



# STUMBLING OVER ANIMALS IN THE LANDSCAPE

## *Methodological Accidents and Anecdotes*

by Karen Victoria Lykke Syse

*This article explores the potential of giving animals a more prominent role in landscape studies. Through an historical constructivist approach, animals can function as object, text, happening, and as a fragment of a larger environmental history. Using empirical examples from Norway and Scotland, animals' symbolic, social, and cultural availability are addressed. After presenting two case studies I claim that we can enrich our understanding of rural landscapes by including animals. Animals help uncover the meanings people embed in their landscape. By using the term animalscape, animals can more straightforwardly be incorporated both methodologically and analytically in rural studies.*

**Keywords:** Animalscape, Constructivism, Animal landscapes, Environmental history, Animal studies

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We were driving timber. One day there was this massive log lying at the edge of a bog. My brother and I were thinking 'this won't be easy to haul onto the timber pile'. We put Blacky to the task. Blacky tries again and again but he can't move the log. We chop down two small trees to use as levers to get the large log sliding – we wedge them under the log; Blacky understands he's been given help, and he hauls the massive log onto the timber pile at high speed! We go and talk to him

to praise him, and he keeps looking back at the huge log, to show us that he could do what we didn't think he could to. And this was the first time I learnt about the immense power contained in a horse, while at the same time I was taught how to get the horse to understand that we work as a team, and that together, we can manage any log.

(Håvard, forester)

## Stumbling

The main object of my studies has been rural landscapes and landscape perceptions. In order to investigate this, I have used oral history and ethnography as a means to understand the interaction between people and landscapes. In 2000 I developed a methodology of combining oral history with walk-about ethnography in order to grasp what rural landscapes entailed in the past and present to the people were working in them (Syse 2000). I use the landscape in five different ways: Firstly, as an arena for interview and secondly, as a trigger for narratives. Thirdly, I study the landscape's physicality as material culture; with objects, relics, and biological material traces of the past and present. Fourthly, I read the landscape as a physical manifestation of changing agricultural practices. Finally, the landscape is explored as a field where environmental and political changes are acted out. Consequently, I use the physical environment both actively and passively through ethnographic fieldwork.

An inspiration for this methodology was classic oral history methodology (Evans 1962, Thompson 1988), and the work of the anthropologist Tim Ingold and his important article *The temporality of the landscape* (1993). Ingold states that landscape encapsulates two concepts: 'time' and 'work'. He views life as time in process and landscape as being formed by (among other things) human work over time. He uses the term 'temporality' to define landscape, and calls the working-landscape a 'taskscape' (Ingold 1993: 153): "Just as the landscape is an array of related features, so – by analogy – the task-scape is an array of related activities." (Ingold 2000: 195). However, trying to understand these activities proved to be impossible without considering animals. This is why I use the term stumbling in the title of this chapter; illustrating that although animals were not initially the object of my study, they constantly appeared both through narratives and by tangible physical traces, requiring

me to address them whether I had intended to or not. As such, and particularly in a historical perspective, one can go one step further and call the taskscape an animalscape.

Agricultural landscapes are still filled with animals and animal-meetings. If you walk across a pasture, your boots will sink into grass nibbled short by grazing sheep. When you pass a farm steading, a reeking silage pit will remind you of the animal's need for winter feeding. Going up a hill or into a forest, a pungent smell might tell you that a fox has just passed by. Sounds of birds and insects, bleating sheep, bellowing cows and barking dogs make their presence and saturate the landscape with their agency; reminding us that this landscape is also an animalscape. Farmers harvest fodder for beasts and accommodate grazing for them. Hunters use the landscape actively and consciously to get within shooting range of their prey. In the past, foresters could not drive timber without working with their horses.

As already mentioned, animals were not my main concern as a cultural historian – landscape history and environmental conflicts were – and I apply the term animalscape as a consequence of my fieldwork. Initially, none of the questions in my interview guides were about animals. Although I knew I would meet animals both through texts, narratives and physically, the animals were not a direct object of my study so everything related to animals came indirectly. However animals became both analytical categories and key symbols for me. Using examples from fieldwork in Norway and Scotland, I'll exemplify how animals were used to convey morality, trust, kindness, and understanding in interviews and narratives which were intended to be about changing landscapes. Animals were also used as mediators in environmental conflicts.

## A forester and his horse

Before forestry was mechanized, forest laborers could be divided into loggers, drivers and floaters. The loggers first chopped down the trees before stripping off branches and bark in the forest. Trunks were divided into logs, and left to be pulled by horsepower and placed in piles along the roadside by timber drivers. Later these

fairly small piles of timber were driven to either a river or a larger forestry road to be driven or floated to the closest sea port.

In order to drive timber, one needed horses, and in order to have horses one needed a farm where one could grow oats and other



fodder. In Nordmarka (a forest north of Oslo), farms and smallholdings were dispersed throughout the forest, and tenants were often by contract obliged to work for the estate owner. Smallholders and farmers who owned their own land would also sell their labor to larger estates during the winter months when there was little farm work. Nordmarka was a lively peasant community in the outskirts of Oslo, and the sounds of bleating sheep, lowing cattle, axe blows, falling timber, sleigh bells, and neighing must have made the forest seem both a populated and animated dwelling place (Halberg 1993, Tveite 1964, Syse 2012, Syse 2000).

The opening quote of this article is a transcript from an interview with the timber driver Håvard. When Håvard was conveying the changes in land-use and forestry practice, he used the landscape as a physical anchorage for memory. This memory also contained a series of horse-stories, used to convey changing values and changing human-animal relations. Håvard's horses were his work-mates, and they could only manage to pull heavy timber loads through cooperation. They worked side by side all winter, and the horses were considered members of the family as well as energetic horsepower. Håvard would talk just as much – if not more – about horses as he did about landscapes, as it was the horse that let him maneuver timber through the forest landscape, as well as huge forest extractors that have changed the forest landscape and created environmental conflicts in the present.

As Håvard and I were walking through the forest during a walk-about interview, he stopped by an old timber-run. This was the place a horse had been tamed, he said. He had bought the horse cheap because it was so nervous the farrier couldn't put shoes on it. According to Håvard, it must have been ill treated by a previous owner. The horse wouldn't stand still when they attached the timber load to it, and they had to be two men to work it – one to hold the horse still and one to attach the timber load. Neither Håvard nor the farrier could manage to shoe the horse, and so he made it run barefoot up and down the steep hills of this particular timber-run. The horse didn't even stop to eat; it was too nervous and restless. Håvard and his brother treated it kindly but drove the horse hard to exhaust it. After three days the horse understood that the men would not hurt it, and so it would stop and eat some hay between runs. After four days one man could shoe the horse alone. A mutual bond of trust had been established between man and horse, and it had become a kind and cooperative working horse. Håvard explained that he even used it as a loose-horse, which is the term for a horse that can work without a harness.

The story above, and the way it was narrated, explains the way an understanding was established between the forester and his horse, and how this understanding was appreciated by them both. The horse trusted that Håvard wouldn't hurt it, and Håvard knew how to establish this confidence. He understood the horse's personality and eventually came to trust it completely. In addition, Håvard and his horse were friends who worked together. This sense of unity and trust is also conveyed in the introductory quote – the

forester had to make the horse understand they were a team, and Håvard had to understand the way the horse thought. The horse was a thinking sentient being that had to be treated like a friend, it wasn't just a machine which could be switched on and off. Håvard knew the horse's peculiarities. He communicated to the horse both through his voice and actions, and interpreted the horse's response through its personality and life history.

According to the agricultural historian Bruvoll, the horse was part of masculine culture within the woods, and this bonding between man and horse is often communicated by foresters' stories about their labor and their horses (1998: 203). The horse and the horse-man were a team. In the days in which horses were used for timber driving, the lack of roads and transport often made it convenient for the foresters to live in the forest rather than commute from the surrounding villages. This created a unique feeling of community and camaraderie among both foresters and their horses that disappeared when forestry was mechanized. The ethnologist Liv Emma Thorsen describes a similar collegial situation among Norwegian milk-maids in the period before milking was mechanized. Thorsen also explains how milk maids and farmers wives conveyed a sense of loss when milking-machines replaced hand-milking. This loss was related to the relationship between woman and cow; that although the hand milking was laborious, the sense of wellbeing associated with the direct contact with the animals was highly valued. (Thorsen 1993: 145).

The importance of human-animal relations, and what the animals actually signified, was never explicitly mentioned by the foresters in my study. At the same time Håvard, the main informant and forester, expressed his innermost feelings through the stories he told about the relationship he had with his horse. For instance, family relations – how he felt about leaving his wife and children for long periods during winter – were typical vulnerabilities he would communicate through stories about his horse. He admired the horse's immense strength, but spoke just as much about other aspects of their relationship. For instance, he explained the lovely smell in the horses stable, he talked about the way the horse greeted him by neighing and how it apparently liked him, and he explained how this was a great comfort on cold winter mornings. He showed love and appreciation to a fellow being and was given affection and respect in return. His loneliness was soothed by his horse. Håvard's many horse stories were central to his understandings of labor and the land, and used as tools to communicate emotions and values he felt uncomfortable about stating directly. Horses and horse-stories were Håvard's way of stating feelings he felt awkward about talking about – they were the narrative lines that filled in what was left between the lines.

Trust was a word often used by Håvard and other foresters about their horses. The horses and men had a bond of trust between them, and this contract could not be transferred to the tractors which the horses gave way to in the 1970s. Physically speaking, the labor was harder for a timber driver using a horse than one driving



a tractor. The driver had to haul and attach the logs to the horse. Using a tractor made life easier physically, yet the transformation from horsepower to mechanical power was not easy.

Although Håvard had driven thousands of cubic metres of timber using a horse, he didn't know much about how to drive a forestry tractor. He didn't understand the machine's physics, nor did he comprehend its limitations. The horse would express its limits, while the tractor's limits were only brought to bear by calamities: Håvard's tractor once tipped over several times and he was almost killed. He stated that driving a tractor took the joy out of his work. The camaraderie disappeared, and the comfort of time spent chatting with the horse disappeared. With the tractor, life in the forest became a lonely life. Rather than getting up early, entering a warm stable to feed and water horses, he would switch on the ignition of

a cold machine to get started. While the horse needed oats, water and words of encouragement to get going in the morning – in addition to some more oats, water, as well as a good rub-down in the evening, the tractor needed mechanical insight and hard cash to keep running. A flat tyre meant a financial setback and hours of lost labour. When horses disappeared from Håvard's life, it wasn't only that he stopped buying oats, started buying petrol, and worked the forest in a different manner. His whole life changed, and how this change came about was described thickly through stories about horses. This retrospective and perhaps nostalgic account made me aware of the importance of animals in the past, but it also sets the scene for talking about animals in the present. The next section will explain how a particular animal was given the role of mediator for environmental conflicts.

## Mediating with the otter

In 2005, I spent 6 months in a village on the west coast of Scotland. I was conducting research for a larger study on land-use changes in Argyll, and moved over with my three children (see Syse 2009, 2010, 2013). About 500 people lived in the village. It was a very scenic and idyllic place, and many people from urban areas both in Scotland and England had moved here, seeking a more tranquil setting to raise their families. Many of the old cottages had also been made into second homes. My children started the local village school, and very soon we all became part of village life. A thing that surprised me was all the talk about otters in the village. Every morning, the local school bus stopped on the single track road outside my cold-comfort farmhouse. The children would hop in, put on their seat belts, and on the second turn in the road after our house, they would be told to look out of the window and see if they could see an otter. The same procedure would be repeated on their way back from school in the afternoon.

Whenever I met someone new, they would welcome me to the village and ask me whether or not I had seen any otters yet. I had expected polite conversation to be about the weather, as the wet and damp weather on the west coast of Scotland could be an easy topic to talk about. However, polite conversation seemed to be centered on the local otters. Many other animals could actually be seen around the village. The fields were full of sheep and cows, and almost all families had pet dogs or cats. A beautiful osprey would sail across the sky over the loch, barn owls were hooting outside my windows, and once I'd let the window open a bit too long I even had a bat in my bedroom. Nevertheless, people were terribly preoccupied by otters. Even though we have otters in Norway, and even though I've done fieldwork in areas I know they have been present, I can't ever remember having talked about otters sightings to anyone before. Otters obviously played a central role in the Argyll landscape.

I had rented the farmhouse fully furnished, and there were books in the bookshelves. Two of these books were 70's paperback editions

of Tarka the Otter (Williamson 1927) and Ring of Bright Water (Maxwell 1960). I immediately read and re-read these books, as I remember having read Tarka the Otter as a child, as well as a vague memory of having seen a film called Ring of Bright Water. Reading the books also made me more aware of otters and otter-chat. I discovered that there was a film director who worked for BBC and had made otter documentaries. There was a photographer who captured otters, and there was also a painter who made her living drawing and painting otter images. As the village was known to have sea otters swimming about, artists came by from other parts of Britain too, hoping to capture an otter through their lenses or on canvas. Interestingly, it wasn't just artists; bus-drivers and incomers living in the village were preoccupied with otters as well. I discovered that one of the farmer's dogs was called 'Mij', named after the otter in Ring of Bright Water. I was doing walk-about ethnography, and part of my methodology was to ask my informants to take me to a favorite place in their working landscape. One of the farmers took me to the top of a hill with a good view over a sandy bay with crystal clear turquoise water. He said he enjoyed coming up here in an attempt to spot an otter.

I've seen three otters here, diving about. Every time I'm over I'll come over and stop here, and see if I can see one. Occasionally... You don't see them all the time. You've got to live here all the time and you'll see otters. I think if I count how many I've seen, over thirty years, they're not many. So the chances of coming out, and actually seeing them, are... not great, but people think that oh there are otters about there, I'll just... I mean I could show you where they play and all of that, their puddles and their tracks... they're always coming in for fresh water. To play in it. (Cameron, farmer)

The study I conducted (Syse 2009) involved interviewing people who had a working relationship with the land, so a couple of representatives from the governmental agency Scottish Natural



Heritage (SNH) were also included in my research. When one of the SNH officers and me were driving along the road, he suddenly stepped on his brakes to show me an otter holt with tell-tale tracks sliding down towards a small loch.

Many of the SNH brochures and leaflets that referred to biodiversity had images of otters on them. By now I had asked myself what all this fuss about the otter could signify. Otters were obviously enigmatic animals that had become particularly popular in Britain through literature and film, but although *Watership Down* was a popular book (Adams 1972) and later a film (1978) anthropomorphizing rabbits, people never mentioned rabbits unless they were squashed under a car tire or got into the vegetable patch. Perhaps otters were particularly apt symbols? According to Mary Douglas, creatures that defy classification are particularly suitable symbols (Douglas, 1975: 30). The otter, in many ways, defies classification. It is a mammal – but spends most of its time in water. It also has webbed feet – almost resembling the feet of a waterfowl rather than the furry paws of most other similar looking mammals. Moreover the otter's front paws have humanoid finger-like extremities that can be used to handle small objects. Otter can even use stones as tools to open mussels. Although the otter is indisputably an animal, the way it behaves and uses tools can be associated with human beings.

Another noticeable feature of otters is that they are ambiguous and liminal creatures. Liminal creatures are ambiguous and defy ordinary classification. Like the owl and the bat, the otter is partly nocturnal and because of this, difficult to see. This ambiguity is central, as it makes otters especially apt symbols. In mythology and folk belief, ambiguous plants, objects, animals, places, and periods are often regarded particularly magical, with strong symbolic associations. An example of this is the mistletoe; symbiotically attached to tree branches it is a plant with magical properties, growing midway between heaven and earth. It is still thought of as having medicinal properties and is used symbolically at Christmas time – another highly symbolic time of year, culturally replacing the dangerous time of winter solstice. Bats, that look like mice but fly like birds – in the dark – are also examples of liminal creatures with high symbolic values associated to them.

Even though certain of the examples I give above might seem curious to modern people, other properties of liminality are commonly acknowledged. Liminality can cure, and liminality can initiate a transformation or alteration in direction. For instance, crossroads are common metaphors and practical places for direction change. In Scandinavia, the rite of confirmation changes the way people regard you from child to young adult. Weddings and funerals – both rites of passage – take you from one state into the next and the state in between the two is a liminal ambiguous state. Neither nor. Since

the otter is indisputably a liminal creature, it is particularly suitable to associate with various kinds of symbolism. However, although I argue that otters are liminal in an anthropological sense, does this mean that it can be given agency enough to convey environmental values and mediate environmental conflicts?

Environmental degradation and pollution led to a serious decline in otter populations in the 1970's. According to the UK Biodiversity Action Plan, the main reason for this was pollutants in watercourses – especially involving an increase in Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). Also, otters had less prey to feed on because of the poor water quality, and riverbanks provided less protection needed for breeding and resting. Other reasons for the decline in otter numbers were unfortunate incidents like road accidents or drowning in eel traps. All in all, the decline in otters was the results of all the environmental problems of industrialization. In many ways, we can compare the role of the otter to that of the canary; in the times of coal mining a canary would be kept in the mine to ensure that the air was good enough for people to survive in. If the canary died, it was time to get out of the mine. In the same way, the otter can be regarded as a key species which indicates the state of the environment. Being a top predator, it is particularly susceptible to pollutants. It needs clean water and functioning wetland ecosystems to survive, and if otters are present in any given place, this tells us that the ecosystem is in order (Crawford 2003).

During the twentieth century, British otters were transferred from being vermin – quarry worth hunting on as it would prey on fish stocks – to becoming a unifying symbol of purity. There seem to be very few conflicts regarding otters; they are simply regarded as a positive and charming species of wildlife. One can even state that otters give people optimism, as the various environmental schemes to bring them back have been so successful. Otters are living proof that environmental action can work (Syse 2013). Due to this, otters have been given an active role, as they cement relations and bridge various interest groups within the Argyll landscape. Everyone appreciated otters; maybe this was the result of various conservation schemes that had been ongoing since the 1960's, and maybe it was because of books, films and other outputs of popular culture. Perhaps it was because of the otter's sweet face; far easier to appreciate than other wild species of the animalscape in need of protection, like toads or adders. Otters were until as late as 1978 still a target for hunters, and a creature considered a pest by some despite its rapidly declining numbers. After successful campaigns it was offered a new role as 'pet of the nation'. It was later used as symbol by environmentalists, who emphasized its vulnerable status due to industrial pollution.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A more comprehensive argument about the otter's role as an environmental symbol can be found in Syse (2013).



## Accepting animal agency and presenting to academia

The geographer Lewis Holloway writes that “[t]he ways in which people understand and use different spaces and places influence their relationships with the various others (including animals) encountered there” (2003:147). This argument is built on a quite recent discourse about animal-human relations in the humanities and the social sciences. An essential question (and critique according to the geographer Chris Philo), is if the inclusion of animals always has been conditioned by a certain ‘human chauvinism’, so that animals are ignored if they lack utilitarian values. Chris Philo suggests an alternative perspective which involves looking at animals as a ‘social’ group indirectly constituted by human communities. As a group, they are subject to a variety of social and spatial inclusions and exclusions (Philo 1998: 103).

The two case studies I have outlined above, show how animals are included both socially and culturally – for instance as work mates, as conversation topics, as environmental symbols, and mediators. One could argue that both the horse and the otter have use in a utilitarian sense, as they become tools to solve certain tasks; horses used to drive timber and otters used as available symbol. But they were also included both spatially and socially. Following this argument, a landscape is not only a taskscape, and the result of human utilitarian actions, but also an animalscape. An animalscape is the result of human-animal relations. It is created and constructed through animals’ cultural involvement, and through both humans’ and animals’ feelings and emotions – exemplified above through the horse’s understanding of Håvard’s intention and the otter’s central position in human consciousness – despite its elusive nature.

The stories about Håvard’s horses were anecdotal. Discovering the importance of the otter in Argyll in Scotland was accidental. The stories about animals that the men I interviewed told me were unexpected and unintentional. Methodologically, this is a hard nut to crack. In interdisciplinary journals related to land use and landscape, animal meaning and agency are seldom given consideration. In a reviewer’s report for the article *Otters as Symbols in the British Environmental Discourse* (Syse 2013), the following statement illustrates that C. P. Snow’s two cultures still very much exists – even within interdisciplinary journals:

“The arguments presented in the paper are largely based on anecdotal observation and selected local opinion and it is recommended that an analysis of a structured questionnaire collated from a wide sector audience (farmers, foresters, fisherman, ecologists, engineers and members of the public) is carried out (of sufficient sample size). (...)The paper does present an original piece of work recognizing how a single species can provide a focus for cooperative working between different

interest groups to further its conservation and I would agree that the otter is a symbol of environmental discourse in Britain.”

In other words, the reviewer criticized the methodology because it was anecdotal, and qualitative, and he or she would have preferred a quantitative survey as the starting point for an analysis on whether or not otters were environmental symbols. Although the reviewer actually was convinced by the argument, he or she felt a need to question the methodological premises of the article and wished the conclusion had been reached in a way more in line with his or her scientific discipline. Accordingly, writing about animals in an environmental journal is a reflexive exercise for an academic belonging to the humanities. The humanities’ concern is what is, or makes us human, and thereby at times addresses and is part and parcel of a human-animal dichotomy; and at the same time humans – or human influence – is sometimes juxtaposed with nature or ‘the natural’. If our landscapes and taskscape incorporate animals, thereby acknowledging the animalscape, this dichotomy has the potential to dissolve.

The academic disciplines representing the humanities use methods that are primarily analytical, critical, or speculative in nature, as distinguished from the mainly empirical approaches of the natural as well as most of the social sciences. Our sources are usually objects, texts, happenings or fragments of these three (Jordheim 2007). By offering an historical constructivist approach, looking at animals as object, text, happening and also as a fragment of a larger environmental history and story, I argue that a larger picture can both be unveiled and understood by the researcher. Referring to Steven Baker, Holloway states how animals have a “symbolic availability” allowing them to be drawn upon in the construction of meaning (Baker 1993: 5, Holloway 2003: 148). In landscape studies, this meaning can be revealed by consciously giving the animals a more prominent role. Using the term animalscape allows the animals to step forward and be included both methodologically and analytically in rural studies. My fieldwork showed how people constructed and narrated the environmental and emotional meanings that were important to them through animal narratives. By addressing these animals’ symbolic, social and cultural availability and using this as a starting point rather than a stumbling block, we have the potential to both enrich our understanding of and uncover the meanings embedded in the rural landscape.

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