



What is Human-Wildlife Coexistence?

Considering the widespread, mainstream use of the term “human-wildlife coexistence” and also the range of definitions of the term currently in use, the following definition serves to clarify the position of the [IUCN SSC Human-Wildlife Conflict & Coexistence Specialist Group](#) (HWCCSG) on what is meant by this term.

The definition has been developed by the HWCCSG’s [Understanding Coexistence Working Group](#). The definition and accompanying notes are grounded in analysis of a coexistence workshop for international wildlife conservationists, and internal HWCCSG workshops, together with experience of stakeholder consultation and research projects conducted by Working Group members, synthesising a range of expert views on the main dimensions of human-wildlife coexistence.

Definition

Human-wildlife coexistence is a dynamic state in which humans and wildlife co-occur in resilient communities and ecologically viable populations, sustained in socially acceptable ways through just institutions and fair processes that enable co-adaptation, adaptive management, and negotiated solutions to keep negative impacts or conflicts at acceptable levels.



Photo: © Anirudh Vasava / Voluntary Nature Conservancy

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Interpretation

Conceptual framework: Human-wildlife coexistence is both a *state* and a *process*. Its key dimensions embrace both a desired state (what) and how it is facilitated (how). Coexistence, as opposed to co-occurrence or tolerance, is conditional on attention being paid to both the *what* and the *how*.

Coexistence is a dynamic state: Both the ecological and social components of coexistence are likely to be dynamic over time, which will change the human-wildlife interaction. The commitment is to work to sustain an ongoing state of coexistence through accepted processes and interventions for dealing with these.

Coexistence is not the absence of conflict: Human-wildlife co-occurrence will always involve occasional negative interactions, conflicts and impacts. Therefore, coexistence is not the absence of conflict. Rather it maintains levels of conflict and impact within acceptable limits, and works to prevent and mitigate these negative interactions.

Coexistence is a deliberate choice: coexistence requires that society at multiple scales must make a positive choice to try and coexist with wildlife.

Ecologically viable populations: species exist in sufficient numbers to maintain stable populations and persist over the long term.

Wildlife: “Wildlife” need not only refer to species of conservation concern, but also to abundant or even non-native species. We recognise the sentience and agency of wild animals and the ethical responsibilities of those tasked with managing them. We also acknowledge culturally diverse ways of conceiving of nature and human-animal relationships.

Shared places: coexistence occurs in context-specific ways in particular places (rather than generic “spaces”), meaning landscapes or seascapes meaningful to those inhabiting or frequenting them. This recognises that coexistence exists across a range of tolerances (weak to strong) regarding what levels of impacts communities feel able to live with.

Conservation: recognising that biodiversity conservation is normative, and coexistence occurs in places beyond formal conservation boundaries, the conservation vision for human-wildlife coexistence is to foster or support more than basic survival in places shared by humans and wildlife. Recognising a range of degrees of coexistence, at the strong end, the conservation goal is to achieve mutual thriving of humans and wildlife.

Adaptive management: Maintaining coexistence will often require the active management of wildlife populations. Human-wildlife coexistence is also dynamic and therefore in many situations a management approach which recognises uncertainty, change and periodic perturbations will be required. Adaptive management takes a reflexive learning-by-doing approach informed by monitoring and evaluating management interactions, allowing adjustments where necessary.

Temporal and spatial Scale: Human-Wildlife Coexistence is a long-term endeavour that may fluctuate over the short term but must endure as successful co-occupation of shared places over the long term. To persist, it must do so at different spatial scales: it depends on local contextual factors, social and ecological, but is also entangled with national, regional and global policy and governance frameworks, actors and drivers. In addition, effective long-term conservation depends on maintaining large-scale ecological connectivity. Therefore, the distributions of species may extend across areas where coexistence states and processes vary. Coexistence embraces this diversity of locally adapted and locally negotiated approaches, so long as the basic ecological and social needs of wildlife and humans are maintained.

Socially acceptable: The choice to coexist with wildlife, and how coexistence is established and maintained, must be acceptable to those communities living with wildlife in particular places.

Just institutions: The governance system and related structures facilitating coexistence must be seen to be legitimate and representative. This will be context-specific. We acknowledge that particular cultural traditions or communities value nature and relate to species and places differently, and we recognise the plurality of ways of conceiving of society and its governance.

Fair participative processes: Decisions on which policies guide action, and which management actions are implemented, should be arrived at through participative processes. These processes should be fair, i.e. acceptable and proportional for the people involved, e.g. in dealing with the differential consequences of negative and positive impacts of coexistence. They should be inclusive of differently positioned groups, e.g. women, youth, pastoralists, landless households, seasonal resource users. We recognise that landscapes and seascapes are politically contested and shaped by unequal power relations, histories of dispossession (including colonial), movements of peoples, and contemporary development and extractive pressures.

Mutual adaptation and accommodation: Recognising that humans and wild animals have the capacity to learn and modify their behaviour, in relation to one another, coexistence requires that wild animals, their populations and communities, and human communities and individuals, should have the means and opportunity to adapt to sharing places and resources with one another. This can either be through developing novel behaviours and interactions, or otherwise acting (or choosing not to act) in ways designed to accommodate the presence of the other.

Dispute resolution: Just institutions should oversee fair processes for adjudicating disputes or conflicts arising from the negative impacts of wild animals, the distribution of costs and benefits, and disagreements over how to respond to these. For more guidance on this, see the [IUCN SSC Guidelines on Human-Wildlife Conflict and Coexistence](#).

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Further resources

Further materials relating to human-wildlife coexistence are available through the Specialist Group's Human-Wildlife Conflict and Coexistence [Library](#).

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