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► **To cite this version:**

Louison Suard, Eric Collias, Anatole Danto. Eco-anthropology in Lower Loire: waterfowl hunting and related knowledges. *Sféologie 2018 - International Conference on Ecological Sciences*, Oct 2018, Rennes, France. , 2018. ⟨hal-01907245⟩

HAL Id: hal-01907245

<https://hal.science/hal-01907245v1>

Submitted on 28 Oct 2018

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Eco-anthropology in Lower Loire: waterfowl hunting and related knowledges

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I. Introduction

Waterfowl hunting is the hunt of some bird species who need wetlands to live, for their reproduction or for food. Three groups are concerned : Anatidae, Rallidae and wading bird. In France, it is 37 waterfowl species that can be hunted from the 21st august to the 31st january (except some species that are hunted longer).

Waterfowl hunting takes place in wetlands, like Loire estuary (France, Pays de la Loire, Loire-Atlantique ; map 1) and the Lower Loire where wetlands are common (Grande Brière Mottière, Guérande swamps and other ones). We took interest for one zone delineated in map 1. That zone is formed of different islands, created by sediments accumulation, result of the tides. Those islands are a great place to hunt waterfowl. Ponds, created by hunters or farmers are disseminated on those islands and contribute to the attractiveness of this environment.

We consider waterfowl hunters in their environment as Tim Ingold defines it (T. Ingold, 2012) : i) « environment » depends on the person considering it, ii) it is not something finished, it is something continually changing, made up by all living beings sharing that environment, iii) « environment » can not be confounded with « nature », to consider « nature » is putting it aside from living beings.

We have different aims. We want to learn which knowledges are necessary to hunt waterfowl, how hunters mobilize them and how do they convey them. We also want to know to compare those knowledges to naturalists's, according to the dualism exposed in human sciences opposing « traditional » and « modern » knowledges.

To learn about how waterfowl hunting happens in this area, we adopted a qualitative method with semi-directive interviews, field survey and participant observations. Hunting stories about Lower Loire have also been analysed, like Jean de Witt stories. We also decided to explore three different themes about waterfowl hunting we will expose here.

II. How do hunters mobilize their knowledges ?

Knowledges are necessary to hunt on Loire's Islands. Tides, flood, low water, wind and atmospheric pressure modify how water comes over the different islands. Hunters could easily get stuck and would have to wait the ebb tide.

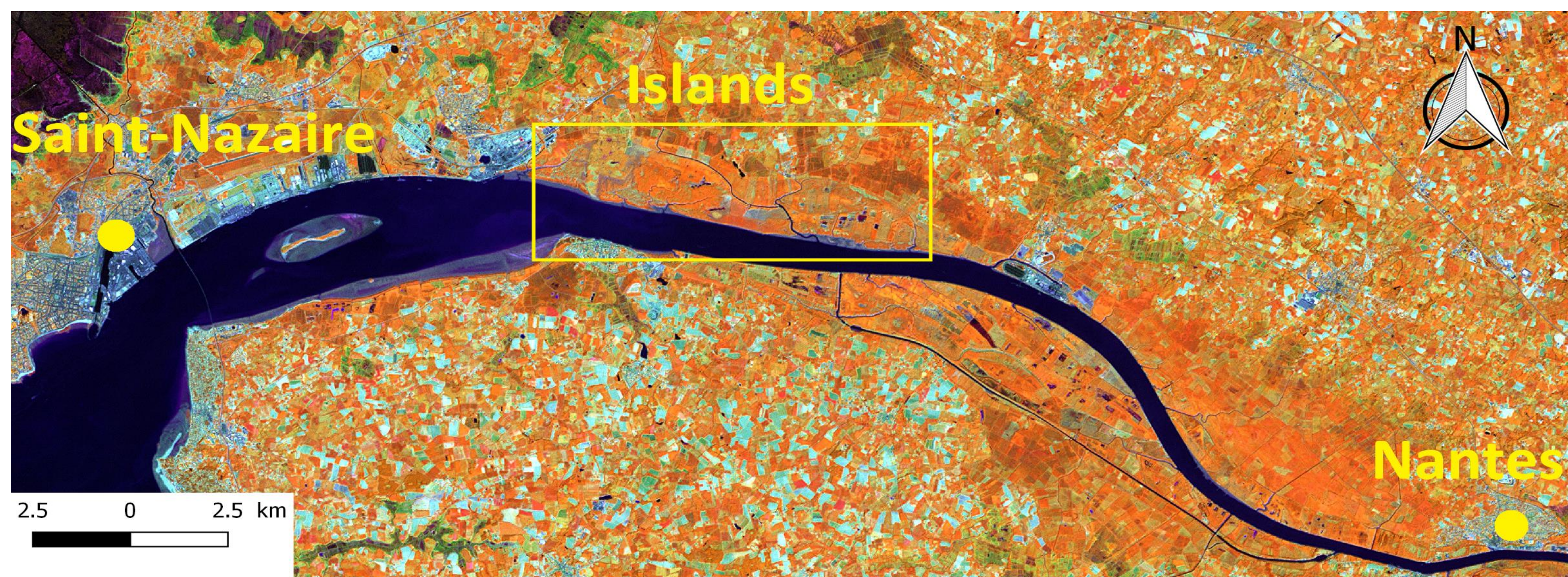
All those things needed to go hunting are known the day before or during the day. Hunters do exchange informations between them about weather and so the game via speaking but also via social networks. They use too weather websites made for other activities like surfing or fishermen. Indeed, weather has a direct impact on game.

Waterfowl hunters would also not use call-birds the same way to attract wild individuals according to the month. At the opening birds are what we could call « naive ». Individuals do not mistrust groups of individuals calling on a pond and come easily. At that period, hunters are not afraid to use many call-birds (more than 5). Later in the season, individuals mistrust those ponds too noisy and avoid those areas. Like many hunters said « *le canard n'est pas con* » (« *duck isn't stupid* »). Hunters use then more fake call-birds in plastic, knowing waterfowl are gregarious during migration. Some hunters also consider the influx of new individuals thanks to migration (there are websites to follow those migrations) and so use real call-birds again. Each hunter has its own strategy to know when use them, in which proportion (fake or real call-birds) and according to the environment where they hunt.

III. How those knowledges are transmitted ?

We thought that maybe hunters, as a traditional activity, would transmit their knowledges between members of a same family, from father to son, or uncle to nephew. That hypothesis is not true. Among all the hunters we met, however their age, hunters have learnt hunting in different ways. Some of them started alone, having « fun » when they were younger on those islands and started hunting *illegally*, because they did not have legal age to hunt. Some of them learnt with a member of their family when they were younger, coming over a day to see how it works. Rarely, some hunters have discovered hunting with friends.

But however they discovered waterfowl hunting, knowledges are also transmitted among hunters on the field when they meet. Some of them consider it is important to train other hunters and to share their knowledges so waterfowl hunting could perpetuate.



Map 1 : Loire estuary. NASA image 2001, colored composition, Eric Collias

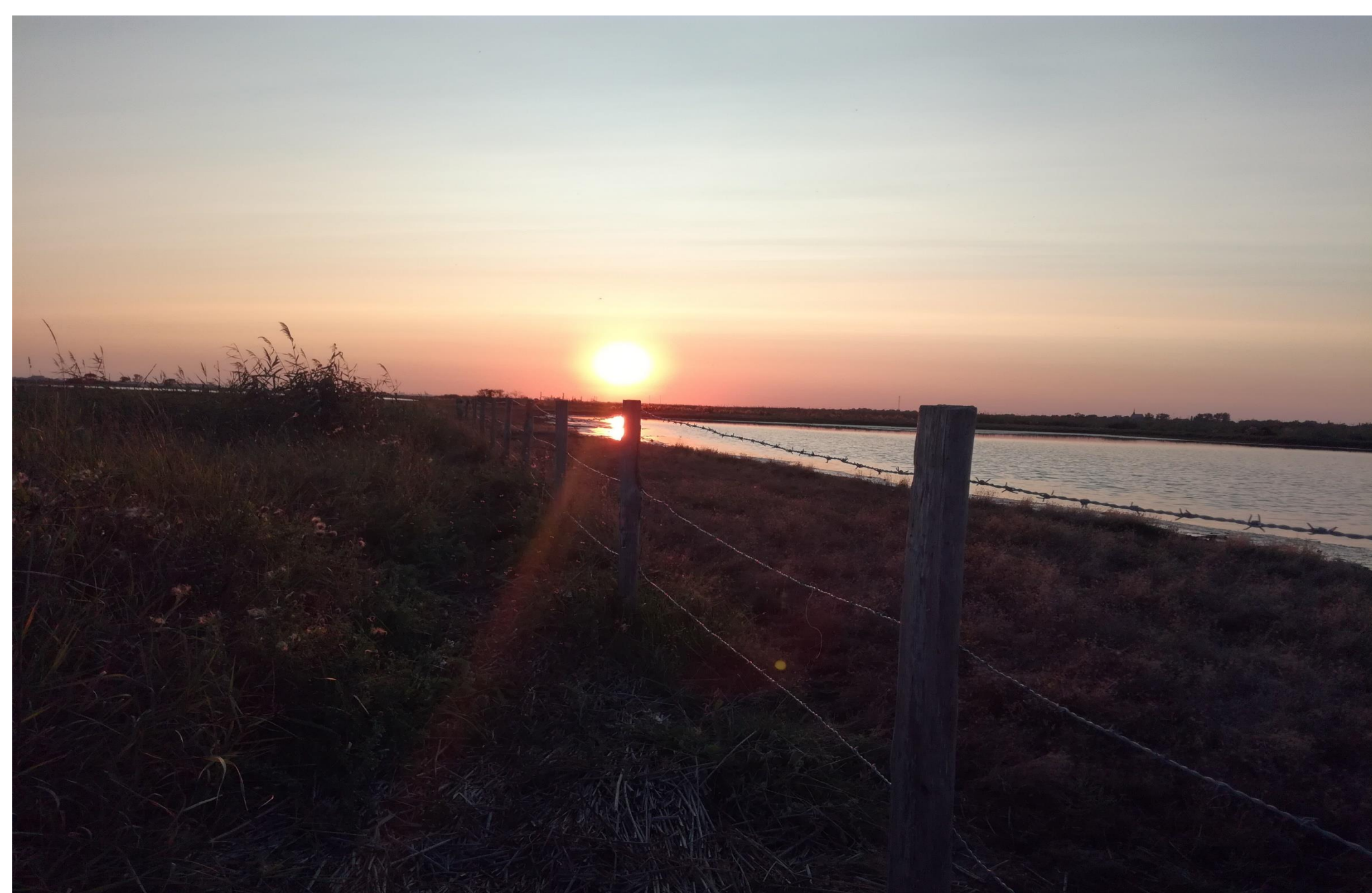


Image 1: Waterfowl hunting in the evening in front of a pond, Ile Pipy. ©Louison Suard



Image 2: Ile de Pierre-Rouge during the day with a pond, used for cattle and for waterfowl. ©Louison Suard

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IV. Hunters and naturalists knowledges

Both hunters and naturalists have knowledges about the field, the species and their behaviours but those knowledges are different because hunters and naturalists do not have the same interests.

Consequences of migrations, the weather (rain, wind) are known by both. Hunters know things allowing them to hunt. For example, they know which traces leaves a Common Teal (*Anas crecca*, Linnaeus, 1758) when it eats somewhere. Common Teals eat at night, so hunters know they have to come there to hunt Common Teals in the evening when they find those traces. This behaviour is not something known by the naturalists, excepts for the ones who are also hunters. Both naturalists and hunters have their own knowledges necessary to their approach of the animal, even though there is common features. Those common features can be observed through different phases : to attract birds – to catch them – wonder observing birds – to know species behaviours and having favourite species.

V. Conclusion

Hunters have their own knowledges to hunt waterfowl ; those knowledges are intimately linked to the environment they hunt in. Hunters imagine how game is going act and match their strategy according to it.

Those knowledges, hunters are not aware of them. What they do, they do it « au pif » (that could be translated as « *guessworking* » or « *randomly* »), those are empirical knowledges. They get them through a practice of their environment. Traditional knowledges are usually compared to « modern knowledges »: without considering this dualism veracity, it does explain in part all the conflicts between those two groups. With the modification of the human-animal (C.Pelluchon, 2017) relationship, we can interrogate ourselves about hunting future. This modification also interrogate hunters themselves about the future of the activity, being more and more threatened by animal welfare associations. Getting to know better hunting in France is also a chance to learn about the relationship Human-Animal and so human-environment as it is in occident. It is also an opportunity to better understand what is/could be naturalism as Descola (P.Descola, 2005) described it.