

Wildlife and recreational organisations discursive strategies and the redefinition of Québec's forest regime

Julie Hagan

Sociology Department,
Université Laval,
Pavillon Charles-De Koninck, 1030, Avenue des Sciences-Humaines,
Bureau 2461, Québec, G1V 0A6, Canada
E-mail: julie.hagan.1@ulaval.ca

Abstract: The popularity of outdoor activities gave rise to a new group of stakeholders interested in forestry practices: wildlife organisations. Our case study of the commission on the sustainability of public forest management in Québec illustrates how wildlife stakeholders used a public participation process to gain recognition. Those organisations formed an alliance with environmental groups and made a strategic use of economic arguments. As the economic discourse remains unchallenged, the arguments most likely to be taken into account are those combining environmental and economic preoccupations, which call for further investigation of the discursive strategies used by social actors.

Keywords: natural resource management; wildlife organisations; public participation; discourse; social movements; Québec.

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Biographical notes: Julie Hagan is a PhD candidate in Sociology at the Laval University, Québec, Canada. Her research, at the intersection between neoinstitutionalism and critical discourse theories, focuses on rural development and the political sociology of natural resources management. She is currently studying the effects of institutional changes on the democratisation of forest resources management in Québec and beginning another project on the formation of unlikely alliances between environmentalists and loggers.

1 Introduction

In Québec, around 90% of the forest is publicly owned, although most of it is allocated to private companies through a system of concessions, which entails that both the State and the industry are dominant actors in Québec forest regime. However, with the growing public concern for environmental issues, ecologists groups came to play a key-role as the watchdog of forest practices. The democratisation of recreational and touristic activities – such as hunting and fishing – and the growing popularity of outdoor sports

gave rise to a new group of stakeholders interested in the management of forest: the wildlife and recreational organisations. The convergence of those trends led to an increase in the diversity of values and conflicting interests around forest management. Thus, Québec's government began to use public participation as a solution to mediate the conflicting interests surrounding forest resources. The participation of a myriad of stakeholders challenge vertical forms of governance and represent a step forward in the democratisation of natural resources management. Public participation fosters the recognition of subordinates actors and emerging discourses. Thus, my objective was to address the discursive dimension of participation, asking: does it allow innovative discourses to be acknowledged? To what extent does it encourage the formation of alliances among different types of social actors (e.g., recreational organisations and environmental groups)? Are those alliances based on shared meaning rather than shared interests?

Arts and Leroy's (2006) policy arrangement approach provided the conceptual framework for this analysis. In this case, the policy arrangement included the social actors interested in forest management, the discourses they brought forth, and the coalitions they formed around the commission on the sustainability of public forest management in 2004.

A myriad of stakeholders, interest groups and 'ordinary' citizen took part to the commission. All of them mobilised specific arguments and discourses. Some of them forged strategic alliances either because of similar interests or on the common ground provided by shared values and discourses. This presentation will focus purposely on the wildlife and recreational organisations strategies. After briefly presenting the context of the commission on the sustainability of public forest management, I will describe the alliances forged by the emergent wildlife actors with some of the most influential environmental groups. Then, I will explain how wildlife and recreational organisations used economic arguments to gain some acknowledgement. I will conclude by some remarks on the combination of seemingly incompatible rhetoric – environmental arguments on one hand, and economic arguments on the other hand – through the use of hybrid discourses such as the one on 'sustainable development'.

2 The commission on the sustainability of public forest management

The Québec forest act was reviewed from 1998 to 2001, and a consultation obligation was added to the law. But the consultation process was criticised both by the industry who found it too costly and time-consuming, and by ecological and recreational organisations who judged the process unfair. At the turn of the millennium, social actors' annoyance with the forest regime grew into a full-blown public controversy, due to the confluence of the discontent around the new consultation processes, and to the public's strong reaction to the viewing of the documentary film *L'erreur Boréale* (whose title could be translated by *Horror Borealis*). This film, which was first broadcast in 1999, showed many shocking aerial images of clear-cut forests. The commission on the sustainability of public forest management was appointed in response to this controversy.

The commission was fully independent from Québec's government, although appointed by the Prime Minister. The objective of this vast consultative process was to evaluate the management of Québec's forest regime. The commission specific objectives were to review the planning process, to conduct an exhaustive assessment of the forest

cover and to examine the technical and scientific basis of calculus estimating of the annual global forest possibility (Commission on the Sustainability of Public Forest Management, 2004a). Although over-exploitation and depletion of Québec's forest resources depicted in the controversial documentary was a central issue, the commission came to investigate most of the aspects of Québec's forest regime.

As one commissioner puts it, "the commission stemmed from an environmental crisis, but came to look at the forest regime as a whole". Thus, some reoccurring issues such as the dilemma between socioeconomic productivity and sustainability, the polyvalent uses of forest resources and regional dynamics were scrutinised. Other issues such as who should be in charge of the planning process, how to address shortage of forest workers and the general mistrust of the public were also addressed.

Public hearings were conducted in 15 municipalities and three first nation communities all over the province of Québec. Over 1,800 person took part to the 39 days of public hearings and 303 documents were submitted [Commission on the Sustainability of Public Forest Management, (2004b), p.263].

3 Wildlife and recreational organisations alliance with environmental groups

Historically, the recreational pursuit of hunting and fishing were the prerogative of the wealthiest citizens. The democratisation of those activities, combined with the growing popularity of outdoor activities – hiking, camping, mountain biking, etc., – lead to the increasing interest of wildlife and recreational organisations in forest management and planning.

Wildlife and recreational organisations bring together different groups interested in wildlife and its habitats, recreational hunters and fishers, for example. Their main argument concerns the harmonisation of forest activities. They argue that forest resources should include not only timber products, but also non-timber forest products such as flora and fauna and intangible assets such as landscapes. In a document presented to the commission's public hearings, the Fédération Québécoise de la Faune (FQF)¹ recommended "to acknowledge that Québec's public forest has many uses besides wood products" [FQF, (2004), p.7].

Wildlife organisations came to build alliances with environmental groups around a shared vision of the forest. Both actors are critic towards timber industry practices and their negative outcomes on the abundance of fauna and the attractiveness of landscapes [FPQ, (2004), p.3 and 5; CRE Chaudière-Appalaches, (2004), p.13]. Both groups are resolutely concerned with biodiversity issues.

Environmental groups adopt a conservationist posture, demanding governmental action for the creation of protected areas [CRE Chaudière-Appalaches, (2004), p.3]. The position of wildlife organisations toward biodiversity is more interested – although not less legitimate – as loss of biodiversity is correlated with a loss of income for wildlife organisations.

Both wildlife and environmental groups are unhappy with the role of the industry – who acts both as judge and party – in the consultation process who followed the revision of Québec forest act. Environmentalists criticise the fact that the timber industry – which is obviously neither neutral nor devoid of interests – is responsible of the negotiation of harmonisation measures with other forest stakeholders

[UQCN, (2004), p.1]. Confronted to processes deemed unfair, recreational organisations, wildlife groups and ecologists demand consultation processes independent from the timber industry interests as well as from Québec's Natural Resources Ministry [Groupe faune du Bas Saint-Laurent, (2004), p.2]. Hunting and fishing outfitters claim that a legal recognition of their specificities would guarantee the fairness of participation to the planning process [FPQ, (2004), p.7 and 8]. Both wildlife and environmental groups worry about the inaccuracy of the estimation of the annual global forest possibility [Groupe faune du Bas Saint-Laurent, (2004), p.3].

Wildlife organisation and environmentalists also share a common worry about the expected negative outcome of intensive forest management practices. Intensive forest management aims at increasing timber productivity through practices such as harvest with regeneration protection and the use fast-growth trees on some of the most productive area of Québec's territory (Direction des Programmes Forestiers du Ministère des Ressources Naturelles, 2000). Ecologists are concerned that such practices lead to "an artificialisation of forests" which would undermine natural ecosystems and affect biodiversity [CRE Chaudière-Appalaches, (2004), p.13].

Outfitters as well as wildlife preserves believe that their participation would be facilitated by the ascription of some legal status. Some argue that the harmonisation of the various interests and values at stake "require that the diverse stakeholders of a given territory be on common legal ground. Unfortunately, Québec's Forest Act doesn't recognise any specific status to wildlife preserves" [FQF, (2004), p.8]. The Fédération des Pourvoiries du Québec (FPQ), an association regrouping Québec's hunting and fishing outfitters, demands the attribution of a legal status to the outfitters. Such a status would acknowledge their specific role in the protection and valorisation of the natural resources taking into account their interest in fauna, forestry and tourism (FPQ, (2004), p.7]. The Union pour la conservation de la nature (UQCN), one of Québec's most pre-eminent environmental groups, gave support to the demands of the wildlife and recreational organisation [UQCN, (2004), p.7].

Most wildlife and recreational stakeholders, as well as ecologists, deplore that the annual global forest possibility estimate was not available to the commissioners – its completion was delayed by technical difficulties. The FQF demands that the scientific premises of the calculus be verified by an independent tier [UQCN, (2004), p.6]. Suspicion towards the techno-scientific ground of Québec's public forest management runs rampant among recreational and environmental actors who criticise the survey software used to assess the state of the forest and insist on the importance of collecting data in the field [Gestionnaires de Rivières à Saumons du Québec, (2004), p.4].

4 Wildlife and recreational organisations use of economic arguments

Wildlife and recreational organisations strategically use economic arguments in order to gain recognition of the market-value of non-timber forest products. As the FQF puts it, "the economic and social value of the fauna must be acknowledged. Unfortunately – while foresters have understood the necessity of incorporating economic arguments to their discourse in order to be heard and helped by the governments – economic arguments are still inexistent within wildlife associations' discourse" [FQF, (2004), pp.2–3]. But, those organisations are slowly catching up and beginning to frame their arguments in an economic fashion.

The FPQ use a terminology borrowed from the economic discourse to gain some legitimacy and acknowledgement. “Outfitting is a key element of Québec’s eco-touristic development (...) in this respect, the conservation and valorisation of resources play a strategic role in the development of targeted products and services aimed at responding to the growing demands of this budding market” [FPQ, (2004), p.2]. The use of such an economic terminology give weight to their arguments in favour of a forest management that would simplify “the consolidation of Québec’s outfitting supplies within a framework favourable to long term investments” [FPQ, (2004), p.4].

Many wildlife stakeholders argue that promoting tourism and outdoor activities can partially compensate the loss of numerous jobs within the timber industry. A regional organisation states that: “through increasing the offer of touristic products and through promotional campaigns, (wildlife and recreational organisations) can boost their market share” [Regroupement régional des gestionnaires de zecs du Saguenay–Lac-St-Jean, (2004), p.7].

Albeit not all wildlife organisations use economic arguments as explicitly as the two major groups – FQF and FPQ – references to sustainable development are numerous. For example, a regional group of hunters argue that: “an attractive area abundant with lakes and rivers could create many jobs by investing in the development of fauna-oriented activities without overexploiting this resource” [Association Régionale des Trappeurs Laurentides-Labelle, (2004), p.2].

5 More of the same: hybridisation of arguments and the dominance of economic discourse

In the case of the commission on the sustainability of public forest management, participation fostered the construction of hybrid discourses. Wildlife and recreational organisations discourse brought forth a concern for the fauna and its habitats and the conciliation of the plurality of forest uses. Those preoccupations were simultaneously environmental and economic as the fauna and natural landscapes are the main source of income for outfitters and other recreational organisations.

Other stakeholders such as the timber industry, resource-dependent communities, first nations or public administrations brought forth different discourses (on public management, economy, plurality, ecology and community). The final report of the commission was an attempt at merging those different points of views through ‘hybrid discourses’. Most of those ‘hybrid discourses’ are attempting – not unlike the wildlife and recreational organisation strategies – at reconciling environmental and economic concerns.

Hybrid discourse is a Bakhtinian concept referring to “a discourse bringing together different belief systems” (1981) and seemingly contradictory semantics. Discourses on ecosystemic management, sustainable growth and environmental services exemplify the reconciliation of economic and ecological values through the hybridisation of discourses.

Mirroring the ambivalence of the public participation process itself, hybrid discourses encourage dialogue and collaboration while remaining profoundly ambiguous in terms of social transformation. On the one hand, hybrid discourses open space for innovative thinking and the co-construction of new discourses on the environment and natural resources. In this sense, it encourages the shaping of new paths. The notion of path-shaping – elaborated in response to the determinism of other trends of

institutionalism – implies that social actors can actively re-articulate given conjectures, consequently making new trajectories possible [Nielsen et al., (1995), p.6]. On the other hand, its semantic malleability renders it especially susceptible to external dominant influences. This can foster the status quo and encourage dynamics of path-dependency, mechanisms reproducing historical patterns of power relationships (Collier and Collier, 1991).

6 Conclusions

However, dynamic the redefinition of Québec's forest regime, the economic discourse remains dominant and the arguments most likely to be taken into account are those combining environmental and economic preoccupations. For example, one primary outcome of the commission was the recommendation to amend existing regulations and build a new regulation based on the principles of sustainable forest management. A consultative committee underlined the fact that “the social aspect of sustainable development seems more difficult to comprehend and to implement” (Comité consultatif pour la révision du règlement sur les normes d'intervention dans les forêts du domaine de l'État, 2008). The consultative committee worries that economic preoccupations might dominate the debate while the less tangibles social and cultural aspects of sustainable forest management would take a backseat.

This calls for further investigation of the impact and coherence of the discursive strategies used by social actors in the context of public participation. The incorporation of economic arguments to the discourses of traditionally non-dominant social actors allows them to gain some leverage in the debates around natural resources management. However, the use of hybrid notions such as ‘sustainable development’ or ‘ecosystem services’ does little to challenge the dominant economic and developmental discourse; a discourse who is being questioned by some of the most prominent natural resources scholars (Speth, 2010).

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Notes

- 1 The Fédération québécoise de la faune is one of Québec's oldest wildlife organisation and one of the most influential. Its mission consists in promoting hunting and fishing as traditional, patrimonial and recreational activities.