Position Statement

On the Management of Human-Wildlife Conflict

SSC
Species Survival Commission

IUCN SSC
Human-Wildlife
Conflict
TASK FORCE

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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 in various forms of positive and negative interactions- 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.

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.* (Further details about the characteristics of human-wildlife conflict are provided in the document *"What is human-wildlife conflict?"* available at www.hwctf.org).

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 (such as livestock predation or crop raiding) 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.

IUCN's position on human-wildlife conflict
The IUCN SSC Human-Wildlife Conflict Task Force urges governments, non-governmental organizations, researchers, practitioners, community leaders, environmental agencies and others to ensure that efforts to manage human-wildlife conflicts are pursued through well-informed, holistic, and collaborative processes that take into account underlying social, cultural and economic contexts.

Essential considerations for managing human-wildlife conflicts

Human-wildlife conflicts are complex and defy easy analysis and resolution. Each human-wildlife conflict is different from the next and what may work in one case may not be transferrable to another. Effective and sustainable practical methods to mitigate damage and minimise retaliation are often difficult to find and, even where they do exist, they are often not implemented in a socially and financially sustainable way. A seemingly straightforward issue of guarding a herd of cows or fencing a patch of crops can escalate into a deeply divided ongoing conflict about who is to blame, who should pay, who did what wrong in the past, to whom the wildlife belongs and who should be responsible for possible solutions. Given the different dimensions involved, there is a need for holistic, interdisciplinary approaches, which should consider carefully the following essential insights for human-wildlife conflict management:

1. **Interventions that focus only on reducing damage are not transferable from one case to another.** Interventions such as fencing, deterrents and compensation schemes are often urgently needed, especially when there is pressure on agencies, governments and conservation organisations to deliver solutions. In cases where there is no particular underlying social conflict, such damage reduction measures can work well if practically effective and economically viable – however, such scenarios are relatively rare. For most human-wildlife conflicts, developing an intervention to reduce damage by wildlife is best pursued as a *process* rather than a direct transfer of a pre-defined method from one site to another. Each case of human-wildlife conflict has unique ecological, cultural, social, physical, economic and political characteristics, and each has different histories, attributes and opportunities.

2. **Poorly informed human-wildlife conflict mitigation attempts can make the situation worse.** Attempts to manage conflicts rapidly and without consideration of underlying socio-political elements can exacerbate pre-existing tensions and escalate human-wildlife conflicts into intractable conflicts in which parties become polarised. This can occur when a damage reduction method is copied from one context and transferred to another without following a process of engagement with stakeholders. The method may work only temporarily, expectations and hopes may be raised and then dashed, leading to misunderstandings about responsibilities and ownership of the solution, and increased divisions and mistrust between the groups involved. Similarly, a trial-and-error approach to human-wildlife conflicts is generally not recommended. While some experimentation with damage reduction measures may be needed, such trials should be evidence-based as far as possible, and must be carefully designed together with the affected parties, not imported ready-made by an external party.

3. **Context awareness and understanding of social and political backgrounds is crucial.** Who are the various stakeholders and actors involved in the situation, what are their relationships, histories and power differences? While there is usually at least one notable community or group most directly affected by the species blamed, most human-wildlife conflicts are multilateral, involving (to varying degrees) other stakeholders as well. Understanding the values, social norms, beliefs, culture, economics and other social and political factors of the parties involved is key for planning and implementing any human-wildlife conflict mitigation initiative. Because of the complexity of contexts, questionnaire-based studies are best complimented with more in-depth approaches that provide additional understanding of the layers, histories and nuances of HWC cases. Such context assessments also benefit greatly from multi-expertise collaborations, involving for example social scientists, development specialists, or conflict analysts to help understand the issues contributing to the human-wildlife conflict.

4. **Conflict mitigation and damage reduction interventions must be designed and managed collaboratively.** Key for the success and sustainability of any human-wildlife conflict project or initiative

is the development of a collaborative way of working. To do so, officials or project staff need to build rapport with the affected communities and other involved parties, while remaining aware of their own positions. Often the process of jointly defining project goals and plans is useful as a vehicle for building such collaboration, trust and cooperation among the parties. Genuine collaboration can allow a balance of diverse goals, negotiation of acceptable trade-offs and allow communities to adjust their expectations about levels of impact or develop skills required to adapt to new situations in future. In cases of deep-rooted (also known as identity-based) conflicts, in which stakeholders are so mistrustful of each other that collaborative working is not currently realistic, help from trained peace mediators may be needed for reconciliation work before or alongside efforts to address the human-wildlife conflict.

5. **Long-term solutions need to incorporate landscape-scale ecological, economic and physical patterns.** Many human-wildlife conflicts involve species that range across highly fragmented habitats and/or well beyond protected areas into human-dominated landscapes. Mitigating damage by wildlife to promote tolerance by people, even when successful, may provide only a short-term solution. Once emergencies are brought under control, human-wildlife conflict initiatives must begin to consider how and where people and wildlife will be able to share the landscape in the long term, and what legal and development frameworks are needed to enable this. It is crucial for communities living near wildlife to be actively engaged in ideas and decisions, supporting e.g. biologists, ecologists and geographers in gaining an understanding a given species' movement patterns, resource needs and behaviour. Many species have very advanced learning and behavioural capacities, an understanding of which can help the design of depredation interventions and movement options. Such landscape-scale planning also generates important sectoral collaborations, across e.g. agriculture, forestry, health, environment, transport, energy, or defense agencies.

6. **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.

The challenge and opportunity of human-wildlife conflict

Efforts to manage human-wildlife conflict often do not sufficiently seek to understand and address the underlying social conflicts that shape these situations. Faced with urgent pressures to address the visible damage or threat, organisations and governments trying their best to alleviate the situation are often pressured into rushed physical interventions to control damage and retaliation. However, human-wildlife conflicts involve tensions among the underlying values of the parties involved, which requires entirely different approaches for which there is often insufficient expertise. This, together with limited resources, means that human-wildlife conflicts are notoriously difficult to manage. Many human-wildlife relationships are complex

and dynamic, and for many cases of human-wildlife conflict a perfectly harmonious state of coexistence may not be a realistic goal.

However, through collaborative, context-appropriate and well-informed collaborative working across sectors and actors, arriving at a situation considered acceptable by those most directly involved can be achievable. The management of human-wildlife conflict is best pursued through sustained, collaborative and process-driven efforts, with the technical support of interdisciplinary expertise including for example peacebuilding practitioners, geographers, social scientists, biologists, development economists and others, to develop more integrated and sustainable approaches to addressing this global challenge. Some human-wildlife conflicts involve situations where lives and livelihoods are at very serious risk, requiring urgent attention that cannot wait for the outcomes of research, dialogues and conflict mediation. In emergency cases, there may be no other option than to implement imperfectly-informed damage control measures as soon as possible. Yet these can and should be swiftly followed by the development of long-term, collaborative and holistic plans for conflict management. As such, human-wildlife conflict presents not only a global challenge, but also an opportunity for biodiversity and communities – a crucial part in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda's vision for the planet, in which "humanity lives in harmony with nature and in which wildlife and other living species are protected."

Further information

This IUCN SSC Position Statement was prepared by the chair and members of the IUCN Species Survival Commission Human-Wildlife Conflict Task Force in July 2020. 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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