, were unable to find common ground on the matter. As a final attempt, the chairman of the DWC, decided to appoint a new working group, with the mandate, not to revise the existing plan, but to develop a completely new management plan for the wolf. The remaining participants from the WDP now had a tangible goal. The goal was to inform and influence the new working group under the DWC on this new management plan. It was agreed that this opportunity should not be wasted, but exactly how to make an inclusive process took a while to figure out.

Loop Two—"Our Proposal for a New Wolf Management Plan"

Initially, a meeting was held to discuss how to proceed. Participants agreed to allow a few new participants to join the process and that the objective was to create a catalogue of more specific suggestions and reflections as a contribution to the work taking place at the national level. By recommendation of the AU project team, participants decided to approach the process following the template of an adaptive wolf management plan developed by a group of biology master students from AU during a course project in the spring semester of 2019. Since the student report was initially based on input from the WDP including conversations between students and locals the AU team figured it would be a good point of departure. Two students from the beforementioned project group volunteered to help the locals apply their own ideas and reflections to the template.

During three workshops held between June 2019 and November 2019 the participants and students worked together to develop goals and objectives to be incorporated into a future adaptive management plan. The three workshops followed the same procedures of facilitation, dialogue, and documentation as described in the first part of the WDP. Each workshop started with a summary of the previous meeting, before participants were divided into smaller groups to develop the one, two or three fundamental objectives that they considered important to address in a new management plan. At the end of each workshop each group presented the outcome of their discussions, including agreements as well as disagreements, and received feedback from the other participants.

During the first workshop the groups discussed the theme "Mitigate resource conflicts," at the second workshop the themes "Minimise fear" and "Increase safety" were discussed and at the last workshop participants discussed the themes "Improve knowledge," "Improve/increase international collaboration" and "Wolves in Jutland". In cases where participants were not able to attend a workshop, they were encouraged to call or email their ideas and reflections to the AU project team. A few participants took advantage of this opportunity, although attendance was largely stable between 15 and 18 participants.

Based on the records from all the meetings, a comprehensive document was prepared in a second participant report, with information about the process, suggestions, and reflections, including internal differences (Frøjk et al., 2020) (see **Table 5**). Hence, it was possible to ensure accuracy as well as transparency. Like the first participant report it was important to ensure that the document would reflect the participants' perceptions and not the facilitators', hence the report drafted by the AU research team was revised twice by the participants. At first, the draft was shared online before a follow-up meeting in which the document was discussed section by section. Citizens who had not participated in the second loop but had been part of the first one also got the opportunity to meet and share their thoughts and comments. The second time, the final report was sent out to all participants, and everyone was asked to actively respond to whether they would endorse the report or not. In that way it was possible to ensure the document's legitimacy.

Once the report had reached its final form, the task was to find out how best to present it and thus complete the project. A working group was set up to invite the DWC's new working group to a meeting on 6 February 2020. At the meeting all eight members of the working group of the DWC attended. Additionally, two representatives from the DEPA and three representatives from the DNA joined the meeting. At the meeting the chairman of the wolf working group under the DWC,[5] presented the status of the working group and the plan for the future process. Afterwards the locals presented their recent work in general terms, including their overall reflections and ideas regarding a new wolf management plan. After the plenary session locals divided themselves into three groups, each responsible for a particular objective. The national wolf working group and the officials from the DEPA were also divided into groups each joining a group of locals. Here, the locals presented their ideas on their specific objectives. Every 20 min the representatives from the national wolf working group and the officials would rotate to the next group of locals representing a different objective and so on.

RESULTS

The WDP generated some public attention. Quite a large number of local and national newspaper articles, radio and television stations frequently reported on the project while it was ongoing and interviewed citizens participating in the project. The national radio and television broadcasting network, DR, went one step further, and–since they were not allowed to broadcast live from the WDP workshops–based on consultations with the project leader, made a full evening live television broadcast of their own dialogue workshop with locals living in or nearby the wolf territory, invited experts and representatives of interest groups. Several participants from the WDP were also invited to for the DR workshop.

[5]The chair of the wolf working group, Jan Eriksen, was also the chairman of the Danish Wildlife Council.

TABLE 5 | An overview of input from the participants WDP to the expected new national wolf management.

Mitigate resourse conflicts	Minimise fear	Increase safety	Improve knowledge	Improve/increase international collaboration	Wolves in Jutland
Minimize/optimize use of livestock for nature management (of heathland) in wolf territory	Better access to updated information and knowledge about the wolves in specific areas	Increase the access to updated information about wolves and make a guide, describing how to act, if one encounter a wolf	Do more research on the sensitivity of wolves towards human beings	Strengthen international collaboration on wolf and wolf management	No restriction of local citizens access to nature in wolf protection zones
Wild deers/burning as an alternative to livestock (sheep) for nature management of heathland	Provide information on the behavior of wolves during different live stages (e.g., pups)/times of year, so people know what to expect as "normal wolf behavior"	Evaluate different types of deterrence	Evaluate different strategies to moderate wolf-behavior—e.g., means of deterrence	Establish wolf-zones on an European level	Make studies of how human activity is affected by wolf-zones
Cover costs to secure sheep if the state wants to continue using sheep	Include a plan of action under various, potential scenarios involving wolves, livestock or people	Make a more clear definition of a "problem wolf"	Document the effect of wolves on game, especially red deer	Establish an international network for reporting wolf-observations and sharing information, like the Danish www.ulveatlas.dk	Make guidelines for wolves-tourists how to behave on private land/forest in wolf territories
Animal husbandries should have access to advisers/support free of charge, when experiencing wolf attacks on livestock	Clarify existing legal means on deterrence and their efficiency	Make the results of DNA-samples from attacked livestock public. That will make it easier to decide if it is a "problem wolf	Distribute information and news about wolves in communities near wolf-areas		
Provide more information and financial support for sheep farmers on various protective means (sheep dogs, fences etc.)	Ensure the wolf management plan to be based on factual knowledge and experiences from a Danish context	Make guidelines for the visual identification of DNA-verified "problem wolves," so that they can be culled as quickly as possible	Reoccurring dialogue- and information meetings with authorities and researcher, for interested locals in wolf areas		
More clear guidelines for governmental institutions on possible actions to implement in relation to mitigate wolf conflicts related to wolves—e.g., safe transportation of children to school	Establish reoccurring dialogue- and information meetings with authorities and researcher, for locals living in wolf territories	A wolf defined as a "problem wolf" in Germany should also be defined as "problem wolf" in Denmark	Establish an online wolf-platform for locals, researchers and others		
Map if the occurrence wolves affect the value of real-estate		Define a maximum limit of wolves in locally and nationally	Establish a center for dialogue and distribution of knowledge		
Estimated max wolf capacity in terms of human/societal tolerance, and effect on other wildlife species		Minimize risk of habituation of wolves by the use of scaring techniques—e.g., the use of rubber-ammunition)	Increase access to support and information, e.g., *via* a hotline and/or libraries in wolf zones		
Set a maximum of one wolf pack pr. "wolf area" (5–8 wolves) and define when culling is needed		If a wolf is to be culled, it should be done in vicinity of other wolves in order to increase fear for human beings	More integrated collaboration amongst all actors working with wolf/monitoring in Denmark		
There is an ethical dilemma between the protection/care for livestock and the legal status/protection of wolves					

Several theses related to the project have been published by students from various universities (Mikkelsen, 2018; Schrøder, 2018; Steinvig et al., 2019; Fox, 2020). Internationally three publications have described the WDP (Ripley 2021a; Ripley, 2021b; Cirino, 2018). However, this paper is the first scientific publication reporting the general results from the concluded project. The scope of our presentation of results and our discussion will be the same as the general scope of the entire experiment, the possibilities to develop a productive alternative to the systematically distorted communication that characterises the Danish wolf management situation, applying a critical-utopian dialogue approach based on a Habermasian discourse ethic and joint fact-finding process. The ambition of the project was through empowerment to encourage the participants to take responsibility as citizens in respect to the needs of their community and society as a whole. Simply put, we have divided our presentation of results into impact on the local level and impact on national level.

Impact Local Level

Over time participants accepted and adopted the discourse ethic required by the tools and methods applied. Several times during the process and after the conclusion of the project, participants pointed out the three simple ground rules as critical for what they saw as the success of the entire process and dialogue. Whenever someone got carried away violating the ground rules, other participants would kindly remind that person about the agreed upon rules. We also witnessed how the process gradually evoked a kind of social responsibility at the individual level, even by some of the more rebellious participants. One example occurred during the planning of the local public meeting during loop one. The appointed working group responsible for planning the local public meeting had six members and included "Jamie".[6] At workshops and during personal conversations "Jamie" was often difficult to interpret due to their ironic jokes, sarcastic and sometimes provocative and conspiratorial comments. One task of the working group was to decide who should chair the public meeting. "Jamie" offered themself as the chair and since no one else volunteered, the group accepted "Jamie" as the chair, although with some hesitation. At the actual event "Jamie's" ironic jokes, sarcastic and sometimes provocative comments, were replaced with a well-prepared and serious chairmanship and strong loyalty to what was agreed upon.

The discourse ethic enforced by a few simple ground rules and the facilitators, served as the platform for advocating the participants' own perspectives, concerns, and a platform for the development of their suggestions in relation to wolf management. Hence, we observed a movement away from being a project initially driven by the AU research team, to a process gradually being driven by the locals themselves. Only on two occasions did the discussions get so much out of hand that the ground rules were violated, both times during the second loop. The second loop was characterised by a smaller and more polarised group of participants and for a relatively long period of time uncertainty about the objectives of the second loop.

[6]This is not the real name of the participant refereed to.

The first occasion was at a workshop after a full day excursion into wolf territory co-organised by participants from the WDP, for locals as well for a group of students from Roskilde University. After the excursion a workshop was planned for the locals and one of the participants had invited the entire group to his/her house for the workshop. The spouse of the host joined the workshop, and gradually took over the agenda advocating for all wolves in the area to be removed and arguing the WDP to be a hoax initiated by "wolf lovers". The second occasion was at another workshop towards the end of loop two during a period when local, national, and social media were occupied by the question about why wolves disappeared. The project leader, who apart from researching wildlife conflicts also researches illegal hunting, was interviewed several times by newspapers, radio and television, to comment on the subject. At the particular workshop three participants expressed a strong dissatisfaction with the fact that the project leader in public had pointed out illegal killing to be a likely explanation for why wild wolves apparently disappeared in Denmark. Both incidents were critical in the sense that they could have put a stop to the WDP, and both times the research team considered whether they should end the project but decided both times to continue.

The project formally ended with the meeting with the national wolf management working group during loop two, in January 2020. Despite the project having officially ended several of the participating citizens are still engaged in the implementation of ideas developed during the two loops. Several participants have continued developing the idea of a local centre for knowledge and dialogue on nature and wildlife and recently received a grant of 860000 Danish Kronor, equivalent to 130,000 USD to make a plan for its implementation and funding (see also "New Conflicts Emerge"). Potentially such a centre will be able to deal with most of the issues raised during both loops of the WDP (see **Tables 3**, **4**, **5**).

The contact between former participants and members of the research team has also been maintained. From time-to-time participants phone or email researchers to catch up on the wolf management situation, to ask various questions or to share some reflections. Likewise, members of the AU research team occasionally call or email former participants, either to catch up on the local wildlife situation or to ask them to present to students about local perspectives on wildlife conflicts. In addition, local participants have, during and after the WDP, been invited to share their experiences with wolves and with the project, by organisations and other communities.

In terms of what has changed in relation to the local management of wolves, several participants have reported that the situation is less heated than before. This is not solely a result of WDP but also because there are currently fewer wolves in the area and that locals over time have probably become more used to the situation. But the fact that the WDP has procured some valuable knowledge locally, addressing some of the existing concerns, has likely also contributed to a less heated situation.

On a more practical level the WDP indirectly contributed to the solution of a specific problem. In the early stages of the project the younger child of one of the WDP participants who lives inside the wolf territory experienced being followed by a wolf walking

home from the school bus. The family asked the local municipality for help but was initially rejected. However partly supported by the WDP the incident got quite a lot of attention by local and national media (BT 2018). Eventually the municipality invited the family to a meeting, and the municipality decided to change the placement of the bus stop to reduce the distance for the child to walk which solved the problem for the family. In terms of the changes on the national level the locals are still waiting for the new wolf management plan to be implemented (see Impact National level).

New Conflicts Emerge

As mentioned previously local citizens have continued to develop the idea of a local centre for knowledge and dialogue on nature and wildlife. Presented to the working group of the DWC, representatives from the DEPA and representatives from the DNA at the last workshop, and later to the municipal director of the local municipality, the idea has gained a lot of support. A centre could potentially be an institutionalisation of the dialogue and joint fact-finding space established by the WDP, representing local common problems, and giving locals a voice in nature and wildlife management.

A few months after the WDP concluded at the beginning of 2020 with the meeting with the DWC and DEPA officials, the citizen initially presenting the idea of a centre, invited some former members of the WDP, representatives from various organisations, officials from the local municipality, officials from the local state forest district and members of the AU research team, to join a meeting. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss how the idea of a centre could be developed and eventually implemented. Members of the AU team offered to serve as a kind of secretary for the workgroups, documenting meetings. Several meetings took place during 2020 and 2021 and gradually a written description of the centre and its purpose was made.

Early in the process the working group meetings revealed local tensions and gradually the process reflected a more traditional strategic decision-making process. After approximately a year the tensions cased a second group to be formed and the external representatives from various organisations, officials from the local municipality, officials from the local state forest district and the AU research team pulled out. The new working group, rooted in the village council that initially co-hosted the WDP, applied for–and recently received–a grant to hire a professional to make a plan for the implementation and funding of a Knowledge- and Dialogue Centre for Wildlife and Nature (our translation).[7]

Impact National Level

As previously mentioned, the WDP managed to attract the attention of the DWC and various governmental agencies. In both loops, council members and officials from the DEPA were invited to come to Idom-Råsted to listen and to engage in a dialogue with the locals. In the first loop the governmental agencies were suspicious of the entire project, but eventually they accepted the invitation.

The two meetings, and the two participant reports made during the WDP obviously functioned as an inspiration for DWC's work with initially the attempt to revise the existing wolf management plan from 2014, and later for an entirely new wolf management plan to replace the first one. From the proposed new management plan, it is evident that many of the inputs from the WDP have been incorporated as central goals, such as fear, safety, communication, and involvement (Danish Wildlife Council, 2020). The new wolf management plan displays a greater appreciation of the need to incorporate the human dimensions of wolf management for its long-term success and legitimacy.

The contribution of the WDP to the development of the new wolf management is credited in the introduction of the final proposal for a new wolf management plan to the government. The plan has not yet been accepted by the government, but the Minister of Environment has announced in a press release on 14 October 2021 (Miljøstyrelsen, 2021) that more resources will be designated to local dialogue meetings.

DISCUSSION

Wolf management conflicts may seem to be unsolvable "High conflicts", and traditional governance methods often fall short (Gieser and von Essen, 2021; Niemiec et al., 2021). However, this should not dissuade attempts to address such conflicts. On the contrary, taking the described consequences of the wolf management conflict into consideration, we argue that we as scholars hold a strong responsibility to deconstruct the conflicts and carefully examine potential solutions. Doing nothing does not seem to be a viable alternative, but we as scholars are also restricted by the limits of our own interpretations of the world, why we sometimes are forced leave our comfort zone and engage ourselves in the conflict. Like the late German-American psychologist Kurt Lewin once said: *"If you want truly to understand something, try to change it."* This was what we tried to do in the WDP.

Before entering our discussion, we want to stress two points. First and foremost, we want to avoid any deliberate "glorification" or exaggeration of the outcome of WDP. We do not claim the critical utopian dialogue approach to be "the solution" to all wildlife conflicts, in fact, this particular method should just be seen as a "vehicle" to test a Habermasian discourse ethic in a practical deliberative process in a real empirical setting. Additionally, the WDP was a small experiment including only a small number of citizens and based on a low budget. Together with the fact that the experiment was made in one of the most safe and political calm parts of the world, a Scandinavian welfare society, an important question to raise is the relevance of this experiment for other places in and outside Denmark. At the end of our

[7]In Danish: "Udvikling og afprøvning af Viden-og dialogcenter for vild natur og mennesker."

discussion, we will get back to the question of whether there are any universal lessons or experiences one can take form the project.

Secondly, we want to emphasise that it was not the purpose of the experiment to transform critics of wolves or wolf management into wolf supporters or visa-versa but, as previously stated, through the critical-utopian dialogue approach to create a shared and more productive responsibility for the common amongst the participating citizens. Guided by the initial header, "The impact on our community," the ambition of the WDP was to create a space for people, living in close proximity to wolf territory, in which to deal with existing concerns and identified problems, to develop solutions and to give the local citizens' a voice.

We will not discuss the content of the WDP and the various issues raised and explored by the participants, but will instead focus on, to what extent, and how, the project might have created a better understanding of the possibilities for developing a more productive alternative to the systematically distorted communication that characterises wolf management, creating responsibility by empowering citizens instead of stakeholders, using a critical-utopian dialogue approach.

Two Fundamental Differences

The WDP offered two fundamentally different takes on the wolf conflict, compared to more traditional governance approaches. Firstly, the WDP was not driven by any other strategic interests, than the curiosity of the research team to explore the potential of the dialogue approach described, within this specific context. Often researchers and/or facilitators are driven by certain governmental interests, or certain NGO interests and thereby, consciously or subconsciously, commit to specific values or predetermined goals or outcomes (von Essen and Hansen, 2015). In the case of the WDP, the research team chose to take a step back, focusing on the democratic deliberative process, and not on the promotion of certain conservation values, but instead trusting the ability of the participants to evaluate the situation and to make justified and responsible decisions.

Secondly the WDP differed fundamentally from traditional governance approaches, by not focusing directly on the wolves, but instead on the broader impact of the wolf conflict on the participants themselves and their community. By this shift of perspective, the WDP opened a totally different arena, and thereby broke with the dichotomy and deadlock created by strategic predetermined interests that dominate the public agenda. Based on the media coverage of wildlife conflicts, nuances are often lost in how public and social media portray the situation as very polarised. The WDP revealed that reality is much more complex, and that the participants' experiences and values are much more ambiguous and nuanced.

Building Trust and Evoking a Common Goal

Early in the process participants acknowledged the impact of the wolf conflict to be a common issue, and that there was no other alternative than to collaborate despite differences in opinion, in order to deal with the specific problems experienced. However, in order to reach a point, from which participants could communicate their experiences, values, and the knowledge they collectively created, including their ambiguities, it was necessary to establish trust between the participants themselves, trust towards the AU research team, as well as trust towards invited experts and officials.

The trust towards the AU research team facilitating the WDP developed relatively fast even though a general mistrust towards AU were expressed by several participants and the motives of the AU research team were questioned in the initial phase. The expression of mistrust towards the university deceased during the project but it required the attention of the AU research team throughout the entire project. Although only a fraction of the community participated in the process, local people started to use the slang-expression, "attending wolf" when talking about the WDP, and at the local community centre the workshops of the WDP became an integrated reoccurring event. We do not know how WDP is perceived among non-participating community members, but WDP participants reported that many conversations took place locally, and similar to the spouse at the WDP meeting in the private home, participants also reported that several community members were suspicious of the whole process. Like the expressed mistrust towards the university many participants also shared a mistrust towards authorities and questioned the real motives of wildlife managers and wildlife officials.

In the initial phase of the WDP participants expressed that they often shied away from uttering their concerns, especially to people living in nearby cities, as they would sometimes experience being ridiculed for them. During the first couple of meetings the project team thoroughly documented the concerns and fears of the local citizens. It was evident, that many of the local participants experienced that their concerns about living in close proximity to wolf territory were acknowledged by the WDP. This recognition of concerns had a positive and immediate effect on the polarisation among the participating citizens. This is not to say that the more radical positions disappeared, but we witnessed an almost instant movement towards much more nuanced reflections and away from the more "radical" expressions and exaggerations of viewpoints.

Apart from being the primary documentation for the AU research team of the process, the instant documentation of reflections, comments, inputs etc. on the walls during meetings, served as a physical common output from each meeting. Everyone had a shared ownership of these workshop reports which is why the facilitating team on several occasions had to turn down journalists, who wished to attend a meeting. To secure the safe space, nothing from the WDP was communicated to the broader public before the participants felt prepared to present something to the public themselves.

The main purpose of the "research stage" was to create an integrated platform of knowledge and learning in order to identify the real problems and possible solutions. The encounter with "experts" provided answers to the raised questions, but also offered the participants an insight into the

nature of research including all its uncertainties. Further, meeting the researchers face-to-face gave the participants the opportunity to see them as subjects with various competences and holding different values, and not just as distant objects that occur in newspapers and on television, or who are demonised in social media. Participants hereby gradually developed a nuanced perspective on the quality of data but also a kind of respect for the willingness of researchers to visit their community and engage in–sometimes difficult–dialogue.

From being doubtful about the chance to have a say, and even more to make a difference, participants gradually saw the opportunity to have an impact. Gradually participants took on the responsibility to formulate their own experiences, visions for the future and ideas for solutions to specific problems. This collective responsibility culminated with the public meeting with their fellow local citizens and with the two dialogue meetings with officials and the DWC visiting the community. Especially the first meeting with officials and the DWC made several participants euphoric and–some–even quite emotional. It was also evident, that both the collective effort put forward by the participants, and especially the everyday-perspectives, concerns, and experiences of the group, made an impression on the officials and representatives of the DWC.

"Slow Impact Syndrome"

During the WDP "time" proved to be a critical factor in two ways. Building trust internally and externally required time, while participants at the same time were rather impatient with the pace. Especially when it came to the governmental processes and the existing bureaucracy of governmental institutions, it was hard for many of the participants to accept that it was not possible to implement obviously "good" ideas immediately. As one of the participants stated "*. . ..most people living in the countryside are used to acting immediately, when it is needed. We cannot understand why governmental institutions cannot do the same* . . . " This point is reenforced by the fact that 4 years after the start of the WDP, and 1 year after the DWC proposed an adaptive wolf management plan (The Danish Wildlife Council, 2021), the plan has still not been transformed into a new governmental wolf management plan, although elements from the recommendation have recently been adapted by the government.

The frustrations with the slow pace of changes caused some participants to withdraw during the WDP. Despite the slow impact, and exhausting meetings continuing late into the evenings, most of the initial participants during loop one attended workshops regularly. During loop two, less than half of the original participants participated, believing that they somehow could have an impact on the new wolf management plan. WDP has undeniably had a significant impact on the officials, as well as the members of the DWC, who visited the local participants. This is reflected in references made to the WDP by DWC members and officials in various settings, including DWC meeting minutes and in the suggested new wolf management plan. As such, the WDP managed to impact the agenda of future management more than most people would have expected. However, it is still a work in progress, and on a local level some still find that there is nothing or little to "show for it" yet.

This leads to the question to what extent have participants actually influenced wolf management? Obviously, the formal power structures related to wolf management have not been changed but are still embedded in the representative political structures exercised by representatives of governmental bodies such as the DWC and DEPA. However, considering that power is not just reflected by formal structures, the participating citizens have had a considerable impact. The longer-term impact made by the participants of the WDP, formally and informally, remains to be seen and will be the focus of follow-up studies.

Balancing Minority and Majority Needs

For the duration of the project, both loops one and two, facilitators had to balance the amount of time each participant was allowed to speak during meetings. Some participants would utter the same critiques and complaints time and time again. It took time away from the meetings and became a source of frustration for some of the other participants. This posed a dilemma to facilitators, as they both wanted to give the minority the space and time to express their frustrations, while also recognising the tiering effect it had on the majority of participants. However, balancing minority and majority needs was important to maintain the broad spectrum of voices, otherwise the WDP could be reduced to an echo-chamber in which the same arguments would have been repeated over and over again. It was vital to the AU research team to maintain the diversity of the group for as long as possible as it contributed to the dialectic dynamic.

Throughout the WFP, there were situations when participants temporarily relapsed into old narratives and beliefs contradicted by facts or science. One explanation is once again the time-factor combined with impact. It takes time to internalise new knowledge and replace previous beliefs with new ones. At the same time participants are impacted by the social control of their fellow citizens within and outside the WDP group, who question the credibility of experts and officials. Nevertheless, conversations with participants long after the WDP ended, have confirmed that the reflection process has continued, also among some of the more reluctant participants.

Twice the AU team experienced such setbacks and losses of control, that it was discussed by the team whether the WDP should stop. During the first incident it was evident that the choice of a non-neutral venue–the private home of one of the participants–at the time of the incident, lack of a clear purpose of the second loop, and a lack of a sufficient critical mass, were significant drivers of the "crisis". Although the second incident was not as critical as the first one, both incidents demonstrated how frustrations and distrust can easily reappear. Following both situations, the project leader decided to continue, and the critical incidents proved not to be as critical for the process as anticipated but revealed a kind of "WDP-resilience" that was able to overcome the setback. That said the "WDP-resilience" was not strong enough to avoid the post-WDP conflict between locals competing for the ownership of the Knowledge- and Dialogue for Wildlife Centre. While it seemed possible to create a rather strong unity, and a significant impact during the WDP, local participants were not able to maintain the unity after the AU team pulled out as facilitators. This indicate that

the adaptation of the communicative processes applied in the WDP, might work as long as they are facilitated by professionals, but will require more time and practice in order to be internalised on a community level.

An Alternative?

To evaluate to what extent the WDP offered a productive alternative to the systematically distorted communication that characterises current wolf management, two questions can be raised: 1) did the WDP succeed in creating a safe and equal space for the participants to transcend their private interest and to exercise their responsibility for the commons? 2) To what extent has the WDP had a positive impact on the existing deadlock characterising the wolf management conflict? And for the relevance of the readers of this outlet a third question must be raised: Are any of the lessons from the WDP transferable to other political and cultural settings?

Based on the documentation from the workshop reports, participant reports, and personal notes, it seems that the WDP did create a relatively safe space of deliberation and recognition for most participants. As we recognise that power differences and expressions of power can be subtle and are embedded in social, political, cultural, and communicative structures, it would be naive to believe that the space created by the WDP has made all participants equal. Asymmetric power relations and conflicts exist within and between individuals and groups everywhere and are as such unavoidable. The question is how we work our way around these power relations and conflicts. Based on the relatively long duration of the project, and the desire of several participants to continue with a second loop, it is evident that the approach offered by WDP had something to offer in relation to the impact of the wolf management conflict on their everyday life. The fact that the participants managed, supported by the AU research team, to develop two catalogues of concerns, reflections, ideas, and solutions for the future wolf management, and collectively to communicate these concerns, reflections, ideas, and solutions to national authorities and the DWC, is a strong indication that the participants developed social and political responsibility for the commons as citizens.

In regard to the second question, the participating citizens did inspire the national authorities and the DWC and officials from the DEPA. And through the evoked interest from the media, the WDP and the participating citizens brought new perspectives into the media, and also raised an awareness about the nature and consequences of the way the wolf management conflict was portrayed and reproduced in the public. It is difficult not to perceive this as a positive impact on the deadlock of the wolf management conflict. Nevertheless, it is harder still to determine how strong this impact has been.

On the third and final question about whether any of the lessons from the WDP are transferable to other political and cultural settings, less homogeneous and more unequal than Denmark one might look at similar types of dialogue and joint fact-finding experiments, or processes guided by the same type of discourse ethic and ambition to create social and political responsibility through recognition and empowerment. Experiences from a range of other political and cultural settings, including Sweden, Mozambique, Nicaragua, and Colombia, indicate that it is possible in different social, political, and cultural settings to create spaces for dialogue on the commons guided by a common discourse ethic, making the participants–at least for a period of time–equal as citizens, as an alternative to strategically distorted communication (Dalsgaard, 2009; Sriskandarajah et al., 2016). In a world where populism and fake news threatens our ability to govern, there is an urgent need to explore the potential for similar approaches in different political and cultural contexts and on different scales, in order to test its applicability.

CONCLUSION

The WDP proved that it was possible, *via* dialogue and joint fact-finding, and based on the commons and simple rules of communication and recognition, to create a more constructive take on the wolf management conflict. The WDP managed to gather local participants, external experts and governmental institutions in an integrated learning process that explores visions and solutions for the future. Both on the local level and on the national level the project made a significant impact on the wolf management agenda.

The results from the WDP are promising and indicate that a dialogue approach, guided by a Habermasian discourse ethic, can be a useful "tool" in unchaining "High" wildlife conflict. The outcome of the WDP could inspire further studies on ways to empower and engage local citizens as a resource in the resolution of wildlife management conflicts.`

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary Material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent to participate in the study was not obtained as we obtained verbal informed consent.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

HP, CD, GF, and AJ have been a part of the research project described and have all contributed to the manuscript. Being the project leader of the research project HH developed the theoretical framework of the paper. HH, CD, and AJ developed the outline. HH and CD drafted the first version of the manuscript. HH completed the manuscript for submission. GF proofread, edited and commented on two drafts and on the final submitted manuscript. The distribution of work required for the manuscript

has been approximately like this in order of authors: 50%-30%-10%–10%.

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