Whose place is this anyway? An actor network theory exploration of a conservation conflict

Abstract

This is a story of community protest, natural landscape and the conservation of a small area of National Trust land. Taking an ethnographic approach into the history of this conflict over the management of nature, this research examines contested perceptions of an area of countryside with the national designation of a 'site of special scientific interest' (SSSI). There is a disjuncture between policy-oriented 'official' interpretations of the site as a SSSI needing conservation, which alludes to its historical identity, and local people's sense of belonging to the place as it has evolved through benign neglect. Using an actor network theory (ANT) based approach to the relationships between the different entities involved at this site this article examines the implications of different ways of caring for places to pass on to future generations.

Keywords

Actor Network Theory; nature; culture; place; conservation; belonging; ethnography;

Prologue

This is a story of community protest, natural landscape and ancient history. The setting is Bickerton Hill in South West Cheshire. The story takes place over the last 23 years, but has roots back into the ancient past, when people began to inhabit these hills. Nature is pitted against man, local community against trusted national icons, authentic landscapes against a romantic nostalgia. Will the local community win out? Or will the "national interest" steal the day? Whose place is this anyway?

This story sits on the cusp of nature/culture debates. The cast includes local people, both now and in the past, The National Trust[1], government departments and agencies, big weeds (played here by birch trees), various wild, farmed and domestic animals, including those designated as 'rare species'. These actors all 'jostle against each other' (Hitchings, 2003, p. 100) in complex and sometimes unforeseen ways. The mundane nature of this 91 acre site where humans have gone through the motions of daily life for 3,000 years or more helps to deflect attention from the current struggles over its future. The micro rhythms of the place shaped by the seasons disguise the historically longer rhythms of the trees and other plants, rocks, soil, animal and human community creation and dispersal over the centuries. Eventually a beat longer than a human lifetime transposes the nature of the place, most recently tipping over from being common land where domesticated animals graze to a site of leisure pursuits, such as walking, running and horse riding. This results in not only a loss of biocultural heritage but also of the intangible heritage embodied in local knowledge (Rotherham, 2015: 3417), potentially leading to a communication breakdown between people and place (Adams, 2016). Using Bickerton Hill as a 'placeholder' (Adams, 2016: 55) and inspired by the approach taken by Michel Callon (1986) in his classic study of scallops, the narrative here follows the trails left by some of these actors to discover where they lead and what influences they may effect.

One of the lead roles in the story is played by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC), part of Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). They are responsible for defining sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs) as any area of land which is 'of special interest by reason of any of its flora, fauna, or geological or physiographical features' (JNCC n.d. b) and for defining 'lowland heath' which is the designation of Bickerton Hill. SSSI status is granted at national or European level based on the prevalence of the habitat across Europe, that is, a habitat is more special the less there is of it. Like the treeless fells in the Lake District (Monbiot, 2013), the heath at Bickerton was created and maintained through grazing domesticated animals. There is evidence of an Iron Age fort on the hill showing the place has been inhabited by people for at least 3,000 years. Over that time the 'natural' state of the hill has been conserved as a heath through the everyday activity of grazing. Taking away this human influence the place quickly reverts to woodland. In policy the trees are seen as an invasive species taking over the heath, crowding out the

heather and bilberry and thus a variety of rare species that depend on these plants. The trees therefore need to be removed. However, a group of people representing the local community, known as 'The Friends of Bickerton Hill,' have opposed the tree felling since it began in 1992. This group have, on occasion, succeeded in mobilising local people and demonstrating the often hidden communal nature of a place where many have lived their whole lives (Curry-Roper, 2000). This is the basis of the dispute on which this narrative rests.

As with many places its history is deemed important to justify how the place is managed now. Let's go back to the beginning…

Once upon a time on Bickerton Hill

Once upon a time in the Triassic period some 250 million years ago sandstone cliffs were formed in semi-arid desert conditions close to what we now call the equator, at a time when all the land mass on the earth formed one continent –now known as Pangaea. As the land mass broke up these particular rocks ended up in Cheshire, England. The 'Triassic period', 'Pangaea' and the 'equator' are all cultural constructions used to tell a story of the evolution of the earth. As Doreen Massey (2006) reminds us, even rocks are not stable over a long (nonhuman) timespan. The signage on the Sandstone Trail informing walkers of the age of these rocks does not mention that they originated elsewhere, that they, too, are invaders.

The formation and composition of the rocks, however, is integral to this story as it is the sandy soil that encourages the growth of the heather and bilberry that typify 'lowland heath' (JNCC, n.d. b). But, as the JNCC documents point out '[t]he habitat is generally dependent on grazing and burning to prevent invasion by trees and conversion to woodland' (JNCC, n.d. a). In other words, the heathland habitat is man-made, not natural in the sense of occurring without management by people.

About 3000 years ago the Iron Age hill fort, Maiden Castle, was built on Larkton Hill, part of the Bickerton Hills. The people who stayed at the fort would have used the surrounding woodland for fuel and grazing their animals creating the Hill as what the JNCC now defines as a 'lowland heath' (Bainbridge et al, 2013). Grazing, and therefore optimum conditions for lowland heath, continued until the mid-twentieth century. During the twentieth century the everyday habits and practices of local people changed. Rather than collecting water from Dropping Stone well in the sandstone cliffs, water is piped to houses; the use of chemicals for cleaning meant that servants and other locals no longer collected sand from the caves for scouring floors; fewer people collect birch twigs and saplings to create besoms, a type of broom. These changes to habits since the end of WW2 extend to animals no longer being grazed on the hill. In common with most of the UK and Western Europe and the US there has been a disembedding of the local community from place with a concomitant loss of local knowledge (Curry-Roper, 2000). This has allowed the birch trees to flourish.

The history of the place is integral to the dispute over its future. As Amin and Thrift (2002, p. 30) put it, places are 'moments of encounter, not […] "presents", fixed in space and time, but […] variable events; twists and fluxes of interrelation.' Although most social analysis takes place in human time we need to consider that other timescales also exist, they are just not as visible to the human eye. Throughout most of its long history it is likely that the hill has been covered in trees.

Since the 1990s the National Trust and various government agencies have cut down some of the birch trees at intervals in order to try to recreate the place as a lowland heath (Chester Chronicle, 2008). A pressure group, The Friends of Bickerton Hill, was established in 1992 by local people when the first fellings took place. These local residents and users of the hill set up a public meeting at Bickerton Village Hall in March 2015 to discuss the most recent work to clear the heath with the National Trust, the owners of the land, and Natural England, a government agency who are subcontracted to manage the SSSI. The National Trust, who have had many dealings with the chair of the Friends of Bickerton Hill over the years, declined to attend. Two representatives of Natural England did attend and the meeting was chaired by an independent chair.

Between 120 and 150 people crammed into Bickerton Village Hall on a Thursday evening. The meeting began with a slide show of stunning photographs of Bickerton Hill through the seasons to the music of *Morning* from Peer Gynt, by Grieg, the waltz time and major key providing an uplifting soundtrack. After a brief introduction by the chair there were several audience members who spoke, some on behalf of the Friends of Bickerton Hill and some for the Sandstone Trust, who are in favour of the restoration of the heath in order to preserve rare heathland species. Two employees of Natural England, including the manager of the site, also answered, or took away, the many questions from the audience about the future of the site. Speakers described trees as 'emotive' and 'magical'. At the end of the meeting there was a show of hands for those in favour of carrying on the felling which received about 8 votes and the rest voted for stopping all further felling (Broad, 2015; Holmes, 2014; Ord, 2015). Of course, the vote was not binding on the National Trust and the planned felling went ahead. The Friends of Bickerton Hill continued their campaign, particularly in trying to find irregularities in the granting of the felling licence by the Forestry Commission. They requested, and received, a series of emails through the Freedom of Information Act (Forestry Commission, 2015).

Occasionally the mundane erupts to create an event, in this case the crowded meeting where the local community became a 'community' in a way not usually visible (Curry-Roper, 2000). Such eruptions tend to subside equally quickly, leaving uneven traces as a reminder of the activities which create a community-in-place. In the spring of 2016, parking at the bottom of the hill, opposite the church, I can walk up the path and be unaware of the tree fellings. Here, on the eastern edge of the hill birch, holly and a few oak trees create a shady canopy. I could continue to the top of the hill noticing few changes, but if I follow the path

further on to my left, skirting around the southern side of the hill, I am met by a scene of devastation, of tree stumps and bare earth. On closer inspection there are plenty of birch seedlings growing, but far less of the heather and bilberry required to maintain the heath's specific characteristics. Volunteers work with the National Trust rangers to remove some of the birch seedlings, but weeding such a large area thoroughly would require far more than the three volunteers I met out and about with a ranger in February 2016, even weeding a suburban garden is an on-going job (Doody, Perkins, Sullivan, Meurk, & Stewart, 2014). At this point, there is no satisfactory ending to the story as the heathland plants will take a number of years to repopulate the site (National Trust, n.d.). Plant eradication efforts are not usually successful though (Davis et al, 2011).The interests of the National Trust in restoring heathland requires it to create alliances with the heathland plants, with the grazing animals, with volunteers who work on the site and with the regulations around tree fellings. It is also in the National Trust's interest to problematize the local protesters as acting against conservation norms, whilst it is in the interest of the Friends of Bickerton Hill to work with the National Trust to ameliorate the amount of felling. To examine this story from the various perspectives of the different actors taking part I will trace their various stories. Following Callon (1986) the analysis takes Actor Network Theory as its starting point, the principles of which are described in the next section. Three of the associated networks are unravelled in the following sections to demonstrate some of the power structures inherent in conservation disputes that are underpinned by particular ideologies.

Setting the scene: Actor Network Theory

Actor Network Theory (ANT) emerged from Science and Technology Studies in the 1980s. A key argument of ANT is that 'knowledge is a social product' (Law, 1992). Knowledge as Law uses it is materialised in documents, presentations, newspaper articles, embodied knowledge (how to ride a bike for example). Knowledge itself is the organisation of all of these disparate materials into a network. This applies to other 'things' too such as the family or the economy: all are 'ordered networks of heterogeneous materials' (Law, 1992). Although all these things are social they are not comprised only of humans. ANT directs attention to the significance of nonhumans in social life (Nimmo, 2011, p. 109). It does away with dualist conceptions of nature and culture in favour of 'heterogeneous assemblages in which humans and nonhumans are inextricably mixed up together' (Nimmo, 2011, p. 109). This makes it particularly suitable as a tool with which to examine the conflict over Bickerton Hill. ANT is considered to be both a method and a theory (Crawford, 2005; Nimmo, 2011), both aspects underpinning this paper: as a theory in which to frame my analysis and as a method of tracing heterogenous, flat networks to see where they lead. The real strength of the ANT approach is that it is an approach rather than a fixed method; as Nimmo (2011: 109) puts it: 'ANT really is what ANT-influenced theorists and researchers do in their research'.

In using an ANT inspired approach to examine the intersection of nature and culture on Bickerton Hill I am following the seminal work of Michel Callon (1986) on scallops. As well as Callon's exemplar others have used ANT-inspired approaches to study animals and the human environment. Pickering (2005) does not go into the same level of detailed analysis as Callon but also uses a human / animal anecdote as the basis of his argument that one cannot predict in advance how an interaction between different actants will develop. Nimmo (2010) follows this line of thought through the development of milk as a modern essential food item, taking into account not only the agency of the cows which produce the milk but also wider developments such as the railways which enabled the speedy transport of fresh goods to the cities. Spreading beyond Science and Technology Studies, geographers have built on the concept of ANT (see for example Hinchcliffe et al, 2005; Murdoch, 2006). Whatmore (2002; 2006; Whatmore and Thorne, 2000), in looking at the 'more-than-human', shows how the concept of agency should be understood differently for different types of nonhumans. Most recently Moore (2015) looks at caring for both human transport links and the natural world. She also uses a sea creature, the horseshoe crab, to illustrate the unforeseeable outcomes of human actions on the natural world. In studies of plants Jones and Cloke (2008) take three examples of trees which have, over time, changed the nature of the place and the relations between people and place. It may be easier to understand animals as actants than it is to conceptualise plants as actors within a network but Doody et al (2014) and Hitchings (2003) also provide examples of human-plant networks in gardens.

Superficially there are two conflicting groups at the centre of this story: the National Trust and the Friends of Bickerton Hill. As with Callon's (1986) study they 'develop contradictory arguments and points of view which lead them to propose different versions of the social and natural worlds' (p199). Closer analysis, however, brings other players in to the picture. At the centre of ANT is the premise that the world is shaped by more than human actors. In the present example plants, animals, geology and policy documents are some of the nonhuman actors crucial to the outcomes. ANT provides a flat surface on which to draw out the different themes of the story. None of the actors is privileged in telling their version but In any situation power will be unevenly distributed. The policy documents provide definitions and the legal authorisations that shape the way the story proceeds. Policies exert power in subtle and unseen ways. The words they use create a particularly powerful discourse that is hard to argue against. Although ANT attempts to mitigate the impact of this it is still necessary to examine the different ways in which the axis of power moves through the different actors involved.

Auditioning: methods and data collection

This started as an ethnographic study. I live in the area and walk in these hills regularly, and have done so for 15 years. I am one of the 'users' of the hill and therefore have a personal interest in its future, but I am not a member of the Friends of Bickerton Hill. I went along to

the community meeting held at the hall along with many other local residents. Although I subsequently contacted the Friends to request an interview this didn't happen. I also contacted the National Trust who sent me some information about their recent work on the hill that is also available on their website. Apart from visiting the site most of my information has come from web-based searches of local papers, Government policy documents and a series of emails between the Bickerton site manager and the Forestry Commission over the felling licences that are publicly available at www.whatdotheyknow.com as the result of a freedom of information request, which I didn't submit. I also have a number of tourist focused leaflets produced by the Sandstone Ridge Trust in conjunction with the National Trust and Cheshire West and Chester council. These are also available online. The ethnographic analysis is therefore complemented by discourse analysis of these documents.

This article is not engaging in wider environmental and ecological debates around the future of particular species, for example, or the wider impact of the loss of species, or commenting on the perceived or inherent value of any particular species; that would not be in the spirit of ANT. What it is trying to do is to take a very specific example of conservation and examine how everyday life and a consideration of what kind of future we want is at the heart of the bigger global picture of biodiversity and conservation.

So let's begin by unravelling some of the parts played in this particular story.

The Actants and their Assemblages

There are multiple networks that can be drawn together from this story although there is space to focus on only some of these and the ones chosen here are those that have perhaps been most successful in 'translation' (Callon, 1986), or creating authority for themselves. The assemblages or networks that I will examine in some detail here are: in Act 1 the ideology of conservation which plays the part of a *deus ex machina* in trumping any arguments for allowing a takeover by the trees; Act 2 looks at an assemblage of 'lowland heath' and its constituent parts, that is the environment being 'conserved'; and finally in Act 3 the trees that play the part of the alien invaders. In separating out these networks and dealing with them as 'entities' I do not suggest that they are in fact separate from or independent of, each other. These various definitions, ideologies, human and plant actants become a tangle of hybrids.

Act 1: The Ideology Of Conservation

Conservation is a particular ideology that, in the United Kingdom, began to take root in the romanticism of Wordsworth and Coleridge and later the work of John Ruskin and William Morris, who were also involved in the establishment and development of the National Trust (Gaze, 1988). The romantics redefined nature as untouched by man, a wilderness (Williams, 2005). There is very little of the earth's surface that can truly be considered to be an

untouched wilderness. Much of what is seen as wilderness today is in fact land mixed with human labour, as John Locke put it (1764, Chapter 5); but letting go of the idea of a 'pure' natural environment is difficult (Lorimer, 2012). Most modern landscapes are, in varying degrees, human-made, either deliberately (in the case of landscaped parks) or as a side effect of other activity (such as flashes, lakes, created through mining subsidence). Lowland heath was also created as a side effect of human labour, albeit a long time ago. The National Trust's positioning of Bickerton as heathland for nearly 3,000 years enables it to present a strong case for preservation of this 'authentic' identity of the place. The National Trust enrol a particular 'social construction' (Castree, 2014) of the heathland as both a 'heritage' site and a site of ecological importance in order to strengthen its case for restoration (National Trust, 2014).

Nature conservation, as it has evolved over the twentieth century is performative; it is performed by networks of people, animals, plants (Adams, 2016; Doody et al, 2014; Jones and Cloke, 2008; Moore, 2015). Whilst people can be unruly (Chester Chronicle, 2008) so too can animals and plants. Rival stakeholders disputing the purpose of common land has a long history. There may be a *discursive* separation of 'nature' from the 'activities of men' (Williams, 2005, p. 81) but the activities of people cannot be separated *performatively* from the activities of nature (Barad, 2003). The continual growth of woodland demands a performance of pruning and cutting and grazing by nonhuman animals. But sometimes the grazing animals don't eat the 'right' plants, leaving birch saplings to continue to grow (Holmes, 2014). There are calls for a more 'hands off' approach to conservation in a world already riddled with changes caused by human activity (e.g. Monbiot, 2013; Lorimer, 2015) but also a greater acknowledgement of the historic influence of humans on the environment to encourage an appropriate level of conservation activity (Rotherham, 2015). Lowland heath is an assemblage of human, geological, plant and animal activity which, Adams (2016) argues, should be treated as an organic whole. Conservation activities also involve this multiplicity of unruly actors who need to be attended to (Adams, 2016).

The discourse of conservation is present in the definition of a SSSI and documents underpinning this. The documents have power to shape the hill's future. The policies are produced by the JNCC who are responsible for defining SSSIs and for defining 'lowland heath,' the designation of Bickerton Hill, although this is linked to European designations and to globalization and climate change (National Trust, n.d.).By linking their restoration aims to wider global concerns the National Trust problematizes the birch trees making the tree felling appear to be a 'no-brainer' (Forestry Commission, 2015). In order to restore the heath these must be removed. In doing this work the National Trust is positioning itself as an indispensable part of an international movement for biodiversity.

Act 2: Lowland Heath

Lowland heath, the type of habitat aimed for here, is an environment created by humans, albeit thousands of years ago. The fact that this habitat is disappearing across the UK and

mainland Europe is down to changes in everyday human habits, mostly the grazing of animals, which mean that there is now generally less, rather than more, human intervention in these places.

Time interacts with place and biological species to create a 'hybrid collectif' that, as Sarah Whatmore (2002) points out, implodes the inside/outside binary defining social action as an individual property of discrete, unitary individuals or collectives. The vegetation on the hill has *agency* in shaping this site as do the grazing animals and the Iron Age hill population, whose presence is still felt in the rhetoric of an authentic landscape; although increasingly the intangible heritage of local knowledge around the traditional grazing rights and use of the land for collecting sand for household use and twigs for making brooms is disappearing (Curry-Roper, 2000; Rotherham, 2015). The heath is performed into being by the various actants in the story (Doody et al, 2014). But these performances alone are not enough to create the heath as a 'thing' that the National Trust can preserve. They need to enrol the concept of 'lowland heath', which is done through policy documents.

The policy documents themselves become actors in their own right once they become public documents. They are accorded authority through their association with the government and thus have a quasi-legal status. These are powerful characters in the story, in effect taking the part of narrator and determining events. *The detailed guidelines for habitats and species groups part 4* describes how a Lowland Heathland should be managed:

> 1.3 Lowland heaths have become enormously reduced in area through various *human impacts* - agricultural reclamation, afforestation and building works of various kinds. Some have become scrubbed over or even converted to birch and Scots pine woodland through natural succession *in the absence of grazing or other management*. The decline is a long-established one, but it has become increasingly rapid and serious during the last 50 years…
>
> 1.4 …Many lowland heaths occur in association with woodland of birch and Scots pine and show *invasion* by these species. …[which] usually poses a *management problem* and also that the area of heathland may sometimes need to be expanded at the expense of this tree cover…
>
> JNCC (n. d. b) [*my emphasis*]

The definition of lowland heath is notable for its language: nature is 'managed' and trees are showing 'invasion' – language that seems to go against common perceptions of 'the natural' and has similar 'othering' overtones to migration debates. The term implies a sense of nonbelonging, something foreign that has intruded into an established community, despite the fact that the silver birch are a native British species. In ecological studies, as

Foster and Sandberg (2004) point out 'invasive species are typically assessed as "disturbances" (or at least symptoms of disturbance) that may upset the "normal" workings of a biotic community, be that normalcy based on balance or on flux' (p. 179). There is no pretence here that heathlands are anything other than a manmade environment, however the strength of the language - 'serious', 'invasion', 'management problem' - presents the maintenance of the heath as the only viable option. The documents define lowland heath through the process of 'interessement' (Callon, 1986). They clearly problematize the growth of trees in causing the loss of heathland and the subsequent necessity to 'manage' the site. Once the definition of 'lowland heath' is established it interests the National Trust. The National Trust has to call on other discourses, such as a 'heritage' discourse, to allow it to remove trees, which are usually a positive force in conservation policies.

A lowland heath requires a nutrient-poor soil covered in dwarf shrubs (JNCC n.d. a): heather and bilberry are key species at Bickerton Hill. The plants have not modified their behaviour over the last sixty years and somehow *allowed* the birch trees to take over. The change in the everyday habits of local people has precipitated the growth of the birch seedlings thus changing the environment and requiring other interests (management of the trees) to be enrolled into the lowland heath network to, in effect, replace the local cottagers or labourers who had common rights over grazing the land (Rotherham, 2015).

Act 3: Symbolic Values: the tree of life

The trees are central to this story but they are, in effect, the chorus. As with most of the rest of the island of the United Kingdom, the area of Bickerton Hill would have been covered in woodland prior to its inhabitation. Neolithic farmers would have used the trees for building and fuel, leaving the site clear for grazing farmed animals (Cheshire West & Chester, 2010). Continued grazing right up until the mid-twentieth century kept the trees at bay, the soil poor and therefore ideal for heathland shrubs. The trees can be understood as having agency, just as Callon's (1986) scallops do. They need to be enrolled into the network of the JNCC policies in order to be felled. Although the birch trees are not 'alien' in the sense of being an introduced species (Warren, 2007) they are both invasive and unwanted, by some (Atchison and Head, 2013). It is, however, important to consider the larger rhythms of the life of the invasive species. Birch are a hardy but short lived tree which will improve the soil allowing longer lived species to germinate in due course (see Barker, 2008). These plant life rhythms tend not to be considered. The metaphors used in these documents of plants acting with 'intent' to enter and take over the area by force, that is, to invade it, is racialized (Biermann and Mansfield, 2014, Robbins, 2004). The sense that the trees are active participants in destroying the heath also comes across strongly in the wording of a poster put up by the National Trust at the site to warn people of the fellings taking place. The reasons given for the fellings are that 'birch trees are trying to take over' as they are a 'threat' to the hill which has been 'a heath since the Bronze Age' (National Trust, 2014). Rather than 'blame' the local people who no longer graze their animals on the hill, the

National Trust poster explicitly 'blames' the trees for 'taking over' the site. This enables the policies to require the removal of the trees for the 'greater good' of other species by positioning their growth as abnormal, aberrant and, importantly, different from what has happened on this site historically. So their enrolment into the network is not in their own interest but in the interest of the lowland heath.

Laying claim to the historical longevity of the heath the poster minimises the sense of time between the Bronze Age dwellers and the current dog walkers and families, uniting past and present under one local identity. Maintaining the heath through removing trees is positioned as a moral project to continue this authentic community identity. The poster also plays into local people's sense of particularity by mentioning that this 'special place [is] internationally important' (National Trust, 2014). Competing with the Friends of Bickerton Hill the National Trust problematizes the identity of the local community in order to attempt to interest them in the heathland restoration project.

The trees also 'speak up' (Adams, 2016) to stake their right to grow here and the seedlings refuse to be enrolled, continuing to outgrow the bilberry and heather. At the public meeting it became clear that trees arouse emotions. The wooded landscape was described as 'magical' by one speaker and 'emotive' by another. Here, as in other places such as in Jones and Cloke's (2008) research, trees create a particular *kind* of place. Open heathland has none of the mysteriousness of a wood. Woods conjure up fear as in Little Red Riding Hood and Hansel and Gretel, but also other, magical worlds such as C.S. Lewis' Narnia. Bickerton Hill with the trees gone *feels* different, to the people who visit as well as to the birds and insects that rely on the trees for food and shelter. The slide show playing as we entered the hall for the community meeting showed a number of visually beautiful photographs of the hill through the seasons: trees laden with snow, sunsets over the Welsh hills, spring flowers and birds and butterflies. Background music of 'Morning' from Peer Gynt by Grieg, helped to secure the romance of the trees and the gentle rhythms of the seasons in the audience's mind. This presentation tried to assert an aesthetic moral superiority for a wooded landscape and position those who wanted to remove the trees as destroyers of natural beauty and, potentially, life itself via the symbolism of the tree of life. The trees, the weather and the seasons were all enrolled to make a particular impact on human emotions and bolster the argument for conserving the trees instead of the heath. Rather than policy, ecological science and expertise, the Friends of Bickerton Hill create interest in their network through aesthetics and emotions.

The various documents and the slide show shown at the community meeting have parts to play in this story that go beyond their human creators. They become 'things' themselves with agency to affect how other people, animals and plants act. The DEFRA and JNCC documents are the underlying protagonists in this story problematizing the site's definition as a SSSI and as lowland heath to determine its future. The National Trust's poster and the Friends' visuals are attempts to sell or mitigate the effects of the policy documents to the

local community. Looking at these as actants in their own right shows how human influence goes beyond the initial action and becomes something more – a performance which then has further impacts in the material world. In creating 'things' in the world – heathland, documents, posters – the story moves beyond the control of the human actors. Looking from the perspective of each actant the underlying (lack of) control becomes clearer. We can begin to appreciate the enormity of the task of 'managing' the heathland for the future, and perhaps, begin to question its value and purpose (Monbiot, 2013) as we decide what kind of place we want to pass on to the future.

Epilogue

Taking an ANT inspired approach to the relationships between some of the different actors this story has examined a few of the ways in which different ideologies of natural environments shape the way we understand the past and the future. Taking each in turn, this method has shown how a wide variety of 'things' bring together a particular place/social happening. These exist in different temporalities and are brought together at different moments to create an 'event', a disruption to everyday rhythms. The past continues to have an effect on the present, and one could also argue that the future does too, as the projected future of Bickerton Hill described in documentation on SSSIs and conservation policies, affects how the place is today. By separating out the different elements in play and examining the actions not only of humans but of other lifeforms and nonhuman actors in shaping this story the ways in which each party uses particular strategies to promote their position become visible. The story is not dominated by global warming or vast and inherently uncontrollable changes to the environment but stems from relatively small, unremarkable changes in the everyday habits of local people in Cheshire albeit changes shared by most in Western Europe at least. The heath grew out of the daily tasks of the original inhabitants 3000 or more years ago and its potential disappearance is also a result of changes to mundane habits.

There is a disjuncture between policy-oriented 'official' interpretations of the site as a SSSI needing conservation, which alludes to its historical identity, and the current generations of local people's sense of belonging to the place as it has evolved through benign neglect. Each party in this dispute cares for the future and wants to pass on the best possible version of this place to the next (human) generation. By appealing to different ideologies of 'science' on one side and the emotional impact of the landscape on the other, the parties present their cases in appeals to different anthropocentric ideologies. As Moore (2015: 900) says the '[h]uman everyday is often deeply anthropocentric' and both ideologies ultimately position the human as the central beneficiary of their actions: restoring the heath is to restore biodiversity in order to keep the planet healthy and sustain human life; keeping the trees is to retain a beautiful landscape for human senses. But what ultimately becomes of this site will depend, as with Callon's (1986) scallops, on what the plants, animals and soil do here.

This is a small story about changing human everyday activity and its impact on the environment. It calls attention to the ways in which we belong to and care for places and how we look after them for the future. Using an ANT inspired approach I have been able to pull apart some of the strands of the story and examine them from a number of perspectives. This has shown how we need to attend to the more-than-human world in order to understand our human impacts on the future. Over the lifetime of the sandstone rock, that immigrant from the centre of the earth that forms the hill, these changes in human and plant habits are fleeting.

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Endnotes

1. The National Trust is a charitable organisation formed in 1895 as 'The National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty' (Gaze, 1988: 34). They now own over 300 historic buildings look after 250,000 hectares of countryside and more than 775 miles of coastline (National Trust, n.d.).