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The Char and the Oystercatcher. The Value of the Wild in Rossfjord, North Norway

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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study explores and compares the relationships that locals in Rossfjord, North Norway, have to the oystercatcher and the sea-going Arctic char respectively. Both these animals are highly valued locally, while the valuations at first look very different. The oystercatcher is protected by building bin-cases for its nesting, while the Arctic char is killed and eaten. Discussing these valuations against the value theory of David Graeber, I argue that they both connect to an underlying perception of the freedom and autonomy of wild animals, where what is not fully understood enhances an experience of wonder and appreciation of what I call *the wild*.

KEYWORDS Human–animal relationships; value; narratives; hunting and fishing; conceptions of wildness

Introduction

The oystercatcher first laid its eggs down by the seaside, but the high tide took them. Then it nested in the hill between the house and the sea, but a fox took the eggs one of the first nights. Then one day when I was working in the yard, it landed on the barn-foundation, close to me. It walked on the wall, wiggling its head, moving its beak back and forth along the wall, acting as if it was looking for something. When it came to the middle, it stopped and screamed several times directly at me. That afternoon I made a bin-case for it; put it on a pole, roughly a meter above the ground, close to the entrance of the yard. I filled it with sand from the beach. Now it has nested there every year since. (Hans, June 2016)

This article is an attempt to understand people's relationship with two different species of animals in Rossfjord, North Norway: the sea-going Arctic char (*Salvelinus alpinus*), and the Eurasian oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus*). This article is based on fieldwork in the Rossfjord area performed between 2014 and 2018.¹

The initial question is connected to the very different, if not contrasting ways, these animals are appreciated and valued. The value of the Arctic char is somewhat of a

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paradox as the char is smaller and a rarer catch than the related species of salmon and sea trout, but still gets more attention locally. As opposed to the oystercatcher, it is an example of an animal that is highly valued but hunted and eaten and considered a delicacy. The oystercatcher is appreciated and helped in protecting its nestlings. This valuation is of itself remarkable as the help and protection is a response to the birds' own request. As opposed to the Arctic char, its value is not connected to use or advantage in any ordinary sense of the term. The Arctic char and the oystercatcher are thus examples of very different processes of the valuation of wild animals, which is the background idea of comparing them.

What we call 'value' can represent very different sorts of things, from the value of caught fish, which can mean food on the table or even money, to understanding a bird's needs and acting to fulfil them. In the first case it is impressions left by the hunt for narration and catch of the Arctic char that makes it valuable, while the other is an act of recognition: the oystercatcher seems to be valuable in itself.

Appreciation of the two species in Rossfjord is based on very different forms of recognition. The oystercatcher brings no practical benefits to people's economic or subsistence activity. It does not even accept to be fed by humans as it lives on a relatively specialised diet of shells, mussels, snails and worms (see e.g. Bonner 1989) that it finds in abundance here at low tide. Nevertheless, the protection of its nestlings is common here and goes far beyond national law. The values of care here can directly affect the lives of birds and wild animals. Sometimes orphan fox puppies are fed, more often sea-gulls, but most visible is the protection of the oystercatchers. However, it always happens on their initiative – people do not choose the bird – the bird chooses them. This touches something deeply, soberly expressed in the opening story.

The Oystercatcher Lands in Your Yard

In Rossfjord, the oystercatcher nests by the road, near farmhouses and yards, from the river inlet to the uninhabited coastline 20 kilometres further out. In uninhabited areas just outside of the community it is hard to find. There seems to be an obvious relationship between the nesting of the oystercatcher and human settlement. Fifty years ago it was more common for the oystercatcher to nest closer to the sea, away from humans and farmhouses. This has changed, however, most likely due to increasing populations of fox and birds of prey. In local cultural practice, one can also find clues partly explaining the phenomenon. Residents in Rossfjord are very friendly toward local birds in general with only a few exceptions like the great black-backed gull (*Larus marinus*) and the hooded crow (*Corvus cornix*), who are known to be notorious egg and nestling-thieves. People are especially friendly towards the oystercatcher, the earliest and most visible animal marking the beginning of spring in Rossfjord. There are between 50 and 100,000 pairs of oystercatchers that nest in Norway every summer (Kålås et al. 2014). The oystercatchers spend the winters in the Wadden Sea or eastern England and return here between one and two months after the winter solstice. For a three-month period in mid-winter the sun is completely absent. For an equal

period in summer, the sun shines 24 hours a day. The difference between the dark period of winter and the endless daylight of summer is dramatic and profound. The arrival of the oystercatcher marks the beginning of this transition for the people of Rossfjord as well as large parts of Northern Norway.

In the Faroe Islands, March 12th is considered the normal arrival date of the oystercatcher. In Rossfjord its arrival is not precisely connected to the calendar but may be an even more accurate predictor of variations in the seasonal cycle.

The oystercatcher lives a relatively long time compared with many other local birds and is reported to reach around 40 years of age. However, in locations like Rossfjord, it struggles to keep its nestlings alive, losing them to eagles, seagulls, and most often to its local nemesis, the red fox (*vulpes vulpes*). The nestlings obviously cannot fly and they cannot swim well. The oystercatcher very seldom nests on roofs or in trees, probably due to nestlings long and weak legs which can break when jumping down from heights. As a result, the nestlings are on the ground, most vulnerable during the bright summer nights when people are sleeping and the roads and yards are quiet.

Valuation of Animals

According to David Graeber, value is what makes action meaningful within the larger social whole. Graeber points to the lack of precision in anthropologists' former use of this notion. Value can refer to very different things, from a measurement of the degree to which objects are desired, to something connected to meaning systems, and to 'conceptions about what is good, proper, or ultimately desirable in human life' (Graeber 2001: 1).

Crucial in Graeber's understanding of value is action and hindsight. Graeber understands value as a connection between human action and a larger *social whole*, which could be purely personal but often relates to a shared cosmology. Understanding the appreciation of the char and the oystercatcher, according to Graeber's thinking, is a question of understanding the broader context of how the bird and fish species become valued in relation to human action. From this perspective, the appreciation of char and oystercatcher is seen as an improvisational act, given value as a process where the *hunt* and *catch* on one hand and *protection* on the other is evaluated or related. Contextualising the appreciations in this way references different relationships in terms of contrasting *social wholes*. However, they are at the same time just two different aspects of the lives of my informants from Rossfjord, who both protect birds and fish Arctic char.

Connecting the appreciation of the oystercatcher and the Arctic char to Graeber's analysis of value (2001; 2013), the valuation of Arctic char aligns better than the valuation of the oystercatcher. The hunt for and catch of the Arctic char is the basic act for which the valuation results. Graeber understands value as '... the way people represent the importance of their own actions to themselves' (2001: 45). In the case of the oystercatcher, it is however the behaviour of the bird itself that is the basis of human valuation, and not that Hans builds a bin-case for it as stated in his introductory quote. This places the process outside of Graeber's more anthropocentric theory of

values: the oystercatcher is valuable in itself, but the realisation of this follows an act of the bird. It is not a human act, only a human hindsight.

This finding suggests a multispecies approach to a theory of values where action is the basis of hindsight and valuation, and is not restricted to human activity. Multispecies ethnography (Kohn 2007; 2013; Nadasdy 2007; Haraway 2008; Bubandt 2018) is an ethnography that is not confined to humans, but is ‘... concerned with the effects of our entanglements with other living selves’ (Kohn 2007: 4). The oystercatcher chooses people and acts toward them. This is the act that calls for human hindsight and reflection, the act that inspire valuation. As we shall see, the birds’ insistence on nesting in people’s yards can create some pressure on the recipient, but also an experience of meaning and wonder. The value that makes the actions of the oystercatcher meaningful is not connected to economic rationality or economic value, but possibly to what Graeber would define as ‘meaningful’, or to his definition of ‘moral values’, which he connects to what in a given cultural universe should or *ought to be* valuable (2001: 1). The latter type of value is somewhat problematic when compared with my Rossfjord findings. From this perspective, the valuation of the oystercatcher seems to me to be of a more spontaneous character, connected to how local cosmology connects to nature and the wild, than to any moral prescriptions about what people *ought to do* in the highly individualistic, egalitarian culture (s) of North Norway (see for example Archetti 1984; Anderson 1985; Eriksen 1993). How this local cosmology considers animal actions and characteristics in the creation of the value of the birds, and to some extent the Arctic char, will be addressed later on.

Arctic Char and Local Knowledge About Fishing

The mythology around and appreciation of the Arctic char can be understood in at least two different contexts. The char is appreciated by the quality of its meat and on how the *catching of it* is experienced and recognised socially. In the Rossfjord area, the catch predominantly takes place in the sea, from mid-May to mid-July. The angling for char in the sea is basically no different from angling for seatrout or salmon and consists in casting lures or flies from the beach to try to get a bite when the fish comes close to the seabed. Seatrout, Arctic char and Pollock, hunt for the same prey in shoals and these shoals are often given away as flocks of seagulls attack krill (*Euphausiacea*) or sand lances (*Amodytidae*) from above when the hunting fish chase them to the surface. Respectively, the shoals of seatrout, Arctic char and Pollock look different to a trained eye, and a shoal of Arctic char is more dense and higher in the water than the two other species. To identify and monitor the shoals and then actively fish the char-shoals is the only way to increase the chances of catching Arctic char instead of other species.

My point is that the Arctic char is especially appreciated in local narratives, but this is not so much reflected in the actual practices of fishing. However, as an example of the kind of species knowledge that is generic of a good catch and of a good hunter or fisher, Arctic char knowledge gains importance. The combination of being a cherished

food item and an unpredictable and often scarce prey tends to give stories of the Arctic char a special place in local culture.

One such story concerns where the char goes when it leaves the sea: out to a close-by island and up to a small lake in the woods, more than 10 kilometres from the sea. On its way up, it passes a big lake where only a few of them stop. Why the majority of the char continues up to the small, hidden lake, nobody knows as many of them probably leave and eventually spawn in the big lake. To be able to catch the char in the little lake, the story goes, you have to be there the first week after its arrival. After then it disappears and probably hides or waits in some deeper sections of the little lake becoming almost impossible to catch. Sea-trout and salmon almost always stop in the pools as they swim up-river, making it possible to catch them in the lower parts of the rivers, even if they eventually are heading higher up. The sea-going Arctic char is more unpredictable. ‘They just swam straight through five o’clock this morning’, a local angler from the watercourse says with a headshake when I visit the river in mid-July.

The char is elusive but also very precise in the seasonal way it migrates to and from the sea. According to Hans, it disappears from the bay below his house between 11th and 15th of July. When the char disappear from the area, all of them go. The char in the sea shows its extreme capacity for coordinated collective behaviour, just like it does on the way to spawning. It is thus a precise element in the natural cycle of the fjords and lakes where it lives.

Narratives on Arctic char also reveal qualities of the relationship between the practice of the catch on the one side and the narration of the catch on the other. A story of a straightforward catch, unless it is unusually big or surprising, is very seldom an interesting story. Cherished stories among hunters and anglers in Northern Norway are interesting because they are funny, tragic, dramatic or unusual. Sometimes a popular story about salmon or sea-trout could even combine several of these characteristics, while the stories about Arctic char on the other hand are consistently about its strange behaviour and sometimes about the angler’s ability to overcome or understand it, and then catch it anyway. The stories also deal with how the char uses waterways, small ponds and deep or shallow water in ways that other species of anadromous or freshwater living fish would not. The char-knowledge thereby connects to a wider knowledge about landscape and a variety of other species of birds, fish, or other animals that become relevant in its surroundings. For the expert fisher or angler, the stories are exchanges of experiences, knowledge and importantly, recognition. A caught char becomes an element in the presentation of self in highly specific cultural contexts. First, in an old egalitarian, skill-based hunting and fishing culture, and second, in a modern culture of recreational angling. For Hans, who practiced shore seine fishing until the general ban in the early 1970s, the ability to distinguish a shoal of char from shoals of other species was crucial, and are often underlined in narratives on shore seine fishing. After the shore seines were forbidden, angling for char is the only legal way of catching it, whether in freshwater or in the sea.

The starting point for this investigation was an observed specific appreciation of the Arctic char in the northern Norwegian county of Troms. The coastline of Rossfjord was one of the places where angling for sea-going Arctic char could be investigated,

and it was here that the idea of comparing the valuation of the char and the oystercatcher first occurred to me. When I was visiting or angling from the beach by Hans' house, he came down for a talk and to watch us anglers trying to catch char or sea-trout. As the char fishing in the sea and the nesting of the oystercatcher takes place in the same period of summer, the bird was highly visible with its black and white feathers and orange beak, opening shells at low tide or incubating in the case that Hans had made for it. When he then told me the story quoted in the introduction, I decided to expand my analytical focus to include the relationships with the birds and make a sort of comparison of the relationships and valuations. With one or two exceptions, all my findings stem from visits to places in the Rossfjord area where several species of anadromous fish can be found together with the Arctic char and where the oystercatchers nests close to the farmhouses.

Relationships with Wild Animals in Rossfjord

Rossfjord is a local community of around 1000 inhabitants a few hundred kilometres north of the polar circle. Originally, Sámi people inhabited Rossfjord but the visible culture, language and social life are Norwegian. Open expressions of Sámi heritage are relatively few in the area. The semi-commercial fishing for char and seatrout with shore seines was in practice up to the early seventies and was an integral part of typical North-Norwegian subsistence patterns of small-scale husbandry and fishing (Saugestad 1988; Nielssen 2014). This type of fishing depended on conditions with little or no wind and the fisher's ability to distinguish shoals of char from shoals of pollock – not always an easy task.

From the beginning of June, locals depart from their homes to a nearby area of the seaside where seatrout, salmon, pollock and Arctic char pass close to the seabed. Anglers mostly fish with lures, a few with flies, often catching pollock which is especially appreciated in early summer for its liver which is used in the popular local dish, *seimølja*. However, people are most after sea-going species of the salmon family: seatrout, Arctic char and salmon.

When getting a bite on the line from a fish it is hard to determine at first what species it is. As the angler gets the fish near land she will try to get a glimpse of the fish in the water to determine which one of the three species it is (pollock is easier to distinguish from the others when hooked). If it is an Arctic char it is appreciated with a howl to nearby fellow anglers: 'It's a char!'

The sea-going Arctic char is a variant of the fresh water living Arctic char, which under certain conditions migrate out into the sea for shorter periods in the summer. The sea-going Arctic char is not a separate species, but represents a specific strategy which it adopts when living in coastal rivers or lakes (Nordeng 1983; Kristoffersen et al. 1994; Halvorsen 2010). Like the seatrout and salmon, the Arctic char gets its silver-like colour from contact with saltwater but with white specs instead of brown or black.

The sea-going Arctic char lives five to six weeks in the sea before it migrates back to its spawning places in lakes and rivers. If it survives spawning, it stays the winter before migrating to the sea again in May or June, when lakes and rivers are generally ice-free.

Based on the above, we can safely say that the sea-going Arctic char is more appreciated in stories than in the actual angling for it. These stories address types of behaviour that are difficult to fully know, and this adds to both the value of (a caught) Arctic char, and to its 'wildness'. There is something that feels true in understanding the wild char. *The wild* can be a trait of nature that gets special attention because it is hard to understand.

We have seen that the appreciation of the Arctic char and the oystercatcher are paradoxically different, while people in Rossfjord apparently move between them friction free. What are the understandings or contexts that allow this? When it comes to cultural traditions, Rossfjord is an example of a relatively common uncertainty about ethnicity and heritage in many North Norwegian communities. Rossfjord is first of all old Sámi land. Norse and Finnish immigrants have settled here under different circumstances at different times. My own family-history exemplifies a fairly common basis of uncertainty about ethnicity and cultural heritage. My great-great grandfather moved here from Gudbrandsdalen (Lesja) in south-Norway. He married a local woman from a Sámi/mixed area in nearby Dyrøy, who probably had Sámi ancestry.

The Norwegianisation of the Sámi and Kven population which tried to assimilate them into a uniform Norwegian culture and ethnicity (Thuen 1995; Hansen and Olsen 2004; Minde 2005; Myrvoll 2010; Nergård 2019), further confuses the question of ethnicity, ancestry and cultural background. Sámi people are predominantly a Western, European people with a slight genetic influence from the East (Tambets 2004). As a result, it is often difficult to differentiate between Norwegian, Sámi and Kven people based on their appearance. It is impolite to ask directly about one's origin because of the racism and discrimination that was connected to the Norwegianisation policy. Hans claims that 'we' descend from Sámi people, while other locals deny Sámi ancestry. But even though it is difficult to determine who people 'are' ethnically, old Sámi and possibly Kven understandings of nature, that differs from mainstream Norwegian beliefs, clearly remain.

Generally, relationships with wild animals are understood as a privilege that people cherish and prolong in Rossfjord. In summertime, care an orphan fox pup or a nestling can suddenly become a project and the centre of family attention. However, what looks like a semi-domestication of such a wild and shy animal as the oystercatcher in reality implies a reciprocity, and a great deal of respect for the integrity of the birds. Oystercatchers are moreover agents of their own will that announce their intentions. Their actions are understood to have meaning.

The valuation of the oystercatcher, however, is just part of a more general tendency of curiosity and openness toward wild animals in Rossfjord. This contributes to conceptualisation of animals and to features of landscape as subjects rather than objects. One example of this is a saying that a local lake has a 'double bottom'; a notion that relates directly back to the Sámi pre-Christian understanding of *sáiva*, or holy lakes and mountains with connected spiritual beings (Wiklund 1916; Bäckman 1975; Hultkrantz 1987). In a *Sáiva*, the fish were especially shiny and fat, but difficult to catch, as it could hide in the deep, or even in the lower sections of the double-bottomed lake, thus equivalent to the sayings about the behaviour of the Arctic char after its migration to freshwater.

There are also stories about troubled places (*urolige steder*) in the landscapes of Rossfjord, where incidents in the past suggest a certain carefulness when approaching, even if no danger can be seen. However, it is more often the day to day interaction with wild animals that gets attention.

One day in June, Hans came down to my car, eager to relate some gossip. Now that I am in on the protecting of the oystercatcher, which indicates that I have shown interest and demonstrated some knowledge connected to it, all gossip relating to the birds is relevant.

Have you heard about Jon?

Jon built a new house and he dearly wanted magpies to nest on his property. Moreover, what do you know! One day this spring a pair of magpies started to build a nest in a tree close to his garage (laughs). However, he thought they were too slow. He put a ladder up the tree and helped them out with some effective twigs. He never saw them again! (Laughs again)

Why is it such a funny story? I think it reveals someone without crucial knowledge, a knowledge that Hans perhaps thought I shared with him. It goes something like this: A human encounter with a wild animal such as this – a bird building a nest close to your house – has something to do with honour. It represents the crossing of a divide that puzzles people, especially as the decision is the animals and obviously signifies a kind of recognition of which components you cannot truly know. To understand human relationships with the birds as a kind of domestication undermines the value of it: *it is valuable because it is wild*.

In the case of the magpie and oystercatcher we can say that their value is connected to something uncompromised and pure that is ruined if they are domesticated by humans. At the basis of this valuation lies an understanding of the freedom of wild animals. If the behaviour and decisions of magpies and (especially) oystercatchers were expressions of a mechanical nature, they would hardly be noteworthy at all. To understand the animals' behaviour as significant, they must be understood as free, thus opposing what Anna Tsing calls a Kantian understanding of freedom as '... the ability to transcend nature's call to what ought to be done' (Tsing 2013: 29).

Without an understanding of animals as basically free, their approaches or perceived requests would hardly be meaningful at all. Alas, if a wild animal approaches you at its own initiative, it is understood to mean something. If it is hard to understand exactly what it means, it has surprisingly gained value. Following Graeber, the value that gives meaning to the actions of the birds is connected to their autonomy and basic freedom as wild animals. Elicited by animal behaviour, however, it falls aside of Graeber's model, where only human action is taken into account.

Jon is portrayed as someone who lacks knowledge about, and thereby respect for, the delicate aspects of relationships with wild animals. Neither magpie nor oystercatcher should be approached in ways that press the birds towards a closer relationship. All steps toward a closer intimacy must be taken by the birds themselves, as pressure from humans will only cause stress and chase them away, like what happened in the case of Jon's futile nest building.

Locals follow *their* birds with genuine interest and will bring the disappointing news to the neighbours when their protection fails and the nestlings are killed; ‘the fox killed all three nestlings early this morning’ Ola, a retired fisherman complained to his neighbour, Hans, one afternoon early in July. ‘We should have taken out the fox puppies!’ Hans replied, ‘Well, it is too late now’, reflecting on the age of the puppies rather than the dead nestlings.

After Ola had left, I asked Hans if he did not like foxes. ‘Not in the nesting season’, he replied with a smile acknowledging the paradox. He likes both foxes and nestlings.

As a lumberjack and fisher, Hans has lived his whole life in close contact with nature. He now makes a living as a fisher while hunting and angling in Rossfjord is more of a hobby. Ola, now in his eighties, is a retired fisher like many of the elderly men in this part of Rossfjord.

‘The oystercatcher is *Freda*’ (protected), Jan, a retired engineer, claims with some pride, using a term most often used in public language for the regulation of hunting and fishing. He could just as well have said *sacred*, as this protection goes far beyond the prohibitions of hunting or fishing that the term normally signifies.

For Svein, a retired local carpenter, the nesting became something of a problem as it blocked the entrance to one of his outhouses, while a pair of seagulls nested on his supply of firewood. ‘I was almost relieved when the eagle took one of the seagulls so that the other one gave up the nest’, he claimed, underlining the obligations he felt imposed by the initiative of the birds. This initiative is obviously crucial for the creation of emotions, values and obligations towards the birds.

The contrast between this attitude and hunting and fishing, which implements killing of animals may seem dramatic. The narratives on the catch of Arctic char however underline the difficulties of the hunt and not the kill. They are also a way of honouring the char. It is unpredictable, strange and beautiful, and it takes a skilled angler to catch.

Recognising that nature is not fully understood, it leaves authority there on the one hand, but also implies a sacralisation of the human connectedness to unknown aspects of nature. This is what makes the oystercatchers nest a kind of sacrament: an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace (Bateson 1972), that connects your emotions to a world that is not dead or mechanical or downgraded, but unknown, inviting and spiritual.

As I hope to have demonstrated, the value that people give the char and the oystercatcher becomes understandable when it is connected to a more general understanding of nature in Rossfjord and likely in many other northern Norwegian rural communities. The wider region of Troms has not been part of this investigation, but the construction of case-bins for seagulls and oystercatchers is visible in the whole region and is a telling sign of care for and attention towards the nesting birds from the local populations.

The Value of Arctic Char

The unpredictable char functions as a representation of the environment different from others both locally and regionally. As its habitat is limited to Northern

Norway, it represents an environment where special skills and knowledge are key to survival and subsistence mastery. A char fisherman who does not invest all his knowledge, effort and skill will never be successful. Fishing, just like hunting, differentiates the participants dramatically according to variables like interest, effort and time invested in understanding natural phenomena, just as in other forms of traditional hunting (Sahlins 1968; Henriksen 1973; Woodburn 1998; Lee 2002).

Char knowledge, therefore, is like a currency that circulates through the medium of narration, which is at the same time an arena for the realisation of value. Respect and recognition from others as fellow experts and equals balances this exchange. This system of circulation continues into contemporary angling practices, which is a sort of syncretistic system, in continuity with symbols of nature-knowledge from another age. Except for the consumption of its meat, it is through this medium of narration that people create the appreciation or value of the Arctic char.

When catching Arctic char, anglers cheered when they realised what kind of fish they had hooked. Moreover, they spontaneously made plans for it as prey. This one is for my aunt! That's a good food fish! Or, taking it home to his most significant other – his wife. Almost all caught Arctic char is given away or shared, according to anglers. During this fieldwork sea-going Arctic char have been given by anglers to close family like wives, aunts, siblings and in-laws, but also to neighbours and friends. The receivers are predominantly women, probably because they are the ones trusted not to ruin the good food. As it is rarer than sea-trout and salmon, it is also often set aside when caught and saved for a special event, or refined through salting and smoking, enhancing its value further. Through this circulation and the narration discussed above, the catch of the char is given meaning and value in a living local culture.

The Creation and Realisation of Value

For Tim Ingold (2000), animals have significance as they are contributing to people's life worlds, (based upon a type of evaluation Graeber (2001) would call linguistic or meaningful). In relation to my data, it becomes clear that neither the value of Arctic char nor oystercatcher fits into one single definition of value in Graeber's tripartite typology of meaningful, sociological or economic value. They are seen as more than signs, symbols and value for humans, especially the emotions and obligations created by the oystercatcher's request. This points to a different and extended frame of the analysis than Graeber's more anthropocentric theory of values. Animal behaviour must also be taken into account.

For Karl Marx (1961), value stemmed foremost from the creative act of production. The source of value we are concerned with remains hidden through the process of fetishisation. This occurs when the market exchange of commodities leaves the impression that their value stems from a position in the market and not from time and energy invested in its production. Terence Turner, who reworked this perspective in his analysis of the domestic cycle and village structure of the Kayapo, distinguishes between the *production* of value and the *realisation* of value (Turner 1971, in Graeber

2001: 76). The sea-going Arctic char is part of a tradition where knowledge is a crucial means of production. It is circulated in sharing or gift giving and realised in consumption or through narratives. To some extent, we can distinguish between the circulating and the realisation like Marx would distinguish between production, circulation and consumption of goods. We can only do this when we view the char as an object, as food. If we see it as a symbol of skill and knowledge, circulation and realisation become one in the same. It is not circulated in the anonymous market but given or shared, thus becoming difficult to fully separate from the giver (Mauss 1966). The value of the char is fully realised through consumption, sharing and narration, but more importantly, it is something that connects to aspects of nature that (regardless of the catch) still comes forward as mysterious.

The oystercatcher, on the other hand, invites itself into your yard, thus initiating or intensifying a relationship between bird and human. The appreciation of the oystercatcher expressed through the acceptance of its assumed request does not give it the same kind of value that is attributed to the char. It is close to meaningless to consider its *production* value when it is not circulated or consumed in any ordinary meaning of the terms.

We could say that while the char is eaten, the oystercatcher is observed. Where the char is shared as a meal, the oystercatcher is shared as an experience of the wild. Stories about the catch of the Arctic char can be compared to stories about nest building or exotic meetings with wild animals.

The value of the oystercatcher is closer to Marx's notion of *use value*, which he defined as the value of a product before circulation. Use value can be an aspect of a commodity and is 'anything necessary, useful or pleasant in life' (1977: 1). Therefore, even if the bird is not consumed it is considered a pleasant guest. What it is not, however, is a commodity or a human product. Moreover, the oystercatcher opens up a personal relation that is beyond use. The relationship produces new living oystercatchers if it is successful. In this sense, nature is considered to be producing value on its own, but neither Marx nor Graeber seem to give this origin of value much attention. The value theory deduced from practices like the protection of the oystercatcher show how native and indigenous cosmologies can include this natural creativity. As exemplified by the response to the oystercatcher's request, value in Rossfjord can have its origin in the actions of wild creatures.

The Catch and the Story of the Catch

People in Rossfjord do not attribute human or human-like qualities to the char. They in fact do the opposite – they talk about its strangeness and about problems with understanding its behaviour. This focus is not surprising when considering the environment in which these comments and narratives take place. Hans and Ola are old-school household economy survivors and thus deeply concerned with subsistence. The division of labour in more traditional subsistence lifestyles in Northern Norway, dictated that men were occupied with fishing, hunting and short-time paid jobs in the commercial fishing industry, while women were responsible for the care of domestic

animals and the day-to-day work on the farm (Saugestad 1988). Hans and Ola have thus worked outdoors much of their lives, which characterises their presence and activity in their rural neighbourhood. While occupied most of the time with work in the yard or nearby land, there is always time to read the signs of nature. Flocks of seagulls that move decisively towards an area in the fjord, a shoal of pollock or Arctic char that moving along the seashore, are monitored and commented on between other tasks. Sometimes an opportunity for a catch opens up and commands immediate action, while other times it is an unusual trait of nature such as a pod of long-finned pilot whales (*Globicephala melas*) visiting the fjord that gets attention.

Svein, a retired carpenter who has a summerhouse nearby, shows much of the same combination of activity and constant monitoring of the surrounding nature. He is almost always on the move, often out in a small boat with someone from his family, angling for char, pollock, or setting a line for halibut. At the same time, a pair of oystercatchers and a pair of seagulls are nesting close to the walls of his summerhouse, tolerated and loved despite Svein's occasional complaints.

The nesting birds are perhaps a nuisance, but birds like these have much more finely tuned senses than humans and therefore habitually serve as helpers in finding fish. In this sense they have a spiritual parallel in *saivo*-animals described by Hultkrantz (1987). These spirit animals are connected to the *såiva* beliefs discussed previously and were the helpers of Sámi *noaidis* (shamans). This is central to the discussion in Hultkrantz of ordinary people (Bäckman 1975; Hultkrantz 1987). Sámi could inherit their spirit animal from parents or grandparents.

They could seek them in *Såiva* areas or meet them in dreams. Thus, any individual could turn to 'zoomorphic guardian spirits in order to obtain spiritual help' (Hultkrantz 1987: 1). The connection between the profane practice of using animals (mostly birds) as helpers and signifiers in the open landscapes of North Norway, and the spiritual practices and beliefs in guiding spirits is a classical trait in Sámi culture. The experience-based and the spiritual are not contradictory but complementary (See for example Myrvoll 2010; Nergård 2013; 2019).

For the shore seine fishers of the past, as for most hunters and fishers, observation and understanding of the behaviour of their prey was crucial. One example of such knowledge and perceptiveness is the ability to determine what kind of prey a shoal of fish is hunting. The behaviour of both Arctic char and sea-trout are very different when hunting krill which they do discretely, showing only their noses above water, as compared to their jumps and splashes when hunting sand lances. Knowledge about relations and connections between different species of animals give observers the possibility of using some animals as signifiers of others, so that seagulls, Arctic terns or sand lances can signify shoals of char, pollock and seatrout to the trained eye. One's story of a catch should signal some knowledge, preferably modest, and thus present the fisher as knowledgeable and skilful. Such modesty connects to the wider realisation that nature is not fully understood, and thereby not fully mastered by anyone. The storytelling should be sober and based on the bare facts, mostly leaving explanations to the listeners. Such a story could also have a pedagogic aspect where observations of the behaviour of the char could teach others the tricks of

shore seine fishing. Most important is the ability to distinguish a shoal of char from pollock or other species. ‘The Arctic char pushes the waves’ (*skyv sjøan*), is a typical saying connected to recognition of an Arctic char shoal, here recollected by Helmer, a retired fisherman:

There was no wind that day and I spotted the char shoal pushing the waves on my way to visit my neighbor, so I rushed over to him and we took out the boat and barely managed to set the shore-seine before the shoal disappeared. Had it been a windy day, I would never have spotted the shoal, as it was eating krill, very discretely.

Hans recollected the massive amount of Arctic char in the sea here in the mid-1980s when asked by researchers from the University of Tromsø to help catch char with the shore seine:

The shoal filled the entire bay, so I just set the seine in the very end (*sneppen*) of it. We caught 230 char in one single cast. Had I set the seine in the middle of the massive shoal, I would have lost it as they would have dragged it down.

The problems associated with catching Arctic char in stationary nets in the sea is another topic on which several of the former beach seine fishers have commented. ‘The Arctic char has scouts in front of its shoals, so you will never catch more than one or two’, one fisher claimed. When confronted with this information, another fisher claimed that he knew this but always placed nets parallel to land, to catch the flying shoal. No other informants had heard of or observed this practice. It would be very hard to foresee what direction the shoal came from and therefore how to place these parallel nets. It seems very likely that this is not true. People here however consider lying in fishing and hunting stories common and almost legitimate, especially as ways of limiting competition (Olsen and Thuen 2013). North Norwegian sayings like, ‘He lies so well he believes it himself’ (*han lyg så han trur det sjøl*) or ‘Downsize to acquaintances’ (*slå av for kjentfolk*) are often humorously invoked in the telling of fishing stories.

Lying, bragging, or being modest about knowing the sea or other parts of nature in Norwegian/North Norwegian culture has become a classical theme since Fredrik Barth’s account (1966) of information management on a Norwegian fishing boat (see e.g. Maurstad 2002; 2004; Svensson 2007; Olsen and Thuen 2013). Most of this literature tends to be very anthropocentric. It risks missing out on how fishing and other forms of interaction with nature take place in a natural environment where animals also can be considered to partake in secretive and deceiving attitudes. Myrdene Anderson (1985) addresses this when she shows, among reindeer-herding Sámi people, that not only humans are considered to be deceiving, but also animals:

The working dog knowingly malingers from its assignment on the range, the missing child is not lost but rather hiding out with neighbors, the sibling has not borrowed but rather stolen the heirloom iron pot, and the draft reindeer is only feigning injury by limping (Anderson 1985: 330).

This is the same and not at all controversial for fishers, hunters or pastoralists: Animals hunted or fished hide, evade, fly and run off. When you hunt you are often hiding and

when you are angling you are trying to trick the fish into believing that your lure or fly is fish food. Deceit and secrecy are at the heart of many interactions between humans and animals, on both sides, and this tendency is reflected in narratives on Arctic char-fishing.

A good story should have some drama to it, so many ordinary fishing experiences do not survive as fishing stories. The result of such variables in this local culture is that the exotic, strange and bizarre behaviour of the Arctic char is further exaggerated. The char in fresh water can apparently disappear from a lake in periods, and the whole school can hide in very deep or surprisingly shallow water. The day-to-day quality of angling/fishing practice goes unnoticed in stories and narratives as it is an implicit part of practices and is ordinary, not interesting, dramatic, or new. These characteristics of the narration of Arctic char shows how their actions are central to its value, thereby connecting its valuation to animal action. Thus, the actions of the Arctic char and oystercatcher are key to the value of both species.

Char and Oystercatcher Connected

The arrival of the oystercatcher marks the beginning of spring while the char in the ocean marks the arrival of summer. At that time ice has gone out and the rivers are open all the way to the spawning grounds in the inland lakes. This is a certain sign that the short summer has come to Rossfjord. Aside from both animals signalling the turn of the seasonal cycle, they are also rarities. The char is known for its strange behaviours and the oystercatcher does not show much curiosity towards humans, except for choosing nesting place close to them. They are thus parts of nature but elusive, as is our understanding of them. They are also seasonal harbingers and in their own way threshold figures of time, signifying the dramatic shift between seasons.

Both have names (*Valas* and *Cagan*) from old, forgotten languages that today are substrates in north-Sámi language, which means that the naming of them is older than the shift to contemporary Sámi language. Ante Aikio connects the paradox of the European genetics of Sámi (Tambets et al. 2004) and their eastern, Finno-Ugric language to linguistic shifts that he anticipates took place approximately 1500–2500 years ago (Aikio 2004: 26). More than five hundred words from these ancient languages remain in contemporary north Sámi language. The freshwater-living Arctic char is called *rávdu* contemporary Sámi language, a radically different name than *Valas*, the ancient name of the sea-going type, that has no known etymology (Aikio 2004: 6).

Conclusion: Living Close to the Forces of Nature

Can the relationships between humans and oystercatchers in Rossfjord be described as a kind of domestication? Initially, I did not see it like that. The nesting bird in the periphery of Hans' yard brings him no economic or material benefit nor was the relationship initiated by him. The result, however, is that it does not nest in Hans' house but close to it, in a *proxy house* that Hans made for it.

Bente Sundsvold (2015) describes the relationship between humans and eider ducks in Vega, North Norway, in a way that is relevant to this discussion even if her case seems closer to domestication than the examples I have given. The eider duck, just like the oystercatcher, initiates relationships with humans by making or moving into nests in farm-like areas. Sundsvold claims that the motivation for this must be protection against predators, which is in line with my initial analysis of the motivation of the oystercatcher. Sundsvold (2015: 266) connects this interpretation to Fijn's concept of co-domestication, which defines a relationship in which interaction with several species is included (Fijn 2011). In this sense, the protection of the oystercatcher could be seen as a form of co-domestication, however one that is outside of subsistence or other economic activity. Fijn uses the term to clarify some sort of motivation in both animals and humans, while the questioned domestication in Rossfjord is explained only from one side by her concept.

As we have seen, the valuation of the Arctic char revolves around its strange behaviours which makes it hard to understand. This applies even more to the oystercatcher, which cannot be fed or approached by humans under normal circumstances. The perceived request for living in one's yard is an exception, but leaves an impression of meaning and wonder as the distance separating humans from creatures of the wild is temporarily minimised. The quality we call *wildness* is in both cases a factor that contributes to appreciation. The wilder the animal is, the more it gathers weight as a subject through its *wildness*. The wild is furthermore not only 'out there', but has a presence in both yards and barns.

Returning to Graeber and the question of the very different valuation of the char and the oystercatcher, the point here is to understand these valuations through practices in their cultural contexts. The valuation of the char is based on a conceptualisation of its mystical character and the problems with understanding an attractive prey. The oystercatcher lives in resident's yards as a mystical guest, revealing a notion of value originating outside of the human realm, elicited by the request of the animal, and thus exemplifying what Anna Tsing calls a 'more-than-human sociality' (2013).

Graeber's sociological implied value must come closest to interpreting the human response, but to connect the act of case/nest-building to what *should* be valuable would however mark a retreat to rather cynical thinking about social prestige. This would attack Graeber's own cardinal point about altruistic acts and their systematic translation as a kind of selfishness (Graeber 2001; 2013).

The history of Rossfjord is in many ways a history of discontinuities. The language shift in Sámi culture left place names in these landscapes that are 'completely opaque' (Aikio 2004: 9), while other names have survived in some form through the ages. The people who lived here in ancient times thought about the landscape and the animals and named them over thousands of years. The meaning of many such names have been long forgotten, which is understandable and common for old names generally, but the circumstances of Rossfjord are special.

The colonisation of Sapmi and Norwegianisation of the Sámi population entailed another discontinuity; the change of Sámi place names into Norwegian-

like ones that often provide no meaning at all. Translation to Norwegian predominantly was based on loan adaptations, mimicking the sound of the original Sámi name (Helander 2004). To give names meaning, one would have to translate them back into Sámi, which people are often reluctant to do because of the discrimination and racism that made Sámi people hide their ancestry. As a result, whole communities are reluctant to accept and communicate a Sámi past. The very name *Rossfjord* could be an example of this. *Ross* is obscure in the Norwegian language. The Old Norse meaning could be ‘horse’ (*Hross*), but it is hard to see clues as to why. In contemporary Norwegian, *Ross* (e), can signify a gust of wind – but wind is everywhere here – and not exclusive to *Rossfjord*. If we refer to substrates in the Sámi language, however, the word *reašši* means, ‘flat sea-shore with a clay bottom’ (Aikio 2004: 11), which is a precise description of the topography of the fjord. If we look elsewhere in northern Norway, we find places like *Risfjord*, *Nordreisa*, *Sørreisa*, *Risøyhamn*, where the topographic description fits and suggests a connection.

The last kind of discontinuity concerning relationships to animals and nature is the large-scale closure of local husbandry and farming that together with small-scale fisheries defined places like *Rossfjord* adaptively and economically well into the 1960s. Until then husbandry and daily contact with domesticated animals was common. Today, these practices are almost totally gone and the activities in *Rossfjord* that reflect our ancestor’s connection to animals, wildlife and nature, have become activities of leisure such as angling for Arctic char or care of the oystercatcher. Such activities give meaning to a deep continuity with the land, even without the presence of the traditional place names and concepts that suggest an experience of wonder and connectedness.

What is the value of the wild? Does it fall outside of Graeber’s model? In his analysis of the value-theories of the Maori and Kwakiutl respectively (2001), he presents them as opposites. This understanding is based on the treatment of important valuables like heirlooms and not value per se: Maori people can never truly own an important valuable that they obtain: It belongs to history anyway, as it is closely connected to the stories that made it a famous heirloom in the first place.

Kwakiutl people *become* what they obtain, as valuables here are ceremonial things, a sort of theatre prop, giving one the right to play a certain role in a ritual. The problem with Graeber’s use of the general concept of value is that his focus is on valuables and heirlooms and not about what living cultures like Maori and Kwakiutl hold valuable. The motivation for participation in the Kwakiutl potlatch could just as well be connected to a specific cosmological view of nature, as to competition for important roles in the Kwakiutl potlatch. The Maori concept of nature connects directly to divine creativity, to a *tapu*, a general prohibition, which must be lifted before any harvesting (Graeber 2001: 170–172). Generally, value here clearly transcends what we consider to be ‘valuables’.

Moreover, Graeber is relatively unclear about whether cognition in general is socially determined:

There is something to me quite fascinating about such hidden talismans. Descriptions of them (see Best 1909, 1929, 1942) almost invariably emphasize that their power was twofold: not only did they increase the fertility of birds or fish, but they also drew them in from other forests, or other parts of the sea. Clearly there seems to be an echo here of the zero-sum game of cognatic kinship ... (Graeber 2001: 178)

Even if Graeber does not explicitly come forward as a Durkheimian when considering if cognition is socially determined, he certainly does not express understanding of an origin of cognition like the one suggested by Maurice Bloch in his famous article from 1977, where cognition has a twofold origin, social on one side, and connected to adaption and interaction with natural phenomena on the other (Bloch 1977). Graeber's concept of value in general echoes an unilateral understanding of cognition.

In this article, I have shown how animal action can inspire human valuation and appreciation. I accept the premise that value is connected to human hindsight, but it can be inspired by animal action as well as by human: we need a multispecies perspective to formulate a general theory of values.

The value of Arctic char is further unattached to conceptions of anthropomorphous qualities of animals. The appreciation of and help given to the oystercatcher also gravitates around its perceived *wildness*, which makes contact more of a paradox as well as more appreciated.

Following Graeber's understanding of values as a part of gifts and exchange, the connection to wild animals can be seen as 'open relationships', where the request and need of an animal motivate human help. On the other hand, such a way of understanding relationships to animals also can legitimise the use of animals to satisfy human needs.

In Nergård's analysis of Sámi nature-based practices like reindeer herding, hunting and fishing, they become foundations for the continuity of cultural material in the wider sense (2019: 187–192). Learning angling or fishing Arctic char or learning how to be merciful towards animals not hunted or fished involves a transference of culture connected to a nature that is not fully understood, and therefore some of the authority of the content of the transference remains in this nature.

In the transference of nature-near practices, some of nature's authority remains because the mastering of hunting, fishing or herding is developed through participation where individual experience with natural phenomena is fundamental. The image of the mysterious Arctic char is transmitted together with the knowledge and skill necessary for mastering its catch and become fundament for cultural continuity, despite brutal discontinuities like colonisation and Norwegianisation.

The meeting with the remarkable oystercatcher connects one to a living, free and intentional nature in a different and more immediate way. With this experience, it is possible to understand, and even glimpse the unknown land of the wild. It is the solution of a simple riddle that gives you the privilege of living close to a creature of the wild that includes you in its world by its own free choice. The value of the wild is connected to a cosmology that (for both practical and spiritual reasons) enhances an openness and relatedness to natural phenomena.

Note

1. The fieldwork this article is based on took place in Rossfjord between 2014 and 2018. I originally focused on angling for Arctic char in the sea, roughly between early June and mid-July. This angling coincides with the oystercatchers nesting both time-wise and geographically. Hans lives only 200 yards from a well-known place for angling, and often visits the fishing place to talk to other locals. During this yearly fieldwork period, this and two other places became important as I participated in the angling and met other anglers, most of them locals. Here I also met the oystercatcher, often opening shells at low tide. The comparison of local appreciation of the char and the oystercatcher grew out of this experience, especially since Hans had built a case for its nesting, the first one I had ever seen. During the yearly fieldwork period, I lived in a cottage ten kilometres away and would almost daily spend some hours at this or the two other places for angling nearby.

Through this activity, I became acquainted with 10–12 other inhabitants from Rossfjord who became my most important informants. Among them were two neighbours of Hans who tried to protect local birds that nested in their yard or by their boathouse nearby. Some of these locals are my distant relatives, as my Mother grew up in this community, so most people in Rossfjord know who I am, which made it relatively easy to make contact and talk.

The sea-going Arctic char came into my life at 11, when I was lucky enough to catch one in *Tromsdalselva*, close to my home. They have followed me since, and from 2010 also as subjects for my research.

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