



What is human-wildlife conflict?

Wildlife can pose a direct threat to the safety, livelihood and wellbeing of people. Retaliation against the species blamed often ensues, leading to conflict between groups of people about what should be done to resolve the situation. Although this is not a new phenomenon — people and wildlife have lived in proximity to each other for millennia — it is one that is becoming much more frequent, serious and widespread, and a global concern for conservation and development interests alike.

These conflicts over wildlife, commonly called *human-wildlife conflict* involve many different terrestrial and aquatic species, ranging from large cats, bears, elephants, deer, primates, sharks, seals, crocodilians, snakes, rhinos, otters, to invertebrates and plants, and many more. Human-wildlife conflict also negatively affects communities whose support for, and benefit from, wider conservation goals is important, and poses serious challenges to governments and organisations trying to align wildlife conservation with sustainable development, among other pressures. Furthermore, where conservation ‘successes’ have resulted in wildlife population increases, or species have recovered and expanded their ranges, human-wildlife conflicts often follow.

Extensive efforts to understand and manage human-wildlife conflicts have revealed that these situations tend to be complex, dynamic and multi-layered. Effective and practical methods for preventing the impacts of wildlife on people and their livelihoods in many cases are difficult to find. Furthermore, retaliatory or preventive persecution of wildlife by people is often complicated by past experience, fear, perceptions or wider underlying social tensions. Thus human-wildlife conflicts are usually about more than the apparent species-human interaction, but involve several stakeholders set in specific contexts of environmental, social and economic change.

Human-wildlife conflicts may include a wide range of situations, the scope of which makes it difficult to stipulate what precisely constitutes a case of human-wildlife conflict. There are many conflicts in biodiversity, but not all of these are human-wildlife conflicts. Given the range of perspectives on the issue, it is difficult to distil the issue into a single-sentence definition that is inclusive, comprehensive, precise, succinct, and user-friendly. While a strictly delineating definition may not be essential, a common understanding of the essence of the issue and its main characteristics is important for progress and collaboration among agencies and actors involved in this topic.

In trying to capture broadly the essence of what makes a situation a human-wildlife conflict, the IUCN SSC Human-Wildlife Conflict Task Force describes human-wildlife conflict as **struggles that emerge when the presence or behaviour of wildlife poses actual or perceived, direct and recurring threat to human interests or needs, leading to disagreements between groups of people and negative impacts on people and/or wildlife.**

At its core, HWC is about a direct or perceived interaction between wildlife and people, over which there is some clash or disagreement among the people involved. Human-wildlife conflicts typically contain elements of interaction, intention or recurrence, linked to underlying social tensions, and often involve species of concern to conservation.

Thus, situations such as crop raiding by elephants leading to poisoning of elephants by farmers, or livestock predation by lions causing local persecution of lions, or mass culling of birds or bats to prevent damage to orchards are fairly clear cases of human-wildlife conflict. There are, however, many other circumstances involving wildlife which may or may not be regarded as human-wildlife conflict, depending on viewpoints. Poaching, vehicle collisions, rare attacks and disease transmissions are scenarios where the delineation of whether or not it constitutes human-wildlife conflict is context-dependent.

For example, poaching of wildlife is not necessarily a human-wildlife conflict if the animal has been killed only with the motivation of obtaining meat, body parts, or a trophy, for trade, recreation or cultural reasons. If, however, the animals poached were also blamed for damage caused to livelihoods, then its killing may have been influenced by, and therefore incorporates, human-wildlife conflict to some extent.

Collisions between animals and airplanes, trains, cars, boats or other vehicles are considered by some as human-wildlife conflict, while others argue that if these are purely accidental, then this does not constitute a conflict. Some cases of recurring collisions lead to clashes among groups of people and thereby begin to take on characteristics of conflict. Where collisions are deliberate, for example, drivers striking wildlife on purpose out of superstition or aggression towards the species, this also leads to disagreements among people and is more clearly a case of human-wildlife conflict.

Similarly, incidences of predation on humans by, for example, carnivores or sharks may be considered rare tragic events rather than conflict, however, when recurrence, resentment or retaliation against the species start to emerge and tensions among stakeholders grow, this too can develop into human-wildlife conflict.

Along these lines it follows that zoonotic or other disease transmission from wildlife to humans or their livestock is also not clear cut in terms of whether this should be called human-wildlife conflict. Again, context-specific characteristics and perceptions will guide whether or not it is useful to include these in the definition of human-wildlife conflict. For example, widespread killing of bats or monkeys arising out of fear of epidemic disease outbreaks certainly takes on characteristic elements of human-wildlife conflict.

The main characteristics of human-wildlife conflicts

The definition recognises that human-wildlife conflicts are diverse and complex and typically marked by the following three characteristics, an understanding of which is key for effective management of human-wildlife conflict:

- 1) **Human-wildlife conflicts involve direct and recurring negative interactions between people and wildlife.**
All human-wildlife conflicts result from some form of real or perceived damage or threat caused by wildlife, however the degree to which a human-wildlife conflict is merely about the presence or behaviour of animals versus how much the human-wildlife conflict is actually a conflict between different groups of people about the wildlife, can vary greatly. Damage caused by wildlife can range from being negligible or even perceived, to economically devastating and life-threatening. Whatever the severity, if people react negatively to this real or perceived damage and especially if the situation becomes a recurring event, human-wildlife conflict usually ensues.

- 2) **Human-wildlife conflicts are almost always underpinned by social conflicts** between people over the management of wildlife. Typically, this involves one party reacting to the presence/impact of the species and another party asserting conservation interests on behalf of that species. Usually several groups are involved, each with different interests, values and needs. In some cases, people may use complaints about wildlife as a vehicle to express other grievances about issues unrelated to wildlife, such as clashes over identities, values, power differences or social justice, irrespective of the measurable impact of the species involved. In rare cases the wildlife itself may also be considered to be a party to conflict, as has been observed e.g. in some incidences of elephants attacking people in retaliation for past confrontations.

- 3) **Human-wildlife conflicts tend to involve species of conservation concern** that are negatively affecting human interests. This is because for situations involving IUCN Threatened Red Listed or otherwise protected species, killing the wildlife believed to be responsible is usually not an option for those wishing to protect that species. This often results in higher stakes and solutions of greater complexity. Without the option of being able to legally eliminate the species causing losses for people and communities, and the clashing perceived valuations of that species and options for its management, the result is a fuelling of the social conflicts that underlie human-wildlife conflicts.

What about human-wildlife coexistence, interactions and other terms used?

Conflicts are not always negative, but words and language matter. Conflicts bring about change. As such, conflicts can be positive opportunities leading to dialogue, stimulating action and forcing a bad situation to be resolved or improved. If addressed properly, human-wildlife conflicts force us to look at underlying tensions and inequalities and work together for improved wellbeing, development and conservation. Nevertheless, the term 'human-wildlife conflict' is not without implications and thus much debated in the conservation community. Some prefer to refer to these situations as 'conflicts over wildlife' or 'conservation conflicts', while other prefer to avoid the word 'conflict' altogether and focus on 'human-wildlife coexistence' or 'human-wildlife interactions' rather than the 'conflicting' aspects of relationships between people and wildlife. Whichever the preferred and appropriate term for a given situation, it is important to consider context and sensitivity to the possible effects of words used. For example, calling a relatively mild situation a 'conflict' can escalate it unnecessarily but, conversely, avoiding it altogether may leave communities feeling that their situation is not receiving sufficient attention. Different cultures, languages, communities and countries will use different words to describe these situations.

Further information

- See also the *IUCN SSC Position Statement on the Management of Human-Wildlife Conflict* prepared by the IUCN SSC Human-Wildlife Conflict Task Force, available at www.iucn.org/theme/species/publications/policies-and-position-statements.
- At the time of writing, the Task Force is also preparing a comprehensive technical policy and advisory document, the *IUCN SSC Guidelines on Human-Wildlife Conflict and Coexistence*.
- Further information, publications and guidance can also be found in the online *IUCN SSC Library on Human-Wildlife Conflict* at www.hwctf.org.

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