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Assignment 2:

Evaluating Relationships of Responsibility Within a More-Than-Human Commons

## Overview

North of Vancouver, British Columbia in a popular outdoor tourist town named Whistler, Alpha Lake Dog Park lays on the lake's edge surrounded by Black Cottonwood trees. Normally leafy green in the spring and summer, winter had struck during my time at Alpha Lake Dog Park and the trees were empty, looking almost cold without the cover of their leaves. During my first field visit, a little bit of snow was in the corners of the park, but by my fifth visit, a month later snow covered the majority of the gravel and grass in the park, providing a seemingly clean finish to a dirt-filled park. When I first approached the dog park, the path led me to the double gated fence on the east end where signs read, "Please pick up after your dog" and "Please respect the common rules and respect the space" followed by bullet points telling owners to shut the gates fully upon entry and exit avoid conflict between dogs, and ended with a "thank you" note. The park is fenced in with three entry points, one at the east, south, and north ends of the space. In Alpha Lake Dog Park there are benches and picnic tables, tall grass species surrounded by a small ditch and large rocks, and a dock that goes out onto the water.

I described the park's makeup because it is easier to visualize and understand what takes place in Alpha Lake Dog Park when visual cues are given. In this case study, Alpha Lake Dog Park will be viewed as a commons, which is a set of co-becomings. Co-becomings involve intimate and transformative embodied relations where commoners are intertwined within a commons through capacity building, and how their interconnection and effect on one another shapes relationships (March 2021). The co-becomings that exist between non-human entities expand our view of the commons instead of viewing it as a site or resource (Nightingale, 2019). To understand what type of non-humans use this space and why it is important, the idea brought forward by Anna Tsing of companion species is vital. Companion species are different entities finding ways to live together, amidst even great differences, because developing a joint future is necessary for the livelihood of each entity (Tsing, 2012). Due to the extensive list, this case study only evaluates a handful of the non-human entities that are companion species within Alpha Lake Dog Park on their work within the commons as co-becomings. Specifically, this case study evaluates Alpha Lake Dog Park as a more-than-human assemblage and the relationships of responsibility that exist between dogs and fences, the lake, and park benches. Thus, I argue that relationships of responsibility exist between dogs and non-human entities within Alpha Lake Dog Park because of their senses, such as sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. How their

relationships of responsibility are developed between gated fences, Alpha Lake, and benches because of their senses is proven through research and regular observational research

### **Space History and Context**

Alpha Lake Dog Park opened in 2014 intending to harmonize relationships between different user groups in the park (Resort Municipality of Whistler, 2014). About 2070 meters square in size, the dog park was created as a set of improvements in the larger Alpha Lake Park area. These improvements were made due to increased demand, the deteriorated condition of the pre-existing dog off-leash area, and dog-related conflicts with other park users (Resort Municipality of Whistler, 2014). After the reconstruction of the park, the space is in excellent condition. By choosing gravel as the park's surface, there is excellent drainage and the park has experienced significantly less deterioration throughout its years of use.

Human activity in the Alpha Lake Dog Park contributes largely to a dog's experience and commoning practices within the commons. Human owners tend to be the ones bringing their dogs to the dog park, thus deciding when the dog can play and for how long. Human activities within the park include sitting on park benches, throwing toys or sticks, picking up feces, making sure no conflict arises between their dog and others, and enjoying time outdoors in a social setting. Dogs' interactions and responsibilities within the park are truly limited and impacted by humans and the human schedule. Even my presence at Alpha Lake Dog Park impacts the way my dog, Finnigan, explores the different plants, surroundings, and other dogs because he checks every few minutes to make sure I am still there. The human impact on a dog park varies depending on a dog's sense of dependence and connection to its owner. Some dogs prefer to play or wrestle with other dogs, while others want to play fetch, swim, or simply just watch the action and greet all the humans in the dog park. The human presence is strong within a dog park and important to note, even when evaluating the space as a more-than-human assemblage.

### **Relationships of Responsibility at Alpha Lake Dog Park**

To understand relationships of responsibility, Donna Haraway's work on animals, especially dogs, provides an excellent base for further evaluations on Alpha Lake Dog Park. Haraway says that mattering is not by calculating or ranking, instead it is inside connections that demand and enable a response (2007). From such a response grows the capacity to respond, which is responsibility. Responsibility is only shaped in multidirectional relationships of more than one responsive entity. Thus, relationships of responsibility come from intra-action (a

replacement for ‘interaction’ meaning one or more entities precede and produce an effect) through which entities come into being (Haraway, 2007 & Kleinman, 2012). By using this understanding of Haraway’s work on responsibility, it is also important to note that the capacity to respond, thus responsibility, will not take shape in similar ways for all entities because response cannot develop from relationships of self-similarity (Haraway, 2007). This section will evaluate the relationships of responsibility that exist between dogs and entities within Alpha Lake Dog Park, and how dogs’ senses drive their relationships.

### ***Dogs and Fences***

Alpha Lake Dog Park is enclosed by a chain-link fence and three double-gated entries. When I first walked up to the dog park with my dog on a leash, he began to get very excited and pulled on the leash. A fence’s relationship of responsibility has largely to do with a dog’s sense of sight. By Finnigan using his sense of sight, the fence’s responsibility of enclosure triggered a cue of intra-action between Finnigan and the fence. Since intra-action is to participate in action with each other, the fence served not only as a barrier to the enclosure but as a visual cue that related the fence to a dog park for Finnigan, so he knew he was allowed in this restricted space.

The fence and double-gated entries relate to the space by having the capacity to respond to who enters at any given moment and is responsible for keeping dogs inside the dog park. When the Resort Municipality of Whistler decided to expand and upgrade the dog park in 2014, it was determined that fencing was necessary to separate user groups due to increased conflict (2014). Separating user groups meant that social interactions between, what used to be, all of Alpha Lake Park, was now seen as limited and possibly limiting response-ability. Yet, Nicholas Blomley’s article *Enclosure, Common Right and the Property of the Poor* articulates that commons are not always seen as “good” and enclosures as “bad,” but instead enclosures may improve social possibilities (2008). This is evident in Alpha Lake Dog Park because having an enclosed space promotes socialization and play between dogs without having to worry about interfering with other park users. This also allows dogs to experience longer and more positive interactions with each other.

Lastly, the fence also has a relationship of responsibility to the rest of the park in protecting it from degradation by maintaining dog activities on one side of the park only. The fence exists where it exists because it encloses all things that share a relationship of responsibility within the dog park. This includes a section of the lakeshore, benches and picnic

tables, unplowed snow, and certain plant species. On the contrary, the fence also restricts certain relationships of responsibility from existing between dogs and other park and valley trail users, cars, bicycles, and native Alpha Lake species such as squirrels.

### ***Dogs and Alpha Lake***

In Donna Haraway's work *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* she addresses how dogs are about the inescapable relationships where the relating is never done once and for all (2003). I found this statement intriguingly accurate when evaluating dogs and their relationships of responsibility to Alpha Lake. During my field study, I noticed how dogs would go to the lakeshore after acknowledging all the other dogs to dip their legs in and check the water to make sure it was safe and drinkable (not saltwater). Similarly, after dogs would play with each other, they would go into the lake to drink water and cool off, almost as a reset for their system before returning to play. This goes back to Haraway's comment on how relating is never done once and for all; dogs' relationship with the lake is a continued intra-action where dogs know they can go to feel safe, reset and hydrate, and cool off. The rhythm of this ongoing, very stable relationship provides dogs with a sense of calmness and security with the lake in regards to its responsibility to dogs.

Dogs' senses largely impact the lake's relationship of responsibility to them. The lakeshore makes the park smell wet, and the sound of ripples hitting the shore cues to dogs that there is a source of water nearby as soon as they enter the park. This also addresses a dog's sense of taste; by the lake being a part of the dog park, dogs can drink water as they please which increases the amount of time they will stay in the park. Without Alpha Lake, the length of time dogs would spend at the park would decrease because they would get tired and thirstier faster meaning they would have to leave. Lastly, through a dog's sense of sight, the lake provides dopamine for dogs who love to jump off the dock into the water to play fetch. Their sense of sight while feeling the motion of jumping into water gives dogs a sense of pleasure. Alpha Lake's relationship of responsibility with a dog is to provide comfort, pleasure, and calmness.

When evaluating what dogs' relationship of responsibility is to Alpha Lake, I had a difficult time analyzing in the field what the dogs' responsibility was towards the lake in return for all the positive aspects it provides for dogs. I realized that not all relationships of responsibility are positive. When I readjusted my thinking toward a companion species approach, I remembered Anna Tsing's definition of companion species and how they are different entities

that find ways to live together even amidst great differences (2012). This is important because, at first glance towards a dog's relationship towards Alpha Lake, I viewed them as destructive to the shoreline, disruptive to small fish in the lake's waters and a deterrent to species that live along the shore like ducks and small birds. In reality, this is their relationship to Alpha Lake. Without such chaos and disruption, birds wouldn't have come up with more protected and hidden places for nests, fish would come closer to shore risking getting eaten by birds, and larger creatures like bears would have occupied a space that is loved and enjoyed by humans. Dogs' relationship of responsibility to the lake is the repercussions of their 'disruption' because it shapes the lake and its commoners entirely. Haraway refers to this as "relating in significant otherness," (2003).

### ***Dogs and Benches***

The last relationship of responsibility that I evaluated during my fieldwork was between dogs and benches. During my fourth site visit, I forced myself to sit down on the bench instead of standing and try to understand the intra-action between the two. I always brought Finnigan with me to Alpha Lake Dog Park because I knew that understanding his behaviour and relationships would be easier than other dogs due to my understanding of his personality and regularities (yet this didn't stop me from evaluating them all). Once I sat down, the relationship became much more clear as Finnigan could visually tell that I was going to stay for a long time and that I wasn't going to move. I learned that through a dog's sense of sight, they can read a situation much better than their ears or nose could for them when it comes to their humans. Haraway believes that relating between entities is from the thread of ongoing alertness to otherness-in-action (2003). By taking this idea and evaluating the rhythms of the park, it becomes clear that the benches' relationship of responsibility to dogs is to increase their autonomy. Knowing that their owner is sitting and letting them play, dogs were less likely to stop playing with other dogs or exploring the area at a given time to look for their owner (as described previously) because they knew their owner was stationary and seated. This was especially true for Finnigan and was easier to understand as a dog owner in the park because I could see the difference in an experience Finnigan had when I was sitting, allowing him to play without causing him to worry. Being limited to their humans and by the schedules of humans impacts the majority of a dog's life, and a bench's responsibility to dogs is to provide a place for humans to sit so dogs can spend longer at the park without their human getting tired of standing.

Through my eyes and evaluation in the field, dogs and their relationship of responsibility to benches seemed to in turn be through gratitude. I speculate, through watching dogs and benches interact, that very simply and respectfully they understand that benches offer them a longer time at the park. I often wondered in my time on the site if this was the reason for leaving their scent (urination) on many of the benches. Was this a dog's way of leaving their mark, signalling that this bench offered them a positive experience in this space? Are dogs this complex of thinkers? Of course, I can only speculate, but after evaluating the relationships of responsibilities between this more-than-human assemblage, I can only imagine how far these intra-actions go between them.

## **Conclusion**

Analyzing Alpha Lake Dog Park through fieldwork and secondary sources such as Donna Haraway's work on dogs and Anna Tsing's work on companion species in terms of the more-than-human relationships of responsibility that exist in the commons opened this case study to think more broadly than what was just visible. By understanding a dog's sense of sight, smell, taste, touch, and sound, this analysis argued that dogs' relationships of responsibility exist because of these senses, which provide a more robust argument for this more-than-human assemblage and why they exist where they exist. The relationship between fences, Alpha Lake, and benches to dogs was chosen because after completing my fieldwork, I found their intra-action was the most diverse between each other and would provide excellent support to my argument. Current research on the ever-existing and evolving relationship of responsibility that humans and dogs have to one another is at mass. Yet, viewing dogs' relationships to more-than-human entities is addressed far less in literature, thus making this case study far more intriguing to implement and rewarding to analyze.

## Addendum

Photos taken below were during different field visits to Alpha Lake Park. Majority of the visits to the park there was snow cover, other times it was bare.



1. A photo of the Black Cottonwood trees that grow at Alpha Lake Dog Park, outside the north side of the fence. Photo taken by author.



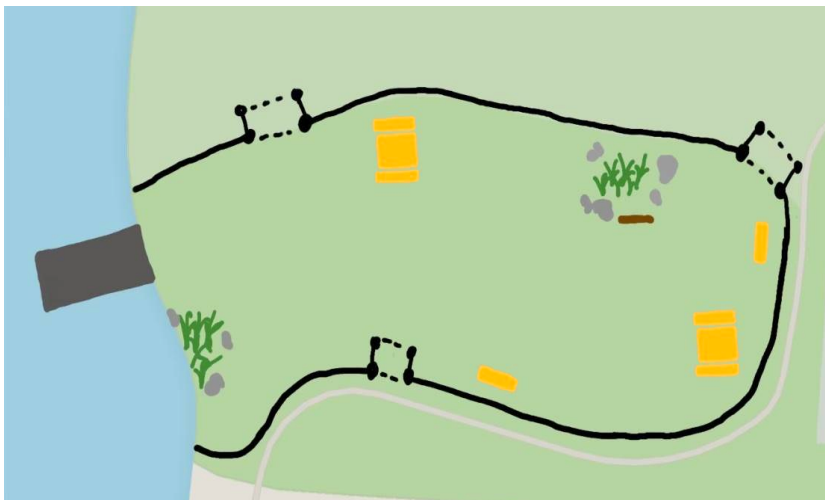
2. The first photo is of the fence, with the north gate, that surrounds the park. The second photo is of the east gate and fencing. Photo taken by the author.



3. *A photo of the benches at the park.  
Photo taken by author.*



4. *Two photos of the lake  
(on field research Day 1 and  
Day 5, a month apart) that is  
on the west side of the park.  
Photos taken by author.*



5. *An aerial drawing of  
Alpha Lake Dog Park by the  
author. Black lines and dots  
are fences and gates, orange  
rectangles are benches, grey  
round objects are rocks, green  
sticks are tall grass and small  
trees, the large grey rectangle  
over the water is the dock, and  
the brown long object is a log.*

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