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PERSPECTIVE

Insights from diplomacy for the prevention and resolution of conservation conflicts

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Abstract

Conflicts between people over conservation are increasing and are likely to become more acute with global change and increased competition for resources. In this article, we add to the toolbox of conservation practitioners trying to prevent and resolve conflicts, often in a local or regional context, with insights and knowledge from the techniques that diplomats employ. These techniques include conflict prevention such as early-warning systems and knowledge gathering for in-depth understanding of conflicts. Conflict resolution is managed through quiet or preventive diplomacy, such as mediation, shuttle diplomacy and arbitration, or the application of external pressures including through media campaigns, legislation and sanctions. We argue that while conservation may in some cases already use these techniques, their application could be more widespread, and conservationists could make greater use of the wealth of resources available to guide the use of those techniques. We conclude with a need for more systematic dissemination and use of these techniques, as well as sharing of experiences of conflict prevention and resolution in conservation to build greater capacity and reduce the negative impacts of conflicts on conservation outcomes and human well-being.

KEYWORDS

conflict, conservation, diplomacy, global change, governance, interdisciplinarity, international relations, politics

1 | INTRODUCTION

Conflicts around conservation and its management are increasing, with negative impacts on people and wildlife (Redpath et al., 2013). Over recent years, there has been a paradigm shift in moving from human-wildlife impacts to "conservation conflicts," which we focus on in this article, defined as conflicts between people with often incompatible values, interests, and goals regarding conservation, and where one party often asserts its interests over the other (Peterson et al., 2010; Young et al., 2010; Redpath et al., 2013). These can include conflicts around moving from production (agricultural, forestry, fisheries) to conservation (Lecuyer et al., 2022; Slee, 2001; Niemela et al., 2005; Henle et al., 2008), rewilding initiatives (Lorimer et al., 2015; Wynne-Jones et al., 2018), large carnivore management (Butler et al., 2015; Salvatori et al., 2021; Mishra et al., 2017), and species reintroductions (O'Rourke, 2014;

Coz & Young, 2020). This shift toward conservation conflicts has led to scientists from a range of disciplines, including social sciences (Bennett et al., 2017; Dickman, 2010; Pooley et al., 2017) and peace studies (Madden & McQuinn, 2014; Bhatia, 2021) and others, coming together with ecologists to study conservation conflicts in a broad and interdisciplinary manner. There remains, however, a real opportunity to learn from even broader but relevant fields, such as diplomacy, in the prevention and resolution of conservation conflicts.

Global change means that access to habitat and water resources by wildlife and people will become increasingly disputed in the future. Accordingly, we expect conservation conflicts to become an increasingly prominent political and societal issue and a risk to safeguarding nature and its benefits to people (Diaz et al., 2018). Disrupting conservation by killing wildlife, degrading ecosystems and attacking conservationists is both a consequence of conflicts as well as a means of destabilizing political and social systems (IUCN, 2021). Threatened species are endangered by armed conflicts that pose another threat to their conservation, adding another layer to already complicated conflicts. An example of such an intertwined layering of political and conservation conflicts emerged during the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar in 2017, when a conflict erupted between conservationists and Rohingya refugees after a herd of elephants used the only migration corridor between Bangladesh and Myanmar where refugees had settled, leading to human deaths and more instability for both refugees and wildlife (IUCN, 2021).

This intertwining of conflicts in a changing world calls for greater sectoral integration and transdisciplinarity (Adams, 2015). Integrative working and mutual learning between the domains of conservation and diplomacy can bring shared, innovative insights. In this article, we argue that the huge wealth of knowledge from diplomacy in political conflict and its resolution should be harnessed more to improve the prevention and resolution of conservation conflicts. This is already apparent in a growing field of diplomacy focused around environmental conflicts at the international scale, referred to as environmental diplomacy, that focuses on the resolution of international disputes over the global environment (e.g., the Antarctic treaty) or treaty processes to manage a shared environmental resource (such as with climate change) (Ali & Vladich, 2016). The latter is also sometimes referred to as conservation or heritage diplomacy, with examples that go as far back as the Inland Fisheries Treaty of 1908 to manage US–Canadian fish populations and the North Pacific Fur Seal Convention of 1911 that led to treaties between Russia, Japan, Canada, and the United States and were in both cases prompted by conservationists who sought international cooperation to address the decline of threatened species (Bogue, 1999). There are also notable examples of conservation contributing to broader diplomatic outcomes and peace building. One initiative using conservation for diplomatic purposes is the establishment of "Parks for Peace." This designation applies to Transboundary Conservation Area dedicated to "the promotion, celebration and or commemoration of peace and cooperation" (Erg et al., 2015). The transboundary conservation areas are established with the long-term goal of sustainable peace building (IUCN, 2021). Another successful example is the establishment of the European Green Belt in 2003. This transnational cooperative initiative was adopted shortly after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the Balkan war, to promote peace and integration in the region. This initiative highlights conservation as a major tool in strengthening diplomatic relations and in postconflict peace-building efforts.

In this article, we focus on insights and knowledge from the techniques that diplomats employ, to help conservation practitioners trying to prevent and resolve conflicts, often in a local or regional context. We acknowledge that those working on conflicts may already use diplomacy techniques, or elements of these techniques, but we argue that the application of these techniques should be more widespread and strategic, and that conservationists could make greater use of the wealth of resources on the use of techniques from the diplomatic sector. We bring together the perspectives, knowledge, and experience of a senior career diplomat with 37 years in the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, a political ecologist with over 20 years of experience studying conservation conflicts and a young researcher in international relations and conflict studies.

1.1 | Conflict prevention through early-warning systems and in-depth understanding of conflicts

Early warning systems already exist for predicting political conflicts, including quantitative modeling (see Austin, 2004 for a review) and qualitative monitoring (e.g., the UN secretariat's early warning capacity). Such systems can provide more in-depth information about an emerging conflict (Ramsbotham et al., 2011) and could help preempt conservation conflicts and their potential negative impacts on conservation, resources and well-being of affected stakeholders (Young et al., 2016). Underlying such early warning systems specifically, and conflict prevention and understanding more broadly, is knowledge gathering—a key resource in and function of diplomacy (Jönsson & Hall, 2003). This can be done through having a presence and open communication channels on the ground. While these sources are harder to tap under repressive regimes,

personal established relationships can glean information from different sources such as local media, government officials, journalists, businessmen, and activists. Even if the outside world has been alerted to a potential conflict through the internet or social media, having someone with enough adequate local knowledge to be able to reach an informed opinion will make a difference to the way—and the rapidity with which—the potential conflict is handled. In addition to presence on the ground, a number of other techniques are used in diplomacy to gather information, including bringing in external experts capable of integrating different forms of knowledge—similar to processes in conservation (see Ainsworth et al., 2020 for an example of bringing scientific and local knowledge together to better understand moorland species trends). Such information gathering does, however, require resources, trust of local actors toward the outside expert, the capacity of the expert to integrate different forms of knowledge and transparency both of the criteria against which external expert are hired and of the research process, engaging with actors throughout. Other techniques used in diplomacy that can support the more in-depth understanding of conservation conflicts include contextualization (i.e., transforming data into relevant information) and condensation (i.e., presenting the information in a concise manner). The latter is similar to certain scientific approaches to synthesize knowledge, for example through systematic review processes (Pullin et al., 2016), or other approaches (see Dick et al., 2017 for 21 approaches to synthesize knowledge for environmental decisions).

Information gathering around a conflict also includes the identification of all relevant stakeholders. This identification is essential and experience shows that omitting or ignoring a stakeholder—who may not be from the immediate region, or is seen as having views that are too "extreme" to be incorporated in conflict resolution—can have disruptive consequences (e.g., Cox et al., 2020; Salvatori et al., 2021). The identification of those stakeholders should also include an understanding of their stake in the conflict and their position, interests and needs, as well as the power dynamics between actors (e.g., Wianti, 2014). This understanding should make it possible to ascertain how keen the parties are to find a solution, and what that solution might look like for them—this is where the definition of goals (and their (in)compatibility) will be crucial (Ramsbotham et al., 2011). The issue of reaching agreement on the facts, or the nature of the conflicts is also key in conservation conflicts, where the interpretation of facts by different stakeholders can be a major stumbling block (e.g., Hodgson et al., 2019) preventing conflict resolution. A key objective in this step will be to create confidence from the outset in the data relating to conflict and the way it is processed, handled, and communicated. Indeed, experience from diplomacy highlights that creating confidence and trust among the stakeholders is a vital ingredient in the progress and eventual success of the entire process of conflict resolution.

1.2 | Conflict resolution through quiet diplomacy and applying external pressure

The aim of conflict resolution, defined for the purposes of this article as the management and transformation of deep-rooted sources of conflict, is to ensure that "behavior is no longer violent, attitudes are no longer hostile and the structure of the conflict has been changed" (Ramsbotham et al., 2011, p. 31). There is a wide range of diplomatic techniques available for conflict resolution, many of which can be relevant to conservation, although considerations are necessary for their application in the conservation context (see Table 1). Table 1 presents these techniques under two broad categories: quiet or preventive diplomacy, and applying external pressure.

Quiet or preventive diplomacy aims to stop conflicts before they escalate to widespread violence (UN, 2011; Zyck & Muggah, 2012). In quiet or preventive diplomacy, there is an emphasis on starting discussions with the stakeholders individually, often through third party involvement ("Mediation" and "Shuttle Diplomacy" in Table 1), either by bringing in a respected local, regional or international figure sufficiently well known to be trusted by parties and thereby acting as a bridge between the stakeholders, and/or outside experts. An example of such third-party involvement in preventive diplomacy was the appointment of the UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes in 2008 after growing tensions and fear of regional war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The negotiator engaged in preventive diplomacy to obtain a negotiated peace in the DRC. By March 2009, the peace talks led to agreements regarding demobilization and disarmament in the Great Lakes region and reopened the dialogue between the DRC and Rwandan presidents as well as formal diplomatic relations. If the situation remained unstable in the region, these talks led to a de-escalation avoiding another regional conflict (UN, 2011). Through these processes, parties need to feel that the rationale for their views has been fully acknowledged. While one may have to wait years until the forces for compromise coalesce, a key lesson from diplomacy is the need to maintain dialogue in order to seize opportunities for progress which may occur. Incentives (Table 1) can also be used such as financial support, for example, through government subsidies; an appeal to a more intangible prize in the shape of enhanced public esteem; or though proposals to fix side issues of concern to one of the parties—not necessarily directly related

TABLE 1 Selected diplomacy techniques relating to conflict resolution, and their applicability in conservation

Diplomacy techniques	Short description	Examples	Considerations for application to conservation
Preventive and quiet diplomacy	***Bringing parties to a joint understanding or agreed outcome to a conflict***		
Mediation	Engage a respected local, regional or international figure to create conditions for the parties to initiate and maintain dialogue, to put forward proposals to resolve the conflict.	The Sustainable Uplands project used mediation to manage a conflict in the UK uplands around overgrazing and managed burning of moorlands (Reed et al., 2015). In Saxony (Germany), the State Minister of the Environment convened a mediation process to address a conflict between coastal protection and nature conservation (Striegnitz, 2006).	Resources for hiring a mediator. Capacity of mediator (knowledge of the context, experience). Known, trusted mediator acceptable to all parties. Engagement from all relevant actors in the mediated process—often in the long term.
Shuttle diplomacy	When direct contact between the parties is impossible, involve an impartial figure to try to reconcile the objectives of the parties by seeking concessions and creating common ground.	Shuttle diplomacy was used in the Sage-Grouse Conservation Partnership in eastern Oregon's sagebrush range, where the aim was to bring federal, state, and private stakeholders to address landscape-scale threats to greater sage-grouse while ensuring rural economic and community interests. A project manager progressed the discussions through shuttle diplomacy that contributed to subgroups negotiating components of the overall outcome (Allen et al., 2017).	Impartial person acceptable to all parties. Willingness and availability of impartial person to engage in the process. Knowledge of the impartial person of the conflict context and actors (either from the start, or following a data gathering period). Clarity of methodology used by impartial person in shuttle diplomacy. Agreement from the part of the relevant actors on confidentiality of the talks with the impartial figure.
Incentives	Provide financial support, enhanced public esteem; or proposals to fix side issues of concern to one of the parties.	Conservation NGOs have been known to address side issues of concern to the communities such as education or healthcare to build trust with local communities ahead of or as part of developing conservation contracts (Mishra et al., 2017).	Access to funding or other resources (e.g., media to publicize your stance) supporting the incentives. Understanding the needs of the stakeholders to offer relevant incentives. Transparency on the continuity of the incentives (to avoid overreliance on incentives).

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Diplomacy techniques	Short description	Examples	Considerations for application to conservation
Arbitration	Refer the dispute to an international court or tribunal.	In 2010, Australia instituted proceedings against Japan, in breach of obligations assumed by Japan under the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling ("ICRW"), as well as its other international obligations for the preservation of marine mammals and the marine environment. Having found that Japan had indeed breached some of the provisions of the convention, Japan was ordered to revoke any extant authorization, permit or license to kill, or take whales in relation to it, and to refrain from granting any further permits (ICJ, 2014).	Capacity of actors to know and engage with the international legislative process. Time and resources, often over years—risk of long, drawn-out process. Risk that one party is unhappy with or ignores the outcome, perpetuating the conflict.
Outside pressure	***Forms of leverage to force an outcome to a conflict***		
Media campaign	Start a campaign locally (and, if necessary, more widely) in the press, TV and social media, to create public pressure.	The Yasunidos movement in Ecuador went against the government's decision to drill for oil in the Amazon through a media campaign dwarfed by the resources of the government (Coryat, 2015).	Resources for (sustained) media campaign. Capacity of local actors to manage a media campaign (and potential negative repercussions). Difficulties in controlling media campaign: unknown outcomes—including counter-campaigns, lack of visibility or change.
Lobbying	Attempt by individual(s) or private interest group to influence the decisions of government or the legislature.	Using glue sticks to catch thrushes continued in France until June 2021, due in large part to a strong hunting lobby claiming the practice to be a centuries-old rural tradition and leading the French Government to authorize the practice under exemptions to the Birds Directive (Fay, 2021).	Resources (access leading to influence, money)—bearing in mind that others might have more. Risk of turning into unproductive battle between competing lobbies, ending in stalemate.

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Diplomacy techniques	Short description	Examples	Considerations for application to conservation
Legislation	At national level, pass legislation affecting the dispute or a related issue—often as a result of lobbying (see above).	The Clean Air Act of 1956 was enacted after debates on the effects of air pollution in the UK. The British Electricity Authority, an important contributor to air pollution criticized the findings of the Beaver Committee, appointed to investigate the phenomenon. Following the recommendations of the Committee and ignoring the economic pressure, the government passed the legislation to regulate air pollutants.	Capacity of actors to know and engage with the national legislative process. Time and resources, often over years—risk of long, drawn-out process. Legislation might not pass, might only cover parts of what was expected, or be reversed. Risk that one party is unhappy with or ignores the outcome, perpetuating the conflict. Lack of flexibility of legislation, potentially not reflecting changes.
Sanctions	Have recourse to international bodies (e.g., UN or other international bodies) or national government to impose sanctions (for example, in the form of a ban) aimed at forcing one or more of the parties to compromise.	In 2003, the UN imposed sanctions on timber exports from Liberia, in order to prevent the Taylor regime from funding arms with which to destabilize its neighbors. By imposing a Conservation Order in 2002, the Scottish Government triggered a crisis point by banning all shooting of seals, which led to a bottom-up conflict management process to develop a management plan (Young et al., 2010).	Capacity of actors to know and engage with the international political process. Once the issue has been passed to the international body, local actors have limited control. Short-term nature of sanctions. Not relevant to all conservation conflicts.
International treaties	Negotiate a formal, binding agreement between actors under international law, e.g., states, international organizations.	In the 1980s, concern grew regarding the commercial interest in Antarctic krill resources and the over exploitation of other marine resources in the Antarctic Ocean. As a result, the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine living resources was created, and it entered into force in April 1982 to support the conservation of marine living resources (CCAMLR, 2021).	Capacity of actors to know and engage with the international political process. Not relevant to all conservation conflicts: Issue at stake needs to have an international dimension. Responsibility for policing treaties is at national level.

to the conflict, but a solution to which would help the party accept a consensus on the wider issue. Should such approaches prove unsuccessful, conflicts can be referred to an international court or tribunal through arbitration (Table 1).

In addition to quiet diplomacy approaches, there may be situations where applying outside pressure may be appropriate in conservation conflicts, in the form of media campaigns and/or intervention or support from, for example, a foreign government or grouping such as the European Union or an international organization, or through administrative or legislative action (see second half of Table 1). Pressure on the parties in the form of administrative action or legislation designed to force them to negotiate should be considered a last resort, but may, if the timing is right, trigger a positive response (see examples in Table 1). Similarly, if a local conflict has an international dimension, governments may consider imposing sanctions on one or more of the parties, or may seek to address the issue in international treaties. Such "hammers" have been used in both conservation and diplomacy, but must be wielded with care because of potential unintended consequences, and the fact that agreements reached under duress are not always durable. It is also important here to add another caveat: conservation conflict resolution in many countries occurs within a defined and often very strict regulatory and legal framework, which influences the outcomes of negotiations. However, not all countries have the same levels of regulatory frameworks, or the same approaches in implementing regulations. This has an impact, of course, in terms of if and how to apply "outside pressure," and the extent to which such pressure can influence conflict management.

2 | DISCUSSION

There are a number of examples where techniques from diplomacy are already used by conservationists working in local or regional contexts. In terms of conflict understanding, while conservationists are perhaps less experienced in using early warning systems, there is evidence that they apply approaches to better identify relevant stakeholders (Salvatori et al., 2021; Young et al., 2012; Mishra et al., 2017), integrate different sources of knowledge (Harrison & Loring, 2020; Hodgson et al., 2019; Pouwels et al., 2011; Torrents-Ticó et al., 2021; Young et al., 2021) and identify possible joint solutions (Ainsworth et al., 2020; Baynham-Herd et al., 2018; Skrimizea et al., 2020). In terms of conflict resolution, there are also excellent examples of conservationists at the local or regional scales using elements of preventive diplomacy such as mediation and shuttle diplomacy, as well as applying external pressure.

Through the examples in this article, we aim to highlight these approaches used by conservationists and draw attention to the huge wealth of information from diplomacy on how to better apply these techniques. As such, we argue that the techniques mentioned above should be disseminated more widely and systematically, as should lessons be drawn from the successes and failures of conflict prevention and resolution in conservation. We acknowledge that the toolbox used by conservationists involved in conflict is growing. Diplomacy techniques can further add to this toolbox, but need to be compiled and further reflected on in terms of their use in conservation: What techniques are relevant or effective in which contexts? What were the conditions that needed to be in place for diplomacy techniques to work? This perspectives article aims to open this debate and encourage sharing of experiences of conflict prevention and resolution, but also experiences of the techniques used from different sectors and more broadly compiling evidence for the effectiveness of different approaches, so that we can better target approaches and techniques to minimize the negative impacts of conflicts.

As part of this broader capacity building, diplomats in any given country could have a role in providing training for conservationists on diplomacy techniques relevant to conservationists. Such an approach could be included as part of international aid programs of the EU for example, where a general training framework programs could be developed (in cooperation with key actors involved in conservation conflicts such as NGOs and statutory organizations) and adapted to allow flexibility depending on the country selected and the types of organizations interested in the training. Such an approach, which would of course have to be carried out with the knowledge and support of the national hosting government, could also be of great benefit to diplomats, in terms of building relations with organizations involved in conservation, but also increasing knowledge of grass-root concerns (not only over conservation), which in turn can build capacity of preempting or preventing other potential conflicts. Alternatively, these specialist skills might demand a new niche profession, thereby reducing the already high demands placed on conservationists and acknowledging often stretched conservation budgets.

To conclude, while conservationists continuously broaden their scope and evidence-base, we still have much to learn from other sectors, especially as global change is increasingly leading to competition from people and wildlife for resources. Conservation conflicts will become a more prominent political and societal issue requiring improved management and greater sectoral integration to avoid the degradation of the benefits that people derive from nature. This intertwining of political and conservation conflicts in a changing world calls for

greater integration and mutual learning between domains of conservation and diplomacy. This could be achieved at different levels, from the more systematic dissemination and use of diplomatic techniques in conservation, to training by diplomats of conservation practitioners working on the ground. We argue that such learning can improve conflict prevention and resolution, acknowledging that this process is not about creating a new discipline but rather rethinking and broadening existing toolboxes.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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