

*What motivates gamekeepers to manage predators?*

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The management of predatory animals is a contentious issue across the world, especially when predators kill and eat animals that are important to people.

This is the case in the UK, where there are a number of social disagreements and disputes over the management of predators that eat the target species of recreational hunters. Gamekeepers are key stakeholders in these conflicts as they are responsible for legal predator control, while some have also been linked to illegal persecution of protected predators. However, despite their central role in wildlife management and some associated disputes, there has been little research into the factors that might influence their actions towards predators.

In this study we explored the underlying reasons behind gamekeeper decisions in predator management. We did so by conducting 20 one-to-one discussions with different gamekeepers across southern England. These discussions focused on the social, personal and ecological factors that influenced how they felt about, and acted towards, various predatory species. We then analysed these conversations by sorting responses into different 'motivations'. Finally, we structured these motivations using a framework from the field of social-psychology (the theory of planned behaviour) that links how a person's beliefs influence their behaviour.

We found that predator killing behaviour was influenced by motivations associated with professional identity, personal norms, potential penalties, perceived impact, personal enjoyment and perceived ease. Our results highlight that predator killing is not solely due to perceptions of financial loss but of multiple interacting factors that include: ideas of how others in their profession expect them to behave, feelings of personal responsibility for game and non-game wildlife, and individual assessments of predator populations and behaviours based on daily encounters.

In describing the multiple drivers behind predator killing our work identifies both opportunities and challenges in reducing social conflicts over wildlife management. Finally, we suggest that conflict mitigation may be most effective if targeted at specific motivations.



*A gamekeeper at work. (Photograph by Evelyn Simak and licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0)*

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