



Perspectives on human-wildlife coexistence

The concept of ‘coexistence’ has emerged into the mainstream of conservation science as an increasingly significant framing for thinking about human-wildlife interactions. However, despite its potential to stimulate a systems-change in thinking about human-wildlife interactions, at present there is little agreement on what the concept means, or how to operationalise it (see box 1).

Resolving some of these issues is becoming important to interested researchers and practitioners working on challenges associated with human-wildlife interactions, particularly as the use of the word ‘coexistence’ has increased exponentially in the literature over the past decade, and is being used by conservation managers too.

The IUCN SSC Human-Wildlife Conflict Task Force, which was founded before the term ‘coexistence’ became quite so prominent, has also been engaging with the ideas and questions this word presents, and will be including it in the name of the group itself in the new 2021-2024 IUCN Quadrennium. To this end, the Task Force will be considering what ‘*human-wildlife coexistence*’ means in the context of human-wildlife interactions and human-human interactions over how to manage these. This includes considering how it relates to human-wildlife conflict, and whether a single universal definition is needed or indeed appropriate.

Box 1: Diverse definitions and perspectives on human-wildlife coexistence

“...we conceptualize coexistence as a ‘dynamic but sustainable state in which humans and large carnivores co-adapt to living in shared landscapes where human interactions with carnivores are governed by effective institutions that ensure long-term carnivore population persistence, social legitimacy, and tolerable levels of risk’.” (Carter & Linnell 2016)

“...coexistence is not just a fixed point at the end of the conflict-to-coexistence continuum, but a process that encompasses two fundamental elements: (1) the well-being of the people interacting with wildlife and (2) the ethical handling of the wildlife involved in the interaction.” (Glikman *et al.* 2019).

“Coexistence is not an unalterable, predetermined or locked state. It is regenerative, as every time human-wildlife and human-human interactions destabilize or disrupt the status quo, a new level of organization and expression of coexistence emerges.” (Glikman *et al.* 2019).

Scope and complexities of human-wildlife coexistence

Just as human-wildlife *conflict* is complex and context-specific, so is human-wildlife *coexistence*. At the most basic level, choosing *coexistence* as a goal requires that at some level and in some form **humans must choose to share landscapes and natural resources with wildlife in sustainable ways**. If coexistence is the desired goal for a particular landscape (and it need not be), then it follows that achieving coexistence ideally also requires

agreement – or at the very least, cooperation – between different groups of people about the wildlife in question.

At this initial stage, attempting to produce a single definition of coexistence is counter-productive to the IUCN SSC HWCTF's pluralistic and evolving approach to understanding human-wildlife interactions in all their various forms. Instead, coexistence can be conceived of more loosely as a set of ideas (see below) useful for enabling diverse research disciplines, and non-researchers, to collaborate on mutual challenges relating to how best to facilitate sharing landscapes with wildlife - without requiring total agreement on a definition.

Key characteristics of human-wildlife coexistence

The Task Force intends to support constructive discussions of coexistence, and as a basis for this, proposes five broad **characteristics of coexistence** helpful for exploring its nature:

1) Coexistence is not simply the opposite (or absence) of conflict:

Coexistence is often discussed as a dynamic state, or process, rather than an endpoint on a continuum from conflict to coexistence. A state of coexistence for example doesn't imply there is an absence of conflict or require an absence of negative interactions or impacts: it refers to how these are understood and managed. Indeed, a broad state of coexistence normally contains incidences of conflict within it, but these conflicts are managed well.

2) Coexistence does not prioritise negative human-wildlife interactions:

Studying human-wildlife interactions and human-human interactions over wildlife holistically requires consideration of positive interactions and neutral interactions and relations in addition to the negative. Positive reframing and language can be very helpful in transforming conflicts, so long as communities' grievances are not dismissed in the process (see also [the IUCN SSC Position Statement on the Management of Human-Wildlife Conflict](#)).

3) Coexistence emphasises human-wildlife interactions in multi-use landscapes:

Many kinds of wildlife, including abundant, uncharismatic and introduced species, have significant impacts on people's livelihoods, and attitudes toward conservation. A coexistence framing includes the interactions of all these kinds of wildlife with people in multi-use landscapes.

4) Coexistence must work at broad landscape scales, as well as resolving specific problems in particular places:

The aim is to transform conflict scenarios into durable, workable coexistence not just at local scales but also at the landscape level. This requires taking into consideration multiple species including those of less concern to conservationists, multiple stakeholders with diverse views on the costs and benefits of cohabiting with wildlife, patterns and processes occurring at broad spatial and temporal scales which impact on local scenarios, a range of management solutions with varying applicability and effectiveness across different scenarios, and diverse capacity and resource constraints.

5) Coexistence is ecologically and socially complex and context specific:

Our current understanding highlights the high degree of complexity and local specificity of human-wildlife and human-human interactions. We are currently working on accumulating a significant body of knowledge from diverse settings.

Approaches to coexistence

1) Coexistence requires self-awareness from conservationists:

While desiring coexistence with wildlife is a goal for conservationists, this might not be the goal of all of those affected by wildlife; nor should contrasting views be regarded as inherently unacceptable. Taking such differences into account requires recognising one's own positionality and accepting other worldviews and the rights of local and indigenous peoples.

2) Coexistence involves consideration of power, equity and justice:

Understanding, and intervening in, human-wildlife interactions and human-human relations requires consideration of historic legacies of conservation, and asymmetries in power and influence of actors in landscapes shared by humans and wildlife. Attempts to foster coexistence should consider which parties (human, and non-human) are favoured by attempts to facilitate coexistence, and which parties may suffer. Ideally, they require the participation of all affected groups in transparent and democratic processes for framing and developing management aims, plans and procedures. Humans as well as wild animals should have agency and reasonable freedom to choose how to behave in shared landscapes.

Human-wildlife conflict and coexistence

In **Table 1** (below) we summarise the focus, the approach to the problems addressed, and the solutions proposed by this framing of human-wildlife interactions.

	Human-wildlife coexistence framing
Focus	To produce enduring survival of humans and wildlife on shared landscapes in a just manner
Problems addressed	<p>Look beyond immediate, direct determinants of human-wildlife interactions to identify other important factors enabling or hindering coexistence</p> <p>Look beyond rare and endangered species to consider other wildlife affecting locals, and/or clashes with locals' priorities and livelihoods</p> <p>Consider diverse values and knowledge systems seriously as a source of alternative approaches</p>
Solutions	<p>Up-scaling of the analysis and management of the relationships beyond conflict</p> <p>Learning from actions and attitudes that emerge in the context of particular reciprocal relationships between human and non-human life in specific places</p> <p>Using this learning where needed for social conflict negotiation/ transformation</p>

Human-wildlife coexistence is complex, dynamic and context-dependent. Given the rich diversity of currently developing ideas on coexistence, it may be best mobilised as a flexible concept to enable diverse research disciplines, as well as non-researchers, to collaborate on mutual challenges and learning. This ongoing work is contributing to the maturation of this concept.

Further reading

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