

The Birds' Eye View: Perceptions of Bird of Prey Conservation in Ireland's Falconry Practices

Falconry

Falconry is generally acknowledged as a tradition of hunting which involves taking quarry in its natural state and habitat by means of trained birds of prey. Evidence has located the practice in various forms in numerous locations across the globe from at least as early as 1,500BC. It is similarly proclaimed to have a long tradition in bird conservation (International Association for Falconry and Conservation of Birds of Prey, 2021).

So it is in Ireland, where the current practices of falconry are encouraged through the 'sustainable use of wildlife' and 'preservation of natural habitats' such that "the falconer therefore naturally acquires a particular and unique understanding of their place in the natural world" (The National Inventory, Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sports and Media, 2021).

This unique understanding, combined with a long-standing tradition, has resulted in falconry's addition to Ireland's National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage (National Inventory). As such it is inscribed as an art form which is:

"associated with *nature conservation*, cultural heritage and social engagement within and amongst communities [in which a] *deep love of nature* and its complex tapestry is the common thread that binds them together" (author's emphasis)

(The National Inventory, Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sports and Media, 2021).

Intangible Cultural Heritage

The National Inventory is identified as a key instrument that helps safeguard falconry under its "obligations to protect, promote and celebrate Irish living cultural heritage practices, customs, crafts and traditions". By formally recognising falconry as Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) on the inventory, falconers and the Irish Government are positioning the practice as nationally significant to the extent that it must be safeguarded according to Ireland's obligations in ratifying the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003).

According to this convention, ICH is defined as "manifesting through a set of practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, etc., that individuals or groups recognise as part of their cultural heritage" and as such is based on "a dynamic of recognition" (Cornu, 2020, p1). This recognition includes the relationship and mutual interactions of the materials and intangibles involved (Dazjack et al 2020) and the co-existing rights and interests of the parties involved (Cornu, 2020).

In the case of falconry then, safeguarding the mutual interactions and co-existing rights and interests of the parties involved must include those of the bird around which the practice revolves. This is especially crucial given the current, tragic plight of birds of prey: Birds of prey are amongst the greatest number of threatened and declining species globally (McClure and Rolek, 2020), birds of prey are a group most at risk of extinction in Europe (Birdlife, 2021) and Ireland has arguably the worst record concerning its bird of prey populations where it has lost a higher percentage of their native breeding raptor species than any other European country (Golden Eagle Trust, 2021). Further, research on Ireland's birds of prey shows that this decline is significantly impacted by direct anthropogenic causes where illegal acts or misuse of poisons/poisoning incidents accounted for 71.5% of cases, while shootings accounted for 28% of mortality in 2017-2019 (National Parks and Wildlife Service, 2020).

It is therefore vital to understand how Ireland's birds of prey are safeguarded by being recognised as an important part of Ireland's cultural heritage and falconry's inclusion on its ICH national inventory.

Falconry Practice in Ireland

A brief survey of the websites of the Irish Hawking Club (Ireland's key falconry members organisation) and a few falconry clubs across the country demonstrates that they frequently contain messaging around 'bird of prey conservation' and 'education on conservation issues'. Indeed, it is stipulated in the National Inventory that a key activity in safeguarding this heritage is raising awareness and disseminating knowledge through local, national, and international cultural events such as country fairs and festivals.

A mode of communication frequently employed at these events is the 'Falconry Display'. These displays typically involve the presentation of a number of bird species to a public audience and use a somewhat standard format that includes a semi-static display in which a variety of birds are tethered to a stand so they can be viewed by the audience, and a more dynamic display in which trained birds perform a sequence of flights or imitate a hunting bout whilst the falconer talks around various topics relating to the practice and context. Thus, falconry displays provide a useful opportunity to engage the audience in conservation issues.

However, while the format of the display is relatively consistent, the context in which they are performed can vary. Displays take place in a variety of cultural settings such as agricultural shows/festivals, 'natural' ecological settings or where displays are used as part of re-enactment events situated in stately homes/historic sites in which falconry was likely practiced.

Applying Hooper-Greenhill's (1994) theory on 'holistic communication' to the falconry display context, it should be insightful in considering how, alongside the formal and direct communication by

presenting falconers, other aspects of the display, such as the setting, influence the audience's perception and receptiveness of birds and their conservation issues.

Project Aims

Therefore, the aims of this research projects are to identify:

1. If and how falconry displays effectively contribute to the education of conservation issues surrounding birds of prey?
2. If and how the specific cultural setting of the display impacts the audience's understanding of the messages/information conveyed?

Methods

The research approach will broadly follow Carnagie and McCabe's (2008) examination of re-enactment events using a qualitative and ethnographic approach to provide exploratory data. This data will then be analysed for emergent recurring/predominant themes.

The base data will be obtained through audience surveys at three falconry display sites that differ in setting:

1. The Nation Bird of Prey Centre at Kilruddery House and Estate: A 17th century house currently promoted as an exemplary 'Historic House of Ireland' on the national and international tourist circuit;
2. Falconry Display at monthly Battle of the Boyne re-enactment fair: The Battle of the Boyne, part of the 17th century Jacobite wars, saw William of Orange defeat James II and ensured the continuation of Protestant ascendancy in Ireland;
3. The Burren Bird of Prey Centre: the Burren is a UNESCO Biosphere site in the west of Ireland known for its unique natural landscape and rare flora.

The survey will be structured as follows (adapted from Miller (2017) and McGhie (2018)):

Section 1 will establish survey respondent's existing (i.e., prior to the display)

- a) interest in/experience of falconry in Ireland
- b) knowledge of bird of prey conservation issues

Section 2 will focus on the respondent's understanding of information conveyed after the display in relation to:

- a) the cultural context and history of the location

- b) the cultural context and history falconry

Section 3 will focus on the respondent's understanding of information conveyed after the display in relation to:

- a) wildlife conservation generally
- b) specific messages convey relating to bird of prey conservation

Section 4 will focus on:

- a) Assessing any changes to respondents' attitudes/perception to the setting following the display
- b) Assessing any changes to respondents' attitudes/perception to falconry following the display
- c) Assessing any changes to respondents' attitudes/perception to bird of prey conservation following the display

Anticipated Findings

The variety of cultural settings in which falconry displays are performed provide an opportunity to assess 'the work' (Smith, 2006) that this heritage does. The different settings are highly likely to influence the audience's response to and perception of the display and the information it conveys. Thus, where education on the conservation status of birds of prey is a key objective of falconry centres, how the setting contributes to this objective is significant.

For example, Ireland's National Inventory inscription of falconry makes a point of informing us that although "falconry was the preserve of royalty and nobles" it is now more accessible and egalitarian as is practiced by a 'broad cross-section of backgrounds'. It would be interesting to know if this view is shared outside the practitioners or does situating a falconry display within the grounds of grand stately homes suggest aristocratic tendencies remain thereby alienating audiences that do not identify with this classist implication? Further, that in Ireland 'the aristocracy' is commonly associated negatively with British rule prior to independence, does this lessen the impact of the conservation message due to potentially diluting the shared elements of the cultural heritage?

Alternatively, where, according to the National Inventory "Many consider falconry as providing a connection to the past", displays situated in a historic context, such as the Battle of the Boyne, bring the audience closer to the birds spatially and demonstrate the historic role of the birds. However, by delivering educational conservation information through messages pertaining to practice's

significance in ‘times gone by’, it creates temporal distance between the bird and the audience such that the urgency or relevance of the conservation issues are perceived as distant.

Finally, where displays are performed in agricultural shows or ‘more natural’ ecological settings, the life history and ecology of the bird may be better highlighted and understood. However, for the visiting or tourist audience, the differences between the birds’ habitat and their may make it difficult to relate to their birds and their plight.

Conclusion

Given the critical conservation status of birds of prey in Ireland, the effectiveness of safeguarding the birds central to Ireland’s falconry heritage must be improved urgently. The findings from this analysis can help inform how conservation issues are communicated and understood by the wider public with the aim garnering increased public support of conservation initiatives.