UK state identity-making and British overseas territories' environments in times of ecological crisis and geopolitical change

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ABSTRACT: Analysis of state identity constructions can provide important insights into the ideologies, values, ambitions and policies of influential state actors. Existing research on state identities has focused mainly on how such identities are constructed and utilised within domestic politics or conventional inter-state/international relations but limited attention has been paid to how states construct their identities in relation to, and through, overseas territories that occupy liminal positions of sovereignty. This article addresses this gap by investigating how state actors have discursively constructed the UK's identities through the lens of environmental protection in the UK's overseas territories. It analyses UK parliamentary debate between 2010 and 2018, identifying how territory environments were enrolled in the production of multiple state identities, representing differing spatial imaginaries of the UK, its power and responsibilities at a time of environmental crisis and the search to define the UK's post-Brexit status and roles. This shape-shifting capacity underscores how states may draw on a multiplicity of personas in response to different circumstances that become particularly noticeable where uncertainty and ambiguity exist around the ethics, power relations and responsibilities involved in relations with overseas territories in an ostensibly postcolonial era.

Keywords: environment, marine conservation, overseas territories, parliament, post-Brexit, state identities, United Kingdom

Introduction

At the G7 meeting held in Biarritz in August 2019, the United Kingdom's Foreign and Commonwealth Office issued a press release that began with the headline "Britannia Protects the Waves: £7 million extra funding to protect UK marine life" (FCO, 2019). The jingoistic play on words from 'Rule Britannia' is striking because the "UK marine life" receiving funding under the UK's Blue Belt Marine Protected Areas programme lies thousands of kilometres distant from British shores around the UK's remaining overseas territories. Several of these non-independent legacies of Britain's imperial era have no permanent population and are effectively governed from Whitehall but responsibility for environmental protection in inhabited territories lies primarily with locally-elected territory administrations (Wentworth, 2013). The announcement and other statements by UK policy-makers indicate an increasing emphasis by UK governments on environmental conservation in the UK's offshore territories, with some suggesting that ministers view the overseas territories as a synecdoche for its 'Global Britain' agenda on a range of issues as they seek to reshape the UK's international relations after Brexit (Jessop, 2021).

The increased attention paid by UK state actors to the overseas territories' environments offers an important illustration of the use by state actors of the environment to construct and communicate – domestically and internationally – aspects of state identity representations to assert the status, character and values of that state (McCourt, 2011). The role of state identities in the portrayal and functioning of states has been the subject of extensive enquiry (Eder, 2009; McCourt, 2011; Steele, 2008), including a growing body of scholarship on state environmental identities and the notion of "the environmental state" (Duit et al., 2016; Fisher and Freudenburg, 2014; Hausknost, 2020; van Tatenhove, 2016; Wurzel et al., 2003).

Among other things, studies reveal how state identities are intrinsically multiple, contested, and evolving, especially during times of crisis or change as states appraise and seek to reinvent or re-express their identities (Doty, 1996; Wendt, 1994). State identities can be constructed and expressed in multiple ways but are commonly detectable in the discourses state actors use to communicate their norms, ideologies, imaginaries and assumptions (Doty, 1993; 1996; Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992; Whittaker, 2017). Such discourses are widely recognised to contribute to the promotion and maintenance of ideas about different groups, roles, identities and relations, and to the practice of relational power, structuring of "truths" and influencing of political outcomes (Dryzek, 2013; Medby, 2020; Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992). Analysis of discourses is also recognised to aid understanding of the environmental geopolitical claims made by actors to support actions in different places (O'Lear, 2020). As with state identities themselves, the competitive nature of politics at both the domestic and international levels means that state discourses are rarely singular or uncontested. Instead, they consist of "discourse complexes" wherein contradictory or complementary ideas from various fields (science, economics and so forth) jostle for attention and are adapted to increase their influence on policy and practice (Christoff, 2013).

Existing research on state identities has tended to focus predominantly on how identities are constructed and utilised to pursue domestic political agendas (Eder, 2009; Nayak, 2006; Steele, 2008; Wurzel et al., 2003), in conflict situations, or as part of efforts to address collective action problems within international relations (Medby, 2018; Wendt, 1994). In contrast, relatively limited attention has been paid to how states construct their identities in relation to overseas territories, many of which have their own constitutions and are largely self-governing but over which states retain sovereign powers and a range of obligations. Overseas

territories consequently often occupy a liminal position in the international system (McConnell and Dittmer, 2017), and the identities accorded to them by the sovereign power – as well as the identities these states attach to their relationships with overseas territories – can carry important implications for governance relations between territories and states and for how states are viewed internationally, especially where overseas territory claims are disputed. Investigation of how states construct their identities through discourses and policies affecting the environments of their overseas territories thus not only fills a gap in theoretical understandings of state identities but may also help to contextualise and inform practical understanding of state/territory relations and the emerging politics of ocean territorialization and environmental governance (Gruby et al., 2016).

The aim of this article, accordingly, is to explore how UK policy-makers have sought to discursively shape the UK's identity as a domestic and international actor in relation to, and through, environmental and marine protection in its overseas territories. It draws on Christoff's (2013) concept of discourse complexes to examine three elements of how states construct their identity and relations: (i) self-identification (ii) responsibilities and (iii) power, key elements of the Identity, Ethics, Power (IEP) model developed by Daddow and Gaskarth (2011) to help comprehend how different factors influence foreign policy decisions. This framework recognises that state identities and their elements are compound, changing, and often inconsistent but nevertheless produce composite (but still disputed) interpretations of 'what a country *is* and *should be…*' and how it should act (McCourt, 2011, p. 1604 original italics)[1].

The article is constructed around analysis of debates in the UK parliament during the period 2010 to 2018, from the election of the Coalition government to the early years of the UK's Blue Belt Marine Protected Areas programme. It forms part of a wider project with artist Naomi Hart to create artistic responses to parliamentary debate on the environment in the territories. Parliamentary debates were analysed because parliaments form an important political space where conceptions of the state are discussed, contested, and at times coalesce around particular ideas. The overseas territories do not have direct representation within the UK Parliament, but the Houses of Commons and Lords nevertheless provide fora where governments outline policies and are held accountable by parliamentarians for their dealings with the overseas territories (Harmer, 2018). Parliamentarians' questions and statements therefore provide a valuable window into the shared and contested ideas, assumptions and imaginaries that shape policies towards the territories and the various ways in which the territories become entangled in the construction of state identities.

The next section explores ideas of state identity-making and the importance of the environment in state identities. It then sketches the political and historical context of the UK's relationship with its overseas territories, paying particular attention to environmental governance relations. The methodology is then reviewed, followed by analysis of the main discourses identified in parliamentary debates. The analysis identifies how discourses of identity, responsibility and power were expressed, interacted, and contributed to state identity-making in a process in which parliamentarians accorded the UK state a range of identities that involved variegated portrayals of the UK's power relations with the overseas territories. The article concludes by discussing the broader insights gained on how the overseas territories and their environments are imagined and enrolled in processes of state identity-making and how these constructed identities shape policy actions towards the territories and marine conservation.

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[1] McCourt (2011) outlines mainstream constructivist ideas about identity but argues for the importance of existing social roles which make international actors identity affirming actions meaningful.

State-identity making and the environmental state

Constructivist approaches to international relations and political geography have long highlighted the importance of identities in helping to understand the actions and motives of political actors, including states (Doty, 1993; 1996; Wendt, 1994). Mainstream constructivist thinkers view state identities as ensembles of images and ideas constructed and projected by elites about the character and values of their states for the purposes of informing and shaping state actions (McCourt, 2011). State identities are therefore neither natural nor stable but are subjective, contested and changing ideas and ideals about the state that are "scripted" into official documents, political rhetoric and policy at given times to "impose coherence on what [would otherwise be] fragmentary and arbitrary conditions of historical assemblage" (Shapiro, 2008, p, 278; Nayak, 2006). Some commentators argue that such identities are not necessarily consciously created and that, instead, actors and agents are themselves part of, and enrolled in, discursive practices that construct "subject identities and their positions vis-a-vis each other" (Doty, 1993, p. 305). Other authors draw attention to the agency of "state personnel" (Jones et al., 2014) in influencing the narratives and activities of political actors, and the ways in which those who work directly for the state are influenced by, and articulate, state identity discourses (Medby, 2018).

State identities can be constructed and expressed in multiple ways, ranging from policy to political speech-making, but are commonly articulated in the discourses and framings used by state agents and actors to discuss policy and social issues. As a consequence of various factors, such as political contestation and changing circumstances, the identities of states are never singular or fixed but, instead, are multifaceted, contested and changing, as certain identities (or individual traits) gain salience at particular times or in relation to specific issues, while others recede or become counternarratives and points of critique to dominant strands of thought (Roe, 1994; Wendt, 1994). Identities may also be inward or outward facing, designed to address internal debates or international relations and can be framed both spatially and temporally in relation to particular territories, boundaries and linear histories, and relationally in respect of other discursively formed groups (Medby, 2018; Doty, 1996; Wendt, 1994). Whatever these permutations, the significance of state identities resides in their capacity to encourage, constrain and otherwise shape the actions of states through their subjective portrayals of what the state holds itself to be and how it wishes to be viewed. Conversely, identities may be adapted or constructed anew to justify certain actions – and at times of fundamental change or crisis, when customary or commonly-held identities are challenged, the representational practices that construct identities may be particularly intense as different groups vie for authority and legitimacy (Doty, 1996, p.12; Nayak, 2006).

Daddow and Gaskarth's (2011) IEP model of foreign policy-making is helpful in identifying some of the key components state actors draw upon when developing stances and actions on international issues. They argue the importance of examining not just the powers available to states but also how the use of these powers is contextualised within a broader framework of ideas and norms about the ethics of various actions and how actions and norms resonate with ideas about a state's identities both as a domestic entity and as an international actor (2011). These three broad elements of identity, ethics and power are interrelated and may work with or against each other within particular contexts (Daddow and Gaskarth, 2011). Identity can be informed by the values, ethics and responsibilities ascribed to different groups and by ideas about ethical behaviour in the use of either hard or soft power. Identities may equally be shaped by perceptions of the power held by states and, correspondingly, how this power is or is not extended may influence the actor's self-identity (Daddow and Gaskarth, 2011). Although Daddow and Gaskarth use these constituents - identity, ethics (which we call

responsibility) and power - to understand foreign policy-making, they may also be applied to "the tasks of state" more generally (Jessop, 2016). Furthermore, policy-making regarding the UK overseas territories, as entities that lie under UK sovereignty yet outside the UK (Hendry and Dickson, 2011), may be approached as a hybrid form of policy making that blurs the line between the domestic and international.

Amongst the many identities assumed by states for domestic and international audiences, recent decades have seen a steady growth in the notion of the so-called environmental state (Duit et al., 2016; Fisher and Freudenburg, 2014; Hausknost, 2020; van Tatenhove, 2016; Wurzel et al., 2003). Defined broadly as states that possess significant sets of institutions and practices for managing the environment and societal-environmental interactions, the concept has been utilised to help understand how different forms of state agency are enlisted to constitute and reproduce environmental governance arrangements, the organisation of networks and interactions between political, economic and social actors, and to create identities about the stances taken by states towards environmental threats (Duit et al., 2016; Hausknost and Hammond, 2020). This latter dimension in particular draws attention to the deployment by state actors of knowledge structures and ideas alongside the state's administrative, regulatory and financial powers to help govern environmental problems. Such ideas have variously included constructed understandings of current environmental conditions, future aspirations and the state's environmental capabilities, and the mechanisms through which environmental improvements might be achieved, for example, through concepts such as ecosystem services and the valuation of environmental resources.

In contrast to other apparatuses of environmental governance involving the gathering and marshalling of empirical data about environmental conditions and factors influencing change, the portrayal of state environmental identities falls solidly into the terrain of discourse and the use of representation to convey certain impressions of the state's responsibilities, agency and relations with other political actors in both the domestic and international spheres. Numerous examples exist of state actors using depictions of national identity to confront domestic political obstacles to environmental policies, such as Germany's attempts to style itself as a 'social and ecological market economy' in order to promote renewable energy and ecological tax reforms by presenting environmental protection as synergetic with economic growth (Wurzel, 2002). Germany has equally been energetic in projecting itself as an environmental leader within the European Union to persuade other countries to adopt German environmental standards, despite evidence that its environmental credentials sometimes fall short of this billing (Scheurs, 2016). Similarly, during their terms as New Zealand Prime Minister, Helen Clark and Jacinda Ardern both sought to appeal to popular conceptions of national identity – including New Zealand's clean green image and opposition to nuclear weapons – in an attempt to redefine the country's aspirations and responsibilities to tackling climate change (Skilling, 2018).

The projection of environmental identities has also been used widely by states to communicate national values and advance national interests within international environmental politics. For example, China has consistently stressed global interdependence and positioned itself as a developing country in order to justify calls for greater leadership by other states on climate change (Economy, 2018). Joe Biden's assertion that "America is back" and "ready to lead the world" on climate change and Donald Trump's depiction of a United States whose responsibilities lay with itself rather than the wider world (Kupchan and Trubowitz, 2021) nevertheless underline the contested and shifting nature of state environmental narratives, a point that Christoff (2013) captures in his analysis of how six major discourses emphasising

the scientific, ethical, economic, technological, political/legal, and "everyday life" dimensions of climate change competed during debates on carbon pricing in Australia in the early 2010s.

While the use of environmental identities to promote state ideologies and interests on environmental issues has been documented extensively, the majority of analysis has again been directed at analysing their role in domestic or international environmental debates. Limited attention has been paid to the ways states construct and utilise environmental identities to define and enact their relationship with overseas territories that lack full independence but hold degrees of political autonomy. These entities have remained relatively neglected in studies of state identities compared with the attention paid to environmental identities at the national and international levels, while research on the governance of their environments is only recently emerging. However, growing recognition of environmental concerns at a global level, the significance of many overseas territory environments (Churchyard et al., 2014) and the importance of justice issues in relation to environmental governance and the overseas territories indicate a need for deeper investigation of the governance and discursive construction of overseas territories in relation to powerful states.

UK relations with its overseas territories: Territorial and environmental governance

Britain's overseas territories are non-independent entities that were taken from the 17th century onwards during Britain's period of colonial expansion. The UN classifies them as non-self-governing territories that are awaiting de-colonisation, with Britain as an administering power (UN, 2019). Successive UK governments have stated that these relationships are based on: self-determination with independence available (where this is an option); mutual responsibilities; and maximum feasible fiscal and political autonomy (FCO, 1999; FCO, 2012), and that these links form "a significant element in [Britain's] national and international identity" (FCO, 1999, p.7).

While the UK retains sovereignty, most territories have constitutions, governments, varying democratic institutions and levels of autonomy (Hendry and Dickson, 2011). These institutions make decisions (depending on individual constitutions) on areas including health, education, the economy, and, pertinently, the environment. The UK Parliament has unlimited power to pass legislation affecting the territories (FCO, 2012), while Orders in Council can also effect legislation in the territories (Hendry and Dickson, 2011). Overseas territories populations living outside the UK are not formally represented in parliament but in 2019 a Foreign Affairs Committee enquiry recommended that "there needs to be greater scope for Parliament to examine OT issues" given the involvement of UK government departments in overseas territories affairs (FAC., 2019). The committee's recommendation for a new formal scrutiny mechanism underscored the role of parliament as a discursive space for debating issues affecting the territories.

The territories' constitutional status involves blurred boundaries between domestic and foreign policy-making and debate continues in the literature over the character of relationships between the UK state and the territories. Some authors have stressed a lack of desire for independence based largely on the economic, security, reputational and diplomatic benefits of continued associations with the UK (Aldrich and Connell, 1998; McElroy and Parry, 2012). Baldacchino and Milne (2009), meanwhile, highlight the creative use of jurisdictional powers by some non-independent territories to participate in the global economy, while McConnell and Dittmer (2017) stress the circumscribed agency held by the territories in conducting diplomatic relations and conceptualise both states and territories as dynamic entities in which states have a monopoly on political legitimacy as "multiplicities" or "assemblages" within a

fluid and relational international sphere. The overseas territories are concordantly described as having "a liminal political subjectivity between colonial ward and independent statehood" but one that holds the possibility of change, where legitimacy is contested, and where political agency is used creatively (McConnell and Dittmer, 2017, p.7). Such scholarship questions assumptions that non-independence necessarily equates to powerlessness and instead highlights the capacities of non-independent jurisdictions.

Other analyses emphasise unequal power relations between states and territories and ascribe a more trenchant colonial character to the UK's role. Yusuf and Chowdhury (2019) argue that UK overseas territories' constitutions retain colonial provisions alongside those fostering self-determination. They conclude that a "spectrum of coloniality" (p. 219) persists as a result of powers to disallow or give assent to local legislation, the executive and legislative powers reserved for territory governors, and the power of Parliament to legislate for the territories. Writing in 2020, Boatcă highlighted how colonial histories and ongoing colonial entanglements between Europe and the Caribbean were obscured and largely silenced within Europe, although developments in Barbados and Jamaica in 2021 and 2022 indicate that this situation may be beginning to change.

Over the past decade, the socio-political implications of UK environmental governance in the territories have received growing research attention (Appelby, 2015; Vaas et al., 2017; Farran, 2019; Howson, 2020; Ferraro and Failler, 2022) Environmental governance in territories with permanent populations is the responsibility of territory governments but the UK has direct responsibility in territories with no permanent population (Wentworth, 2013; FCO, 2012) and retains broad responsibilities for the environment in all its territories, including commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Sustainable Development Goals (O'Leary et al., 2018). The lead government department for the territories is the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, while the Department for Environmental Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and its agencies provide support on biodiversity and other environmental issues (Wentworth, 2013). Some territory constitutions specify the environment as a matter for the territory's legislature. For instance, the Virgin Islands Constitution (2007) empowers the legislature to make laws preventing pollution and ecological degradation, and to support conservation, sustainable development and the sustainable use of natural resources (2007, p. 20). In St Helena, Tristan da Cunha and Ascension Island, in contrast, responsibility for the environment is not mentioned in the constitution, although much work is conducted under local control (Ferraro and Failler, 2022). However, even where territories have delegated powers, many have limited resources to manage large-scale environmental challenges (Wentworth, 2013).

UK government interest in the overseas territories' environments began to gain momentum around the turn of the millennium (Clegg, 2015) with the publication of two white papers in 1999 and 2012. Labour's 1999 white paper placed the environment within the context of sustainable development and local livelihoods and advocated a partnership approach in which the UK government provided a supporting, advisory and funding role, while facilitating the extension of international treaties. The paper emphasised that use of environments should "provide benefits to people in them" and "conserve our global heritage by managing sustainably all the Overseas Territories' natural resources" (FCO, 1999, p. 36*)*. The Coalition government's 2012 White Paper, meanwhile, placed responsibility for protecting natural environments on individual territories and stressed a partnership approach with support from the UK, NGOs and the private sector through funding, expertise sharing, and representation at international fora (FCO, 2012). Both white papers conceded to past neglect by UK governments (FCO 1999; FCO 2012) but the UK has continued to be criticised by NGOs

(Doward, 2012) and territory government representatives (Harrabin, 2017) for a lack of strategic overview, a failure to prioritise (Wentworth, 2013), and inadequate funding for environmental projects in the territories.

Since the mid-2010s the UK government has funded marine protection around its territories through the UK Blue Belt Programme, which has established Marine Protection Areas (MPAs) around British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, Pitcairn Islands, Ascension Island, St Helena, Tristan da Cunha and British Antarctic Territory[2]. Sand (2010) and Farran (2019) emphasise how MPAs in territories' waters can help states meet international pledges on marine ecological protection and boost their blue-green credentials and note that concern has been expressed at how some states have competed for green leadership credentials by declaring large scale offshore MPAs around non-sovereign territories where small populations and smaller fishing lobbies offer little resistance to such initiatives (Jones and De Santo, 2016; Farran, 2020). Sovereignty disputes with Mauritius and the Maldives have made the BIOT MPA particularly controversial (Sand, 2012). In 2015 the Tribunal of the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled that its establishment was incompatible with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) because the UK had not properly consulted Mauritius (Appleby, 2015). The forcible removal of the Chagos Islands population by the UK government in the late 1960s and 1970s has also made the BIOT MPA highly contentious (Sand, 2012, Vine, 2011; De Santo, 2011; Harris, 2015). De Santo et al. (2011) and de Santo (2019), meanwhile, describe the creation of protected areas in territories with military activities or a strategic presence by powerful states as "fortress conservation" and suggest that, in addition to protecting biological diversity, some overseas territories "provide a footprint in key strategic locations, as well as potential future energy and mineral resources" (2019, p.3). Meanwhile, Farran argues that the creation of MPAs in the UK overseas territories "[salves the] civic consciousness of environmental responsibility without infringing on individualism, consumerism or the economic foundations of prosperity and growth for developed countries" but undermines the rights and livelihoods of local people (2020, p. 145). Howson (2020) similarly characterises the UK's Blue Belt programme in St Helena as part of a damaging pro-growth agenda with negative impacts on inshore environments and local peoples' lives. However, Vaas et. al (2017) describe the Caribbean UK overseas territories as part of a highly autonomous grouping where field work on Anguilla showed little perceived UK input to invasive species policy or management on the island (Vaas et. al., 2017).

Methods

The research was based on discourse analysis of statements by UK parliamentarians on environmental protection in the overseas territories taken from Hansard, the official transcript of debates and written and oral questions and answers by government ministers and other members of the UK Parliament. The time period for the analysis was May 2010-December

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[2] The Blue Belt programme was funded £33 million between 2016 and 2022 from the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund and the FCDO to support the overseas territories in protecting biodiversity within over four million square kilometres of designated Marine Protected Areas. The programme works with the overseas territories to support a wide range of activities involving scientific research, strengthening the governance of MPAs, managing human impacts, supporting sustainable fisheries management, and supporting surveillance, compliance and enforcement. This includes water quality, marine and other environmental surveys, advice on identifying environmental priorities and strategies, consultation, training on environmental data collection, the development of relevant legislation, the provision of equipment and support for surveillance (for example developing satellite surveillance, the trialling of drones to support fisheries patrol vessels, and the establishment of an intelligence sharing hub), and enforcement activities against illegal fishing, among other activities https://www.gov.uk/guidance/the-blue-belt-programme;

2018 to incorporate the election of the UK's Conservative-Liberal-Democrat Coalition government in May 2010 and the establishment in 2016 of the UK's Blue Belt Programme to protect and manage the marine environment around its overseas territories. The analysis centred on understanding how the overseas territories were discussed as a collective rather than as individual territories in order to capture a broader view of how relationships were articulated by UK parliamentary representatives (Harmer, 2018). Although individual territories were mentioned in Hansard, the approach avoided the analysis being over-skewed towards the particular, and potentially unrepresentative circumstances of more commonly-discussed territories.

Discourse analysis was preferred to examining substantive policy decisions affecting marine environmental protection in the overseas territories, as it provided a clearer optic for understanding the ways in which the UK's identities, responsibilities and power relations in respect of the overseas territories were perceived and expressed by UK parliamentarians. Although policy decisions provide more direct articulations of responsibility and power, discourse analysis carries distinctive advantages in capturing how language and framing have been used to create meanings, norms and "rules" around discussion of political actors and places (Dryzek, 2013; Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992). Discourse analysis is also well-attuned to illuminating how different ideas and portrayals compete and intersect with other texts and discourses to create intersubjective interpretations, and to probing the assumptions and contentions underpinning viewpoints, identity construction, and power relations (Neumann, 2004: 822). For example, Neumann's (2004) investigation of state-sponsored violence in African national parks explored how moral attitudes towards poachers were influenced by historical power relations in which African citizens were subordinated to European interests and identities. A common conclusion is that such discourses obscure the specificity and complexity of places in favour of "over-determined and a-historical abstractions" that reduce group identities to simplified binaries and assumptions (Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992 p. 191). Environmental geopolitics scholarship similarly contends that geopolitical discourse tends to reduce environmental issues to selective and limited features, obscuring power relations and disregarding the nuances of human-environment interactions in particular places (O'Lear, 2020). The concepts of spatial and environmental imaginaries equally focus attention on shared ideas about places that do not depend on immediate knowledge and the ideas groups hold about the environments of particular landscapes (Watkins, 2015; Davis, 2020). Attention to such discourses helps to understand how parliamentarians, few of whom will have visited the overseas territories, create tapestries of knowledge, ideas, images and associations about distant places (Medby, 2018). How places are discursively constructed thus offers important insights into how the UK's overseas territories are viewed and engaged with (Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992; O'Lear, 2020) and how, through such processes, policymakers construct the UK's own self-identity in relation to the territories.

The first stage of analysis employed general word searches for terms that identified debates where UK-overseas territory relationships and environmental issues were discussed; these included: 'overseas territories', the anachronistic term 'dependent territories' and 'environment', 'sustainability' and 'marine'. A total of 118 excerpts were identified for detailed investigation, using NVivo software to organise extracts into the main themes of identity, responsibility and power relations to enable further exploration of: (i) the major discourses used to characterise the environments of the overseas territories and the UK's relationships with its territories; (ii) contrasts and connections between discourses; and (iii) discourses that remained more marginal or excluded from the parliamentary debates.

Discourses in UK Parliamentary debate on overseas territories' environments

UK parliamentarians raised the environment of the overseas territories on multiple occasions between 2010 and 2018 during debates on Overseas Territories (Sustainability) (2014); Blue Belt Programme: Marine Protected Areas (2017); and Blue Belt Programme: South Sandwich Islands (2018), and more general debates on the overseas territories, the environment, and a wide range of other issues (Harmer, 2018). The overseas territories' environments were mentioned 118 times by 62 individuals during this period, 77 times in the Commons and 44 times in the Lords, with Conservatives speaking on the topic on 77 occasions, Labour 28, Liberal Democrats 9 and three mentions by other representatives. Analysis of these debates suggests that three main interrelated discourses shape the relationship between the UK and the overseas territories: (i) the self-identification of the UK in relation to the territories and other actors involved; (ii) responsibility and ethical reasons for promoting environmental protection; and (iii) the maintenance or exertion of power. These elements can be regarded as discursive fields that are "interrelated to a greater or lesser degree, sometimes mutually constitutive, [and] sometimes more loosely aligned" as part of a "discourse complex" in which self-identification, responsibility and power are intertwined in both supportive and tensile ways (Christoff, 2013, p. 355).

Self-identification discourses

Several constructions of UK self-identification in relation to the overseas territories were discerned from the parliamentary debates. Many of these immediately highlighted the interconnectedness of these discourses in the sense that responsibility and power (perhaps inescapably) featured simultaneously within UK parliamentarians' representations of the UK's persona, but also emerged in more distinctive ways that merited standalone consideration within a wider exploration of the UK's identity-making in its relationship with its overseas territories. The first self-identification discourse centred on a former colonial power grappling with the character and parameters of its twenty-first century relationship with non-independent territories. This in turn bifurcated into one persona that emphasised continuing sovereign power and another where colonial power structures were veiled behind images of the supportive and powerful friend. Further discourses interlinked ideas of self-identification with those of responsibility and power, and included: the 'undivided realm', the 'steward/custodian', and the middleweight global player and international environmental leader. Within these discourses, the overseas territories are accorded various identities, including: environmental Edens, assets for the UK, and partners whose rights and agency are recognised.

The discursive construction of the UK's self-identification as a 'continuing sovereign' and 'supportive and powerful friend' featured prominently in a 2014 House of Commons debate 'Overseas Territories (Sustainability)' on the government's response to the Tenth Report from the Environmental Audit Committee on Sustainability in the Overseas Territories. Continuing sovereign discourses foregrounded a portrayal in which ongoing constitutional links with, and sovereignty over, the territories were emphasised and where being a continuing sovereign meant retained responsibilities. These responsibilities were used by MPs to argue for action (and critique inaction) by the government on environmental issues in the territories. For example, Committee chair, Joan Walley [Labour] opened the 2014 debate by reminding MPs that "The Environmental Audit Committee is particularly interested in overseas territories because all 14 of them are under UK sovereignty; Parliament has unlimited power to legislate for them as matter of constitutional law and has a responsibility to ensure good governance". Parliamentarians were told that the UK's sovereign identity enabled Parliament to legislate for and the committee to "scrutinise sustainability in our overseas territories" (Walley, 2014), but

raised questions about the extent to which the UK should demand "the same kind of [environmental] standards that we have in the UK" (Walley, 2014). The UK has insisted, against the wishes of some territory governments, on measures to combat tax avoidance and evasion (Harmer, 2018), a precedent noted by Labour's Kerry McCarthy (2015), who complained that the government is "not prepared to exercise similar powers to protect biodiversity" (McCarthy, 2015). In the same debate, Matthew Offord [Conservative] underscored this self-identification, arguing that the UK had a responsibility to act where standards on environmental impact assessment are not followed. Offord (2014) used a geopolitical analogy to contrast the status of the UK's devolved nations with the situation in the territories, where there has been "no such parliamentary devolution … whether of legal authority or budgetary resources" and "The key constitutional concept is that of reserved powers….". His description emphasises the UK's identity as a sovereign state with continued expansive power (derived through "colonial legal structures inherited from the 18th and 19th centuries") over territories beyond its borders, although he clarified that the government should not directly manage the territories' environmental affairs and that he did not oppose proper delegation of powers and partnership working. Nonetheless, Offord and McCarthy's accounts depict the UK as a still powerful sovereign with the legal and normative capacity to act on environmental governance in the territories.

This self-identification was contested at times by government spokespersons. For instance, then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, George Eustice, drew on the Coalition's 2012 White Paper (FCO, 2012) to argue that "although the Government have a fundamental objective and responsibility for the security and good governance of the territories, each has its own constitution and local laws, and powers are therefore devolved to the maximum extent possible. The inhabited territories are constitutionally responsible for the protection and conservation of their natural environments and for developing appropriate environmental policies and legislation." Eustice referenced the territories' desire for autonomy in this respect; and the UK's character as sovereign is thus shifted in this portrayal to that of partner and provider of support to the territories' democratic institutions (Eustice, 2014).

While these debates show parliamentarians contesting the enactment of reserved powers and presenting different versions of the UK's character and relations with the territories, these are not necessarily rooted in party politics and tensions between identities are evident even within individual positions. For instance, Joan Walley [Labour], quoted above, also told MPs: "It is important to note that we cannot impose what should and should not happen on other elected Governments, but at the same time, Parliament does have sovereignty and cannot abdicate its responsibilities towards the overseas territories" (2014).

Responsibility discourses

The analysis similarly reveals parliamentarians ascribing the UK's responsibilities for environment in the territories to several sources: responsibility as legacy; responsibility as possession of a valued resource; and responsibility as stewardship or protection. Responsibility as legacy emerged mainly through reminders of the UK's colonial history and relationship with the territories. Mark Lazarowicz (Lab/Co-op) argued: "We chose to take them on as colonial possessions over the centuries, and we now have a responsibility to those communities and areas, and to the wider world community, to recognise their importance to the environment of the world" (2014). Here the speaker foregrounds the UK's imperial past to argue for ongoing responsibilities, although the past tense used to describe colonial appropriation means the

statement leaves ambiguities over the character of the current relationship and the UK's continued sovereignty.

A more frequent rationale for the UK's responsibility draws on assumptions of association and closeness which are not clearly characterised but invoke both responsibilities and the extension of power, wherein the UK holds responsibility because the territory environments are valued by the UK and are imagined as 'belonging to' the UK in some undefined sense. This image of connection is seen in parliamentarians' recurrent reference to the statistic that: "the countries account for some 90% of the biodiversity for which the UK Government have responsibility" (Kerry McCarthy, 2014) [Labour]. The source of this figure was not given but is repeated in several policy documents on the overseas territories from 2012 and offers an example of "environmentality … driven by government agencies or international environmental NGOs that define the "scientific truth" used to justify conservation actions" (Ramutsindela, 2019, p. 2)[3]. This was exemplified in 2011 where Barry Gardiner MP [Labour] used the figure to argue for increased UK government funding on biodiversity: "Given that that 90% are [the Foreign Secretary's] responsibility, can he assure the House that he is spending nine times as much as DEFRA on protecting biodiversity?"

Framing of the figure as the combined UK and overseas territories biodiversity tally similarly creates an assumption of belonging and connection, even if the principles and mechanisms of this relationship are not elaborated. This discourse of responsibility through possession works through a geopolitical environmental-spatial imaginary that encloses the UK and its territories as one entity for the purposes of identifying, creating accountability for, and acting on biodiversity. Dame Caroline Spelman [Conservative] noted that "In fact, 90% of the biodiversity on UK territory is situated in our overseas territories" (2016), suggesting territorial possession. One intervention in the House of Lords illustrates this responsibility discourse by suggesting the territories form a bank of biodiversity for the UK in a time of ecological crisis:

> What native species do we have left in the UK that have not been lost? Soon we might have no red squirrels left, and even hedgehogs are becoming an endangered species. However, the overseas territories are packed with wildlife on land, in the air and in the sea. In the overseas territories we have some of the best marine parks in the world, and most of our coral reefs are still intact (Lord Blencathra [Conservative] 2013).

The comparison with the UK and the possessives 'we have' and 'our coral reefs' suggest an imagination of the territories as a source of biodiversity that is somehow available to the UK; and the suggestion of ecological emergency in the UK is used to justify urgent or drastic action. The construction of the territories as wildlife cornucopia equally links to other discursive traditions in which islands are represented as objects of fantasy (Stratford and Langridge, 2012), Eden or Arcadia (Schulenberg, 2003), often associated with colonial appropriation and exploitation. Grove (1995) argued that European colonial expansion was accompanied by an idealisation of distant landscapes that "offered the possibility of redemption, a realm in which Paradise might be re-created or realised on earth…." to justify colonial economic, social and environmental projects (1995, p. 13). The idealisation of biodiversity in the territories may be at once a rhetorical device for signalling their ecological significance to policymakers while simultaneously connecting with wider discourses framing the global south as a leitmotif for remnants of 'pristine nature' in need of protection by external actors (Ramutsindela et al., 2019), while upholding an imaginary of the UK and the territories as one geopolitical entity.

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[3] FCO-funded research carried out by the RSPB and published in 2014 found that the overseas territories hold the equivalent of 94% of known endemic British species (Churchyard et.al., 2014).

A third ground given for UK responsibility was a duty of stewardship or protection. This argument highlighted that territory environments are fragile and susceptible because of their physical geographies and limited resources for conservation. For instance, the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Dr Thérèse Coffey (2016), noted that many "are small islands that are highly vulnerable to environmental challenges, in particular through human activities and the introduction of invasive species". "Significant threats" (McCarthy, 2014) to the territories' environments raised included: the vulnerability of seabirds to invasive species (Baroness Young of Old Scone [Labour], 2015; The Earl of Selbourne [non-affiliated], 2011), unrestricted development (Walley 2014; McCarthy, 2014); lack of baseline data; limited knowledge and attention to species at risk (McCarthy, 2014); and possible seabed mining (McCarthy, 2014). Threats posed by climate change to territory environments (O'Leary et al., 2018) were also raised by parliamentarians as affecting all the overseas territories (Hooper, 2011; Durkan [SDLP] 2015; McCarthy, 2017). MPs and Lords generally highlighted threats in order to hold the UK government to account and lobby for resources for environmental protection. In the early years of the analysis period, parliamentarians described shortfalls in government funding or lack of engagement by UK departments such as Defra (Walley, 2014).

This responsibility may be linked both to Britain's identity as a continuing sovereign power and more general stewardship obligations to the global environmental commons. This version of responsibility claims an ethical responsibility for the state to oversee the environment for reasons beyond narrow state interests. Action is urged because territory environments are 'globally significant' Baroness Hooper (2011), and 'globally threatened' (McCarthy, 2016). As Walley (2014) stated: "It is no exaggeration to say that our overseas territories contain some of the richest remaining biodiversity on the planet and that we have a duty of care to safeguard it." Government spokesperson and Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defra, Lord Gardiner, framed the UK's work in the territories as part of its wider international responsibilities:

> We know that our task extends beyond these shores. We have committed to provide long-term protection of vital habitats and species around our overseas territories through the blue-belt programme, and have committed at least £5.8 billion to help developing countries to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change, reduce deforestation and support cleaner economic growth. We work through the UN, G7 and G20 to tackle marine plastics pollution at an international level (2018).

Here, UK action in "our territories" is linked to a more international set of concerns, creating a rather blurred geographical imaginary between territories under UK sovereignty, "developing countries", and the broader international sphere. The language of 'stewardship' was used widely in the 2012 white paper (FCO) and by the government spokesperson in the House of Lords in 2010, who argued: "We have a responsibility to provide effective stewardship, even for our uninhabited territories: they include some of the world's most pristine and varied environmental assets ..." (Lord Howell of Guildford, 2011). This language, denoting the protection of something which one does not possess, was repeated by government spokesperson Alan Duncan in a 2018 debate on the Blue Belt programme in South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands and suggests a recognition that rights to the territories' environmental resources accrue to others and that UK oversight is time limited and dependent. The rights of territory populations over their environments were recognised, albeit infrequently, by speakers, including: the importance of biodiversity to Falkland Islanders' livelihoods (Earl of Selborne, 2011 [non-affiliated]); the agency of Pitcairn islanders in calling for an MPA (McCarthy, 2014; Goldsmith, 2014); the importance of the Tristan da Cunha MPA to protecting

the island's fisheries (Goldsmith, 2018); and critique of the lack of consultation with Chagos Islanders over the BIOT MPA (e.g. Corbyn, 2014).

Power discourses

The first power discourse identified involved the construction of the UK as an international actor with global reach in which the territories represent material assets. This was expressed firstly through the use of superlatives to refer to territory habitats and species. This discourse relates to their identity as valued possessions and is again used to lobby for greater protection while also suggesting competition with other states. Ascension Island, for instance, was noted to have the largest green turtle rookery in the Atlantic (Baroness Hooper, 2014) [Conservative] and "one of the most important tropical seabird breeding stations in the world" (Goldsmith, 2014) [Conservative]. Gough Island near Tristan da Cunha was described as one of the most important seabird islands in the world and Great Chagos Bank as the world's largest coral atoll (Hooper, 2014). Zac Goldsmith equally described the MPA around St Helena as "an area bigger than Germany" with "more than 40 endemic species, including whale sharks, turtles and humpback whales" (2018), while Rosindell (2017) [Conservative] claimed that "The UK is custodian to a third of the world's albatrosses… and, believe it or not, perhaps more than a quarter of the global population of penguins". And Dame Caroline Spelman (2016) [Conservative] noted that, with MPAs in Ascension Island, South Georgia, St Helena and Tristan da Cunha, "the area offering some form of protection will be greater than the size of India" (2016). Such comparisons invoke the extent of the UK's environmental ambitions and spatial reach to encompass environments and species outside the UK mainland.

Depictions of territories as "precious and unique environmental assets" (Coffey, 2016) [Conservative] suggest assumptions that they are, in some senses, UK possessions, although the speaker notes that these are assets of which the UK is a "custodian". The language of 'assets' also appears in the Coalition Government's 2012 White Paper (FCO, 2012), although here the proprietors of these assets are ambiguous, suggesting the value accrues to the territories: "The UK Government wishes to ensure that the rich environmental assets of the Overseas Territories, for which they are internationally recognised, are cherished" (Benyon, 2012, p.39). Such framings nevertheless bring the territories into the purview of Parliament and government and signal both the value inherent in spaces and environments that for many years remained low on the UK political agenda, and the UK's role in protecting these assets.

Authors such as de Santo (2019) and Kühnhardt (2019) have noted how powerful state actors use their overseas territories' maritime areas to project geo-political power. De Santo (2019, p.2), for example, explored the "multiple motivations behind designating very large MPAs", as spaces of conservation, "footprint[s] in key strategic locations", and potential areas for resource extraction. Kühnhardt (2019), meanwhile, highlighted President Macron's vision of France and its overseas territories as a 'global archipelago' for research and innovation in environmental protection and maritime security in support of a rules-based global order, while describing the UK's designation of MPAs around territories as "a smart strategic projection of soft power claims" (p. 42). Similar drivers are discernible at times within debates on marine protected areas in Parliament. Lord Selsdon, (2010, 2011, 2012, 2017) [Conservative], for example, spoke of the UK's identity as a maritime nation and the economic and strategic opportunities accruing from Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) around the territories. Labour's Lord West of Spithead also enrolled the territories in a wider conception of UK interests, although here the territories' interests were also raised:

> … our nation, with the overseas territories, controls the largest area of ocean and EEZs of any nation in the world. Has there been any discussion about the protection of those huge areas and the development of their economic potential for the countries themselves and our nation? (2015).

The second expression of power coheres around ideas of standing and international environmental leadership, particularly in relation to marine conservation. For example, Goldsmith argued that establishing extensive marine areas around the territories allows the UK "to show leadership, with or without our international partners" (2014). Similarly, Baroness Bloomfield (2017) [Conservative] argued that: "We are already seen to have a global leadership role in ocean conservation, taking long-term decisions such as creating vast marine reserves around some of our overseas territories". This idea was repeated by government spokesperson Thérèse Coffey when reassuring colleagues during a debate on environmental regulation on leaving the EU in 2017 that "the interests of the United Kingdom in providing global leadership will be well represented" at the International Oceans Conference. In 2017, Andrew Rosindell MP invoked Britain's environmental leadership, noting that through "safeguarding more than 500,000 square km of pristine sub-Antarctic habitat, the UK can reaffirm its standing as a global leader by becoming the only nation in the world to create fully protected marine areas in the Indian, Pacific, Atlantic and Southern oceans". This competitive comparison of the UK's record against those of other states also constructs a spatial imaginary wherein Britain holds an extensive, even universal, reach, arguably evoking associations with Britain's former imperial naval power. Rosindell also noted that: "The UK and its overseas territories combined represent the fifth largest marine estate in the world and have been at the vanguard of global efforts to increase ocean protection through the Blue Belt policy to create the largest marine sanctuaries anywhere on the planet" (2017). This discourse links to power as material possession and the combining of the UK with the overseas territories into one "marine estate" and the identity of "one undivided realm".

The importance placed on the overseas territories as an expression of Britain's environmental leadership was also linked to Britain punching above its weight – a familiar trope that implies the UK retains authority on the international stage despite decline since the end of formal empire, (Colley, 2017). During a 2018 debate on Blue Belt Conservation in South Georgia, MP Zac Goldsmith drew on this discourse while raising the idea that marine protection provides a vehicle for British leadership.

> … a relatively small nation… we are in a good position to take the lead. We are, after all, custodians of the fifth largest marine estate in the world, thanks to our extensive overseas territories, which contain, incidentally, over 94% of the UK's unique biodiversity. They are scattered across the world and home to countless rare and threatened species (Goldsmith, 2018).

This assertion can be read as suggesting that the extent of the overseas territories' marine areas enlarges Britain's global influence and reach. Goldsmith then stated that Blue Belt was "the biggest conservation commitment ever made by any Government ever", "making us world leaders in ocean protection, and it is hard to think of a better illustration of global Britain" (Goldsmith, 2018). The phrase 'global Britain' is often used by Brexit-supporting politicians to signal an international role for the UK after leaving the European Union, which has become a key plank of the Conservative government's policy (Johnson, 2016). The link between the UK overseas territories and this post-Brexit role was made explicit by Defra minister George Eustice in 2018:

There is still much more that we can do to end uncontrolled fishing on the high seas. Our exit from the EU, while not dispensing with the need to build coalitions with EU countries, will enable us to build coalitions with other countries, to project our voice in other parts of the world where we have overseas territories and marine protected areas, and to ensure that we can still continue to deliver wildlife conservation and the conservation of sharks.

Spatial imagery was equally used by Richard Benyon for the Government in 2013 to connect contemporary British international identity and ambition with its imperial past: "a necklace of marine protected areas that can be this country's legacy from our imperial past to the future protection of marine zones" (2013). Such language reverberates both imperialistic nostalgia and support for the contemporary extension of British influence overseas, arguably echoing the 'string of pearls' metaphor used to describe China's investment in maritime facilities and ports in the Indian and Pacific Oceans (Tiezi, 2014). These two main strands of power discourse: material power and power related to previous identities, also suggests two new identities. The first constructs overseas territories as assets providing the UK with an extended geospatial/geopolitical reach within one "one undivided realm", with the UK as sovereign power. The second is that of the UK as a "global power" with this position heavily vested on environmental protection.

Discussion

State identities are complex entities that exist as ensembles of norms, aspirations, and characteristics whose properties are continually contested and evolving, especially during periods of crisis (Doty, 1996; Nayak, 2006). They nevertheless serve the function of helping to define, cohere and communicate the values, goals and ambitions with which political actors wish their state to be associated at particular times and provide moral and practical compasses for, and mechanisms to justify, state actions (Eder, 2009; McCourt, 2011; Steele, 2008). Such identities are constructed and applied across a range of state concerns, including national "values" and – increasingly in recent decades – through the concept of state environmental identities, as states have sought to define their aspirations and credentials in relation to addressing global environmental threats (Duit et al., 2016; Fisher and Freudenburg, 2014; Hausknost, 2020; van Tatenhove, 2016).

Existing research on state identity has focused mainly on the nature and effects of state identities within domestic and international political arenas (Doty, 1993; Medby, 2018; Steele, 2008). However, limited attention has been paid to how states construct their identities with and through their relationships with overseas territories, many of which occupy an ambiguous status internationally and in their relationships with nation states. Our analysis of UK parliamentarians' discussions on environmental protection in the UK's overseas territories provides new vantage points on several dimensions of this relationship and broader processes of state identity-making: the identities states ascribe to their overseas territories; the identities states attach to themselves through these relationships; and how key elements of state identity-making – self-identification, responsibilities and power relations (Daddow and Gaskarth, 2011) – are conceptualised and expressed. The study also has important implications for understandings of governance relations where issues of sovereignty and other agendas – such as environmental protection and the identity of the state itself – become entangled. Deepening understanding of how states construct their relationships with and in respect of their overseas territories thus not only augments theoretical understandings of state identities but also

provides important lessons on the emerging politics of ocean territorialization and environmental governance (Gruby et al., 2016).

More specifically, our analysis explored how elements of the UK's identity have been expressed by UK policy-makers on environmental governance in its offshore territories within the broader contexts of global environmental crises and the existential angsts created by Brexit. The UK overseas territories' species and habitats are recognised as both significant and vulnerable (Churchyard, 2014), yet the overseas territories continue to occupy uncertain positions within UK policymaking, being distant and politically differentiated from the UK but also historically and constitutionally connected in ways that remain subject to debate and, in some cases, legal contestation. As places that many parliamentarians have not visited, the analysis revealed the territories as the object of spatial imaginaries woven from threads of scientific data, historical narrative, anecdote, and images that drew on tropes of the tropical, unspoilt (and sometimes unpopulated) Eden; with less attention paid to the lives, livelihoods, interests and agendas of territories' citizens. The analysis of parliamentary discourses on identity, responsibility and power revealed the construction of multiple and relational identities for the overseas territories. These included their depiction as entities subject to UK legislation and power but also as actors with their own democratic institutions, responsibilities for their environments, and political agency. Simultaneously, they were portrayed as encompassed within UK territory for the purposes of biodiversity accounting, and as environmentally unique and significant, yet vulnerable due to their geographies and limited financial capacities to address major environmental challenges. They were also framed as material assets, strategic locations, and as enabling Britain's projection of soft power through the UK's environmental leadership.

The analysis also revealed considerable plasticity in parliamentarians' understandings and discursive constructions of the UK state's relationship with its overseas territories. Many UK policy-makers, persuaded of the intrinsic value and global significance of biodiversity in the UK territories, appeared genuinely keen to support or enact pro-environmental actions. However, in debates specifically on the overseas territories, ambiguities in the constitutional positioning of the territories led to deeper reflection on the underlying character of these relationships. This included: uncertainty about how to describe the UK's identity as an ostensibly postcolonial, but still sovereign, actor; discussion of the responsibilities associated with these different identities and the extent to which UK power should extend over territories that possess their own constituents, and governments or councils. Two main identities were foregrounded at such times: the UK as a 'continuing sovereign' predicated (albeit not unreflexively) on the constitutional and legal basis of the UK's continued responsibilities towards, and power to act in respect of, the territories' environments; and that of the 'supportive and powerful friend' where the mechanics of UK power were veiled behind ideals of partnership and support for autonomous decision-making by territory administrations. This dual identity suggests a somewhat angst-ridden relationship that lacked consistency in how to conceptualise and articulate colonial legacies.

Alternative identities were revealed, however, when the territories featured in discussions on environmental issues but where the territories were not primary topics of debate. In these instances, the territories were often constructed in more instrumental ways, as environmental assets within the UK's marine estate and 'undivided realm' that articulated an enlarged view of the UK state's physical extent (Harmer, 2018) and environmental ambitions. Hesitancy nevertheless remained about claiming offshore spaces explicitly and some parliamentarians were careful to promote notions of state custodianship and temporary and provisional responsibilities for assets that rightly belong to others. The assumption in this

contingent arrangement was that the rights and interests of territory citizens are recognised or that stewardship is carried out on behalf of a global community. However, the rights, livelihoods, expertise, experiences, and actions of overseas territory citizens in respect of the environment were seldom raised in the debates analysed which discussed the overseas territories' environments collectively. What is clear in all regards, however, is that the state's identity in relation to the overseas territories displayed shape-shifting qualities – at times enlarged and expansive, at others appearing more circumscribed and cautious – perhaps in response to anticipated critique of the UK's use of its territories to pursue national interests.

The idea of the UK treating the territories as environmental assets equally contained synergies with a third main discursive strand that used the overseas territories in order to assert the UK's enduring significance as an international environmental actor post-Brexit. Here, the territories' environments were discussed more as vehicles for achieving wider biodiversity and marine protection agendas and for promoting the UK's environmental leadership credentials. These identities, particularly where they involved images of the UK's expanded global geopolitical reach, also became entangled within the UK's attempts to define its broader identity in the world – as global Britain – as it debated leaving, and ultimately exited, the European Union.

In identifying the various strands of this discourse complex, the study provides insights into the ways UK parliamentarians have sought to make sense of the UK's post-Brexit identity and its responsibilities towards, and power relations with, the overseas territories. Far removed from Hobbes' conception of the state as a Leviathan with uniform and hegemonic authority, the discourse analysis reveals state actors drawing flexibly on a range of imaginaries to define the overseas territories as both part of, and as partners to, the UK. In so doing the imaginary of the UK state itself may be seen as shape-shifting, with state actors defining the UK's own identity through its relations with the overseas territories and drawing on multiple personas that made different assumptions about the geographical scope and extent of the UK's powers and responsibilities. What is particularly interesting is the spatial expansion and retraction involved in the different constructions of selfhood that link to multifaceted expressions of the nature, reach and acceptability of sovereign power to internal and external audiences. This mutability of shape, form and tone is arguably enabled by the liminal position of the territories and their ambiguous identity, both of which enable an intriguing elasticity in the spatial and political imaginaries articulated by state agents, as their discourses shift the loci and spatial scale of power, responsibility and polity from that of the territorial sovereign state, to that of colonial continuances – the undivided realm - and, at times, to allusions to the interests of a broader global commons.

Conclusion

The image by artist Naomi Hart in <u>Figure 1</u> below captures the deep connections that exist between the UK and its overseas territories by juxtaposing a King Penguin from the South Atlantic with the portcullis of the UK Houses of Parliament in London. Our analysis has explored the ongoing entanglements that exist between environmental issues in the overseas territories and state institutions and discourses. It underscores the profound effect of debates and decisions taken in the UK Parliament on the overseas territories – and their human and non-human inhabitants – while also highlighting how the UK's own identity, reputation and credentials as a global leader on environmental issues may depend, in part, on outcomes achieved thousands of kilometres away.

This article has built on scholarship on state identity-making and state environmental identities by exploring UK parliamentary debates on environmental protection in Britain's fourteen overseas territories. It identified how the territories' environments have been enrolled in the production of multiple state identities, representing differing spatial imaginaries of the UK, its power and responsibilities at a time of environmental crisis, and the search to define the UK's post-Brexit status and roles. This shape-shifting capacity underscores how states may utilise and present a multiplicity of personas in response to different circumstances and the expectations and responses of different interlocutors and audiences. This mutability is particularly noticeable where uncertainty and ambiguity exist around the ethics, power relations and responsibilities involved in governing overseas territories in an ostensibly post-colonial era.

Figure 1: King Penguin and the UK Houses of Parliament Portcullis - lime juice, indigo and seawater. Artwork by Naomi Hart, 2019. Reproduced with permission.

In so doing, the research draws attention to the importance of future research to understand how these state identities, and the ways in which they position and characterise the overseas territories, are received, supported or contested within the overseas territories, and their implications for environmental governance. UK state identity constructions in which environmental leadership and environmental credentials are foregrounded and, to a significant extent, are built on the ecological importance of overseas territory environments suggests a

likely ongoing policy emphasis on marine and terrestrial conservation and protection in these areas. This, in turn, indicates the possibility of an ongoing deeper and wider engagement between the UK government (and its relevant agencies) and governments, councils, environmental agencies and non-state actors in the overseas territories on these issues. The character of this engagement, the power relations held and enacted within these relations, and the resulting outcomes and impacts on the territories and on their relationships with the UK warrant further scrutiny and discussion within relevant political institutions, by academics, and among other stakeholders and citizens. The analysis presented in this article also suggests the importance of research on state identity-making in other types of spaces or sites where state sovereignty may be uneven and contested (Mountz, 2011) and where state processes of territorialisation operate beyond or on the margins of *terra firma* (Peters et al., 2018).

Acknowledgements

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