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Evolving Our Understanding and Practice in Addressing Social Conflict and Stakeholder Engagement Around Conservation Translocations

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The conservation field has evolved to include an understanding of human values and attitudes toward wildlife; however, there is still too little emphasis on, and prioritization of, building understanding of the complex and context-specific social conflicts among people and groups involved with or impacted by conservation actions, including translocation. Both foci add value, but the latter is critical for building receptivity for conservation efforts and more thoughtfully designing appropriate context-specific processes for stakeholder engagement and shared decision-making. A deeper analysis of the social conflict dynamics involving the human relationships among individuals and groups engaged in a conservation conflict is needed as a first step in paving the way for the long-term success of conservation projects. Using a "Levels of Conflict" model offers a starting place for the analysis of social conflict often underpinning conservation translocation efforts. Further, we recommend employing a Conservation Conflict Transformation approach when considering conservation translocations to ensure that stakeholder engagement processes sufficiently engage the system, reconcile deep-rooted conflict among those involved and offer the best chance for shared progress and conservation success.

Keywords: human dimension, conservation conflict transformation, levels of conflict, decision-making process, engagement process, conflict analysis

INTRODUCTION: DEEPENING ANALYSIS OF AND THE PUBLIC'S ENGAGEMENT IN CONSERVATION TRANSLOCATION DECISION-MAKING

Conservation translocations involve the deliberate movement of living organisms from one area to another through reintroduction or reinforcement efforts of existing species populations to benefit conservation of the focal species (IUCN, 2013). In the same way that conservationists seek to learn what an endangered species' biological and ecological needs are before designing a recovery

plan suited to that species specific needs, one needs to understand more comprehensively what the social conflict dynamics—that is, the conflicts among people and groups that inhibit shared progress to address diverse needs, concerns and goals—are in a given context before designing or implementing decision-making processes (Madden and McQuinn, 2014; Riley and Sandström, 2016; Butler et al., 2019; Harrison and Loring, 2020). Further, those impacted by the focal species translocation need to be engaged early, genuinely, and inclusively in decision-making processes that are designed specifically for that context. Yet, typically a rushed, one-size-fits-all process for engaging different voices is employed under the erroneous assumption that simply convening and facilitating a big meeting—often using an existing template for social engagement used in previous contexts elsewhere—will be sufficient to meet the needs of the diverse individuals and groups (Bennett et al., 2017). These typically fail to address unique social and psychological needs, untangle complex histories, reconcile relationships, and disentangle deeper roots of conflict (Dickman, 2010; Skrimizea et al., 2020). We propose that conservation translocation projects should employ early analytical tools that orient the conservation practitioner and stakeholders to the depth and types of conflict that are at play in conservation efforts.

We are writing this perspective as we have worked in the field of social conflicts for decades, from human dimensions to community engagement processes to transforming social conflicts in conservation. Conservation Conflict Transformation (CCT) is both a philosophy and approach whereby the energy from conflicts are engaged and changed into an opportunity for shared progress in a constructive way (Lederach, 2003; Madden and McQuinn, 2014). Engagement processes allow for ongoing stakeholder involvement in projects or policy decisions from their inception right through to implementation. Such processes create the venue for people to get involved in crafting, informing, validating, implementing and adapting decision making- from the start to the end of the project or policy.

LEVELS OF CONFLICTS IN CONSERVATION TRANSLOCATIONS

Standard approaches that ignore or fail to fully embrace the unique system and human needs in which social conflicts are embedded, typically fall short of creating the kind of change needed for conservation projects and people to succeed in mutually beneficial ways (Leong et al., 2009; Peterson et al., 2013; Bennett et al., 2017; Madden and McQuinn, 2017). This is because acceptance of a species is often less about the species itself, and more about the perception that the species in question is symbolic of deeper unresolved conflicts (e.g., Skogen and Krange, 2003; Iwane et al., 2021). For instance, the conservation translocation of protected species may feel like a physical manifestation of government or authority overreach (Eriksson, 2016). Similarly, what may seem to be a conflict about a species, could be a deeper conflict among groups over power, status, autonomy, recognition, or identity—and these deeper conflicts need to be transformed if shared progress is to be achieved (Madden and McQuinn, 2014).

The field of conflict and peace studies offers many conceptual models for understanding conflicts between groups of people, including tools that analyze the sources, cycles, patterns, and types of conflicts (Ramsbotham et al., 2011). One starting place to deepen understanding is the "Levels of Conflict" conceptual model, which can help orient practitioners and stakeholders to the types and depths of conflict in a given situation (Madden and McQuinn, 2014; Sprague and Draheim, 2015; Zimmermann et al., 2020). As with most models, the Levels of Conflict model simplifies complex dynamics. Yet understanding the model embraces the interplay of complexity and non-linearity between the different levels of conflicts. Good analysis will likely illuminate how many of the most obvious conflicts for conservationists focused on translocation appear to be at the dispute level, even as deeper conflicts simultaneously exist below the surface (Zimmermann et al., 2020). Disputes are the physical, tangible manifestation of conflict. These may include addressing conflicts related to: whether to recover, translocate, or reintroduce a species in an area, the number of individuals to be re-introduced, the species management, and the tools used for implementation. Practitioners of CCT consider disputes as opportunities to begin constructively engaging the deeper roots of conflict that exist among those involved or invested in the outcome so as to create an enabling environment for effective, lasting, widely-supported conservation efforts (Lederach, 2003; Madden and McQuinn, 2014). Sustained progress will only be achieved if the deeper roots of conflict are transformed.

To illustrate "Levels of Conflict" (**Figure 1**), we share a current conflict scenario involving a potential conservation translocation, applying Chatham House Rules (i.e., removing any potential identifier of the participants) to the case to protect the identity of engaged parties and due to the sensitive nature of the case. The conflict involves the likely imminent extinction over the next few years of several bird species on an archipelago in the Pacific Ocean—and the effort among several pro-conservation parties to come to a shared agreement on what is the best approach to conserve these species. While there are numerous factors affecting the survival of these bird species, and while enormous resources from various institutions have been expended to save them over the last 30 years, climate change is now causing invasive mosquitoes, carrying avian malaria, to move further into the birds' range—with lethal results. As a result of the changing range of mosquitoes, viable habitat for these species is shrinking and shifting to higher elevations, where some islands can no longer support the birds. Multiple species may be extinct in the next few years. The involved parties include a national government, local government, indigenous peoples, multiple conservation NGOs and the public at large.

At a dispute level, the conflict looks like a lack of agreement among the various actors as to which strategy will best save the birds—capture and captive breed the birds to prevent extinction until new technology can suppress the mosquitoes, translocation of birds to another island with higher elevation to buy the birds more time, or leave the birds where they are and wait

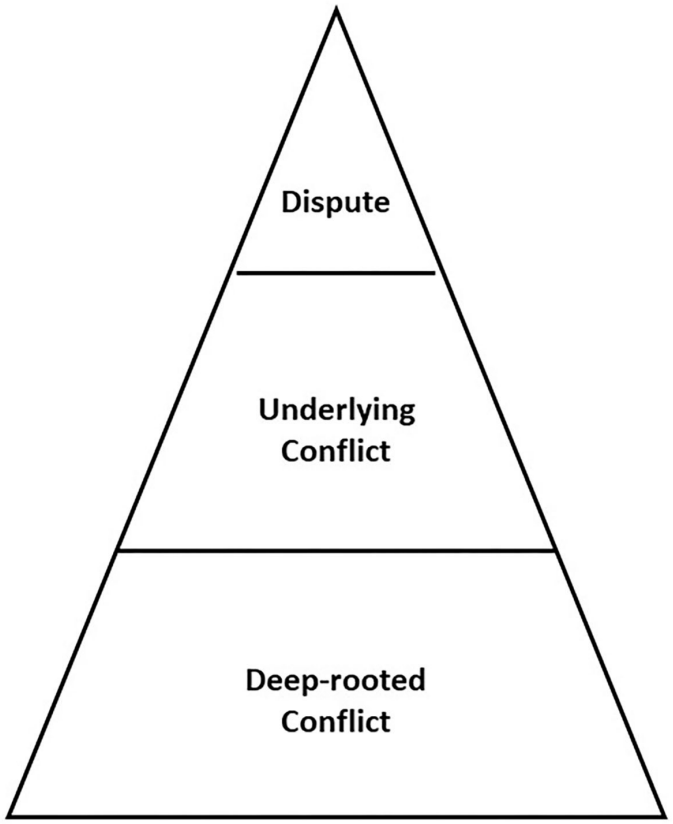

FIGURE 1 | The levels of conflict in conservation translocation. Adapted from Madden and McQuinn (2014) and Zimmermann et al. (2020).

for new technology (**Figure 1**). If this were all that was going on, or if no deeper conflict were investigated, the process for settling this issue might be designed to merely weigh the pros and cons of each strategy and arrive at the best option to implement. After all, all parties in this case want the species to survive. However, a deeper examination of the conflict reveals that each "side's" opinion about what would best support the birds' recovery is less informed or swayed by science, and more influenced by a history of unresolved issues, such as distrust, emotions, unmet social and psychological needs, and deeper threats to identity that make the current dispute more complex and seemingly intractable—and thus require a different kind of dialogue process. For instance, in the recent past, key partners in this current project were also involved in several previous projects, and the results of those challenging efforts created deep distrust and a lack of confidence by some individuals in their partners' capacities, motivations, and willingness to put the conservation of the species ahead of their own needs and ideas (**Figure 1**). At a deeper level, there is conflict between and within national and local governments that center around decision authority, means of influence and mandate; between government and NGOs over perceived credibility and a lack of willingness to look at past failures and learn from them that creates prejudicial assumptions about the institution as a whole. In addition, conflict exists between government and indigenous peoples because of historical harms done to the indigenous peoples by the national government and a lack of cultural recognition of native peoples' identity and voice in decision making, which fuels resistance to some options (**Figure 1**).

In this example, untangling the levels of conflict allows for the thoughtful consideration of biological and social factors that influence whether a conservation translocation of the species to another island should proceed. Ecologically, these considerations include, for example, whether suitable habitat exists and if it will remain suitable given the increasing effects of climate change; whether there are sufficient numbers of birds in the source populations to meet translocation needs, as well as the impact of translocated species to and from other native species. There are also critical social considerations that influence the decision. For example, whether suitable sites have landowners that are supportive of accepting a species, community support for a species being removed from their "home" island, the cultural appropriateness of moving species and the process by which it is conducted, and the ability for conservation entities to work collaboratively within and between themselves to develop and implement the conservation translocation. These types of social considerations, while often overlooked, are foundational to the success of any conservation translocation, and in this example, exemplify the rationale for using CCT to analyze and inform decision-making processes.

While the confines of this article do not allow for a complete analysis, the above examples hint at the implications and benefits of untangling the levels of conflict. Doing so offers strategic direction for how parties need to be engaged, what types of processes are needed to get all sides to be better capable of, and receptive to, evidence-based planning for the species in question (Zimmermann et al., 2020; Auster et al., 2022). In fact, while providing scientific evidence for why one approach or another may result in better conservation outcomes for these imperiled birds may seem initially a logical place to start, if the deeper roots of the conflict are not addressed first, then receptivity to evidence and shared agreement are unlikely. For instance, if the distrust among some partners persists, then that distrust will continue to hinder one or more parties from being able to constructively harness the full suite of resources and power of a broad partnership (Auster et al., 2022). In such a case, the underlying conflict that gave rise to the distrust needs to be addressed before all parties can be fully open to determining the strategy most likely to result in positive conservation outcomes. If the deeper analysis indicates that resistance is due to a perceived lack of cultural recognition and security, and a threat to identity and a lack of voice for indigenous peoples by the national government, then no amount of scientific evidence will influence the community's perception of the situation until these deeper roots of conflict are reconciled. The reason is that the birds—and the community's fight for the birds' survival—is intricately tied up in the fight for the inclusion of cultural values and voices in the management of natural resources.

Conservation translocations, including the discussion of the possibility of a translocation, may accompany, provoke, or exacerbate existing social conflicts, since most projects cannot be separated from the human-centered history of, and context around, conservation-related actions or research (Auster et al., 2022). Many conservation projects and contexts, just like many societal issues and engagements, are often characterized by prejudicial assumptions about individuals based on group affiliation and embedded social injustice, meaning there is deep-rooted conflict at play (Madden and McQuinn, 2014; Rodríguez and Inturias, 2018). Given the underlying and deep-rooted conflict, even seemingly simple disputes may be charged with antagonistic feelings and community resistance to change, perhaps especially where that history includes groups who have felt marginalized and disempowered by more powerful groups (Coleman, 2006; Madden and McQuinn, 2014; Rodríguez and Inturias, 2018). As such, employing a process that fails to untangle and reconcile these deeper relational and structural conflicts may unintentionally escalate or aggravate conflict within this system. At the very least, any solutions or decision will be short-lived (Madden and McQuinn, 2014; Skrimizea et al., 2020).

MOVING BEYOND A "STANDARD" ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

Participants of conservation engagement processes too often feel they are part of a "check box" approach because the unique attributes of their conflict have not been recognized, appreciated, or acted upon (Madden and McQuinn, 2014; Zimmermann et al., 2020). What may feel satisfactory to some decision-makers and authorities can be perceived as superficial and insincere to those people and groups involved with or who have a stake in the outcome—hereafter mentioned as the public. Often, many of the individuals and groups involved feel marginalized, imposed upon or disempowered and thus desire more decision-making power over processes and projects that may deeply affect their core values, way of life and wellbeing (Rodríguez and Inturias, 2018).

Even if well-intentioned, a poor engagement process may unintentionally generate more harm than good, especially when given cursory attention. Conservation entities desiring species translocation may assume that having a diverse public convene to make decisions about a translocation is meeting the needs of all those who are invested in the outcome (Auster et al., 2022). However, the very act of narrowly defining the process around translocation may already be setting the process up for failure since only the needs and goals of conservation are under consideration in the process. As a result, the process could lead to a perpetuation of or increase in opposition to conservation goals (Innes and Booher, 1999; Reed, 2008; Madden and McQuinn, 2017). Too often a process is poorly designed because it lacks the contextual, conflict-oriented analysis necessary to inform the process design. Context-specific design may also be missing when a process is "recycled" from other contexts where it worked well for that time and situation, but may not be the right fit for this unique context and point in time. Further challenges arise when unrealistic expectations are placed on a process; a process is left unmonitored; resources, adequate skillset or time are lacking to "do it right"; or a process lacks a sufficiently broad scope or clear goals (Reed, 2008). A process may also fall short when the limitations of participant capacity and power imbalances are not addressed.

A well-designed engagement process that is informed by a social conflict analysis and centered on the human relationships can untangle both the presenting issue, as well as related or deeper conflicts that can impact conservation outcomes, thus resulting in lasting conservation outcomes (Lederach et al., 2007). Such a process ideally fosters meaningful dialogue and trust, develops the group's capacity to reconcile relationships and work through complex issues through to the implementation of shared solutions. A good process increases transparency, integrity, and legitimacy for those directly and indirectly involved, and builds capacity and support for making thoughtful, shared decisions around conservation translocation as well as other conservation or community issues (Reed, 2008; Pomeranz et al., 2021). A good process considers the political realm, public environment and cultural appropriateness—the complex social system—in which the project is embedded (Reed, 2008; Pomeranz et al., 2021). Imposed processes or prescriptive solutions will likely fail to both secure diverse support and achieve the desired aims. Decision-making power should be as widely shared as possible to ensure buy-in by all sides (Reed, 2008; Pomeranz

et al., 2021). Furthermore, a good process keeps the public engaged over time, with all sides recognizing that when the public's input is not taken, a clear justification will be made (e.g., the contribution goes beyond the agency's jurisdictional power, or the suggestion cannot be supported by current regulations). This ensures that the public feels they have meaningful input into decisions through participation and feedback, which is important for the integrity of the process. Monitoring and evaluating progress through time will allow for adjustments to be made to better address the public's needs and concerns (Reed, 2008; Pomeranz et al., 2021).

Leaders or initiators of a conservation translocation effort may be disinclined to rethink their process investment, scope and design and may resist giving up control or power in the process. However, perhaps counterintuitively, a well-designed, facilitated, and inclusive, transformational process where needs and power are balanced, will increase the necessary receptivity and creativity needed to find shared solutions and durable conservation outcomes (Madden and McQuinn, 2017; Iwane et al., 2021). To be clear, transforming deeply-rooted conflict does not eliminate conflict, but rather it creates the conditions for constructive engagement with conflict when it does occur, as it inevitably will (Deutsch, 1973; Lederach, 2003; Madden and McQuinn, 2017).

Given the likely complexity of conflict in any conservation translocation endeavor, and given the needs for long-term success for both species and communities, the philosophy and approach of CCT offers a better match to conservation realities and needs through time (Lederach et al., 2007; Madden and McQuinn, 2014). Philosophically, conflict is conceptualized as a natural, potentially constructive, and even creative element of human relationships and processes. As an approach, CCT honors the needs and values of all sides, builds receptivity for shared engagement, ensures diverse needs are met in decision-making, and creates the conditions for lasting progress (Deutsch, 1973; Lederach, 2003).

The Center for Conservation Peacebuilding (www.cpeace.ngo) leads CCT capacity building workshops and third-party neutral facilitated interventions in the conservation field, continuing to advance the practice of CCT as the science and our society evolve. Practitioners who have integrated CCT have created the conditions for positive progress in conservation translocations and other conservation efforts in places ranging from Ecuador, USA, Kenya and Mozambique (Glikman et al.; *forthcoming*, Madden and McQuinn, 2014; Draheim et al., 2015). In doing so, building the capacity of those impacting or impacted by the conflict or the conservation effort in CCT is critical, since these people are the most important agents for long-term progress and success. The cornerstones of CCT proficiency go beyond theoretical understanding to include high levels of self-awareness and intellectual humility; a genuine ability to empathize, relate to and engage at the individual level with people who are different from and/or who disagree with you; a high capacity to visualize, engage, and navigate strategically within and through complex social system dynamics; and skills to design processes that prioritize reconciliation of deep-rooted conflict in relationships and shared problem-solving. Proficiency is achieved through mentorship and strategic guidance experiential learning, continual practice, self-reflection and receptivity to feedback.

CONCLUSION

Although the goal of conservation translocations targets a biological need for ecosystem or species restoration through time, the biological component is only one part of the equation for success. Too few conservation professionals have sufficient knowledge of and/or capacity in conflict approaches that specifically target the deep-rooted, complex, and systemic conflict that is a ubiquitous challenge in the conservation field. There is a pressing need to evolve how conservation as a field addresses conflict, beginning with prioritizing and improving the capacity of conservation leaders, institutions, and practitioners to better understand and transform destructive conflicts into opportunities for positive change that benefit both the people and the species. Lasting success is more likely to be achieved if sufficient resources, knowledge, and energy are focused on transforming the social conflict among people and groups that inevitably underlie the conservation challenge.

The success of conservation translocation projects is inherently tied to complex social human dynamics that determine conservation outcomes. The quality of the engagement process and relationships is as necessary to success as consideration of the biological needs of the species. To ensure both, the decision-making processes need to create the space for genuine trust-building, mutual learning, inclusion, and empowerment—not as a "check box" effort. To start, relevant parties need to undertake high quality analysis of the social conflict dynamics as a first step in co-developing the engagement processes with the impacted and interested parties. In doing so, societal skepticism and division around conservation endeavors can be better addressed without fueling further conflicts and reactionary opposition to conservation translocations.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

JG and FM share first authorship as they contributed equally to this work. Both JG and FM are corresponding authors for this article. BF contributed to the conceptualization of the article and MB contributed the case study. All authors contributed to editing the manuscript and approved the submitted version.

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