# Of Otters and Humans: An Approach to the Politics of Nature in Terms of Rhetoric

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**Abstract:** *Local protest against the establishment of conservation zones is a worldwide phenomenon. Environmental protests focus not only on pollution and protection, but tend with almost magnetic force to centre around more abstract concepts such as identity, power, and development issues. Using as a case study a nature park in the South of Portugal, I trace the complex process of nature conservation as a rhetorical construction, as I focus on the relation between people and animals. This nature park was legitimised not at least by reference to an endangered species of otters, which also play an important role in the ongoing controversial debate about tourism, construction and industrialised international agriculture. The article highlights encounters between people and these otters from different perspectives: their representation in the media, in nature conservation discourse, and in local discourse and practises. Significantly, the otter becomes a powerful metaphor in both conservationist and (opposing) local discourses. The discussion suggests that, given the complexity and multitude of issues involved in such cases, the implementation of nature conservation strategies is changing the relation not only between man and nature, but between people themselves. While the controversy surrounding this particular nature park found a resolution (at least a temporary one), surrounding issues of development, identity and power relations remain unresolved.*

**Keywords:** nature conservation, environmental conflicts, ecological discourse, people–animal relations, Alentejo, Portugal

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***Conservation and Society,*** Pages 354–370
Volume 3, No. 2, December 2005

## INTRODUCTION

> – *through metaphor to reconcile*
> *the people and the stones*
> (A sort of song, William Carlos Williams 1986)

THIS ARTICLE is about otters and humans. On Portugal's southwest coast, both species are to be found: humans who shape, develop, own, administer and inhabit the landscape; and otters which leave behind their traces on the banks of rivers, estuaries and the coastal sands of the Atlantic Ocean. During the 1980s, environmentalists began to raise the alarm over threats to these otter populations.[1] As soon as humans began to discuss the issue, it was not only their own relations to the otters which changed, but also those amongst themselves. This in turn led to a change in the landscape and in the manner in which it became administered, shaped and perceived. Finally it brought into being a new institution: the Nature Park '*Sudoeste Alentejano e Costa Vicentina*' (Nature Park Southwest Alentejo and Vicentinian Coast). In this article I propose to investigate the role played by otters—as a powerful metaphor—in the conflict-laden history of this Nature Park, and how an otter finally came to be used as the park's official logo in the form of a comic strip character.

My point of focus is geared to certain conflicts which developed between the local population and the Nature Park administration. In turn, these conflicts can be seen as part of a world-wide phenomenon which has gained increasing relevance in the recent years with the institutionalisation of environmental policy (West and Brechin 1991). In such conflicts there is always more than just a 'mere' confrontation between the forces of environmental conservation and environmental destruction. The implementation of conservation strategies tends, with almost magnetic force, to attract conflicts over power, identity and development issues, especially in regions, which for the most part are economically marginal. Recent studies from the beginning of the 1990s onward take such factors into account, with environmental conservation itself being made the focus of critical investigations in terms of a technique of power. Environmental conservation is investigated in the light of its colonial past, and because of the difficulty it appears to have in depicting the 'human factor' as anything other than being detrimental to nature (West 1991). Nature Reserves and National Parks are often accused of being little more than 'paper parks' (Painter 1995). 'Sustainable development', as an integral part of the policy aims of modern protected areas, is also suspected of amounting either to little more than 'empty rhetoric' (West 1991) or simply being a post-modern expression of capitalism (Escobar 1996). In the present discussion, the object of nature protection, i.e. 'nature' itself, can be seen as being hit by crisis. The 'nature' of 'Western discourse' is not always the nature of the 'other' (even within the West!), and today's questions are increasingly concerned with es-

tablishing just who represents which version of nature, and to what end. It becomes thus an issue of the 'politics of nature'.

In the course of my research[2], stretching back over a period of ten years, I have been able to observe the development of the Nature Park '*Sudoeste Alentejano e Costa Vicentina*', from its inception as a 'protected landscape area' in 1988, through its transformation into a 'Nature Park' in 1994, right up to the present day. In this article I am less concerned with providing a critique of environmental conservation, than with offering an analysis of the 'culture of nature' (Wilson 1992) created by a Nature Park, and the conflicts arising from these processes. National or Nature Parks can be seen as being cultural landscapes in which neither culture nor nature can be, as it were, 'surgically' dissected as analytical categories: it is rather that they are created by and change as a result of permanent negotiations about what nature and culture should be. As such it is necessary to investigate various metaphors and discursive forms to gain an impression of what a Nature Park actually is, and what type of conflicts and new relationships to nature this particular 'cultural form of nature' engenders.

My research area—the regional municipality of Odemira in Portugal—is situated in the Alentejo region, an 'age-old' cultural landscape. Seen in this context, the adoption of a part of this landscape as a 'Nature Park' bears no relation to any 'pre-discursive realities' such as an 'innocent nature' (and even less an 'innocent culture'), but rather to the voices of previous discursive regimes which were also able to make use of the powerful rhetoric engendered by the traffic between culture and nature.[3] In the first part of this article, I will attempt to show that the relationship both to nature and culture found in this region has always been an expression of power relations, and that nature protection and the translation of environmental discourse into praxis has historically been linked to certain social formations, to political economy and to a specific form of knowledge–ecology.

In the second part I will illustrate some of the complexity and the variety of discourses which arose over the issues of nature and culture, with the aid of a concrete example: I take up the otter's trail, both rhetorically speaking and 'in the flesh' by following the chronology of my personal encounters with these creatures in the Nature Park. In doing so I will show how a new 'culture of nature' comes into being, which not only re-establishes the classical 'nature/society' dichotomy, but involuntarily is leading to new kinds of 'environmental conflicts' between local populations and conservation strategies.

### *The Making of a Nature Park—Power and Representation*

The Nature Park '*Sudoeste Alentejano e Costa Vicentina*' occupies a 110 km stretch of the south-western coast of Portugal and extends to varying degrees inland. The geographical area covered by my investigation encompassed the

expanse between the Alentejo region and the Nature Park itself and was served by the regional municipality of Odemira. This area borders on to a broad Atlantic coastal plain, with its sparsely inhabited hinterland stretching far back into the mainland (see Figure 1). This Alentejo region is situated at the very geographical and economic margin of Europe, and, as a classic cultural landscape, has been inhabited and shaped by agricultural activity for many centuries. The history of this landscape, right up to the present, is one which can be characterised by certain unequal power relations, by repression, and periodic outbreaks of resistance. Its history is one which is deeply etched upon the memory of its inhabitants and on the landscape itself:

> *'There is never a landscape, always many landscapes. And landscapes are not passive, not 'out there', because people create their sense of identity—whether self, group, or nation-state—through engaging and re-engaging, appropriating and contestating the sedimented pasts that make up the landscape*.' (Bender 1998: 25).

For centuries, the Alentejo was treated as a colony by the power-brokers of Lisbon, the land being held by large-scale landowners who kept great swathes of the population at the very margins of serfdom right up until the 1970s. The

**Figure 1**

***The Alentejo region of Portugal***

dictatorship of Estado Novo which shut the country off from the outside world for almost fifty years from 1928 to the Revolution of 1974, looked as though it would last for ever. The former regime promoted a corporatist ideology, propagating a concept of an 'organic state', supposedly reflecting the natural order. Social hierarchies in turn were naturalised and maintained with brutal and arbitrary force. The rhetoric and iconography used in the ubiquitous propaganda of that era tended to present an idealised image of social harmony in a rural setting, and the Alentejo was intended to become the 'bread basket' of the nation. But in reality, state campaigns in forestry and agriculture ended up in economic and ecological disasters, and they led to human and natural desertification.

Following the revolution of 1974, this conception and its related power relations were reversed. The same landscape came to represent the right of those who were landless 'to take possession of the land they were working on' (*a terra a quem a trabalha)*, as the revolutionary slogan goes. A great number of large estates (*latifundia*) from mostly absent landowners was occupied, and self-administered co-operatives began to emerge in their place in order to create new jobs.[4] During the eighties, agrarian reform failed and the former landowners returned, re-establishing former property structures or selling their land to global players in the European market of food production.[5] What remained was the representation of the Alentejo as a landscape of resistance, which was often orchestrated by the still-powerful Alentejo-branch of the Communist Party. The myth of agrarian reform, a growing consciousness of the region's own marginality, and the image of the simple yet honest agricultural worker, all continue to shape the representation of the Alentejo. From the outside, this view tends to be used as a means of stigmatising the inhabitants, while from within it is used as a means of constructing a regional cultural identity.

With Portugal's entry into the EU in 1986, the Alentejo was officially declared a 'particularly disadvantaged region'; Europe's 'poorhouse' showing all the indications of structural weakness. Farming methods were seen as labour-intensive, and, if looked at within the EU framework, this poorly productive agricultural system was resulting in growing migration from the inland areas and increased pressure on the coastal region which had remained sparsely populated up to the 1970s—a process which had begun far earlier in Portugal's remaining coastal areas. Above all, the advent of mass tourism to the southwest coast seemed to bring with it both promises of new sources of income and a spate of new construction, which led to property and land speculation.

The local authorities of the Odemira municipality attempted from the beginning to control this 'unruly' development with spatial planning and construction measures. However, by the 1980s a new discursive credo came to prominence that made its entry into local politics: environmentalism. The coastal landscape was seen as especially endangered by oil spills, erosion,

*Eucalyptus* monocultures, intensive agriculture and above all gigantic tourism projects. The coast offered attractive potential for differing interest groups, such as (inter-)national development strategies which promoted urbanisation and tourism resorts as new sources of income, as well as international 'free market' protagonists in tourism and agriculture. Portuguese environmentalists called for the protection of what they termed 'the last largely unspoilt coastal region in Portugal', and this cry of alarm resulted in co-operation with the local authorities, and led to the southwest coast being designated as an 'area of protected landscape'. However, soon after the establishment of the protected area this co-operation split up and brought a new dual constellation of conflict into being.

### *Nature Protection*

If the agrarian reform was a social movement 'from below', the Nature Park was a concept implemented 'from above'. The initiative for founding the park originated with the Portuguese non governmental organisation (NGO), 'Nature Protection League' (LPN). The latter is a classic nature protection organisation, which had been founded back in 1948. Its members mainly belonged to the elite and to academic circles from the very centre of Portugal; and, as a result of their social origins, the members had ready access to the administrative and political elite within their respective regions.[6] It was only during the 1980s that the LPN began to open up to the outside world to attract new members from other social groups. The impetus for this move grew not least out of the somewhat delayed development of the Portuguese environmental movement as compared to many other countries. In its early stages, the Portuguese environmental movement continued to be characterised by political discussions of the post-revolutionary era, in which social and ecological questions were closely intertwined (Melo and Pimenta 1993).[7]

Together with other large environmental conservation organisations, the LPN enjoyed access to state bureaucracy and succeeded in gaining control of heterogeneous Portuguese environmental activities, and in 'de-politicising' the environmental movement as a whole. At the outset, the LPN pursued a classic nature protection strategy by setting aside and protecting stretches of 'unspoilt' wilderness. It was only in the 1980s that the LPN extended its concept of nature protection to include the protection of 'cultural' landscapes. In the course of this switch, the LPN also carried through the process, which West and Brechin (1991) term as the 'revolution in the international nature protection paradigm'. Here, humans were no longer viewed simply as enemies of nature but also as producers of valuable cultural landscapes, as an integral part of the latter—a conception which is the precondition to the whole 'sustainable development' credo.

The setting aside of the southwest coastal area of Portugal as a Nature Park had in fact been a long-held dream of the LPN. A new generation of conserva-

tionists schooled in the principles of 'environmentalism' helped to finally bring about the establishment of the '*Area de Paisagem Protegida Sudoeste Alentejano e Costa Vicentina*' (Protected Landscape Southwest Alentejo and Vicentinian Coast). But finally, it is the state that is required to define precisely in advance what it intends to place under a special administrative regime: in the case of the Portuguese southwest coast, stretches of nature and culture which are seen as worth protecting. Defining the character and normative representation of what is actually 'worth' protecting is, however, generally considered to be a matter for science to decide, as the sole legitimate producer of 'truths'. In this context, it is ecology, here being conceived of as the form of knowledge that lends its authority to environmental discourse, and shapes its rhetoric and language.

This ecology-based environmental discourse takes a specific administrative-scientific representational form which legitimates the setting aside stretches of land as protected areas all over the world. It is usual that initial scientific reports are commissioned for a given region, mostly by NGOs such as the LPN. These reports are subsequently concretised and integrated into certain spatial planning and administrative procedures by specialist firms, selected through public tender. This standard procedure the world over tends to lead to a large degree of similitude to be found in the rhetorical strategies of so-called ecosystem studies, specialist reports and lastly, publicity material. Although the aim of providing nature protection areas is geared to the protection of natural and cultural values, studies from the natural sciences greatly predominate.[9] Biologists, geologists, physicists, zoologists, ecologists, etc., all decide just what an 'environmental fact' is, with the actual value of the given object of concern being measured in terms of its uniqueness and/or endangerment. Local, 'cultural' or regional significations of a plant, animal or a regional landmark, are completely ignored. In this respect the implicit underlying conception of science remains a positivistic one (Grove-White 1993). So too, the results of research in this context into ecosystems, biospheres and endangered species are all neatly transformed into concrete applications for the Nature Park administration to carry through. The 'cybernetic thinking' of modern ecology reveals itself in this regard to be extremely 'bureaucracy-compatible'.

Only a small part of these studies is concerned with culture, mostly in terms of looking at national heritage, and restricted to archaeological or historical sites. Here the implicit underlying conception reduces culture to 'customs and traditions' and invests them with terms such as 'authentic', 'genuine' or 'archaic'. It is 'traditional agriculture' alone which is entrusted with an all-embracing vanguard role as producer and guardian of cultural landscapes. This strategy is clearly seen represented in official promotional material: there are almost no signs of humans in the iconography—with the exception of 'cultural' activities in the above sense, such as the production of pottery or traditional fishing. Conversely, images of human-free landscapes are omni-

present—steep coasts, pictures of flora and fauna, and mostly including a view out to sea.

There are several 'culture-specific' reasons for the almost complete lack of the subject of culture in these studies. These include the marked stress placed on regional culture in local political discourse which is coloured by resistance to the central government. First and foremost however, it is quite simply the lack of culture which members of the elite—and surreptitiously, also a large number of environmentalists—ascribe to the local population. The Alentejo region is considered by many, including scientists in academia, as backward, as lacking in symbols and rituals, and as such not worth researching. In conversations with functionaries from the national park, the hardship of living in this provincial area was a recurring topic. Locals were said to be ignorant of nature and having lost their 'archaic' culture, as being fatally attracted by the evils of consumerism and the city.

Thus, the local population is required to fulfil a double function—they are imagined as potential cultural bearers of tradition or as guardians of the local culture, as a homogenous unity, and also as producers and protectors of cultural landscapes. In actual practice, and because of their failure to fulfil the imagery, they are however above all made systematically subject to administrative procedures, and the consequent discourses of restriction, prohibition and education. Thus nature protection is not only concerned with the conservation of nature and culture, but also with constructing power relations in the name of nature and culture. The 'translation' of the global environmental discourse[10] is more often than not contradictory and does not lead directly into the 'ecological paradise', but it brings a new and contested 'culture of nature' into being. The process of the establishment of a new hegemonic representational system, and the nature of the subsequent conflicts, can best be shown in analysing the multiple ways of symbolising nature itself, i.e. the permanent traffic between nature and culture.

### *Eating an Otter*

My first stay in the Alentejo was at an agrarian co-operative in 1987. This co-operative provided approximately 400 people with work, with a large number of those concerned being former agricultural workers who had occupied the land in the post-revolutionary era. At the very end of the eighties, the occupied land reverted in ownership to the returning latifundists in the process of the withdrawal of agrarian reform. The inhabitants of the co-operative were forced to petition these large-scale land-owners for work, or alternatively emigrate in turn, move to Lisbon or to foreign countries.

One late afternoon, my attention was drawn to a disturbance in the village square. A man had caught an otter at the nearby river in a trap, and now it was to be seen lying bound and frightened in the dust. A group of on-lookers quickly assembled. Several men, and then increasing numbers of male youths

and children stepped forward and began to kick the otter in the side, with the result that the creature squirmed in panic and snapped out wildly. Approvingly, the spectators expressed signs of recognition which seemed both to be directed at the otter's wild display and at the courage of the youths.

The otter was eventually slaughtered by the men and ended up in a stewing pot. That evening the leaders of the co-operative were found sitting around the table of a bar, and I was invited to join them. On the menu was stewed otter. I felt as if I had been accepted into the male community; it was the first time that I had been shown this honour. I confirmed that it really did taste very good—even though the part in me which had been schooled in environmentalism made a loud cry of protest somewhere deep down. I justified my lack of open protest by the fact that as an anthropologist I was not there to teach lessons, but rather to learn about the local life.

According to the Portuguese anthropologist Vale de Almeida (1997), hunting, the tormenting of the otter and its final consumption can be interpreted as a ritual in the construction of masculinity. In a further step, this 'gendered' action appears also as the 'gendering' of a particular power conflict. Many of the latifundists used (and still use) their land as a hunting preserve, while local people were, and are forbidden to hunt. Even worse, in former times the landless workers had to serve as 'hounds' for the land-owning hunter. Poaching therefore became not only a matter of survival, but also a political act of resistance—and a way to re-establish the masculine identity in an act of self-determination and rebellion. Today, resistance to particular protection measures can also be read as a prolongation of these power conflicts—even more so as many environmentalists see themselves as being part of the elite.

During my later investigations into social poetry,[11] I realised that there is indeed a local tradition and attitude towards the non-human world, but it is one which fits neither the denigrating nor the idealising imagery of locals in the discourse of the conservationists. Certain local symbolisations of flora and fauna play an important role in the context of specific 'interstices'—those between man and woman, but also between the worlds of the living and the dead, the powerful and the dispossessed, the healthy and the sick, nature and culture: places in which myths originate. In this understanding, certain animals pose a real threat to the underlying order of the world. For example, snakes are believed by some of the elders to suck at the mother's breast and trick the baby by sticking their tail into its mouth. In addition often seemingly quite harmless individuals are transformed on particular nights into werewolves; on the horizon will-o'-the-wisps flash or animals themselves become touched by the evil eye (emanating from women). The Portuguese anthropologist, Benjamin Perreira related to me that in his youth there had been scores of otters everywhere.

However, the otters' disappearance cannot be explained by the stories told above (i.e. by hunting alone); rather they show that there is more to the relation between humans and animals than sheer utilitarianism, or direct causes

only. Other essential factors for the threat of otter populations are more likely—they include agricultural mechanisation, hunting as a modern mass phenomenon and mushrooming construction along the coast. But addressing and examining the latter factors generally proves to be more conflict-ridden. Even though their basis is in no way less 'cultural', they are more difficult to address: large-scale agriculture, leisure- and tourism industry have influential lobbies, which are well established in the political and administrative network of power relations. The administration of a Nature Park is part of this network, and nature conservationists easily admit that it is easier to blame the weak than the powerful.

### *Protecting Otters*

Four years after my otter experience, during an interview with a Nature Park administration official, I decided to withhold my story of having eaten an otter. It all seemed too complicated or at least too embarrassing to me. The official spoke of the unique otter population in the estuary region of the Rio Mira, an ecological rarity in Europe. This protected area is still characterised by its natural beauty, steep coasts and rare geological formations. Like many European cultural landscapes however it possesses few spectacular flora and fauna species—at least when compared with other parts of the world. The otter population is therefore not only currently endangered, but is also considered to be symbolically significant, solely because of their relatively large size. They have been placed under the protection of various international agreements such as the Bern convention, and they are on the 'red list' of species threatened with extinction. Thus the otter became one of the weighty arguments in favour of the establishment of the Nature Park on the Southwest coast.

The discussion over the otters ended with the official mentioning to me in a low voice a particularly abominable threat to the otters' existence. It had been reported that the people in this region were actually consuming otters! This comment by the official contained a full sense of disgust for the 'uncultivated' nature of the ordinary local population. In the eyes of the elite, to which environmentalists also belong, this population is invariably considered to be wholly without culture and to be lacking education. On top of this there is a collective disgust of hunting in environmentalist circles in Portugal, with the image of drunken, armed groups of men driving through regions, dressed as they would be in the former colonies of Angola and Mozambique, where they were obliged to do military service as youths.

We also spoke of the agrarian reform. Like all environmentalists, my interlocutor stressed that the reform had made little sense from an ecological perspective, and indeed that it had even been detrimental. Co-operatives set up under the reform had over-used the earth and thus depleted it; extensive agriculture alone was suited to this region. In order to avert the suspicion of ecol-

ogically legitimising 'latifundiarism', he also criticised the tendency amongst large landowners, and that of EU agrarian policy, to leave stretches of land fallow, leading to the desertification of cultural landscapes. Unfortunately, he said, the Nature Park was itself unable to implement or promote sustainable development due to a lack of economic expertise and funds.

The view of nature held by environmentalists is itself 'cultural'. The threat to the survival of the otters on this coast is an example of metonymy, *a pars pro toto*. In environmentalist discourse, otters symbolise the perceived threat facing humanity and the Earth. Thus the latter's protection or deliverance is the environmentalists' contribution to the establishment of an equilibrium between nature and culture, man and woman, life and death, the powerful and the weak, the 'people' and the elite. This superior symbolic position of the otters in this 'still virgin coastal landscape', as my informants characterise the coast, is represented in its role as a media-star, as I shall show in the following.

### *Investigating Otters*

My discussion with the environmentalists about otters began after I had enquired as to the current state of research on the otter populations. Such research was one of the most sensational actions in which the Nature Park had been involved. The initial impetus had been sparked by requests for building permits for two large-scale tourist projects directly on the coast. These included some 1500-bed and 4000-bed accommodations and golf courses. With the help of scientific expertise, conservationists tried to prevent these projects, and the otters themselves became a focal point in the progress of these building applications. While protected under various international agreements, the existence of the otters was now required to be proven in the specific areas which had been chosen for the development. However, as otters are nocturnal and extremely timid creatures, acquiring such proof became anything but easy. At this point, a biologist who was intending to write a PhD thesis on otters, came forward at precisely the right moment. He was commissioned to carry out a research project under the auspices of the Nature Park to investigate the habitat of these otter populations.[12]

It is well-known that otters require a relatively large and unspoilt habitat. In order to investigate their territorial movements, the biologist had to begin by capturing a number of specimens using traps and implant them with radio-transmitters underneath their coat. Following a short recovery period, the otters were then set free, and the radius of their movements was traced over several months via radio control. This project eventually led to a doctoral thesis which had other consequences than merely academic ones: it became an argument in the licensing procedure for the tourist projects. Following protracted negotiations, both developers decided to suspend their plans, albeit provisionally. To what extent the research work on the otters was concretely

or merely symbolically responsible for this withdrawal is difficult to assess, due to the often inextricable ways of administrative decision making.

However, the symbolic factor was not inconsiderable. Beyond the purely administrative side of the affair, the environmentalists succeeded in mobilising public opinion. In collaboration with the media they made their scientific work public. Following popular movie scripts such as *Indiana Jones*, biologists were presented as adventurers, and the otters won their hour of media glory. Thus, the question of the tourist projects became personalised and a national affair at the same time.

### *The Adventures of Otter Natália*

Close personal contacts exist between the state-backed environmental conservationists and NGOs. Individual journalists from the national press are also linked up to this network. As a result of the administrative and political obligations by which the conservationists are bound, they often fall back on this network to mobilise public opinion over the ongoing threat to the southwest coast. This was, for example, the case at the height of the otter research. The weekend edition of the reputable *Expresso* newspaper had included a double-page colour report on this project. The article bore the headline 'The Adventures of the Otter Natália' and provided practical information on the behaviour of otters, the threat to their survival and the need to protect them. The otters were also portrayed as an 'indicator' of the state of the environment, based on quotations by scientists, with the well-being of the otter population used as a measure of the rational use of landscape.

The capture of an otter by a biologist, followed by the implantation of a transmitter, and the animal's return to the wild, were described in the *Expresso* in minute detail, in a special section entitled, 'Chronicle of an Abduction'. The central rhetorical stylistic device employed by the author of this article was that of a tightly-woven plot in which the first otter to be captured became transformed into an acting subject, a nearly-human being. It therefore became baptised on two separate occasions: initially by the scientists using the Latin name for the otter, '*Lutra lutra*', and then by the biologist, with the name 'Natália'.[13] Despite the female name however, it eventually transpired that the otter was in fact a male.

The main feature of the article described a dramatic 'first encounter' between the biologist and the otter. As the biologist was preparing to fetch the otter from the trap, both became very nervous. Following this initial contact, the biologist was left with a scar on his hand. This scene was repeated as the otter was set free: the fact that the otter hesitated for a moment, prior to making its flight to freedom, was stressed and particularly brought to the reader's attention.

Besides the article's political agenda, as it were, written in the name of nature protection, it is the rhetorical style of speaking 'in the name of nature'

which renders it so interesting. Specifically, nature as embodied by the otter can be seen as being erotically charged: the abducted female(!) is both endangered and in need of protection, but at the same time she is prickly and wild. The interwoven story-telling device used in the *Expresso* article therefore presents a variation on the theme of 'Taming of the Shrew'.

The article finally ends with a question which 'the otter Natália would ask if she were able to use the transmitter implanted in her for speech purposes: Just what decision does the environment minister intend to make regarding the planned hotel projects which threaten the survival of the otter populations?'

Interestingly, the 'human population' is not mentioned at all in conjunction with the threat to the otter populations. Rather, the local population is simply ignored and as such demoted. It is not the welfare of the local people which is the measure of a 'rational use of landscape' but rather that of the otter population.

### *Otters and/or Humans*

While otters had become media stars in the Portuguese press, locals were not too impressed by this effect—if they even noticed. Reading fancy and costly journals is rather unusual in areas where attending school regularly is a relatively recent privilege. But they are usually well informed and make use of their own and informal ways of communication, one of it being a traditional way of storytelling. In these stories, people try to make sense of a world which is characterised by unequal power relations, weaving artfully current political affairs into a traditional narrative script.

During the same summer I found myself involved in a heated discussion in a bar in a coastal town. One of the fishermen told a story, which culminated in the following point: An otter which was apparently already dead had got entangled in a fisherman's net. Upon closer inspection, he found a festering wound on its back, the cause of which turned out to be an implanted transmitter. It was impossible for me to decide upon the inherent truth of this information, if it was based on actual facts or not. But anyway, it served its purpose well and set in motion a long chain of associations.

People had already heard about the environmentalists' project and were thus able to correctly explain the origin of this transmitter. No one, however, had been able to muster up any sympathy for this project. On the contrary, it was generally considered to be promoting cruelty to animals. And in any case, what was the point of it all? They considered that the money, which the inhabitants of the region so urgently needed, was being poured down the drain into such projects. The feeling was that here was money for otters, but no one bothered about the *people* living there. On top of this, it was claimed, one day the locals would also be implanted with such transmitters so that every step could be controlled, and that all actions could be placed under surveillance. In the opinions of these locals, what the environmentalists were in reality trying

to achieve, was total control of everything and everyone. Regulations, bans, negative decisions over house rebuilding, street-tarring or even barn extension applications were taken as proof.

An argument that 'The otters are allowed to catch fish but they want to forbid us from fishing!' related to rumours that so-called sport-angling was to be prohibited on the coast. For fishermen, unfortunately, angling on the coast constitutes a part of their livelihood, as the stormy sea often makes sea-fishing expeditions quite impossible. The environmentalists were accused of wanting to make a zoo out in the southwest coastal region, where animals and Red-Indians would all be placed on view—eventually they would put the Alentejanos themselves on display as a race threatened by extinction. 'It's not only otters which live here, but people too' became a slogan of the resistance against the Nature Park. At public hearings on Nature Park affairs there were often heated debates where environmental protection representatives were sometimes forced to leave the premises under escort. Such actions also provided the local population with access to the media. In an *Expresso* article, understanding for the locals was expressed, and as a result the nature protection movement was reproachfully reminded that a Nature Park can only be successful, if it is in partnership with the local population.

### *Representing Otters*

During my last stay in the region in late summer 1997, I viewed the new administrative headquarters building for the Nature Park. I was particularly struck by certain souvenirs located in the entrance hall, which were available for purchase. These included post cards, baseball caps, T-shirts and other articles, which presented a comic-strip character in the form of a logo, easily recognisable as an otter.

One of these post-cards showed an otter, caricatured in a kind of Donald Duck style, wearing a red and white-striped bathing costume in a combative pose, standing on a sea dune. The badge on its baseball cap had been jauntily turned to one side, and it also displayed a bandage on its foot as a sign of previous battles. In one of its paws it is seen holding a flag blowing in the wind bearing the initials of the Nature Park, and in a speech bubble it is saying: 'Come here, let us defend the Nature Park together, there are only a few of us'.

This picture is taken from the end of a comic strip entitled, 'A Day at the Beach', which could also be obtained at the souvenir stall. The otter Rita[14] is seen lying in the dunes in a red and white-striped bathing costume, tanning herself and chatting with her friend Dona Amélia—an endangered plant rarely encountered on the Southwest coast. In the following picture, a biker is seen riding a trailbike racing towards them and a dark-skinned woman is riding pillion with her legs wide apart. The biker runs over the plant—vrroom!—and the dishevelled otter is then portrayed standing next to a gravestone bearing the name of Dona Amélia. The final picture depicts the motif, which can also

be seen on the postcards—the combative otter Rita, who is calling on all people to protect the southwest coast.

The otters, by being turned into a logo for the Nature Park, evoke a variety of associations. On the one hand, this public relations strategy is clearly a reaction to the resistance of the local population. The comic is intended above all to enlighten the young and to solicit their sympathy for the ideals of nature protection. On the other hand, it is also aimed at tourists, both to draw attention to the 'uniqueness' of this cultural landscape, and to provide education.

## CONCLUSION

Cultural landscapes are located at the interface of nature and culture, and analysing the intense rhetorical traffic between nature and culture offers insight both into the often contradictory attempts to preserve so-called 'natural and cultural values', and into the interrelated processes of symbolisation of the landscape that naturalise unequal social relationships. In this context, a Nature Park is an attempt to isolate nature and culture, and to '(deep-) freeze' (Bender 1998) them at a given point in time. As the history of the '*Parque Natural Sudoeste Alentejano e Costa Vicentina*' illustrates, such a project clearly contradicts the 'polysemantic nature of landscape' (Bender 1998), and is in practice continually overtaken by power, identity and development conflicts. This is particularly so as the Nature Park is located in an outlying region, which is geographically and economically marginal. The implementation of nature protection can be seen as leading to the developmental conflicts being battled out over the Nature Park, with ecology-based 'environmental discourse' gaining a hegemonic position. This not only results in a new relationship to nature being established, but also in a new assertion of power over the local population 'in the name of nature'. The 'politics of nature' is full of compromises and contradictions; the transformation of the otters from a wild animal into a Nature Park mascot illustrates not only the ingenuity of human imagination when 'nature' becomes a central 'stake' in social conflicts, but the very process of producing and constructing an 'ecological nature'. One of the paradoxes of nature protection therefore is that it creates and defines a 'culture of nature' in separating nature from culture. The example of the symbolisation of the otters shows the 'artificiality' of a now protected nature, which in many respects is similar to the portrayal of nature found in zoos, theme parks or Disneyland. Nature is both the source and product of an incessant 'traffic between culture and nature' and, as such, as is clear from the Nature Parks, the last word in this ongoing dialogue has yet to be uttered.

**Acknowledgements**

I thank Ben Campbell for inviting me to his inspiring workshop, and the anonymous reviewers and the editor for their useful comments. I also thank

the people in the Alentejo who shared their time with me. The article is dedicated to Dorle and Joschka, who shared with me many *lontra* experiences and more.

## Notes

1. *Lutra lutra* (*lontra* in Portuguese) in southern Portugal is the only otter species in Europe living as well in freshwater as in salt water.
2. Various stays between 1987 and 1997, with an extended fieldwork of 16 months in 1991/1992.
3. On the term 'discursive regimes', see Escobar (1996); on previous discursive regimes 'in the name of nature', especially in the time of Salazar, see Krauss (2001).
4. On the history of the agrarian reform, see Dracklé (1991).
5. On the rise and fall of international horticulturalists in the Alentejo, see Krauss (2001).
6. National Parks and other protected areas are mostly products of transnational and national elite-based organisations world-wide—global environmental discourse promotes the establishment of new protected areas which are however rarely secured 'from below' via the 'struggles' of the local population. Protected landscapes are thus often tinged by a colonial bias, however complex the given background to the establishment of new areas may be.
7. After revolution, parts of the environmental movement took up a political stance, 'against the system'.
8. In countries such as Portugal where statistical data whether on population or in this case flora and fauna, etc. is only collected to a limited extent, an exponential growth of wholly novel business areas such as these consultancy and planning firms, tends to be the result. Besides classifying the coast as a nature park, five or six other spatial planning measures were given over to tender for the same region. Use of such measures tends to lead to an enormous expansion of administrative activities—and a resulting mass of confusion.
9. This is shown by a comparison with several other ecosystem studies to which I had access, including one covering the Schleswig–Holstein Wattenmeer National Park in Germany.
10. On the origin and complexity of global discourse, see Krauss (2001).
11. Three months field work in the framework of the OBSERVA Project, EU Environment Research Programme, Sub-project, 'Sudoeste' (Pedro Prista).
12. For a selected bibliography of scientific work on flora and fauna of this area, see Krauss (2001).
13. In a short sentence, the article mentions that the name Natália is a reference to the Portuguese female poet and member of parliament, Natália Correia, who supposedly said in parliament that there were no otters on the south-west coast.

14. There are no significant reasons for the renaming of 'Natália' as Rita.

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