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## **The Discovery of Ash Dieback in the UK: The Making of a Focusing Event**

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### **Abstract**

Why did the identification of ‘Ash Dieback’ (*Chalara Fraxinea*) in 2012 in the UK catch the national media, public and political zeitgeist, and lead to policy changes, in a way that no other contemporary tree pest or pathogen outbreak has? The identification of Ash Dieback in the UK is conceptualised as a successful ‘focusing event’ and the ways in which it was socially constructed by the media, stakeholders and the government are analysed. National newspaper coverage contributed to the way that the disease was understood and was significant in driving the political response. Ash Dieback’s focal power derived from the perceived scale and nature of its impact; the initial attribution of blame on government; the ‘war-like’ response from the government; and Ash’s status as a threatened ‘native’ tree. The Ash Dieback focusing event has increased the salience of plant health issues amongst policymakers, the public and conservation organisations in the UK.

### **Key words**

Ash Dieback; tree disease; focusing events; plant health

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### **Disclosure statement**

I have no financial interest or benefit arising from the direct applications of this research.

## The discovery of ash die-back in the UK: The Making of a Focusing Event

### **Introduction**

The media, public and political response to the identification of ‘Ash Dieback’ (ADB) in the UK in 2012 was unprecedented for a contemporary tree disease or pest outbreak. The sustained national media coverage carried apocalyptic warnings of the end of the ash tree in the UK and a concerned public were encouraged to identify affected trees. The Forestry Commission conducted a UK-wide survey of ash trees in four days, the most rapid in its history. Central government entered ‘crisis’ mode with Owen Paterson, the Secretary of State for the Department for the Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs (Defra), calling two ‘COBR’ (Cabinet Office Briefing Room)<sup>1</sup> emergency meetings to discuss ADB.

The event catalysed new policy and governance structures in the policy domain of plant health, and generally raised media and public awareness of the issue. Discussion of the risk of new introductions of diseases and pests posed by the global market in trees and plants, of which very large numbers are imported into the UK, had been limited to concerned scientists working in the field of plant pathology (see Brasier 2008) and some debate within the horticultural sector (RHS, 2008). It had never been articulated within the broader conservation movement in the UK as a particular concern. Indeed, ADB shone a spotlight on the practices of woodland NGOs who had been importing trees for new plantings, and led the Woodland Trust (WT) to set up the first campaign on the issue of tree diseases (WT, 2012).

ADB is a fungal disease of the tree species *Fraxinus excelsior* and is caused by the ascomycete *Hymenoscyphus pseudoalbidus* and its anamorph *Chalara fraxinea* (Pautasso, *et al* 2013). It causes leaf loss and crown dieback, and is usually fatal (FC, 2014). Whilst older ash trees can take several years to die following infection, rapid mortality is frequently seen on tree saplings between 2 and 10 years old (FR, 2012). The disease was first noted in Poland in the 1990s and has subsequently spread to other countries in Europe. ADB is now believed to have been present in the UK for a number of years before it was first confirmed in

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<sup>1</sup> The UK government’s emergency committee, which is convened during national crisis, is known as ‘COBR’ which stands for the ‘Cabinet Office Briefing Room’ where it meets. Its composition depends on the issue being discussed.

February 2012 on infected trees sent from the Netherlands to a nursery in Buckinghamshire. By July 2014 there were 666 confirmed findings; 26 in nursery sites, 355 in newly planted sites and 285 in established woodlands in the wider environment (FC, 2014).

Nevertheless, the scale of the future impact is uncertain (Patusso *et al.* 2013), and it is not clear that ADB is the tree pathogen or pest that currently poses the greatest threat to the UK's trees. The Forestry Commission (2014a) lists 16 'top tree pests and diseases' currently present, but the formal identification of these other threats failed to have any significant impacts in the national media or biosecurity policy. Yet, their effects, and the steps taken to manage these outbreaks, are not insignificant in terms of ecological impacts and economic cost.<sup>2</sup>

Here, I ask why did the identification of ADB Dieback catch the national media, public and political zeitgeist, and lead to policy changes in the Plant Health domain, in a way that no other contemporary outbreak has? I start from the premise that the current domain of plant health contains 'potential focusing events' (Birkland 1997). I conceptualise the identification of ADB in the UK as a successful 'focusing event'. After reviewing this literature, I draw on the social constructivist tradition to develop, through a narrative analysis of newspaper articles and semi-structured interviews, an analysis that looks at the ways in which the focusing event itself was discursively constructed by the media, stakeholders and government.

### **Agenda-setting and focusing events**

Scholars of agenda-setting have sought to 'understand why some subjects become prominent on the policy agenda and others do not' (Kingdon, 1995, p3). There is now an extensive literature on agenda-setting (see Pralle, 2009 for a review). Two of the most important theoretical approaches were developed in the US context: Kingdon's (1995) multiple streams

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<sup>2</sup> Between 2009 and October 2013 about 16,000 hectares of Japanese larch trees in the UK had been felled or were under notice to be felled due to *Phytophthora ramorum* infection (FC, 2014b). Oak Processionary Moth poses a threat to both oak trees and human health and was first identified in London in 2006. It continues to be actively managed and the cost for government in 2013 was estimated at £1.15million (OPM Advisory Group, 2014). Acute Oak Decline is on the increase and can kill affected mature oak trees within 4 to 5 years of the onset of symptoms (FC, 2014c). Asian Longhorn Beetle kills species of broadleaved trees in countries where it has become established: an outbreak in Kent in 2012 appears to have been successfully controlled, but the management involved the removal of 2166 trees (FC, 2014d).

model looks at how problems get noticed and how issues move onto decision agendas, whilst the ‘punctuated equilibrium’ model (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; 2005) focuses on patterns of agenda stability and change and the factors that drive these. Whilst these US models have now been applied to policy contexts across Europe, there is still a lack of knowledge about agenda-setting in UK politics (Carter and Jacobs, 2010)

Focusing events form part of Kingdon’s (1995) multiple streams theory. Kingdon notes that problems ‘need a little push’ to get government attention, ‘which is sometimes provided by a focusing event like a crisis or a disaster’ (1995, p96). There is a significant literature providing empirical analysis of focusing events (Bishop, 2014; Vane and Kolvas, 2013, Jensen 2011, Leiserowitz, 2011). Birkland has developed the theoretical aspects in a series of publications (1997; 1998; 2004; 2009). His description of *potential* focusing events<sup>3</sup> attempts to avoid Kingdon’s ‘post hoc characterisations of the importance of events in agenda change’ (Birkland, 1997 p22). A ‘potential focusing event’ is defined as

‘an event that is sudden; relatively uncommon; can be reasonably defined as harmful or revealing the possibility to potentially greater future harms; has harms that are concentrated in a particular geographical area or community of interest; and that is known to policy makers and the public simultaneously’ (Birkland 1997, p22).

Birkland defines focusing events so that policy domains in which such as events are likely to be important can be identified, avoiding simply retrospectively choosing such events. His framework thus involves selecting all events within a domain over a number of years to understand which of these are or not focal. He outlines two phases over which focusing event politics proceeds: firstly, the news media responds immediately to the event, and secondly, there is a longer-term reaction by those active in policymaking (Birkland, 1997). Here, my focus is largely on the first phase, with detailed consideration of the role that the media played. Empirical analysis of focusing events has found a significant role for the media (Carter and Jacobs, 2013; Vane and Kalvas 2013). Birkland (1998) suggests that major events can reach the political agenda without group promotion if the coverage by the media is so

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<sup>3</sup> However in Birkland 1998 the word potential is left out without explanation for the difference with Birkland (1997), although the definition and the theoretical position appear the same.

large that it cannot be ignored by policymakers or the public. Wolfe *et al.* (2013) argue that focusing events can shift the attention of the media onto new or previously unattended issues, and the news coverage can in turn focus the attention of the government and the public, and carve out ‘agenda space’.

### **Social Constructivist Approach**

Birkland’s perspective and empirical analysis uses quantitative methods, but he touches on the role of social construction in agenda-setting stating that from this perspective problems ‘are socially constructed through the use of symbols, beliefs and facts to tell the story of how conditions become problems’ (Birkland, 1997, p15). In the case of focusing events, he argues that how harmful or important accidents are seen to be is not just about empirical observation but is also a process of social construction. Earthquakes, hurricanes and oil spills ‘need far less interpretation by participants, than do nuclear power plants accidents... [that] are invisible [...] and often difficult to characterise as accidents at all’ (p.129). This aside, it appears that there is currently no work looking explicitly at the social construction of focusing events.

Narrative analysis is an analytical perspective within social constructivist approaches: ‘human agency and imagination determine what gets included and excluded in narratisation, how events are plotted, and what they are supposed to mean’ (Riessman, 1993, p2). Elliott (2006) identifies three key features of narratives: they are chronological in that they are representations of a sequence of events; they are meaningful; and they are social in that they are made for a specific audience. An excellent review of poststructuralist narrative approaches in public policy is provided by Jones and McBeth (2010).<sup>4</sup> In reviewing the key scholars (Hajer 1995, Fischer 2003, Roe 1994, Stone 2002), they report that ‘narratives occupy an epistemologically privileged position in making sense of a socially constructed world’ (Jones and McBeth, 2010, p334). Stone (2002) provides a framework for understanding symbolic representation in the definition of policy problems. One aspect is the identification of the narrative structure: ‘stories with a beginning, a middle and an end, involving some change or transformation’ (Stone; 2002, p138). These policy stories use many literary and rhetorical devices.

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<sup>4</sup> They go on to outline the Narrative Policy framework as a quantitative, structuralist and positivist approach to the study of policy narratives.

In the next section I outline how I use narrative analysis as a methodological approach to examining the social construction of the ADB outbreak as a focusing event.

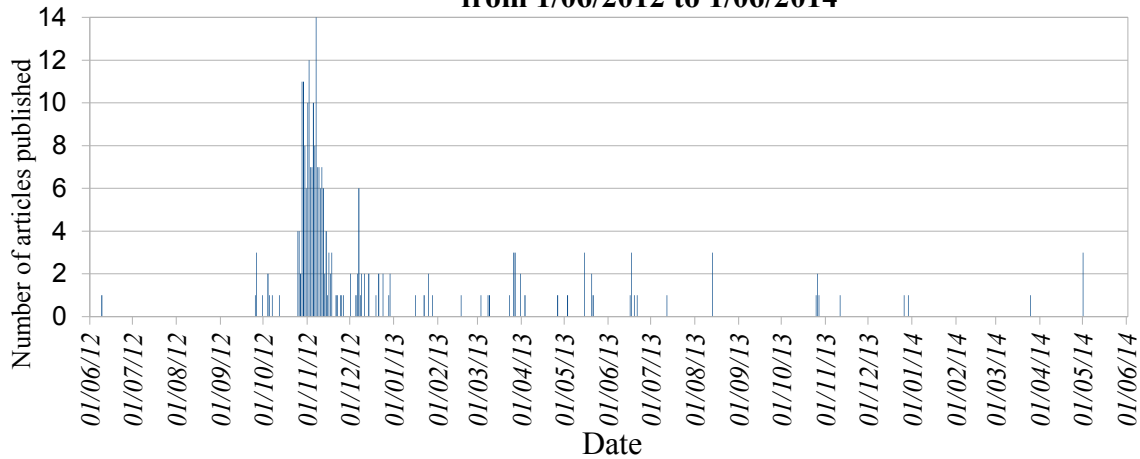
### **Methodology**

The object of investigation in narrative analysis is the story itself (Reissman, 1993). I use two key sources of data: media reports and a series of 10 semi-structured interviews.

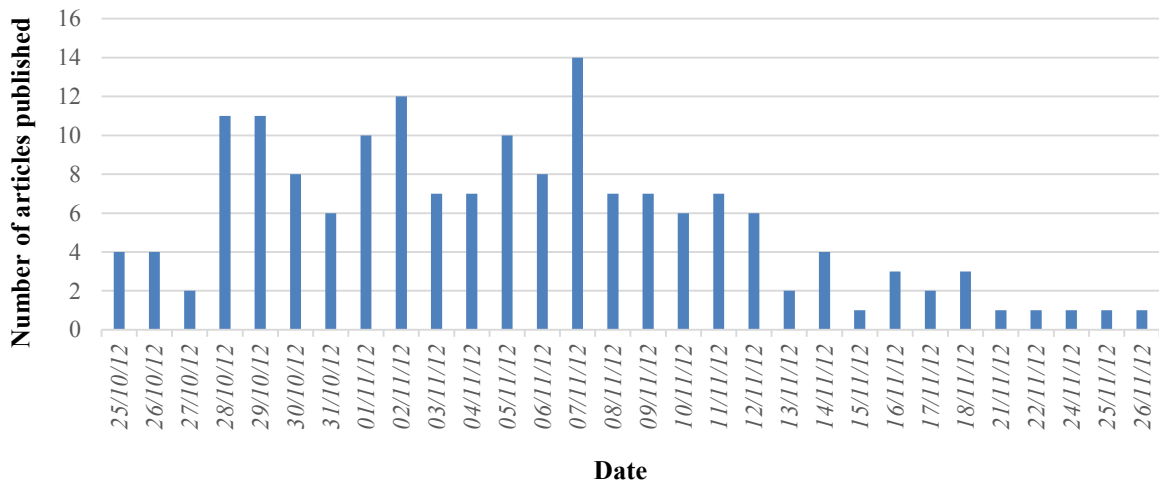
The ADB outbreak was covered by a range of news media. However, to ensure a manageable sample my focus here is on the national broadsheet daily and Sunday newspapers. Using the LexusNexis database, the search terms for the data were set from the period 9 June 2012 (when coverage of ADB began) to 30 May 2014. The search terms were set to ‘disease’ and ‘tree’ anywhere in the article, and ‘ash’ in the headline. This returned 253 relevant articles.

Graphs showing the frequency of media reporting was produced (see Figures 1 and 2). An initial reading of these articles enabled four chronological phases of the outbreak to be identified when the nature of the coverage of the story shifted from the discussion of one sets of issues or framing into another (see the next section). These phases were remarkably consistent across the different newspapers analysed and highlighted the role that stakeholder and government press releases had played in the way the narrative unfolded. This familiarity with the nature and timing of the media narrative was used to write an interview schedule for the semi-structured interviews. Once the interviews were completed, I returned to the media reports for second phase of thematic analysis (see below) and corroborating, or otherwise, issues raised in the interviews. A content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) of key discursive devices identified by the interviewees was also carried out.

**Figure 1. Coverage of 'Ash Dieback' in UK Broadsheet newspapers from 1/06/2012 to 1/06/2014**



**Figure 2. Coverage of 'Ash Dieback' in UK Broadsheet newspapers from 25/10/12 to 26/11/12**



The methodological approach to interviews in narrative analysis is to analyse the ‘informants’ story, questioning how it is put together and the cultural and linguistic resources it uses (Reissman, 1993). Semi-structured interviews were carried out with individuals who had been involved in the ADB outbreak. They remain anonymous but they include civil servants, a journalist, and representatives of non-governmental organisations and trade bodies. I used a targeted sampling method (Newing, 2011). The initial long list of potential interviewees was compiled from a preliminary review of media reports and policy documents. This selection was confirmed and expanded using a ‘snow-balling method’ or process of chain referral (Newing, 2011). The number of interviews was limited by the willingness of individuals to participate given the sensitive and political nature of the issue. Nevertheless, interviews were carried out with 10 individuals representing a range of organisations and interests. Thematic



analysis was completed. The themes highlight important elements of the data in relation to the research question and illuminate patterned responses or meanings within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A deductive approach was used as aspects of the transcript relevant to answering the pre-defined research questions were coded. Interviewees were asked to tell the story of the ADB outbreak as they experienced it, and to discuss why they thought ADB had caused such interest. These codes from across all the interview transcripts were then collated into themes; these were chronologically ordered to correspond to the four phases of the ADB outbreak presented in the following sections.

### **The Ash Dieback Outbreak**

The analysis that follows is divided into four phases. Each of these is distinct in the way that the outbreak is being constructed. Together these phases represent an overall narrative with each phase responding to the preceding one. In the first phase, ADB was ‘discovered’ and the media represented it as a serious threat, relying on information from the Woodland Trust (WT). Blame was squarely directed at the government. In the second phase, ADB was discovered in the wider environment and media coverage peaked. The observation that ADB was also spread by the wind rather than solely by imports was used by the government to deflect responsibility. In the third phase, the government took back control of the framing of the event through the performance of a large survey and two COBR meetings. In the fourth phase, there was a realisation that it was too late to eradicate ADB, and that identifying resistant trees would be the way forward.

#### *Phase one: The call for government to ban imports*

Figure 1 shows the newspaper coverage of ash dieback for the two years from June 2012 which began on 9 June 2012 in a report that confirmed findings on a nursery in Buckinghamshire. The start of the intense period of coverage began on 25 September 2012, following a press release from the WT (WT, 2012a) calling on the UK government to ban the import of ash trees. Significantly, the specific content and general discourse of this press release framed the media’s reporting of the issue in the period up to 30 September.

The WT press release (WT 2012a) provided three important discursive devices that increased the sense of danger that ADB posed, which for the media appeared as ‘apocalyptic warnings’ (Interviewee A). The first was to compare the ADB outbreak with the Dutch Elm Disease outbreak of the 1970s, which led to the demise of over 28 million elms. It has remained an

important reference point in the public imagination (Tomlinson and Potter 2010). For the media this ‘was such a powerful line’ (Interviewee A); there were 131 references to ‘Dutch Elm Disease’ in the newspaper coverage.

The second and third discursive devices were statistics that were widely quoted in the newspapers. Subsequently they were both shown to be inaccurate and exaggerated the potential risk posed by ADB to the UK. The first is a statistic about the impact of the disease in Denmark, to the effect that 90% of ash trees in Denmark had been *killed* by ADB. There were 42 references to this statistic in the broadsheet coverage. At least one of the origins of the statistic is the WT press release (2012a) that states that ‘90 per cent of ash trees in Denmark having been lost in seven years’. Several of the interviewees discussed the error with this statistic in that 90% of trees have been affected by ash die-back in Denmark, but not 90% killed:

“There was all this nonsense about 90% of trees had died in Denmark...which was wrong – 90% of trees had got infected, and a lot had got felled, but they hadn’t necessarily died” (Interviewee B).

*The Guardian* newspaper subsequently published a correction to their articles (Hickman, 2012) to this affect. Whether it was just down to “cut and paste” journalism (Interviewee A) or not, the (mis)use of this statistic contributed to the sense of scale of damage that ADB might cause.

The second ‘mistaken’ statistic in the coverage was that “It is estimated that 30% of the UK wooded landscape is made up of ash which is found across woodlands, parks and hedgerows” (WT, 2012a). This statistic was used in the WT press release and was repeated, sometimes with reference to the wooded landscape and sometimes just to woodlands (7 occurrences). There was also frequent reference to the loss of a third of UK trees or woodland (33 occurrences). However, this appears to be an exaggeration: The Joint Nature Conservation Committee (Mitchell *et al* 2014, p16) reports estimates that the proportion of ash in woodland ranges from 1.2% in Scotland up to 10.2% in Southern England. Kirby (2013) suggests that ‘Reports that ash makes up a third of all woodland or 30% of woods have occurred but may be a misinterpretation that it is the third commonest broadleaved tree in Britain’. Later newspaper coverage used this statistic correctly.

The WT press release firmly placed responsibility for responding to the outbreak with government, calling on it ‘to put in place an immediate and compulsory ban on imported ash before it’s too late’ (WT, 2012a). This was repeated in the newspapers and there was a focus on the problem with imports:

“An immediate ban must be imposed on them in a bid to protect our ash trees from this foreign invader.” (The Sunday Times, September 30<sup>th</sup> 2012 Editorial).

The WT seems actively to have taken discursive control of the way the beginning of the outbreak was reported. With the discovery of ADB on nursery stock, the WT began to debate internally about the issue. It was decided that something that was immediate and achievable was to ask for the import ban, with lots of media comment and writing to government:

“[...] within about three weeks, that ban had been announced and come into effect... we would have been one of a growing number of voices and we went on the front-foot with it” (Interviewee C).

Situating responsibility for the outbreak with government is interesting because blame could have been laid upon those responsible for importing into the UK from the EU since 2003 a reported 5.2 million ash plants (FR, 2012), some of which were infected with ADB. One journalist argued that “everyone likes to kick the government” and that the government messing up is a “bigger story” than other groups such as the horticultural industry (Interviewee A). Indeed, criticism of the importing nurseries, or their representatives, the Horticultural Trade Association (HTA) is absent from the media coverage. However, the HTA was also on the front-foot in engaging with the media coverage of the story and their press release of 18 September 2012 (HTA, 2012) announced that it was calling on its members to abide by a voluntary moratorium on importing ash for planting in the UK. Representatives of the horticultural trade acknowledge that their media work at the time

“was to make sure that the blame wasn’t going to just land on the trade and to protect the industry during that time, but [also] out of a genuine concern to make sure that these things should be avoided in the future, and potentially could be” (Interviewee F).

The HTA press release (HTA, 2012) and the newspaper coverage at this point, and again later at the end of October, made reference to contact between the HTA and the Forestry Commission in 2009, when the HTA reported their concerns in a letter about the potential

impact of ADB if it was to reach the UK, following some of its members seeing the effects of the disease in Denmark. This letter requested that a ban be imposed on imports of ash trees. However, the government responded that because the organism that was believed to be the cause of ADB was already present in the UK, it would not be possible to initiate an emergency response under the EU Plant Health Directive, which allows Member States to take action to prevent the entry and spread of diseases on their territory. In terms of the status of the scientific understanding of the disease at the time, this was a legally correct response. Plant pathologists' understanding of the causes of *C. fraxinea* later changed, with the publication of research (Queloz *et al.* 2010) that identified the causal agent of *C. fraxinea* as a new species, not known to be already present in the UK. Thus it is the delay between this information being known and the 'discovery' of ADB in the nurseries in February 2012 that raises more significant issues about the actions of government, but this was not a focus of reporting at the time.

Another interviewee observed that there was a larger group of stakeholders who were implicated in the spread of ADB because:

“...unbeknown, they'd been bringing in imported plants, and so I think everyone felt a little bit taken aback at what had been happening, that people hadn't known it was happening, and ditto the HTA, even although...they wrote the 2009 letter, they were also a little bit vulnerable to criticism” (Interviewee D).

The WT does acknowledge the role that it had been playing:

“We weren't aware of the trade in people taking UK provenance seed, exporting it abroad, growing it on in bulk in Holland and Europe, and re-importing it.[...we basically said we are going to completely reconstruct the way that we deal with nursery suppliers on procuring both UK provenance seed and making sure that the seed is also UK grown. So that was the bit that had not worked from our point of view, and we had to hold our hands up and say, sorry, we got that wrong” (Interviewee C).

It has since stated in its press releases that it has ceased to stop such imports (WT, 2012a; WT 2012b).

On 4 October, the government appeared to respond to the media pressure by announcing that it was considering banning imports and was launching a consultation on it. (Defra, 2012). There was no attempt to challenge the framing of the problem by the WT and the media.

*Phase two: Ash dieback in the wider environment and the importance of the wind*

The media coverage stopped between 12 and 25 October. However for those in the Forestry Commission responding to the disease behind the scenes, there was a ‘game-changer’ (Interviewee B) moment during this period with the identification of ADB in the wider environment. Four sites in Norfolk and Suffolk were confirmed, using DNA analysis, to have the disease on 17 October. A three-week survey by the Forestry Commission of woodlands in East Anglia began on 22 October.

The public announcement that the disease had been ‘found’ for the first time in mature woodlands as opposed to nurseries or woodland plantings is important. It was announced in a Forestry Commission press release on 24 October (FC, 2012) that it had been found in East Anglia. On the same day the WT (2012c) announced additional outbreaks in the wild in Suffolk. A third press release came from the Norfolk Wildlife Trust confirming ADB in the wider environment (WT, 2012). At this point, in hindsight, Interviewee B reported that it was because of these almost simultaneous press releases that ‘the national press latched onto it’. The media coverage increased, and daily coverage continued throughout November (see Figure 2). Many interviewees reported that the media interest in a tree disease was unprecedented:

“I’ve never had anything which... the media had such an interest in as that... when I think how hard we work on some things to try and get media interest... and they suddenly, this on, we were fighting it off!” (Interviewee F).

Interviewees were asked why there had been such a media response to and public interest in this particular disease when other outbreaks had received so little interest. There was a perception that because *P.ramorum* affects a conifer that isn’t ‘native’ there was not the media interest, although the impacts are much worse than for ADB (Interviewee G). Whilst this common view offers some insight into the lack of interest in *P. ramorum*, it does not help to explain the apparent lack of interest in diseases and pests affecting another ‘native’, the oak.

One consequence of the identification of ADB in the wider environment was, as the newspapers argued, that the anticipated ban on imports might not be effective. For example;

“A ban on imports of ash trees could be too late to stop a deadly fungus wiping out vast areas of woodland, experts have warned” (Gray, 2012).

The anticipated ban on imports was announced by Paterson on 29 October (Defra, 2012a). He stated his belief at this point that the spread of the disease could be stopped: “By working together we can protect our native trees from this devastating disease.”

However, another shift in the framing began to emerge with the observation that it might have been blown in from the continent to the eastern areas of the UK, and thus that the cause might be ‘natural’. From this point, the government began to take back some discursive control of the outbreak. It was able to deflect some of the criticism it was facing over not preventing imports. Its position was reported in the newspapers:

“He [Paterson] defended the government by suggesting the outbreak in East Anglia could have resulted from spores being carried naturally into the UK."I think the real concern is that, geographically, it looks like the disease may have arrived into the wild on the wind," he said” (McVeigh, 2012).

Amongst the interviewees there was general consensus that the two pathways both contributed to the arrival of ADB. The map of confirmed infections (4 August 2014) shows the majority of sites in the wider environment are along the eastern parts of England and Scotland (see FC, 2014). However, the map also shows that sites planted with imports are distributed throughout the UK. One interviewee thus concluded that:

“...Had there not been imports we would not have spread it rapidly around the country and we could have isolated it to the areas where we felt it had blown in...What imports did is it... spread it across the whole country and therefore has made it impossible to control” (Interviewee F).

The debate around the different pathways of entry had important consequences, as Interviewee D noted:

“...in terms of political perception, and media and so on, that was absolutely key and it was quite interesting, politically...as to whether it had come in on nasty foreign plants or whether it had been blown in on the wind”.

However, it could be argued that the identification of this ‘natural’ pathway does not remove the need for countries with the pathogen nevertheless to be proactive in management, and attempt to reduce the rate of spread to other countries.

*Phase three: The government takes action*

It is understood that the Prime Minister became directly involved with ADB from 31 October and instructed Paterson ‘to sort the thing out’ (interviewees). From that Wednesday, there was another discursive shift in the framing - ‘war was declared’ and the FC was deemed to be ‘on a battle footing’. Paterson convened the first COBR emergency committee meeting on 2 November to discuss ADB, an unprecedented event for a matter of plant health (Defra, 2012b). Another interviewee described the situation in Defra:

“...I used to go into Defra and there was literally... all the paraphernalia and sort of language of a crisis – daily bulletin boards, daily briefings... red alert, black alert... You’d go in the office there and it was like going onto a war footing – it was amazing!” (Interviewee C).

Why was the issue escalated to a COBR meeting and this apparent level of urgency? The Defra press release quotes Paterson as saying “The fact that we had a COBR meeting shows how seriously the government is taking the threat of this disease” (Defra, 2012b). It was observed amongst the interviewees that the very high level of media interest led to the need for a serious political response; the government’s “response only really kicked in when it hit the headlines” (Interviewee F). Some interviewees believed government remembered the political fall-out over the intended sale of the public forests and didn’t want a repeat with another tree issue. Others thought that it was less a reaction to a specific past event, but “the need to be seen to be doing something was quite important” (Interviewee D).

Following the meeting, on the same day, Patterson announced a country-wide survey of the distribution of ADB (Defra, 2012b). According to one interviewee,

“... [FC] Director General came out of that meeting instructing the FC that, as of that Friday ... the whole of Great Britain had to be surveyed at four random spots per 10 kilometres square by the following Tuesday lunchtime. [...] We had, well, four and a half days, including the weekend, to survey the whole of GB...” (Interviewee B).

As a consequence the FC had to start asking for volunteers from the rest of the ‘Defra family’ to work over the weekend and join in the surveying. This survey was an unprecedented event: “...not to my knowledge had the FC as a whole organisation been put onto one single operation like this before...the focus shifted in total” (Interviewee E).

Some of the interviewees reflected on whether it was really necessary to do the survey at that rate of urgency. Some felt that there was no reason beyond the political imperative for the government needing to be seen to be taking urgent action, and that a longer time-frame of a several weeks would have been fine. A different perspective (Interviewee E) suggested that it did provide some important information about the seat of the disease and where geographically the leading edge was, which would have been useful in the context of zoning the country for any future management strategy.

The government framed it as an information collecting exercise that would allow the government to better target its efforts, but the identification of widespread infection in woodland in coastal areas, due to the wind spread, was anticipated (Defra, 2012b). Nevertheless, the tone was still optimistic that the disease could be controlled. Paterson also announced that he would hold a stakeholder summit, as previously called for by the WT.

Three other policy developments at this stage were important. First was the setting up of a new ‘Chalara Core Stakeholder Group’ that included representatives of Industry and NGOs:

“... they summoned this thing called the Chalara Action Group [to...] bring some external expertise to the table to help DEFRA through the crisis phase, as they saw it at the beginning” (Interviewee H).

There was a genuine belief amongst the interviewees involved that this was a good exercise in stakeholder engagement:”

“it was very small group, very focused, a group that represents a wide, lot of, interests, collectively, and it was a good process and Defra... they managed it very well actually” (Interviewee I).

They had input into two policy reports; the ‘Interim Chalara Control Plan’ (Defra, 2012c) and the ‘Chalara Management Plan’ (Defra, 2013).

With a broader remit, Paterson asked Defra's Chief Scientific Adviser to convene a ‘Tree Health and Plant Biosecurity Expert Taskforce’. It was asked “to draw on and review the



evidence to provide recommendations to identify risks to the UK from tree pests and pathogens and on the steps necessary to prepare for and deal with outbreaks” (Defra, 2012d). The other significant change in the governance of tree biosecurity was the transfer of the plant health policy team that was located in The Food and Environment Research Agency (Fera), to Defra on 31 December 2013, as well as the UK Chief Plant Health Officer, in recognition of ‘the need to bring plant health policy closer to the heart of government’ (2012c).

#### *Phase four: From eradication to resistant trees*

In the fourth phase, the discourse changed again with the growing acknowledgement that it might not be possible to eradicate the disease. This sentiment, articulated by the UK’s Chief Plant Health Officer was reported on 5 November (McCarthy, 2012; Gray 2012a). At the same time, a new policy focus on resistant trees emerges. The Defra press release of 9 November (Defra, 2012e) quotes Paterson:

“The scientific advice is that it won’t be possible to eradicate this disease now that we have discovered it in mature trees in Great Britain [...] If we can slow its spread and minimise its impact, we will gain time to find those trees with genetic resistance to the disease and to restructure our woodlands to make them more resilient.”

The Forestry Commission and Defra have funded a screening trial to identify resistance in UK ash trees. Trial sites will be monitored and any saplings showing resistance to ADB will be used for future breeding programmes (FC, 2014e).

## **Discussion**

I began by asking why ADB became a successful focusing event when other pest and disease outbreaks did not. The preceding analysis has highlighted that ADB’s focal power derived from the ways in which it was socially constructed.

The first aspect was the perceived severe nature of its impact, which was of interest to the media. The national media coverage of ADB contributed to the narrative through which the disease was understood and was a significant factor in driving the political response. ‘News values’ are described as ‘the criteria employed by journalists to measure and therefore to judge the ‘newsworthiness’ of events’ (Richardson, 2007, p91). Within academic circles there is little consensus as to a definitive list or the order of this list (see Richardson 2007 for an

overview) but the 'impact' or the 'magnitude' is a common factor, (Lansen and Stephens, 2007, Harcup and O'Neil 2001, Galtung and Ruge 1965). The three discursive devices identified appear to assist the 'newsworthiness' of this event.

Stone (2002) focuses on the importance of numbers in policy analysis; a common way to define a policy problem is to measure it, and policy discussion often start with a recitation of numbers that purport to show the size of the problem. The WT provided the statistics through which the ADB problem was initially understood. Miller and Riechart's (2000) analysis is useful in understanding the power of these figures; they argue that whilst journalistic norms stress values such as objectivity and fairness, this does not prevent journalists accepting 'facts' from a source such as a stakeholder. Given that news often comes from an unexpected event, the first journalist who covers it may have little expertise or time to gather background information, and may be reliant on sources to provide the initial briefings and to set expectations. These briefings can then be important in framing the early news coverage.

A second related moment in the ADB outbreak that was significant in its focal power was when it was discovered that the disease had 'spread' into the 'wild' and was no longer confined to nurseries and recent planting sites. The announcement by stakeholders through simultaneous press releases re-engaged the media as the perceived magnitude and impact of the disease was once again emphasised

The third aspect of ADB's focal power was the initial attribution of blame on the government at the early stages of the outbreak. This can also be understand in relation to news values; Harcup and O'Neil (2001) argue that reference to the power elite is the top news value, as suggested by the comments from the journalist interviewed. This framing of responsibility being with the government was reinforced by the other stakeholders.

At this stage we can see the creation of a 'causal story' (Stone, 2002) in which the situation is seen as inadvertently caused by human actions. However, this construction of the problem did not last long with the emergence of evidence that the cause might not have been government failure, but an act of 'nature' with the Chalara spores carried in on the wind. Stone's (2002) analysis is useful here to show how political actors strategically represent stories by constructing them as different types of causal stories; here we see a shift from an unintentional introduction of the disease through imports to aa 'natural' cause, shifting the responsibility away from the government.

It is here that the fourth aspect of the ADB outbreak that contributed to its focal power can be identified. However, this one was not constructed by the media but by government, who reconstructed the outbreak as a 'war', with the government 'doing battle' against the disease. Military metaphors have been recognised as playing a role in policy processes. They can be an effective way to convey seriousness of purpose and to create support for policies as it may be traitorous not to support the policy (Cohen, 2011, Stone 2002).

The spectacle of COBRA and the survey were important factors in the government finally taking control of the ADB narrative. Stone (2002, p168) argues that 'to call for a measurement or survey of something is to take the first step in promoting change'; 'counting is political' (2002, p179) and numbers can be used to tell stories. One of the consequences of recording the presence of ADB over a widespread area was to support the narrative that it would not be possible to eradicate the disease and the focus would be on finding resistant trees.

The final aspect of ADB that was important was ash's status as a threatened 'native' tree. The cultural proximity of a story is an important measure of its 'newsworthiness' (Gultang and Ruge, 1965; Harcup and O'Neil, 2001) and can help explain why ADB was considered more of a story than other diseases affecting 'non-native' trees.

## **Conclusions**

I have sought to apply a narrative analysis to a successful focusing event in order to show the way in which it was socially constructed. ADB's focal power derived from the perceived scale and nature of its impact; the initial attribution of blame on government; the government's 'war-like' response; and ash's status as a threatened 'native' tree.

I have here focused empirically on the immediate response to the ADB outbreak. A series of policy reports relating to the future management of ADB were produced as part of this event, but it also catalysed policy action on the general issue of tree and plant diseases and pests, and future risks. The setting up of the 'Expert Taskforce' was significant: the government's response to the Taskforce's report was the first GB wide Plant Biosecurity Strategy (Defra, 2014). 'Safeguarding Plant Health' has become one of Defra's four key priorities (Defra, 2014). The setting up of a publicly-available 'Risk Register' for diseases and pests is of note, as is a discursive shift to thinking about the 'resilience' of woodlands (Defra, 2014).

Thus, as a successful focusing event, ADB has increased the salience of plant health issues amongst policymakers, and also with the public and conservation organisations in the UK. Nevertheless, the adequacy of these responses to the risks posed by future outbreaks continues to be questioned. It is argued that the sheer volume of the commercial trade in plants and trees makes it impossible that biosecurity measures can be enforced effectively (Rackham, 2014). The fundamental reforms of the rules governing the international trade in plants and trees, deemed necessary on scientific grounds to prevent future introductions of known and unknown pathogens and diseases (Brasier, 2008), have not occurred.

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