Powerbiodiv

Narratives

Staying in the Room: Stories of Power and Participation in Conservation

About

This booklet brings together a set of real-world case studies, each exploring how participatory processes unfold in conservation settings — and how power is entangled in every step.

Written by those directly involved in or observing these processes, these stories come from landscapes as varied as the Andes, the Pyrenees, the Scottish moors, and the forests of Mexico. They describe efforts to bring together communities, governments, scientists, and civil society actors to co-create responses to complex environmental challenges.

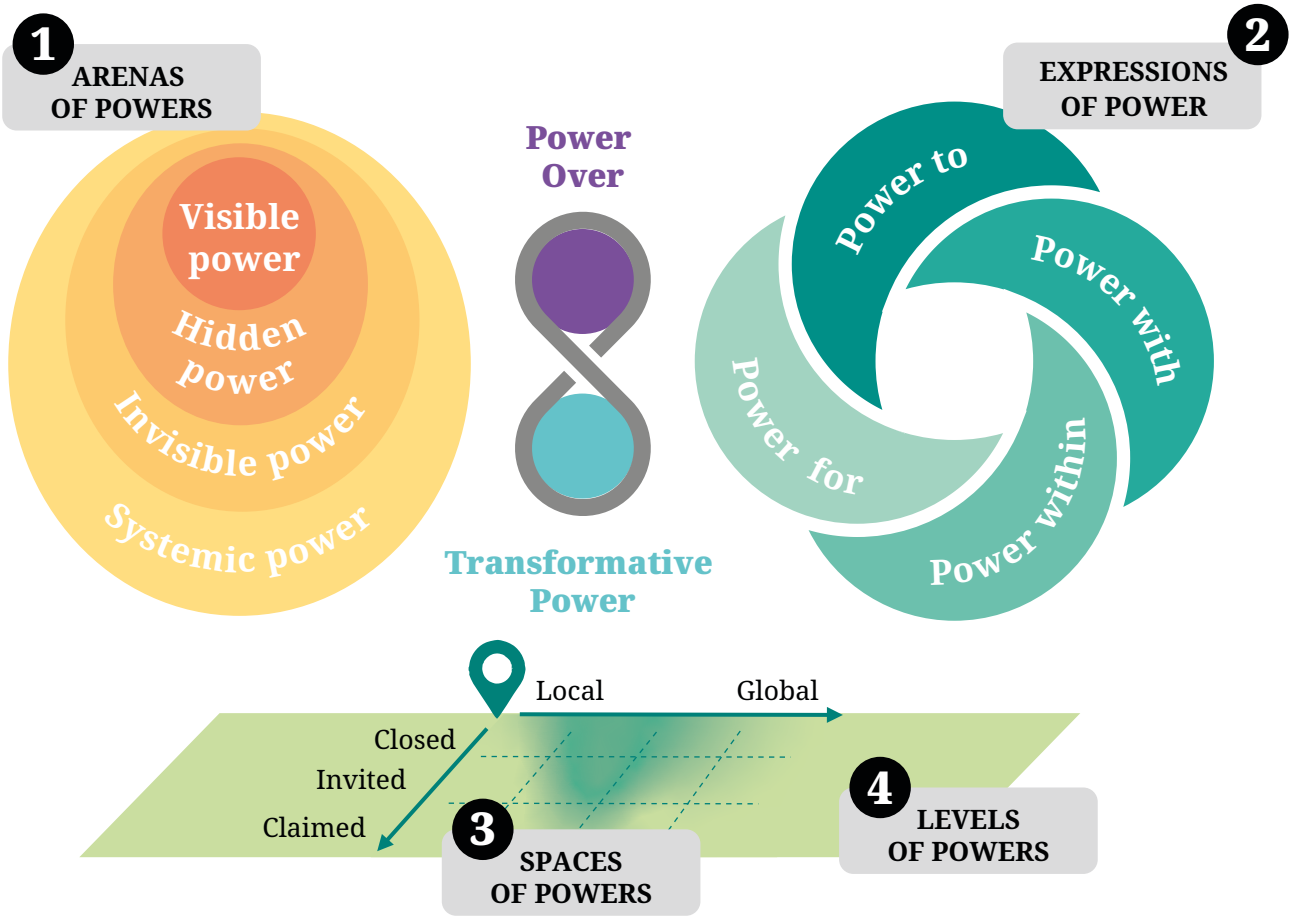
But more than technical achievements or policy innovations, these stories highlight the relational, emotional, and political dimensions of participation. They show that trust takes time. That silence and absence can be forms of power. That listening well matters. And that small shifts — a new question, a reframed agenda, a handwritten agreement — can carry the seeds of transformative change.

These narratives were written in the context of the **PowerBiodiv project**, an initiative aimed at exploring how participatory biodiversity governance can be made more just and inclusive by attending explicitly to power. If you wish to learn more about the **power framework** and its **different dimensions** *(see next page)*, we invite you to consult the accompanying "Tool for Though" developed as part of the same project.

We hope these stories invite you not only to reflect, but to stay in the room — and keep working toward more power aware and grounded forms of conservation.

Figure

Multiple dimensions of power framework adapted from JASS (2024) and from the Institute of Development Studies (Gaventa, 2006) and the Power Cube (https://www.powercube.net). See original in Lecuyer et al. (2024)



1 ARENAS OF POWERS

- **Visible power** making and enforcing the rules
- **Hidden power** influencing and setting the agenda
- **Invisible power** shaping norms and beliefs
- **Systemic power** defining the logic of all structures and relationships

2 EXPRESSIONS OF POWER

- **Power to** the potential to speak and take action
- **Power with** collective strength and action
- **Power within** self-worth and self-knowledge
- **Power for** combined vision, values and demands

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1

Shared Foxes, Shared Questions: Navigating Wildlife Conflict in the Jura, France

1. Shared Foxes, Shared Questions: Navigating Wildlife Conflict in the Jura, France

From the perspective of Simon Calla

In the rural landscapes of Doubs, France, a fox ignited a firestorm—not the animal itself, but the debate it symbolized. When the national list of "likely to cause damage" species came up for revision in 2018, tensions flared between those seeking the fox's removal and others defending its ecological value and right to exist. Hunters and farmers described foxes as nuisances—predators of poultry, transmitters of disease, and destroyers of game populations. On the other side, environmentalists and some farmers pointed to their role in controlling voles, reducing the spread of Lyme disease, and balancing fragile ecosystems. For them, the fox was more ally than adversary.

What unfolded next was unexpected. Instead of escalating into another deadlocked standoff, the conflict opened space for something different—a participatory scientific experiment.

The spark came from an ecologist known and respected by all sides. Drawing on long-standing personal relationships and trust, he proposed a shared research initiative to study the actual ecological impact of foxes. It was a bold move: a process grounded in science, but fueled by dialogue and co-construction. And, remarkably, everyone agreed to take part.

Three traditionally adversarial groups—farmers, hunters, and environmentalists—joined forces. Each took responsibility for a work package, depending on their expertise: monitoring fox presence, documenting bird and hare populations, tracking vole damage, assessing the risk of echinococcus transmission, and more. The methodology wasn't imposed from above—it was built collectively. This opened space for a power with dynamic to emerge, showing how even unlikely alliances can form when a shared process creates space for all voices.

But collaboration did not mean that power disappeared.

Visible power shaped the institutional context. The formal listing of species as "likely to cause damage" happens behind closed doors—every three years, in a government-hosted meeting where hunting and agricultural representatives dominate. Environmental voices are in the minority. This decision-making arena—a classic **closed space**—continues to have far-reaching implications for wildlife policy. The participatory process could not alter this legal structure, but it created a parallel space where different kinds of influence could take root.

Hidden power also ran through the group. Gendered dynamics were observed—women spoke less and were less assertive during meetings. Past hierarchies subtly influenced interactions too, particularly where former teacher–student relationships existed among participants. These quiet forms of influence mattered, even as the group worked toward a shared objective.

To navigate these complexities, the facilitation team introduced an ethics charter—a document affirming scientific neutrality, confidentiality, and a ban on introducing unrelated conflicts (like debates over other species). This wasn't just a symbolic gesture; it helped participants feel safe, grounded, and respected. The process was also kept open and adaptive, welcoming new contributors and refining methods collaboratively.

Conflict over foxes—especially damage to poultry—remained the emotional core of the issue. Yet even here, the group agreed on a common protocol: a jointly designed survey to assess the real extent of such damage. Co-producing the tools of knowledge helped dismantle suspicion and created room for mutual legitimacy—a form of **power to** make decisions rooted in shared evidence, not just opinion or positional authority.

Over time, trust grew. Meetings became warmer, even occasionally punctuated by shared laughter. Informal moments—like communal meals or end-of-year celebrations—helped soften entrenched positions. As one environmentalist put it, reflecting on the scientist's role:

"He's there, he orchestrates everything, he channels everything, he puts safeguards in place so that it doesn't go out of control. That's what's good."

Tangible outcomes included a scientific article co-authored by representatives of all three groups—an outcome few would have imagined possible at the beginning. Intangibly, the process shifted relationships: from guarded and oppositional to cooperative and, in some cases, friendly.

Still, the process offered important lessons.

Participatory processes don't materialize just because they are needed or proclaimed. They require groundwork—trust, existing relationships, and local relevance. They must also remain flexible, capable of adapting to new questions and new contributors. Most importantly, they must not reproduce the power imbalances they seek to address. Facilitating such spaces demands attentiveness not just to the loudest voices, but also to the subtle dynamics—invisible power, gender norms, past alliances—that shape who feels entitled to speak and be heard.

In Doubs, the fox debate is far from resolved. But something shifted. A new kind of space was created—one where adversaries became co-researchers, and where science became a bridge, not a battleground. In a landscape so often marked by division, that shift matters.

2

Dialoguing about Wolves in the Lüneburg Heath, Germany

2. Dialoguing about Wolves in the Lüneburg Heath, Germany

From the perspective of Yorck von Korff

In the forests an pastures of the Lüneburg Heath wolves began to return in 2006. Their numbers grew and in 2019/20 there were 23 confirmed packs. Their presence brought ecological interest but also tension and anger—especially for livestock keepers. The state ("Land") of Lower Saxony had tried before to dialogue wolf management on the level of the Land, but livestock keepers had eventually walked out. In 2019 another professionally facilitated dialogue platform started, this time on the level of the geographical (not administrative) area of the Lüneburg Heath, aiming to bridge divides between shepherds, conservationists, hunters, state authorities, and others.

The process was launched by an EU project team, with funding and backing from the EU but also with support from officials in the Lower Saxony ministries of environment and agriculture. These institutions held **visible power** to set agendas, validate participation, and ultimately determine whether the dialogue's recommendations would be heard. A diverse group was assembled: administrators, tourism actors, environmentalists, hunters, foresters, and livestock keepers.

By hindsight not enough care was taken by the project team to assure that a constructively working social body could evolve: Some of the group members were divided by deep mistrust due to personal history. This – despite initial interviews - only became apparent later. Thus, **power to and power with** of the assembled group were much more unlikely.

The choice of a government owned nature retreat site at Schneverdingen as a central venue made logistical sense and convinced also from the fact that the two mentioned ministries invited the stakeholders in this case.

However, the geographical boundary of the Lüneburg Heath for treating the wolf issue emerged as an unfortunate choice because it was administratively in between the Land of Lower Saxony and its much smaller districts. Therefore, there was repeatedly uncertainty in the group on what administrative level wolf management was and should be dialogued—a reminder that the **level of power**, embedded in how area are defined and managed, can impact clarity on such an issue as wolf management that involves administrative and legal aspects.

To support the dialogue, a "peace obligation" was introduced—an informal pact among participants to avoid public attacks, legal action or media escalation. This was meant to contain conflict within the room and build **power with** through trust. Alongside, the facilitation team adopted a consensus-based approach, as all other possibilities (such as voting) would not have worked. De facto it meant veto power for each participant. So, within the group there was no power over (except for participants belonging to hierarchical lines for example in the same ministry).

In the first four meetings participants got to know each other, explored positions and perspectives, and determined sub-topics to be addressed. A critical issue was the lethal removal of wolves. After some hesitation, all participants finally agreed to dialogue the issue. One agreement that emerged was that "The wolf can stay," There was, however, disagreement on how many wolved should be allowed to stay. Nevertheless, for a moment, it seemed the group might reach common ground – even on how to handle removing (shooting) wolves.

Then, after meeting 4, the Covid Pandemic struck and meetings – so far on a monthly rhythm – had to be suspended.

During this period a ministerial decision was made—outside of the platform—to authorize the removal of some wolves, an assertion of **power over** the process (possibly without being aware of this), disregarding its fragile trust-based commitments. For some participants, especially those advocating coexistence, this act violated the peace obligation and undermined the integrity of the process. Some participants started to sue the ministry. Group meetings were not possible during this period.

By Meeting 5, about five months after the previous, whatever had been there in initial trust had fractured. The livestock keepers withdrew in an apparently coordinated move. Others then questioned the platform's value. The carefully built structure—consensus, peace pact, facilitated dialogue—could not hold in the face of powerful external decisions. The platform ended before final outputs could be agreed.

To say that the Covid pandemic was the only cause for limited results, would miss out on other factors.

The person in the ministry of the environment who had agreed on the process initially was replaced with somebody with another political outlook. This created some distrust among nature activists.

There was at least one ill-guided choice of facilitation method (in this case a systemic constellation) from the main facilitator: Not everybody felt at ease with the selection of systemic constellations as a method in one of the sessions - a sign of in **visible power** at play, where assumed norms around communication, reflection, and participation didn't resonate with participants' expectations or comfort zones

Then it was not clear if all stakeholders were genuinely interested in agreeing on something.

Some of them appeared to pursue political lobbying at the same time and they may have hoped to obtain what they wanted rather in this way.

There were some lessons for platform organizers:

If you can, obtain agreement on the process (e.g. the peace obligation) personally and directly from the top decision maker.

Have a project team that involves local stakeholders in order to select diverse participants but only such parties that can at least imagine a potential cooperation (unless the dialogue iself is seen as sufficient by everybody) .

Select facilitation methods that are always acceptable to all parties

3

Voices from the Valley: Co-constructing Just Land-Use Transformations in the Pyrenees, France

3. Voices from the Valley: Co-constructing Just Land-Use Transformations in the Pyrenees, France

From the perspective of Cécile Barnaud

Deep in the Pyrenees mountains, in the Ariège region, in a valley shaped by centuries of pastoral life, farmers and other inhabitants were about to engage in an unusual process, sharing stories and preoccupations about the future of their valley in the context of climate change. Like so many others, this valley has been sculpted by extensive livestock farming, with herds grazing the high summer pastures, or estives. And like many such valleys, there is a broad consensus — at least on the surface — around the idea that livestock farming has to be maintained to prevent shrub encroachment and spontaneous forest regrowth, a process known locally as the "closing in" of the landscape. Pastoralism has thus been strongly supported by public policies and local institutions for its role in maintaining open landscapes and preserving their rich biodiversity.

In 2021, a small team of researchers arrived in the valley as part of a collaborative project with the regional natural park of the Ariège Pyrenees. The project set out to explore how rural landscapes might transform to contribute to climate change mitigation – and looked at these transformations through the lens of environmental justice. More trees to capture carbon, fewer livestock to reduce greenhouse gas emissions: would such transformation be seen as just by the people who live and work in this mountainous region? Would new climate imperatives challenge or destabilize the local consensus around pastoralism?

With these questions in mind, the researchers began meeting the valley's inhabitants — livestock farmers, market gardeners, local officials, institutional actors at the departmental and regional levels, residents. The aim was to design participatory workshops that would give these people space to explore and voice what, to them, just transformations in land use might look like in the face of climate change. To begin, the team spent a year conducting individual interviews, seeking to understand the diversity of perspectives, farming practices, and social dynamics in the valley.

They met traditional livestock farmers who, despite institutional support, were feeling unheard. Climate discourses left them with a sense of being misunderstood, even looked down upon. They felt that the unique nature of their pastoral practices — and the identity tied to them — wasn't being recognised. But before long, the researchers began hearing other voices, too — voices with different justice claims.

These came from small, diversified farms, often run by newcomers to the region — *neo-rurals* — who were developing alternative farming models: vegetable growing, fruit production, small-scale goat or sheep farming, usually with direct sales through short supply chains. These farms receive little support from the Common Agricultural Policy - that's an expression of **visible power.** And through more insidious forms of **invisible power**, they struggle to access land — especially the flatter plots in the valley bottoms, occupied by the hay meadows of the livestock farmers. Often dismissed, these alternative farming projects are viewed as unprofessional, not serious — mere "lifestyle choices," even "gardening". This is a form of **invisible power**. But it's a vicious cycle: they're seen as economically unviable precisely because they're so poorly supported by public policy. That is **systemic power** at work.

The research team found itself facing a dilemma. Should they support the small diversified farms, often marginalised? But the livestock farmers also had legitimate claims. In addition, taking sides would only deepen the strong divide between the two groups – a divide that prevented them from engaging in dialogue about the future of their valley. So the team took another path: one that would make all these voices heard, and try to get them talking to each other. Their stance wasn't neutral though — they were deeply attentive to power asymmetries, and actively worked to create conditions where diverse voices could be expressed in every workshop. Paradoxically, it was often the traditional livestock farmers who needed the most support to feel comfortable speaking up, notably because they were less numerous in the workshops.

Over the next two years, the team facilitated a series of workshops. Slowly, they brought together people who, though living in the same valley, had never spoken to one another. The three main workshops were held in neutral public spaces — such as the village hall — large enough to host the 20 to 40 persons who came to the workshops. The first workshop focused on identifying problems; the second, on exploring possible solutions; the third, on defining concrete levers for action. Together, participants co-wrote a set of proposals, which the team compiled into a manifesto — a document they would share with local officials and institutions.

Between the first and second workshops, there was a different kind of gathering, an unusual interlude. No sticky notes, no facilitation tools. Just eight residents, carefully chosen to represent different visions, sitting together under a walnut tree in the garden of a local community hub. Guided by a writer, they took part in creative writing exercises, expressing and sharing emotions, values, and attachments — a space for slower, deeper connection with each other.

At each workshop, a filmmaker was present — discreet, with his camera. He followed the process from beginning to end and created a powerful documentary: Tomorrow, the Valley.

All in all, these workshops fostered new connections, mutual understanding and even mutual empathy – they increased their **power for and power with**. Participants began to move beyond entrenched divides. The final manifesto they had built together reflected a wide spectrum of perspectives in the valley.

But when the team presented it to elected officials and institutions, the reactions were starkly divided. Some welcomed it and supported it. Others dismissed it harshly, accusing the process of being activist, unscientific. Some powerful actors who never joined the workshops - despite being invited- said that the process was not valid since they were not present - a classic empty chair strategy. This was **hidden power** at work.

By giving voice to diversity, including to marginalised voices, the project disrupted existing power dynamics. And because it gained visibility — through the film, through the manifesto — it became uncomfortable for those in power. The research team started to realize that they might have triggered **transformative power**.

Locally, the story was different, showing other forms of **transformative power** at work. Participants rallied around the process. Proud of what they had built together, empowered by the film that brought it to light – that is **power within** - they crossed old divides, created a new association bringing together a wide range of producers — market gardeners and livestock farmers alike — and began putting some of their shared proposals into practice, especially around short food supply chains. That was **power to**.

The lesson of this story is that polarizations kill the creative potential of conflicts. And in such polarized words, there is no such thing like science or facilitation neutrality – maintaining the status quo is no more neutral than transformative change.

4

Building Dialogue for Wolf–Livestock Coexistence in Grosseto, Italy

4. Building Dialogue for Wolf–Livestock Coexistence in Grosseto, Italy

From the perspective of Valeria Salvatori

In the agricultural heartland of Grosseto, Tuscany—where livestock breeding is both a livelihood and a legacy—the return of the wolf was met with rising tension. Once rare, wolves began to resurface in the late 1990s, leading to more frequent livestock depredations. Compensation schemes were introduced, but deemed inadequate or slow. In response, retaliation—including illegal killings—persisted.

From 2012 to 2017, the LIFE MEDWOLF project sought to change this. Designed to reduce wolf–livestock conflict, it brought together institutions from Italy and Portugal, blending research with on-the-ground action. The initiatives ranged from distributing livestock guarding dogs and setting up night enclosures to holding international workshops and monitoring wolf numbers.

But the shift didn't come from interventions alone—it came from creating space for shared dialogue.

In 2018, a local dialogue platform was launched in Grosseto. The aim: to move beyond technical fixes and build mutual understanding between often-opposing groups—livestock breeders, hunters, environmental NGOs, animal welfare advocates, and government actors.

Over two years, the process unfolded through eight meetings, involving between 15 and 35 participants at a time. A professional facilitator guided the discussions, held in the neutral and familiar setting of the local Natural History Museum. For the first time, individuals who had long viewed each other with suspicion sat in the same room, searching for common ground.

At first, power dynamics at different **level** loomed large. While the process gave voice to local actors, it struggled to influence decisions at regional or national levels. One lesson later acknowledged: the assumption that local actors would transfer insights upwards proved optimistic. More structured engagement with outer circles of influence might have helped broaden impact.

Hidden power was also at play. A powerful and vocal group that rejected wolf coexistence refused to participate officially. They maintained informal contact but worked publicly to delegitimize the process—especially in the eyes of regional authorities. Their absence limited the completeness of the dialogue, even as it gave space for other, more constructive voices to be heard.

Still, much was achieved.

Through facilitated meetings, participants co-designed a shared plan for improving coexistence. Farmers, once skeptical, reported gaining a deeper understanding of others' perspectives—and of wolf ecology itself.

Perhaps most powerfully, Grosseto became a model. Livestock breeders from the region now share their experience and technical knowledge in other Italian regions, offering testimony that respectful dialogue—even on the thorniest issues—can yield trust, insight, and lasting change

5

Designing Shared Agreements for Jaguar Conservation in Calakmul, Mexico

5. Designing Shared Agreements for Jaguar Conservation in Calakmul, Mexico

From the perspective of Lou Lecuyer

In Calakmul, where dense forests shelter one of Mexico's largest jaguar populations, the relationship between people, livestock, and big cats has always been delicate.

Livestock losses—sometimes due to jaguar attacks, but more often to disease—have created a sense of unease among local ranchers, complicating conservation efforts that rely on trust and shared commitment.

To respond, a new initiative was launched: the creation of a Mobile Veterinary Unit (MVU) to support ranchers' animal health, while also advancing jaguar protection under a One Health approach.

But if this idea was to succeed, it would need more than good intentions—it would require participation, shared responsibility, and new ways of working together.

At the heart of this effort were six participatory workshops, held in the first two months of the project, across strategic communities where jaguar predation and livestock illness were most frequent.

The goal was ambitious: to co-design agreements that outlined what ranchers expected from the MVU, and what they would commit to in return—including not killing jaguars and adopting improved management practices.

The workshops took place in communal rooms—sometimes spacious, sometimes cramped—but familiar and neutral spaces.

Participation varied. In some gatherings, energy ran high. In others, ranchers listened politely but hesitated to speak, often adopting the stance of observers rather than active co-creators.

This reflected a common dynamic of i**nvisible and hidden power**—years of being told rather than asked, a culture of external projects arriving with pre-set plans, and the deference often given to technical experts.

One challenge became clear: while facilitators asked open-ended questions to prompt reflection, the project veterinarian, accustomed to an expert role, would often answer first—limiting space for others to contribute.

Another unexpected barrier arose: in several workshops, some participants had limited literacy, making written tools like post-its ineffective. Activities were quickly adapted to rely more on oral exchanges, ensuring that all voices could be heard.

Despite these challenges, the process moved forward. Ranchers gradually shaped the content of their own participatory agreements, deciding together which veterinary services they needed and what responsibilities they would take on.

One workshop stood out: where women were present in greater numbers, the dynamic shifted. They took the lead in discussions and brought strong proposals to the table—an unexpected and powerful example of **power within** emerging in the space.

By the end of this initial stage, the process had already produced concrete outcomes. Ten agreements were signed across eleven communities, engaging a total of sixty-seven ranchers. Through these agreements, ranchers pledged not to kill jaguars or pumas, even in the face of continued livestock losses. The project team responded with targeted trainings and individualized veterinary support, all rooted in the co-designed commitments that had emerged from the workshops.

Perhaps most remarkably, over the two years that followed, no retaliatory killings were reported among the participating ranchers. In fact, some even persuaded neighbors to avoid killing jaguars after attacks—a subtle but meaningful shift in norms and relationships.

Through this process, new forms of **power with** began to take root: solidarity around shared solutions, collective pride in shaping local strategies, and growing confidence in addressing conservation challenges from within.

Yet limits remained.

Efforts to promote collective action, such as group medicine purchases or equipment sharing, faced difficulties. Ranchers, juggling multiple livelihood activities and unfamiliar with joint decision-making in livestock contexts, were hesitant to coordinate or shift long-standing habits.

This points to the need for longer-term engagement—changing structural conditions and collective behaviors takes time.

Still, something important began here.

The project didn't just deliver services—it opened space for reflection, adaptation, and the gradual reshaping of relationships between people, cattle, and wild cats.

It offered a reminder that power doesn't only show up in big moments.

Sometimes, it begins with a slowed conversation, a new question, or an agreement shaped by many hands

6

Co-producing local and scientific knowledge for ground-nesting bird conservation in Scotland, UK

6. Co-producing local and scientific knowledge for ground-nesting bird conservation in Scotland, UK

From the perspective of Juliette Young

For many years, there has been a deep-rooted conflict in Scotland between efforts to conserve the hen harrier—a protected bird of prey—and the interests of those involved in game shooting, particularly grouse shooting. To help ease this tension and find common ground, the Scottish Government launched the *Understanding Predation (UP)* project in 2015. This two-year initiative, run by the Moorland Forum, aimed to shift the conversation from confrontation to collaboration.

As far back as 2005, a scientific review had examined trends in Scotland's ground-nesting birds, but the findings hadn't been widely used by those shaping policy or working on the ground. With this in mind, the UP project chose to focus more broadly on ground-nesting birds rather than directly on hen harriers. This allowed for a less charged discussion while still addressing important conservation issues in moorland areas.

A key goal of the UP project was to create a shared, accessible evidence base. This meant bringing together both scientific research and the local knowledge of people living and working in the moorlands. The idea was to highlight where these two sources of knowledge agreed, where they differed, and why. By doing this, the project hoped to foster mutual understanding and help shape better-informed decisions.

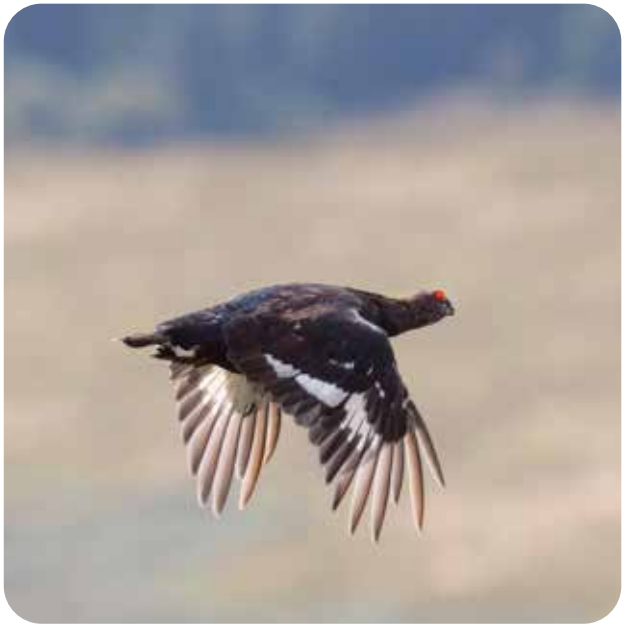
To gather information, the project team—made up of both natural and social scientists—engaged with a wide range of stakeholders. This included 400 people who completed online questionnaires, 62 gamekeepers who participated in nine focus groups, and representatives from over 50 organisations who attended four seminars across Scotland. These gatherings allowed people to share their perspectives, review findings, and agree on practical steps forward.

The project was rooted in local values and guided by community input. It had a strong link to policy through its connection with the Moorland Forum, which acted as a bridge between science and land management. A steering group of eight Forum member organisations provided valuable oversight, helping to shape the research from beginning to end.

Power dynamics were felt within the project team itself. At the beginning, some senior natural scientists were skeptical about incorporating local ecological knowledge, viewing it as anecdotal and less credible than formal science – a form of **invisible power** biasing "proper science" over other forms of knowledge. This created tension and forced social scientists on the team to show **power to** and to advocate strongly for a knowledge co-production approach—one that valued both types of knowledge equally. Through behind-the-scenes negotiation and by drawing on successful examples from elsewhere, they were eventually able to convince their colleagues.

This co-production approach proved crucial. For many participants, it was the first time they felt their local knowledge had been genuinely heard and included in a scientific process. Different methods were used to ensure that everyone could take part in a way that worked for them, such as focus groups for gamekeepers and online surveys for others. Despite efforts to be inclusive, not all voices were heard. Some important organisations, including parts of the farming community, chose not to participate. Attempts to involve them fell flat, possibly because the issues being discussed weren't seen as priorities by farmers. Their absence may also reflect deeper power imbalances—some groups had more resources, time, and legitimacy in the eyes of others, which affected their ability or willingness to engage.

The most important outcomes of the project were a shared list of priority actions for conserving ground-nesting birds and the launch of a new initiative called Working for Waders to put those actions into practice. The shared action plan was not just a list of priorities—it reflected an emerging form of **power with**: mutual respect among people who had rarely spoken the same language, professionally or culturally."



Looking back, it can be surprising to see such resistance to co-production—even among scientific colleagues. We had assumed everyone agreed on its importance and were taken aback to find the main debate was not about how to do it, but whether it should be done at all. The experience highlighted the power imbalances between disciplines, seniority levels, genders, and types of knowledge. It was a hard lesson—but one that brought greater awareness and new skills to navigate future challenges more effectively.

"No one from our industry [hunting], no one's willing to talk about the taboo subject of raptors and the issues that we have with them. So, for me this is a step forward; it's brilliant"

The experience showed that co-production is not just about tools or formats—it's about shifting power relations within conservation itself.

2

Negotiating Conservation from the Ground Up: Planning for Cheetah and Wild Dog in Zambia

7. Negotiating Conservation from the Ground Up: Planning for Cheetah and Wild Dog in Zambia

From the perspective of Gianetta Butler

In 2009, Zambia hosted a national workshop that was part of a wider Southern African effort to secure the future of cheetahs and wild dogs—species struggling to survive in fragmented and often hostile landscapes. The workshop was part of a regional initiative launched after 2007, aimed at aligning national conservation strategies with a broader regional plan. The process had been developed by the IUCN Cat Specialist Group, with facilitation guidelines and action plan templates already developed focused on the conservation of lions and elephants.

Planning began nearly a year before the September 2009 meeting. Funded by a US-based philanthropic donor through a partnership between two conservation organisations, one US based and the other in the UK, and supported by both international and national cheetah and wild dog conservation projects —but the stakes were high. The workshop itself was facilitated not by external professionals, but by a Coordinator who had been deeply involved in the IUCN-driven conservation planning process since 2004, and who had already guided similar workshops in three other countries.

From the outset, the tone was wary. Many participants arrived skeptical—**jaded by past experiences** where international initiatives tended to impose ideas from their perspective, with limited local ownership as a result. However, even before the workshop opened, a few key participants had already started to shift their stance, sensing a real opportunity this time to acheive something different by being more assertive.

Still, the backdrop to the workshop carried weight. The Coordinator, well-versed in the history of the region, understood that **deep structural inequalities—linked to colonial legacies, racial dynamics, and economic disparity**—shaped who felt heard, and how power operated in the room. **Systemic power** was embedded in the very format of the workshop: conservation rules, language, and expectations from outside the region, privileging Western models of science and planning, combined with inequalities amongst nationals in terms of their political and economic power due to age old tribal histories. Many participants—particularly local ones—were hesitant to speak freely, feeling that the process was ultimately steered by those who held political, financial and institutional power.

Some of the newly assertive potential participants even said it aloud: if the process followed the usual pattern, key voices would not attend—or worse, would attend but remain silent. The presence of **entrenched systemic power** meant that even well-meaning participatory frameworks risked creating yet another ineffectual plan that would fail to disrupt the current destructive norms of management. The process prior to this workshop followed a highly formal script, with **rules** set by the programme leadership, and reinforced by IUCN representatives, leaving little space for flexibility or local adaptation.

The Coordinator initially felt the **weight of powerlessness**—unable to challenge the framework she was expected to implement. But she had seen glimpses of how change was possible in previous national workshops. There had been moments when more flexible, **power-with** approaches had opened up new energy in the room. She carried those lessons into Zambia, and had an informal meeting with representatives from three of Zambia's leading non-government conservation research organisations prior to the official workshop. Their message was clear: unless this process adapted to local needs and realities, it would fail. But they also offered something powerful—**a shared desire to succeed**, a willingness to co-lead, and a **power-with** dynamic waiting to be activated.

Buoyed by this support, the Coordinator asked the programme and IUCN leadership for permission to adjust the facilitation model. The answer was reflective of h**ow systemic power** tends to resists change as they were concerned that "new" was not appropriate and could be damaging, essentially denying permission to try a modified approach. After reflecting on consequences, and backed by local actors and grounded in experience, she decided to ignore that she had been told not to adapt and began the workshop with the new approach.

By letting the formal structure loosen, and seeking areas where local knowledge and understanding could overide the regional stance she allowed space for participants to lead rather than follow. Interestingly, **ownership shifted** very quickly. People who had arrived doubtful leaned in. Discussions grew more grounded, more relevant and more enervated. Local realities—not just regional mandates—shaped the conversation.

By the end of the workshop, the group had produced a national action plan that matched the regional strategy in structure, but whose content was unmistakably Zambian, a solid demonstration of how handing over power does not destroy but rather builds better. The language, priorities, and actions reflected lived experience and local insight. It was a powerful example of how **power-with** can be mobilised when facilitators are willing to adapt—and when local actors are ready to step forward.

Importantly, the plan didn't just get written. It is still being used today, guiding collaborative efforts across government and non-government institutions. Relationships forged during the workshop have endured. Cross-sector partnerships have deepened.

Looking back, the Coordinator reflected on what might have made the work easier. At the time, the vocabulary we now use to talk about power didn't exist. If it had, it might have helped make sense of the **systemic power** she was up against—and how she could both articulate its presences and help shift it. Today, having access to that language gives future facilitators tools she lacked: a way to **name power**, understand it, and engage with it intentionally. It offers less experienced or less confident facilitators the **power-within** to advocate for processes that are more inclusive, flexible, and grounded in context.

One quote stayed with her throughout the process. A director from Zambia's Wildlife Authority had once told her:

"We have learnt to take resources from anyone who offers to achieve what we know needs to be done, but it doesn't always sit well with us to do so."

That sentence, she believes, says more than anything else about the **power asymmetries** that still shape conservation in the region. But it also speaks to resilience—and to the quiet confidence that, when given the chance, people know how to lead their own solutions.

8

Bridging Tides: Negotiating Coexistence Between Seals and Salmon Fisheries in the Moray Firth, UK

8. Bridging Tides: Negotiating Coexistence Between Seals and Salmon Fisheries in the Moray Firth, UK

From the perspective of James Butler

For generations, the Moray Firth in northeast Scotland has witnessed a quiet conflict between two protected species: seals and wild Atlantic salmon. As both came under the protection of the EU Habitats Directive, so too did the pressures grow on those who managed their overlapping interests. For salmon fishery boards and ghillies, seals were predators threatening an already dwindling resource. For conservationists and the public, seals had become cherished icons of coastal ecosystems.

By 2002, tensions had reached a breaking point. The Scottish Government was preparing to ban seal shootings entirely. In response, a fisheries director initiated a participatory process to find common ground. What followed would become the Moray Firth Seal Management Plan—the first of its kind in the UK, and a blueprint for coexistence that lasted nearly two decades.

The plan began with a power paradox. On one side, the government held **visible power**, backed by law, able to restrict seal culling through regulation. On the other, local fisheries carried **invisible power**: deep-rooted traditions, place-based legitimacy, and the quiet authority of having worked these waters for generations. Conservation agencies, scientists, and tourism operators added further layers, each with their own perspectives and stakes.

From the start, the process sought to navigate this complex terrain. All eleven fishery boards, along with netsmen, ghillies, government staff, and scientists, were invited to the table. While commercial fishers and wildlife tourism groups were less directly involved, broader engagement was attempted through coastal partnerships. Meetings were held regionally, with additional consultations by phone and email.

Trust grew slowly. Fishery boards shared historic seal-shooting data—a powerful gesture of transparency. In return, conservation agencies opened their monitoring systems to scrutiny. Observational knowledge from ghillies was integrated into scientific research. Over time, **power with** began to emerge: a recognition that while positions were different, solutions could be shaped together.

The plan they co-produced was both practical and precedent-setting. Annual quotas for seal removals were agreed, tied to local monitoring. Licences were issued under the EU directive, within zones where all parties had negotiated consensus. Accredited training for marksmen ensured ethical standards. Scientific research continued to explore non-lethal deterrents, with input from both sectors.

This negotiated model didn't eliminate conflict, but it transformed it. For several years, collaboration flourished. Fishery representatives who had once felt sidelined became co-stewards of a system they helped design. Government actors found legitimacy in facilitating rather than imposing. And conservationists gained influence by listening, not just lobbying.

Yet, over time, cracks began to show. As leadership turned over and resources dwindled, so did coordination. Annual reporting became a box-ticking exercise. A marine mammal NGO began publicly targeting netsmen via social media, introducing a new wave of **hidden power** that was harder to engage through dialogue. The once-innovative participatory process lost momentum.

Reflecting on the experience, it is important to note that crisis opened a door. The simultaneous impacts of new conservation law, viral disease in seals, and salmon stock declines created a moment when entrenched positions could be revisited. But such moments are fleeting. Without ongoing investment in learning, reflection, and adaptation, even the strongest agreements can fade.

Still, the legacy remains. The Moray Firth Seal Management Plan informed national legislation in 2010, introducing regulated removal across Scotland. More importantly, it demonstrated that trust can grow through transparency and shared learning, and that even in polarized settings, power to shape compromise is possible when diverse knowledge is invited and respected. The experience holds a lesson for other contested landscapes: participatory governance is not a one-off achievement. It requires champions, commitment, and a willingness to return to the table—again and again.

"For it to work, you need a champion within the fisheries to provide that leadership. That's not to say that people aren't committed, but it's like anything, you need someone to drive it and I think that has been a challenge."

9

Watershed Management and the Search for Fairness in the Mariño Valley, Peru

9. Watershed Management and the Search for Fairness in the Mariño Valley, Peru

From the perspective of Bruno Locatelli

In the high Andes of Peru, above the city of Abancay, lies the Mariño watershed—a place where fragile wetlands meet deep-rooted pastoral traditions. In the early 2010s, an ambitious effort began here: to conserve water sources by compensating highland communities through a Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) scheme. The idea was simple in theory, but fraught with complexity in practice.This account is based on insights from a research-action project aimed at promoting more just and fair PES schemes, with particular attention to equity, participation, and power dynamics.

While the 2014 Ecosystem Services Law, which provided a national legal framework for PES lacked was not strongly enforced, discussions for a local initiative had already started and led to a first scheme, funded by the urban water utility in Abancay through a fee included in residents' water bills. By the time the first PES contract was signed, upstream communities had agreed to stop grazing and farming in sensitive zones and instead contribute labor to restoration efforts. In exchange, they received in-kind support: materials, technical help, and training—and the promise of more reliable water supplies downstream.

But from the start, trust was hard-won. Some highland community members feared that PES would privatize water or threaten their access to vital grazing land. Local wetlands, especially during dry seasons, are lifelines for livestock. Past disruptions to local governance had left a residue of mistrust. Power here was not only visible—in laws and state agencies—but also hidden and invisible, embedded in memories and systems that favored urban voices and technical expertise over Indigenous knowledge.

The governance of watershed management in Peru is generally top-down. Centralized agencies like the National Water Authority (ANA) hold legal and technical authority, while Indigenous and rural communities—who actually steward upstream ecosystems—are often sidelined. Their voices are diluted by linguistic and cultural barriers, and their traditional knowledge is typically seen as secondary to scientific assessments. This is a clear form of **invisible power**, where what counts as knowledge is itself shaped by power dynamics.

Under the PES scheme, the urban water utility became a central player by collecting and distributing funds. But it lacked clear, equitable mechanisms for doing so. A Regional Committee for the Environment was established to bring together institutions, researchers, and decision-makers, offering a valuable platform for dialogue—but one that held no real authority. The space was consultative, not decisional. This illustrates a form of **visible power** that is structured but limited.

Despite these structural issues, civil society played a critical role. A Swiss NGO, leveraging global networks, helped support the project locally. Other NGOs and researchers advocated for participatory, inclusive governance rooted in both science and local rights. While they lacked formal authority, they brought legitimacy and helped amplify **power to** act among marginalized groups.

Still, challenges persisted. PES schemes often reflect the interests of powerful downstream actors like cities or commercial agriculture, rather than those of upstream Indigenous communities. In the Mariño watershed, this imbalance initially led to minimal participation from local voices. Tensions flared, culminating in protests and blocked access to project sites.

Authorities and supporting NGOs took notice. They began to reframe their approach, broadening the PES scope to include community development goals. This marked a shift toward **power with**: a recognition that durable solutions required shared decision-making and trust. NGOs focusing on rights-based approaches were particularly influential in defending the voices of upstream Indigenous groups.

Even so, concerns remained. PES mechanisms, if poorly designed, can lead to land exclusion and reinforce inequities. Some communities feared losing access to vital resources, even as they participated in wetland restoration efforts promoted by PES. This fear of green grabbing—where land is appropriated in the name of conservation to serve powerful interests—was real.

One community's resistance illustrates that **power within** still exists, even amid imbalance. They initially rejected the project, worried about losing grazing rights, despite already practicing restoration. Their skepticism served as a mirror: reminding authorities that participation must be genuine, and that local people are not passive recipients of policy but active agents.

A key positive outcome of the Mariño PES initiative was that it encouraged dialogue across previously isolated groups. Engineers, bureaucrats, and rural communities began sharing the same rooms. The initiative shifted the lens from engineering-based water solutions like dams to collaborative, nature-based approaches. And while the process is far from perfect, it helped reframe upstream communities not as obstacles to water security, but as essential partners.

As Peru continues to expand its PES programs, there is cautious hope. Civil society, academia, and government actors are increasingly aligned in their push for more just and inclusive models. The Mariño case offers both warning and inspiration: equity must be built into every layer of watershed governance, and power must be named and addressed, not just assumed.

Because in watersheds, as in so many landscapes, what flows downstream begins with who is heard upstream.

10

Guardians of the Mountain: A Story from the Vercors in the French Alps, France

10. Guardians of the Mountain: A Story from the Vercors in the French Alps, France

From the perspective of Estelle Balian

In the high plateaux and deep forests of the Vercors, a quiet struggle unfolded—not just between wolves and sheep, but among the people who share this landscape. As wolves returned to the region, livestock guarding dogs (LGDs) once again took their place among the flocks. But the dogs, while vital to livestock breeders and shepherds, became a source of conflict with hikers, bikers, and tourists navigating the same trails.

In 2019, the Parc Naturel Régional du Vercors, familiar with these tensions from earlier consultations, exchanged with a European initiative on coexistence between people and large carnivores. Together, they launched a participatory process—not to erase conflict, but to understand it, and perhaps, write a shared story.

From the outset, **power was present in multiple forms**—some in the room, some deliberately outside it. Certain actors, particularly the farmers' unions, refused to take part. Their absence was strategic—a form of **hidden power**. By staying out, they positioned themselves to later challenge the legitimacy of the process, a move already seen in past dialogues around wolf and pastoral management. Anticipating this, the facilitators carefully documented invitations and responses, a subtle but important counter to narrative control.

Meanwhile, **visible power** rested with the decentralized state services (DDTs) that attended, although the real decision-making authority—the préfet—remained absent, as expected. When a sous-préfète joined the final press launch of the shared narrative, it was perceived by many as a small but meaningful signal of shifting attention from the state.

The Park, trusted by many local actors, played a central role in holding the process together, offering an institutional backbone. So too did the EU-funded project "Regional Platforms for Coexistence Between People and Large Carnivores", whose external legitimacy and funding gave the process some weight. A professional mediator helped ensure no single voice dominated—a crucial safeguard in such a polarized space, and a step toward creating **spaces of "power with"**.

The process began with tension. The first multi-stakeholder workshop felt strained. Shepherds—central figures in the landscape—were few in number, and a recent, painful incident involving a guard dog being euthanized loomed over early discussions. But rather than push for consensus, the facilitators created space for dialogue. Smaller, interest-based workshops allowed participants to speak more freely and engage more deeply.

A key turning point came when livestock breeders invited others to their own ground—a meeting held on their farm. Some attendees came just to listen. What they heard moved them. Hearing firsthand about the everyday struggles of breeders sparked a quiet, powerful shift. Participants began to step out of their assumptions. Dialogue became more grounded.

Over time, a small group of "référents"—representatives from each interest group—formed. With the support of a communications agency, they co-wrote a “common narrative”: not a consensus, but a reflection of shared realities, coexisting uses, and mutual responsibilities in the presence of wolves. They didn’t agree on everything—but **“power with” had taken root.** They respected each other’s truths.

That narrative was publicly shared at a final restitution workshop. But with it came renewed tension. Farmers’ unions that had refused to join the process showed up and challenged both the story and the process itself. This time, though, the breeders who had stayed in the room responded: “You chose not to join. We did the work. And we support this.” That public defense, by those most directly affected, was perhaps the clearest signal that something meaningful had shifted—not just a process, but a sense of **power within.**

Altogether, around 30 to 35 people took part—NGOs, hunters, mayors, tourism and outdoor sports organisations, and livestock breeders. Each helped build something rare: a co-written narrative about the presence of guard dogs in a multi-use landscape, grounded in real tensions, lived experience, and mutual recognition. Shared with tourists, picked up by local media, and even included in guide training materials, the narrative became more than a document. It became a symbol.

Conflicts haven’t disappeared. But something changed. A small shift. A shared step.

Because in the Vercors, coexistence wasn’t imposed from above—it was built, layer by layer, by those willing to stay in the room.

CREDITS

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