

Journalism

<http://jou.sagepub.com/>

The environment, the press and the missing lynx: A case study

Ros Coward

Journalism 2010 11: 625

DOI: 10.1177/1464884910373539

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://jou.sagepub.com/content/11/5/625>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Journalism* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://jou.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://jou.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://jou.sagepub.com/content/11/5/625.refs.html>

The environment, the press and the missing lynx: A case study

Journalism
11(5) 625–638
© The Author(s) 2010
Reprints and permission: sagepub.
co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1464884910373539
<http://jou.sagepub.com>



Ros Coward

Roehampton University, UK

Abstract

While coverage of the environment generally has increased in the national media, some subjects remain difficult to place. One such subject is endangered species and threats to their survival, in particular, loss of habitat. This article is about the reporting of one highly endangered European species, the Iberian lynx, in the UK national press. It exposes the news values determining which stories get into the press. The article also explores the role of individual journalists and environmental campaign groups in getting coverage and the persistence, invention and manoeuvring which leads to innovation in news values.

Keywords

endangered species, environment, Iberian lynx, NGOs and the media, press trips

Press and broadcasting coverage of environmental issues has undergone a slow revolution since the beginning of the 1990s. In particular, since 2000, international issues overall have had increased visibility in the media: ‘development, environment and human rights’ coverage increased by 50 per cent between 2003 and 2005 (Seymour and Barnett, 2005). From a position in the late 1980s when programme-makers concerned about environmental issues found it hard to obtain commissions, the situation has transformed to the point where retiring news reader Peter Sissons alleges, ‘I believe I am one of a tiny number of BBC interviewers who have so much as raised the possibility that there is another side to the debate on climate change.’¹ A similar transformation has taken place in print journalism. When I started writing about the environment in the early 1990s, subjects such as climate change or threats to biodiversity were not considered either as mainstream news or as conventional politics.

Since the early 1990s, there has been a shift in public awareness of, and interest in, these issues.² Climate change, genetic modification, organic food, and alternative energy are now considered of general interest. Environment stories now sometimes make the front page, especially in broadsheets such as the *Guardian* and *The Independent*.

Corresponding author:

Ros Coward, Erasmus House, Roehampton University, Roehampton Lane, London SW15 5PU, UK.
Email: ros@roscoward.demon.co.uk

The latter pioneered the practice of giving over whole front pages to bold headlines about climate change, global warming and species extinction. When the *Guardian* moved to a new building and reorganized its newsroom in 2008, the environment 'pod' was given equal significance to other key 'pods' like media and integrated production. Taking a long view, the increased prominence of environment news and the broadening range of topics within that area could be seen as the culmination of one of the most significant changes in news values during this 20-year period. However, these shifts have come about slowly and unevenly, partly the result of particular writers, editors and pressure groups forcing them onto the agenda. The subject of the environment is still affected by a number of long-standing practices and prejudices. Even now, getting prominence for coverage of the whole range of environmental issues is beset with obstacles.

When I first started writing on the environment, I was conscious of these practices and prejudices. The subject was mainly covered in science and environment sections and by specialist environment correspondents. Only a few national media outlets had these.³ Environment issues rarely had prominence in the main body of the newspapers nor were they often covered in comment and features. Traditionally, the topic was seen as part of the 'science' remit, and the environment had connotations of being off-puttingly difficult or obscure – connotations it sometimes still retains. Not only were these subjects consigned to specialists but these specialists were themselves sometimes 'territorial' towards freelancers and non-specialists straying onto the terrain. Anecdotally, I occasionally encountered correspondents who could be possessive about preserving this 'weighty' subject for themselves. Coverage of individual species was affected by this science-led approach. Animals, even endangered species, were seen as soft, potentially sentimental subjects in opposition to hard, science-based environmental coverage.⁴

Environmental issues in general also had negative connotations in terms of dominant news values. News is almost by definition 'bad news'. The sort of bad news which attracts attention is usually an immediate crisis – an accident, crime or disaster.⁵ Environment issues, by contrast, were seen as long-term intractable problems and the messages of environmentalists as doom laden. The issues were seen not as bad news that excites editors but bad news that depresses the audience.⁶ This prejudice virtually put a stop to environment coverage on TV in the 1980s⁷ and is something which still militates against environmental coverage in mid-market tabloids.

From the mid 1980s onwards there was growing attention to endangered species but an examination of national newspapers reveals that this was not extensive and focused on charismatic mega-species – elephants, whales, gorillas. Until the 1990s most coverage of endangered species focused mainly on attempts to ban trade in endangered species at CITES.⁸ Prior to 1990 the ivory trade attracted more reports than other endangered species issues. Reports on overall threats to endangered species other than charismatic megafauna were largely confined to articles about British wildlife. An examination of the UK national press between 1984 and 1990 reveals 900 mentions of 'endangered species' of which many were jokes about various humans as endangered species and almost none mentioning habitat loss. There was no specific mention of the Iberian lynx, Europe's most endangered carnivore. In other words, endangered species

came to press attention when they met conventional news values criteria: crime, international political negotiations, news events like fires or fulfilling existing general interest in natural history.

Even as the environment has moved up the news agenda, there remain subjects which are easier to place than others. Climate change and global warming may be recognized as part of the news agenda.⁹ However, the wider newspaper agenda itself, with its lifestyle and entertainment pre-occupations, could be said to have become rather more trivialized hence making it difficult to include some environment issues still regarded as too dull and difficult. These include biodiversity, planning, energy, changes of land cultivation, minor endangered species, habitat loss, globalization, and social justice. Such issues are key areas of concern for environment groups but are not easily incorporated into dominant news agendas, nor do they find a ready place in the lifestyle-dominated feature sections. Consumer-related issues like food, or the ethical sourcing of clothes, are easier to place.

Issues of editorial independence also impact on this area, particularly given the costs involved in researching environmental stories with a significant international content. During the 1980s and early 1990s, news organizations would resist campaign groups' attempts to influence agendas; the conservative press was particularly inclined to see environment groups as pressurizing towards an extreme minority agenda. Over the last 20 years there has been a significant shift in how news organizations relate to environmental pressure groups. By the 1990s, environmental pressure groups were working closely with certain environment writers, who would bring forward stories after receiving tips and background information from these groups.¹⁰

A number of factors have contributed to the increasing credibility of environment pressure groups as both sources and collaborators: writers themselves developed relations of trust where information proved to be accurate; there has been a widespread acceptance of the scientific claims;¹¹ and there has been a political shift towards incorporating environmental issues so that NGOs have gained credibility amongst government policy makers and researchers. Organizations such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and The Campaign to Protect Rural England now participate regularly in government task forces. Such groups have prioritized the production of sound scientific research and its dissemination to the press in the form of reports.¹² Researchers with a science background have been trained in dealing with the press and are encouraged to develop personal contacts with specialist correspondents and freelancers. So thorough has been the transformation of relations with these groups that several news organization have recently used unmediated material generated by these organizations, such as Greenpeace-generated material about the Amazon appearing on news websites during 2009. This can be driven by shortage of funding and issues of competition, however: the Greenpeace video appeared at the point when *The Telegraph* was aggressively developing a web presence, perceiving itself as 'left behind' by the *Guardian* and other titles. These changes are significant, but the process remains uneven and the relationship between journalist and pressure groups was and remains a contested space. My experiences and those of others in writing about one species, the Iberian lynx, demonstrate that most editors remain anxious that the ties between journalists and environmental groups should not become too close.

The missing lynx: a case study

For a number of years, I have been writing on environment issues as a freelancer for national newspapers, especially the *Guardian*. Although not a specialist, I have always, because of my own interest in the environment, tried to write about environmental issues both in regular columns on the *Guardian*'s op-ed pages (known as the Comment section) and in features for different sections of the newspaper. The period in which I have been writing most regularly (1995–2005) is the period in which the environment has come to have far more prominence in the national press. The wider picture of changes in news values can only be seen more clearly in retrospect, but when, as a freelancer, I proposed articles about the Iberian lynx I was, at least subliminally, aware of some of the issues surrounding news values. I, like other writers, had internalized that articles have to meet current news value or be within the remit of what is deemed 'interesting' to an audience. If destined for general features and not specialist environment sections, there was a need for strong general interest, preferably relating to aspects of the readers' lifestyles. I knew to avoid propaganda and to balance contending claims on the subject. I was aware that the Iberian lynx – at the time a little-known European endangered species – presented particular difficulties. The threat to its survival was not any immediate disaster but more complex ecological issues involving changes in agriculture and habitat loss and it had come to my attention as a result of pressure from WWF, an environmental campaign group. For all these reasons it was a difficult subject to place.

The case study which follows shows how dominant news values exert pressures towards new angles, entertainment and impartiality. However, the case study also demonstrates how these news values can and do evolve and reveals the agencies which are key in making this happen. No single pressure group alone produces such a change: editors will readily recognize the overly partisan approach. Instead, this case study suggests issues become newsworthy through the pressure of several different groups promoting issues that sometimes interact with each other. In addition, it shows the important role of journalists themselves. They work as intermediaries, fashioning the issue and the supporting research into a 'fresh angle' or making connections to other news stories or features that will not have occurred to the pressure groups concerned. These intermediaries are also crucial in ensuring some kind of editorial independence is maintained by the commissioning newspaper through the rejection (which remains frequent) of some proposed pieces. The situation for such writers is further complicated because their access to both background research and the necessary on-the-spot reporting opportunities are mediated (and often paid for) by the pressure groups promoting the issue.

In July 2000 an article of mine appeared on the environment pages of the British newspaper the *Guardian*. It was about the Coto Doñana, a world heritage site in Southern Spain, and a casual reader would have seen a straightforward piece of reporting on how, two years after it occurred, this beautiful area was recovering from Europe's worst toxic spill.¹³ The article was illustrated with a striking picture of the animal that symbolizes the Doñana area: the Iberian lynx. Environmentalists would have felt pleased about the article on two scores. It reminded readers about the poor supervision of toxic chemicals used in mining and the danger they pose to the environment. It also foregrounded the plight of the Iberian lynx, one of Europe's most critically endangered species.

The piece looked straightforward but coaxing it into existence was not. The Iberian lynx was virtually unknown and, for the reasons just given, not of obvious news significance. Behind the article's publication was a long saga, involving a complicated press trip, negotiations with environmental campaign groups about sponsorship, issues about propaganda and journalistic objectivity, competition between journalists for the story, and, perhaps most importantly, the struggle to find ways of presenting environmental issues which would win the support of a commissioning editor and capture the audience's attention. This saga illustrates how certain 'difficult' environment stories get into the media, how campaign groups work to place these stories and the critical role of journalists in the process. Played out on the cusp of changes in the newsworthiness of the environment issues, this case study shows news values can be shifted.

I had been introduced to the lynx by the WWF, an organization with which I had already built up a relationship. In the past I had written about 'their' issues, like toxins in household goods. On other occasions, when tackling subjects like over-fishing, I had turned to their policy experts for advice. I had got to know some of these policy experts personally and knew I could always turn to them for information. Having noticed my interest in related subjects, the press officers often approached me with ideas for stories or to see if I would be interested in taking up their issues for newspaper stories. This was typical of a good working relationship – a sort of symbiosis – which can exist between press offices and journalists.

On this occasion, in 2000, WWF contacted me about the lynx as a second stage in a push on their report on Europe's carnivores, correctly recognizing that I was likely to be interested. I had already taken an interest in the wider carnivore report and during conversations had realized that I already knew the area in Spain. I had been pretty ignorant about the lynx itself until talking to WWF experts when I realized simultaneously that a fascinating animal was at risk of extinction and that this was deeply ironic given the tendency of Europeans to proselytize about 'endangered species' in more distant lands. WWF invited me to join a press trip to Spain and Portugal, specifically to find out about the lynx.

Effective campaign groups know it is rarely enough to issue a press release to editors. They need to find journalists who will be both interested in and in a position to sell the story to a newspaper or more precisely to a section editor. They recognized I might therefore be someone in a position to 'sell' the idea of an article on this subject to a section editor. A similar process of 'commissioning' applies even to staff writers given the internal commissioning structure where staff writers pitch their ideas to section editors.¹⁴ They, too, often have to persuade news editor and features editors that the story is of interest to a wider readership. So getting an environmental issue into a paper often relies on engaging that first layer of enthusiasm among journalists who think they can push it through into a commission.

The aim of the communications team at WWF, like any environment group, is to get coverage for their reports, publications and campaigns. The more attention a report gets, the easier it is for the organizations to have dialogue with the relevant authorities in the countries where the particular species or issue is found. Press coverage is a key element in any campaign, its function to inform the public, to increase awareness and motivation in the conservation community and to put pressure on policy makers. Press coverage is

seen as critical in the latter because when the media take up a story, given what I have outlined previously, it signifies there is general interest. Secondary take up, the spread of these stories from national to regional and foreign press, is particularly important evidence of general public interest, providing strong endorsement for campaigners when they approach policy makers.

1 *The commission*

When I first thought of this piece I had wanted to write exclusively about the plight of the animal itself – its habits, its habitat needs, and the direct threats to its survival – but I realized this angle was going to be difficult to place. Highlighting the lynx's plight would involve focusing on a specific animal (thereby running the risk of being seen as a sentimental animal piece) and issues of biodiversity and loss of habitat – both subjects resisted even in the broadsheets. I needed a news angle or peg on which to hang this. I decided to focus on the lynx's dependency on the threatened cork forests of Southern Spain.

On visits to Spain I had been fascinated by the traditional harvesting of cork, cut every nine years from the contorted trunks of the ancient oaks. Those freshly cut had the same orangey red colour of the surrounding soil, others slowly regrow, while some are ready to harvest again. It was a use of nature which did not exhaust it and allowed the forests to support a host of wildlife, including the magnificent imperial eagle, a true model of sustainability. However, the decline in the use of cork has meant many of the traditional forests are being cleared, something which has been particularly catastrophic in Portugal. The lynx's fate was tied up with the fate of these forests because the light vegetation and meadows associated with oak forests provide the ideal habitat for the lynx's favourite food – rabbits.

An earlier RSPB campaign had drawn public attention and press coverage to the wine industry's shift to plastic corks but had not, as far as I was aware, foregrounded the lynx alone. In addition, I had realized that the lynx was also threatened by the pressures on its habitat from the explosion of road and dam building funded by the EU, which would add news values. My first pitch was to the sympathetic deputy editor on *The Observer*. On this occasion he was supportive but rather lukewarm. 'Give it a Go' was the response, but no agreement to pay fares. I went also went to the *Guardian* environment editor and pitched a piece specifically about Doñana and how it was reviving after the toxic spill. He was keen but again made no offer of expenses.

2 *The press trip*

When I went back to WWF with the situation they offered to pay the full expenses for the press trip. With two possible commissions, it looked a good investment from their point of view. To outsiders this would look like a very desirable 'freebie' but freebies come with complications, as all journalists know. They create feelings of financial obligation to the host which can compromise objectivity. 'I think that whilst they might deny it, there will always be an element of loyalty by a journalist to a company that pays for a decadent lunch briefing or a trip to a foreign destination.'¹⁵ Yet in spite of these tensions, press trips remain an important resource for journalists. A campaigning organization's press trip allows the journalist to see the situation first hand, to get local colour and

examine primary sources for themselves. Press trips provide condensed access to all the resources, in this case access to experts, to the wild habitat in remote parts of Spain and Portugal, and to the captive breeding centre. All this was set up in advance, a considerable saving in time and effort.

The group of 'interested' writers assembled for the press trip connected with this story was a typically motley crew. *The Daily Mail* had sent one of their writers who specialized in relatively 'soft' stories about animals; things like 'The last lion in Baghdad zoo', 'Houdini the squirrel' or 'The chimpanzee who can talk'. With her, the *Daily Mail* sent a photographer, someone more used to the war zone than a search for furry beasts. Finally, there was Philippa Forrester, a minor celebrity and children's TV presenter who came with a *Hello!* magazine team. They had sent a writer and a photographer and their focus was in fact on Philippa Forrester as personality; the lynx story was scenic background for the life of the star.

The fun started once the team was gathered together – or not – as it turned out. Strangely, we seemed to have been put in two teams: the *Hello!* team and the rest. WWF were extremely secretive about these arrangements. Details of where we were staying kept changing and the schedule was frequently rejigged. Gradually it emerged that the *Hello!* team were being kept separate, doing the same trip but always a step ahead and strictly apart.

The next few days included many wonderful things, such as meeting the world expert on the Iberian lynx, the son of Spain's leading popular novelist Miguel DeLibes.¹⁶ We visited extraordinary places like La Roccio, still the home of Doñana's extraordinary summer pilgrimage but for most of the year a sleepy isolated place surrounded by marshes and full of flocks of birds. In the evening we tracked the lynx on Doñana on a wonderful evening as the sun set and the radio crackled into life, telling us the cubs, born in the hollows of old oaks, were stirring. The next day we visited the captive breeding centre – a rather sad and sorry place where we learnt about the number of animals killed on the roads around Doñana and the incredible difficulties of breeding these elusive and rare animals. When we moved on to Portugal there were visits to the cork forests, more attempts to find the elusive lynx and an incredible encounter with cork workers living in ramshackle sheds in the forests – a lifestyle which had not changed for centuries.

But there was also farce and frustration. The farce concerned *Hello!* magazine. As we arrived at one door, the *Hello!* team were ushered out of another. Eventually WWF was persuaded to explain: Philippa Forrester was pregnant and *Hello!* was going to 'break' the story; they didn't want any other newspapers get the story first! WWF had been forced to agree to this 'protection' and had to resort to the tactics of a French farce to keep us all apart.

The frustration came in the conflict of interests and competition. Typically on a press trip, journalists have different interests and issues to follow and this press trip was no different. I needed to talk to people who knew about the toxic spill, whether the land had recovered and whether the mines, which had caused the problems, were now safe. The *Daily Mail* journalist wanted 'personal' details of the lynxes. What were their names? Their love lives? She was irritated whenever WWF talked about the environmental issues, complaining about propaganda. Her photographer had his own agenda too. He was looking for something more like his usual earthquakes and war zones, and was only satisfied when he had provoked the captive lynx into springing at the journalists so he could get an angry predatory picture. In Portugal there was an added complication. The trip was joined

by a very well-respected freelance journalist and expert on Portuguese wildlife, Eduardo Gonçalves, who later co-wrote *The Algarve Tiger* (2005) and was involved in SOS Lynx, an independent organizing campaigning for the conservation of the lynx. Gonçalves sometimes wrote for *The Observer* and intended to submit something on this topic to that paper. I began to have a niggling worry that we would be competing for the same pitch.

3 The article

Back home niggling worries escalated. First came problems with back-up information. Writing for newspapers, it is essential to give the opposition's views. But in the previous month there had been negative coverage of Oddbins for its support of plastic corks so they refused to talk to me. I was forced to plunder what Oddbins had said previously: 'the consumers demand it'. Although disappointing, the finished article with its focus on the lynx seemed fresh, forceful and fair. However, when I submitted it, the original commissioning editor passed it on to the foreign editor as it was a 'foreign' story. This editor informed me that Gonçalves had just submitted a piece on forest fires and cork forests in Portugal, which ruled out my story for the time being. I waited a couple of weeks but when I rang again I found that Gonçalves had submitted another story on Portugal. 'Enough on Portugal for now' was the editor's verdict.

At this point, I shifted focus to the piece for the *Guardian* environment pages. I needed to salvage the lynx story, so changed the emphasis from the original commission, which was mainly about Doñana and the toxic spill – a challenge as the editor of these pages favoured a harder edged investigative approach. Nevertheless, I managed to make the links, showing how fragile Doñana was, not just because of spill from which it was recovering but because of agricultural and tourist developments in the surrounding ecosystems. Doñana's isolation from its surroundings, including the cork forest, has particularly tragic implications for the lynx which is territorial and spreads out in search of territories.

There was one further complication. Anxiety about the dangers of appearing propagandistic, led me to drop explicit references to WWF – a disappointment to the organization. From the editors' and journalists' point of view this is forgivable. They consider they have helped the NGO by drawing attention to the cause. However, the NGO needs the mention for evidence of effectiveness. In spite of all the compromises I was still perhaps luckier than the *Daily Mail* writer. Her story never appeared at all, probably because it was impossible to avoid this becoming an angry environmental story rather than an animal story. And perhaps WWF was right to pull out all the stops for *Hello!*. In the end they carried, relatively quickly, a beautifully illustrated piece – Phillipa Forrester in front of a cork oak, a captive lynx and sunsets over Doñana.

4 Analysis of the case study

This detailed case study shows:

- the complicated process of nursing an article idea into print: showing how stories have to be tailored to fit the slots, and finding newsworthy angles for news sections, softer human or consumer interest for features sections and personal angles for celebrity-driven publications.

- the different agendas which shape, influence and alter the story as it emerges into print: the role of the freelancer or ‘committed’ journalist, the pressures from editors and the prevailing news values.
- how, when writing features for the national press (in particular, in covering environmental topics), writers bring original ideas into the commissioning process, shaping these ideas to meet prevailing values while negotiating their own sometimes partisan angles. This process can mean some difficult long-term issues like habitat loss are not addressed head on, but the negotiation between the different protagonists often injects originality and accessibility into the stories.
- how editors ration coverage of what they see as difficult subjects for fear of reader fatigue, and how different papers foreground different aspects of the same story.
- the need for celebrity involvement to engage popular journalism in serious subjects like the environment or poverty (otherwise viewed as ‘worthy’).

News stories are defined, accepted or rejected within a struggle, or at least a constant argument, between individuals who are the representatives of different attitudes and forces. Freelance journalists often pitch ideas to section editors who are not necessarily on an environmental wavelength and have no particular commitment to individual writers. Unlike staff writers or specialist science and environment correspondents, freelancers often have to convince section editors that these stories will make good features in sections which don’t habitually cover them. Freelancers play an important role, using inventiveness and skill at pitching to introduce and renew subjects, and to think of fresh angles. The trick is to find subjects which do fit the section, stories which have some connection to general news or social trends but which are also done in surprising and entertaining ways. In the same period, I managed to get several pieces on the environment into unexpected places by working in this way: a strong environmental piece about sewage, water quality and eco-friendly solutions onto the Women’s page by focusing on what happens to sanitary protection; and an article about public transport reform on the Parents page by writing about school children and travel.¹⁷

In general, covering environmental issues is easier for journalists with regular slots or on contract to specific pages or editors, where a strong bond of trust means that writers have more freedom in pursuing their own commitments or interests. On and off between 1995 and 2000, I wrote a regular column for the comment pages and found that once the editor of those pages developed a commitment to you as a comment writer, he or she would usually trust you to propose good subjects (although some editors were massively more sympathetic than others to environmental concerns). Even so I was conscious of taking care not to appear too nerdish by writing frequently about transport or planning issues, or too sentimental by writing about animal welfare, or too naïve and idealistic by questioning the goals of economic development. Even in these circumstances inventiveness was needed to keep the subjects connected with news values and assumed general reader interests.

The case study reveals the importance of the writers, editors and news values in determining whether or not an issue will receive substantial coverage and the final shape of the articles devoted to it. However, the role of NGOs in defining the issue and promoting it has a significant impact on the coverage of this subject. The work of environmental campaign groups in putting issues onto the news agenda is a longer term process, and

involves many different initiatives as the following analysis of the coverage of the lynx during this period reveals.

How the lynx stole into the headlines: pressure groups and the news agenda

Arguably, the lynx had been rather neglected by the conservation organizations themselves, which had concentrated on the better known charismatic species threatened by poaching or disasters. However, by the early 1990s, largely as a result of the activities of Spanish environmental campaigners,¹⁸ the lynx had begun to feature in campaigns of bigger environment organizations. An examination of mentions of press attention to the lynx's plight shows an exact correlation with campaigns and reports launched by major environmental organizations, in particular the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB).

The first significant attention in a British newspaper was in 1990 when the *Guardian's* Madrid correspondent John Hooper took up WWF Spain's campaign on 'eco-vandalism' leading to loss of habitat mainly around Doñana – a subject to which he returned several times.¹⁹ In the immediate years following, the main attention took the form of a small number of news items picking up on reports initially from Spanish campaigners. The most significant news mention of the lynx came in 1996 with the IUCN's newly revised *Red List of Threatened Animals*.²⁰ This report specifically mentioned the lynx as one of the 16 European species in danger of extinction in the next decade.

In 1998 the lynx was affected by a news event, the toxic spill on the edges of Doñana, which led to several mentions of the lynx in this context in the broadsheets. Later in the same year, the RSPB launched a UK initiative calling on consumers to boycott plastic corks, which were contributing to the decline of the sustainably managed cork forests – home to the rare imperial eagle. The Iberian lynx (said at this point to number approximately 1200 individuals in the wild) was mentioned as one of several species in a whole ecosystem threatened by these changes. The RSPB campaign, linked to consumer issues, was taken up by all the specialist environment correspondents, such as Paul Brown, Charles Clover and Geoffrey Lean. Towards the end of 1999, WWF launched a report on Europe's carnivores,²¹ which again resulted in articles by the environment correspondents in *The Times*, *Telegraph* and *Guardian* about the threats to large carnivores. Through 1999 there were several mentions of the plight of the lynx in passing on the general issues of Europe's carnivores.

My article on the lynx and my dealings with WWF came in the context of WWF's second push on their carnivore initiative, this time attempting to draw specific attention to the lynx as the most threatened of all the carnivores and the extinct species on our doorstep – 'Europe's tiger' as it was now being called (Beaufoy, 1999). Analysed in retrospect, 2000 was a significant year. The combination of the RSPB campaign and WWF's second push produced a much higher level of attention. My article appeared in the context of several others, including Eduardo Gonçalves' articles on the threats to the lynx, the decline of cork production and forest fires.²² Gonçalves' journalism is another good

example of how the inventiveness of a committed freelancer can push an obscure issue up the agenda. By the end of the year declining numbers of the lynx becomes newsworthy in itself – even catching the attention of some the tabloids.²³

In the subsequent three years, with WWF continuing to push on the issues of species extinction and both WWF and RSPB pushing on the issue of the cork forests, the lynx begins to feature more consistently in news reports even in tabloids. *The Daily Mail*, for example, covers ‘the threat to 211,000 species’, but there are specific reports about the lynx, including repeated use of the headlines: *The Missing Lynx* and *The Weakest Lynx*. In the broadsheets, the threat created by the EU’s funding of dams, roads and infrastructure projects in the lynx’s territory attracts some attention, especially from the specialist environment correspondents. I covered this subject on the comment pages in 2002²⁴ and Eduardo Gonçalves returned to it regularly through this period.²⁵ These more obscure, EU-related issues did not reach the tabloids at all. In 2002, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Observer* both reported that the Spanish government had committed €5million to save the lynx.

In 2003 the *Guardian Weekend* carried a major 3000-word, fully illustrated article specifically about the lynx, ‘The cat who walks alone’.²⁶ Natasha Walter, its author, has described²⁷ how this article came about:

I read something about the lynx in another magazine or newspaper (could this have been something by you? I don’t remember the specific piece, but if you wrote something before my piece it is likely to be that which got me started) and got excited by the idea of this endangered species, found out a bit more, pitched it to (the) then editor of *Guardian Weekend*, and then went on researching. I was then on contract to Kath²⁸ and always looking for good subjects for magazine features. I have always been fascinated by environmental issues (although never made it my specialty as a writer) and found the idea that we might lose this species in Europe very poignant. I had no problem placing the article as Kath got why it was important immediately. She didn’t ask me to find any other peg or push it any other direction.

The piece and her comments on how it came about confirm the importance of committed journalists and editors in bringing forward these issues. It is also evidence of a significant shift in news values, where an obscure European species is now considered of sufficient general interest and appeal to merit such large coverage. Walter’s experience was similar to my own: becoming subliminally aware of the lynx’s plight; having a strong commitment to the area; and spotting editorial opportunities to place a piece.

In the last seven years, the plight of the lynx has achieved enough news value for campaigners to run into another problem besetting environmental coverage: the lynx had shifted rapidly from too obscure to potentially overexposed. Attention can still be generated occasionally around the link with cork, providing as it does a reservoir of good headlines and to the still rapidly declining numbers. Even the *Sun* newspaper created a typical punning headline to report: ‘Eek it’s me next. The end of the Fe-line.’²⁹ But there was a limit to how much these could be repeated. Campaign groups were aware that no sooner had they achieved visibility than potential fatigue could set in. ‘Either journalists had not heard of the Iberian Lynx or even if they had they did not see it as important as other felines in the world’ says Dan Ward of SOS Lynx:

Now the situation has changed. Now it is more a problem of providing something new for them to write about given that there has been quite a lot of coverage of the Iberian lynx in recent years; for example, by *El Pais* and *El Mundo* in Spain and by the BBC (especially its website) at the international level.³⁰

As a result, campaign groups now draw attention to lynx road deaths, poisoning and captive births. The broadsheets have reported on some of these events but, having achieved peaks of attention, these subjects are in danger of becoming ‘old news’.

Conclusion

This article has given evidence of a growing media awareness of the lynx itself and of the ecological issues affecting its survival. It has also given evidence of how the change in news values owes much to environmental campaign groups, and to the journalists who find ways of bringing these issues into a mainstream agenda while passing through the filter of editorial demands for newsworthiness and critical distance from pressure groups. Press visibility has been achieved, but what if anything has been achieved in terms of the objective of this visibility: the survival of the lynx itself?

In the period under review several positive things have been achieved. There is higher awareness of the once obscure lynx amongst conservation groups in general, hence the lynx is likely to be included in the wider objectives of these groups: the IUCN *Red List* 2008 had the lynx on the front cover. Secondly, there is higher awareness among the general public, and especially among the Spanish public. The Spanish government has given €5 million towards lynx conservation in the form of a captive breeding programme. This programme has produced several dozen cubs. On the negative side, however, reporting on this obscure single species remains difficult with campaign groups struggling to find new ways of getting into the news. In addition, the critical issues in the lynx’s decline – loss of habitat, changes in land cultivation, and the complex questions of development and EU policy – do not find a ready place and even the pressure and inventiveness of campaign groups and writers cannot change this. Most tellingly, at the beginning of this period it was reported that lynx numbered between 1200 and 2000 individuals. The latest figures show a catastrophic decline to around 120 individuals. For one species at least changes in news values are too little too late.

Notes

- 1 Quoted in Peter Sisson’s *New Friends and Old Enemies*. the *Guardian*, 13 July 2009.
- 2 The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), Rio de Janeiro, 3–14 June 1992 (informally known as the Earth Summit) played an important part in gaining recognition for environmental issues at a public, political and media level. Environment correspondents Paul Brown and Frank MacDonald (2000) refer to ‘the heady days of the Earth Summit’ when environmental coverage peaked. They claim the interest shown by editors in the run up to the Earth Summit waned again afterwards.
- 3 The *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Observer*, *The Times*, *The Daily Express*, BBC.
- 4 I was once told by an environment editor to avoid ‘fluffy bunny’ stories.

- 5 A point agreed by most participants in the debate about news values (see Allan and Zelizer, 2002; Dayan and Katz, 1992; Galtung and Ruge, 1965; McNair, 2007).
- 6 In Smith, 2000. Several environment correspondents complain of editorial resistance to covering long-term trends or complex situations with no obvious solution.
- 7 Interview conducted by the author with C4 commissioning editor and quoted in 'The World Not About us on the Television', 5 August 1996.
- 8 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.
- 9 Increasing attention resulted from disasters and news events, such as Hurricane Katrina, and the acceptance of climate change as a reality by several influential scientific bodies and panels.
- 10 It is interesting to note how leading environment correspondents have developed close working relations with campaign groups, including *The Independent's* environment correspondent, Nick Schoon, leaving to work for the Campaign to the Protect Rural England, and Charles Clover working closely with Greenpeace on the 2009 film *The End of the Line*.
- 11 The Stern review of the Economics of Climate Change 2006 was especially significant as signalling mainstream acceptance.
- 12 Campaign groups have been anxious about accusations of bad science that followed Greenpeace's Brent Spar campaign in 1995.
- 13 The wall of the tailings pool at Los Frailes mine in Aznacollar broke in April 1998, spilling millions of tons of toxic sludge including cadmium, lead, zinc and mercury into the river Guadiamar which feeds the waters of Doñana national park. All river life in that area was destroyed, including 37 tons of fish.
- 14 Interviews with environment correspondents reveal similar acquired 'wiliness' with getting attention to stories. Roger Harrabin of the BBC tells of getting John Prescott to swim among the coral reef only to have the story 'pinched' by the politics correspondent. 'The episode illustrates several themes that recur in this book in contributions from journalists, academics, pollsters, campaigning PR professionals and others. There is the increasing deviousness needed by environment reporters to promote their stories at a time of declining interest among news editors. There is the distorting effect of the constant need to personalize the news, and to find dramatic pictures and short-term disasters to give immediacy to what are often long-term trends.' These correspondents complain of the 1990s as a plateau where main issues had been covered and editors now rejected stories unless dramatic. Harrabin is contemptuous of the 'newsroom culture' of 'drama, conflict and novelty'. Both he and Paul Brown, environment correspondent of the *Guardian*, discuss their strategies for getting stories into the news, and their frustration at the fickleness and ignorance of their editors. 'Never mention a phrase such as "sustainable development", however central it may be to the subject in hand' (Harrabin, 2000).
- 15 <http://iamthemediamonkey.blogspot.com/2009/01/is-press-trip-dead.html>
- 16 Miguel Delibes, author of many novels including *El Camino* (1950).
- 17 Articles for *The Guardian* by the author between 1998 and 2000.
- 18 In particular, WWF Spain, and Ecologistas en Accion.
- 19 First mentioned by John Hooper in an article on eco-vandalism in Spain, the *Guardian*, 9 March 1990.
- 20 This was the year when the IUCN report put itself on a more serious scientific footing.
- 21 *The Campaign for Europe's Carnivores*, a WWF-UK project.
- 22 Pulling the plug. How wine consumers threatened forest. The *Guardian*, 28 June 2000.

- 23 Peter Brown, TB threat to last 600 Lynx. *Daily Express* 1 July 2000.
- 24 Wreckers of the landscape. The *Guardian*, 29 July 2002.
- 25 Iberian lynx nears extinction as EU-backed work wrecks habitat. *Independent on Sunday*, 16 June 2002.
- 26 The cat who walks alone. The *Guardian*, 15 November 2003.
- 27 Interview conducted with author, July 2009.
- 28 Katharine Viner, then editor of *Guardian Weekend*, currently deputy editor.
- 29 *The Sun*, 2 July 2009.
- 30 Interview with author, September 2008.

References

- Beaufoy G (1999) *A Last Chance for the Iberian Lynx*. London: WWF.
- Brown P, MacDonald F (2000) Have we 'had enough of all that eco-bollox'. In: Smith J (ed.) *The Daily Globe*. London: Earthscan.
- Dayan D, Katz E (1992) *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Galtung J, Ruge MH (1965) The structure of foreign news. The presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus crises in four Norwegian newspapers. *Journal of Peace Research* 2: 64–91.
- Gonçalves E, Mitchell S, and Sabater A (2005) *The Algarve Tiger*. Algarve: Vista Iberica Publications.
- Harrabin R (2000) Reporting sustainable development: A broadcast journalist's view. In: Smith J (ed.) *The Daily Globe; Environmental Change, the Public and the Media*. London: Earthscan Books.
- McNair B (2007) *News and Journalism in the UK*. London: Routledge.
- Seymour E, Barnett S (2005) *Bringing the World to the UK: Factual International Programming on UK Public Service TV, 2005*. 3WE/CAMRI, University of Westminster. Available at: http://www.ibt.org.uk/all_documents/research_reports/Bringing%20the%20World_full.pdf#view=FitV
- Smith J (ed.) (2000) *The Daily Globe; Environmental Change, the Public and the Media*. London: Earthscan Books.
- Zelizer B, Allan S (2002) *Journalism after September 11*. London: Routledge.

Biographical notes

Ros Coward is Professor of Journalism at Roehampton University. She is the author of several books including *Language and Materialism* (with John Ellis, 1976); *Female Desire: How Women's Sexuality is Packaged and Consumed* (1984); *The Whole Truth: The Myth of Alternative Health* (1990); *Our Treacherous Hearts* (1992); *Diana: The Authorised Portrait* (2004) and co-author of *Mandela: The Authorised Portrait* (2006). Coward has worked for many years as a journalist and is best known for her columns on the Comment and Analysis pages of the *Guardian* and for her column 'Looking After Mother' in the Family section of the *Guardian*. She has also regularly written features for the *Observer* and the *Guardian* and other national newspapers and magazines as well as having written a regular column for *The Ecologist* magazine. She is a board member of Greenpeace.