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Corridor Talk: Conservation Humanities and the Future of Europe's National Parks

The project “Corridor Talk: Conservation Humanities and the Future of Europe's National Parks” is jointly funded by the DFG and the British Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). In its three-year timeframe from February 2020 through January 2023 it will seek to apply a humanities-based approach to the study of three of Europe's transboundary national parks: the Czech-German **Bavarian Forest** and **Šumava**, the French-Spanish **Pyrénées**, and the Dutch-German-Danish **Wadden Sea**.

Many of Europe's national parks pose a unique challenge to conservation work as they are not just historically wild and contested places, but are also sites of more recent geopolitical disputes. Understanding the role these parks play in local perceptions of place, identity, species movements, and human rights of access involves conservation as refracted through multiple languages and cultures: it requires, in short, a humanities-based as well as a scientific-managerial approach. Featuring a team of six researchers, three based at the University of Leeds and three at LMU Munich, this project applies interdisciplinary perspectives derived from a new field partly pioneered at Leeds, *conservation humanities*, which examines the humanistic aspects of biodiversity loss.

The two key concepts are **mobility** and **boundaries**. All national parks chosen as case studies either abut or transenational borders; they thus depend upon negotiated forms of transboundary cooperation that indicate the transnational parameters of conservation itself. All parks also raise issues of mobility that have political and philosophical underpinnings. Whose freedom is it that is protected in national parks: that of the people who live within their boundaries or that of their resident wildlife? What happens when these ideas of freedom come into conflict? Who or what *moves* in, across, and beyond national parks, and according to which sets of conservation principles are these intersecting movements—of humans, animals, landscapes, knowledge—to be both practically managed and theoretically understood? Do different designated boundaries—geographical and political, but also notional, as in the species boundary—facilitate or impede these movements, and what happens when such boundaries are transgressed?

The national borders crossed in and by these parks are not necessarily obstacles, and it is increasingly recognized that the conservation initiatives they pursue require different forms of transboundary cooperation, confirming current understandings of national parks as 'globalized localities that owe their establishment (and development) to transnational processes of learning, pressure, support and exchange'. However, national differences still apply, and in some cases internal conflicts also play a role, for example in disputes over land ownership and management, and in clashing views of what constitutes the sustainable development of protected sites. These sites, constitutively unstable, are subject to further disruption through climate change, which has facilitated the movements of some animals but not others. Intensifying shifts already present in the landscapes, climate change challenges both territorial and conservation claims.

The project aims to draw on recent and current work in conservation humanities, but to expand its remit so as to ask broader questions about the role of humanities research in conservation generally, as well with regard to four of Europe's largest and most popular national parks. The specific objectives are:

- To assess **patterns of human and non-human mobility** in four transboundary European national parks, focusing especially on the pathways and corridors they have created, and might create in the future, for human visitors as well as resident wildlife;
- To chart the **changing relationship between mobility and boundaries** in and beyond transboundary national parks;
- To ask what **particular kinds of movements** are entailed and by whom, within and across which **particular boundaries or sets of boundaries**, and how these movements and boundaries have **changed over time**.

To date, the humanities remain largely outside of the study and practice of conservation beyond a number of environmental history studies, and this is an important lacuna that the field of conservation humanities seeks to address. This project operates on the premise that conservation humanities can provide unique insights into questions of human culture, values, history and behaviour. It thus has the capacity to create a conservation that is more culturally aware, more aware of human behaviour and values, and more aware of the ethical complexities of its work.