

Hen harrier disagreement could unlock other conservation conflicts

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Adult female hen harrier. Credit: John Wright

The long-running disagreement over Britain's hen harriers could offer lessons for other conservation conflicts, new research shows.

Hen harriers' prey includes birds that are shot for sport, especially red grouse, leading to [conflict](#) between shooting organizations and birds-of-prey [conservation](#) groups.

The new study, by the University of Exeter, analyzes almost three decades of U.K. newspaper articles to see how the debate has evolved.

Researchers found a peak of "polarization" after the 2016 launch of a government-backed action plan for the recovery of hen harrier populations.

"Our research offers a variety of options that could help with other conservation conflicts," said Filippo Marino, of the Center for Ecology and Conservation on Exeter's Penryn campus in Cornwall.

"We identified the most polarizing issues in the debate, and other areas where there was broad agreement. It's useful for opponents to be aware that they share some common ground, and to understand their key areas of disagreement.

"Our findings also show that the hen harriers debate has been dominated by a few high-profile people and organizations. This has probably perpetuated the conflict, increased polarization and hindered resolutions."

"Allowing new voices to speak might change the dynamics and help unlock this entrenched debate."

Researchers examined 737 statements in 131 newspaper articles published from August 1993 to December 2019, finding three main themes in the debate: problems, solutions and reactions.

They found that a multitude of people and organizations contributed to

the hen harrier debate. However, only a subset was regularly quoted.

"Despite a long history of conservation measures and the recent decline of territorial pairs of harriers in Great Britain, the hen harrier conflict appears to have worsened and become more polarized both in England and Scotland," Marino said.

"A key point of conflict is a relocation scheme, known as brood management, that moves hen harriers away from grouse moors. Meanwhile, reintroduction of hen harriers in southern England—where numbers are lower compared to northern England and Scotland—have been less polarizing."

The paper, published in the journal *People and Nature*, is titled "Stakeholder discourse coalitions and polarization in the hen harrier conservation debate in news media."

More information: Filippo Marino et al, Stakeholder discourse coalitions and polarisation in the hen harrier conservation debate in news media, *People and Nature* (2023). [DOI: 10.1002/pan3.10437](https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10437)

Provided by University of Exeter

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