

POLICY PERSPECTIVE

Giving Direction and Clarity to Conservation Leadership

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Abstract

Conservation leadership is a term without a widely shared understanding of its scope and meaning. In this article, the author shares perspectives based on interviews, literature, and a survey to begin to identify strategies that define *conservation leadership*. Results indicate that some elements of conservation leadership are similar to strategies of effective leadership more broadly. Conservation leadership also includes distinguishing aspects, however, such as conflict management and partnership-building. The purpose of this article is to provide some initial thoughts and ideas to address “*What is conservation leadership?*” The outcomes of this work can assist those in leadership positions and those who teach conservation leadership by defining the skills and strategies necessary to be effective in conservation leadership roles.

Introduction

Leadership is often cited as critical for successful achievement of conservation goals. In a 2011 article, the authors state “We identified strong leadership as the most important attribute contributing to success,” of effective fisheries comanagement schemes (Gutierrez *et al.* 2011). But what do authors mean when they advocate for *leadership*? If fisheries comanagement is more successful with strong leadership, what does that look like? Scholars of leadership concluded decades ago that leadership is defined by behaviors and strategies, not traits or characteristics as once thought (Senge 2006). So, what are the behaviors of a *conservation leader*?

Leadership has been a focus of scholarship for at least 60 years (Doh 2003). It is rooted in the fields of management and education, with thousands of published articles and books that address leadership in the context of organizations, businesses, and schools. A summary point of this work is a generally accepted historical understanding of leadership as a construct that was initially understood as a trait when first studied in the 1800s (*i.e.*, leaders are born), then transitioned to a situational understanding (1940s and 1950s) in which leaders can be effective in certain situations (but not others), to a functional

definition in which leadership is defined by learned behaviors and strategies. This latter understanding is generally accepted by most scholars today (Senge 2006).

There is also scholarship that emerged in the 1970s about more complex leadership models which build on the functional understanding. Models emerged as scholars studied differences in the focus of leaders, leader-follower roles, and expected outcomes of leadership. This led to new terminologies such as *transformative leadership*, in which those being led are empowered; and *servant leadership*, in which leaders focus on helping others perform highly through sharing power. These more contemporary frameworks generally emphasize strategies that create an environment in which others have support and mentoring to be successful. This is sometimes referred to as *environmental leadership* (*i.e.*, creating an environment in which people can succeed), though in the field of conservation, the term would likely be interpreted differently. Despite the abundance of work over the past 6 decades on leadership, however, conservation leadership researchers have shown little reference to this work.

There are other areas of research in which “conservation leadership” (or a similar term) is not used explicitly but the work has relevant implications. For example, in the arena of public administration, there

are many articles about the roles of local government in leading sustainability initiatives (see Wang *et al.* 2014) and numerous articles about green building, government and leadership in energy and environmental design (see Cidell & Cope 2014 as an example). However, in my effort to determine if there is a clear definition of *conservation leadership*, these articles have limited utility. They might influence how we ultimately define the term, but they move us no closer to assessing if we have that understanding today.

Given the lack of shared understanding about conservation leadership, and the missing integration of previous leadership work (more broadly) in what modest amount of conservation leadership research did exist, I embarked to move this discussion along through baseline research. I conducted interviews, reviewed articles and books, and surveyed colleagues around the world to draw some initial conclusions to serve as fodder for further discussion.

Specifically, I conducted 14 in-person interviews with individuals from eight countries in leadership positions with a conservation organization. I asked each individual to describe their position and responsibilities (for context), define the behaviors that illustrate effective leadership in their field, and tell a story from their experience that exemplified leadership excellence.

I also reviewed peer-reviewed journal articles that addressed conservation leadership, with content that ranged from empirically based results to thought pieces based on authors' personal experiences. I reviewed nine books about leadership, of which one was specific to conservation leadership while the others addressed leadership more broadly.

Following a descriptive analysis of the interviews and literature, 20 leadership strategies emerged which served as the basis for an online survey distributed to 32 conservation practitioners from 13 countries. I also asked these participants to forward the survey link to their respective networks. A total of 103 responses were received. The survey asked participants to rate the list of 20 strategies (see Table 1) in terms of their importance for effective leadership on a scale of 1 to 7. In addition, respondents were asked to assess if they had a clear understanding of *conservation leadership* and if they felt that understanding was shared by others.

Outcomes

After analysis of all the literature, interviews, and survey, four key outcomes emerged.

Outcome #1: Conservation leadership is understudied and disconnected from the broader body of leadership research.

Table 1 Importance rating of 20 potential skills for conservation leaders^a

Skill	Cumulative "agree" and "strongly agree" percent
Partnership-building	93
Establishing a vision	89
Conflict management	83
Situation assessment	83
Strategic planning	83
Facilitation skills	77
Creating a positive organizational culture	77
Solving problems	77
Community outreach	72
Motivating others	67
Development & fundraising	67
Conservation planning	58
Managing/supervising employees	58
Risk assessment	58
Mentoring	52
Systems thinking	50
Public relations	44
Scientific expertise	33
Research skills	11

^aTotal sample size of 103.

The amount of research about conservation leadership is modest, and the methodological approaches of the studies which do exist are weak. In one of the first articles, published in 2004, the authors cited a total of five sources, none of which referenced any of the abundant research about leadership from the previous decades. In 2008, *Conservation Biology* published an article in which researchers reported that a search of articles in Web of Science using the search terms "conservation biology OR conservation science AND leadership" produced 22 articles, most of which, they noted, did not actually apply to leadership (Manolis *et al.* 2008). Six years later, I conducted the same search and found 60 articles, and similarly, most were not actually relevant.

Conversely, when the term "leadership" is entered as a keyword into Web of Science (i.e., not paired with "conservation" or a related term), the number of peer-reviewed articles is more than 35,000. There are dozens of journals with leadership as a key focal area, as well as institutes and programs built around leadership, yet *conservation leadership* does not seem to have garnered much attention within these institutions and publications, let alone the publications and institutions that are conservation-specific.

Given the modest amount of scholarship about conservation leadership, and that much of it does not integrate previous leadership research, an argument can be made that *conservation leadership* is an ambiguous term without a shared understanding. When I asked survey participants

to respond to the statement, “The term ‘conservation leadership’ has a shared understanding among those who work in conservation leadership programs,” only one in three (32%) agreed, and not a single response from 103 people strongly agreed.

Outcome #2: *Developing a vision and establishing values* are important leadership strategies.

Vision

In Jordan, I spoke with an individual working in a protected area with the country’s highest biodiversity, which is notable since the country in general is largely barren and supports only a modest amount of flora and fauna. In our interview, he described a supervisor who frequently reminded staff of the organization’s goals. “He would remind me . . . that there’s this mountain goat that someday will have big herds that roam these mountains again. And that our visitor book will show people coming from all over the world. He made us to believe these dreams could someday be true.”

This individual described “inspire a shared vision,” to borrow a term from *The Leadership Challenge* by Kouzes and Posner (2007). Their book provides a five-point summary of leadership strategies based on the thousands of interviews with leaders over the past 30 years. *The Leadership Challenge* has been translated into 12 languages, and is used by the Institute for Conservation Leadership and the National Conservation Training Center (United States) for multiday leadership workshops.

Leaders who inspire a shared vision can paint a picture of what *can be*. They enlist others in crafting and believing in those dreams. They see time and money as resources for achieving goals, rather than resources that are too limited (as is often the mantra in conservation). It is a strategy that has endured in leadership books and articles over the past 20 years (Boylan 1995; Eliatamby 2009; Black *et al.* 2011). In addition, “establish a shared vision” was rated as one of the most important strategies in survey responses (see Table 1).

Values

A manager of a wildlife-abundant protected area in Kenya recalled a leader from a previous job that she admired. She stated “He made it clear that always we must be transparent about the money, and every shilling collected must be with a paper trail.” She later described that this same individual often reminded staff that their primary job was to protect and support wildlife, and that tourism was secondary. “He would tell us that without

wildlife we don’t have tourism so to keep the focus on wildlife and the tourism will come,” she stated.

In this example, the leader adhered to values of financial transparency and wildlife protection, and those values were evident to the staff in day-to-day work. This sentiment aligns with Kouzes and Posner’s (2007) “model the way” strategy in which a leader identifies principles and values that clearly guide the work of the team or organization.

In many conversations with practitioners, individuals’ descriptions of an effective leader often included phrases similar to “practice what they preach,” and “have integrity.” In Albania, a woman who worked for a conservation NGO shared a story about a former leader that she revered for her strong adherence to inclusiveness, and waiting to make a decision until every identified stakeholder had an opportunity to participate. “We made a matrix of stakeholders for our watershed project, and until each one was given an equal chance to give input, they remained (a priority),” she stated.

Outcome #3: *Conflict management and partnership-building* are distinguishing strategies of conservation leadership.

At some point in each of my interviews, examples of conflict emerged. Interviewees discussed the importance of managing conflict and working with stakeholders such as fisherman, pastoralists, farmers, and others. Interviewees often talked about conflict in greater length than other parts of the interview, and advocated for the need for conservation leaders to manage and harness conflict, or what is described as “nurturing productive conflict” in one conservation leadership article (Manolis *et al.* 2008). In addition, conflict management was one of the five strategies that survey respondents rated as the most important (see Table 1).

One of the few books specifically about conservation leadership is *Environmental Leadership Equals Essential Leadership* (Gordon & Berry 2006) and its chapters are often presented in a context of conflict and environmental problems. Its content includes a foundation of common characteristics of environmental problems, and discusses the implications of these for leadership.

In articles and books about leadership more generally, conflict is rarely, if at all, addressed explicitly. Yet, conservation practitioners talked about it at length in our interviews as an important leadership strategy, and it is raised as an important skill in publications about conservation leadership specifically. This is perhaps one aspect in which conservation leadership is distinct from leadership more generally.

The leadership strategy of partnership-building can be considered similarly. Again, interviewees discussed

the critical importance of working with stakeholders to establish common ground and win-win scenarios. This sentiment is also advocated in a number of the limited articles about conservation leadership (see Dietz *et al.* 2004; Wildesen 2012; Beever *et al.* 2014), which is sensible given that desired environmental outcomes can rarely be achieved without successful collaborative multiple entities. Finally, partnership-building was the single highest rated leadership strategy among the 20 options in the survey.

Outcome #4: Adaptive management is a critical leadership strategy in our era of scientific uncertainty.

A number of books and articles addressed the importance of adaptive management for effective leadership. In my interviews, many individuals described the need for leaders to be flexible and willing to change course when circumstances or priorities changed. A colleague from Germany who works for an urban sustainability NGO stated "it's a dynamic environment here. Our priority on one day can be trumped by something unexpected, and a good leader needs to be willing to shuffle those priorities and not be set in his ways."

In case study research about governance and ecosystem systems among protected areas, adaptive management was one of the two key findings in research about strategies of effective governance (Kenward *et al.* 2011). A similar value on adaptive management was advocated by researchers of effective corporate social and environmental responsibility practices (Metcalf & Benn 2013) and climate change (Meijerink & Stiller 2013). For the latter, the authors make the case that with the amount of uncertainty that comes with climate change, adaptive leadership is crucial.

In conservation, scientific uncertainty is a reality. While uncertainty can contribute to inaction (e.g., U.S. Congress and climate change policy), it can also be accepted as an inevitable reality that emphasizes the need for adaptive management, rather than an inhibitor to decision-making. In Wheatley's (2006) book, *Leadership and the New Science*, she makes the case that all organizations exist in an environment of constant and unpredictable change, and therefore adaptive management is not only sensible but imperative.

Discussion

Among the conclusions from this project are a number of important findings. One, there is minimal literature specifically about conservation leadership, which leads to my recommendation to conduct more work in this field. In this article, I have presented some

initial premises: conservation leadership encompasses conflict management and partnership-building, for example (which would be unique to the conservation brand of leadership). It also includes strategies common in widely accepted and broader understandings of leadership (e.g., clear guiding values, a vision for the future). As we embark in this work, we should enlist the expertise of leadership scholars from disciplines such as management and education where much of the current research resides. There is decades of work in leadership, and little of the work in conservation leadership builds from, or even acknowledges it.

It would also behoove our field, academics and practitioners alike, to recognize *conservation leadership* as a term that implies a specific definition and suite of skills and behaviors. Albeit that definition and suite of skills remains unclear, organizations can reflect and evaluate their successes and shortcomings to identify what worked and what failed within their conservation projects, link those outcomes to the behaviors and strategies of individuals, and contribute those reflections to the discourse started here. As a starting point for defining the strategies specific to conservation leadership, and therefore what universities, NGOs, and other capacity builders might include in conservation leadership trainings, this project suggests that conservation leadership includes skills to establish a vision, define and integrate values, manage conflict, build partnerships, and manage adaptively. There is much more to be done, and this article can help trigger further discussion.

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