



Ethical Conservation Alliance



CONFLICT MANAGEMENT TOOLKIT

Part 1:
Understanding
Conflicts Over
Wildlife-Caused
Damage



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Summary

The Ethical Conservation Alliance's (ECA) Conflict Management Toolkit is a practical guide designed to help conservation practitioners, community partners, and policymakers understand and manage conservation conflicts – situations where wildlife negatively impacts human lives, livelihoods, or safety, and where differing human values and interests shape how these interactions are perceived and addressed.

Drawing on decades of field experience, ecological and social research, and Indigenous governance principles, the toolkit tries to integrate ecological science, social understanding, and ethical practice into a single framework for fostering coexistence. It emphasises fairness, empathy, respect, and reciprocity as core to effective conservation. It provides a framework that practitioners can use while designing their conflict management programs.

The toolkit is organised into two main parts, with the current document representing Part 1. The toolkit is organised into two main parts:

1. **Understanding Conflicts** – exploring ecological, behavioural, and social dimensions of conservation conflicts (the current document)
2. **Managing Conflicts** – outlining guiding principles, frameworks, and practical measures for conflict mitigation, coexistence, and participatory monitoring (see separate document).

Part 1 includes appendices featuring interactive quizzes, a glossary of key ethical and governance frameworks. In Part 2, a rapid response checklist for immediate field action in severe cases of wildlife-caused damage is additionally included.

This toolkit is intended for conservation practitioners, government wildlife managers, community facilitators, and educators working to promote coexistence between people and wildlife.

The toolkit should be used together with the accompanying video lessons. The document and videos complement each other. Studying both together will ensure a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of conflict management and coexistence.



Purpose and Use of This Toolkit

This toolkit aims to help conservation practitioners, community partners, and policymakers understand and better manage conservation conflicts—situations where wildlife negatively impacts human lives, livelihoods, or safety, and where differing human values and interests shape how these interactions are perceived and addressed.

It integrates ecological science, social understanding, and ethical practice. It draws on decades of field experience, social research, and Indigenous governance frameworks such as Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC); Ethical Space; OCAP®; and the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance.

The document must be used in conjunction with the video lessons. The document and the videos overlap and reiterate each other, but both must be studied to develop a more comprehensive understanding of conflicts and their management.

Intended users: Conservation practitioners worldwide, government wildlife managers, policymakers, and community facilitators engaged in coexistence initiatives.

How to Use this Document

- Watch the accompanying videos for a given section along with reading this document.
- Depending on your needs and prior knowledge, sections can be read as standalone chapters or sequentially.
- The appendices provide quizzes that are also integrated in the videos, a glossary, and an emergency response checklist.



Photo: Justine Alexander



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Understanding Conflicts

1.1 What is “Human–Wildlife Conflict”: Rethinking the Term

The phrase “human–wildlife conflict” is widely used to describe damage caused by wildlife to crops, livestock, property, resources—or, in extreme cases, injury or loss of human life. Importantly, it also encompasses the human responses to such situations. However, this term implies a direct opposition between people and animals, which oversimplifies reality.

In most cases, the conflict is not really between humans and wildlife—it is between different human interests and values: those prioritising conservation of species and habitats and those seeking to secure human livelihoods and well-being.

Describing such situations as a type of “conservation conflict” or the more benign and neutral “human wildlife interaction” is more appropriate. Similarly, describing such conflicts in two parts reflects the reality much better (i) “wildlife–caused damage to human interests” and (ii) “retaliatory or preventive persecution of wildlife by humans”. Humans can take retaliatory action against wildlife when they experience losses, but also because of strong cultural biases, presumably in response to past damage. The Chaco eagle (*Buteogallus coronatus*) for example is still considered to be a species in conflict even though its predation on livestock is minimal. This has been due to cultural transmission of the situation from the late 19th century when lamb predation was higher as lamb production was a major economic activity at that time.

The traditional framing as “human–wildlife conflict” has consequences: it can unintentionally create hostility toward wildlife, encourage reactive actions like retaliatory killing or extreme policies like culling or translocation, and obscure the social and political drivers behind the conflict. Reframing the issue helps shift responses toward coexistence, empathy, and collaboration.

By changing our language, we also change our mindset—from conflict to coexistence.

1.2 Ecological, Behavioural, and Evolutionary Drivers

Conflicts often begin with the ecological realities of how species survive.

Why livestock attract carnivores

Domesticated animals have lost many of their natural defences: they lack camouflage, are slower, and are often confined in predictable areas at high densities compared to wild ungulates. For a predator, livestock represent easy prey compared to wild species, which are typically more elusive and harder to catch. Therefore, livestock often represent an attractive resource for wild carnivores, though killing livestock does make carnivores vulnerable to human retaliation.

Conflicts can take various other forms, such as those around damage to apiculture bee-hives by bears, or to aquaculture by fish-eating predators.

Why crops attract herbivores

Plants have developed physical and chemical anti-herbivory defences, and therefore, all that is green is not nutritious food for wild herbivores. On the other hand, through selective breeding, humans have produced crops that are nutrient-rich and largely free from natural chemical defences. To a wild herbivore, a crop field is an attractive energy-dense patch of abundant food with minimal poisonous or otherwise harmful plants. In the wild, on the other hand, forage plants may further be limited by overgrazing, drought, or habitat conversion. Thus, crop fields near wild habitats are inherently attractive for foraging to a wild herbivore, though it does come with the risk of human retribution. This generally also applies to other forms of herbivory and associated conflicts, such as frugivores foraging in orchards, and wild species consuming flowers, seeds, and other plant parts cultivated by humans.

What this means

As long as herbivores share landscapes with crops; or predators share rangelands with livestock; or wildlife and humans try to use the same resources, some level of loss is inevitable. Therefore, such conservation conflicts cannot be eliminated, but they must be managed.

1.3 Spatio-Temporal Overlap

Sometimes, conflicts arise from unfortunate timing and proximity—when human and animal activities overlap in space and time. Examples include:

- **Seasonal movement:** Wide ranging species such as elephants (*Elephas maximus*, *Loxodonta spp.*) may migrate through expanding farmland or human habitation while following ancient routes; sloth bears (*Melursus ursinus*) and humans may converge at mahua (*Madhuca longifolia*) trees during the flowering season; herbivores may use farmlands and movement corridors, and while doing so, take advantage of the available resources, thereby getting into conflict situations.
- **Habitat overlap:** Settlements built near water sources may attract wildlife during the dry season. Hamlets at the base of cliffs might overlap with snow leopard (*Panthera uncia*) habitats and movement routes.
- **Successful conservation:** Conflict instances may increase with an increase in wildlife populations due to successful conservation efforts.
- **Learning and adaptation:** Animals learn to exploit opportunities, such as foraging at night to avoid detection.
- **Spatio-temporal variation:** Conflict patterns may vary regionally and seasonally. For example: In the Himalayas, snow leopard predation on livestock peaks in spring and summer when animals are weakened after winter. In Mongolia's Tost Mountains, most livestock predation by snow leopards occurs in winter when herders move closer to the mountainous snow leopard habitats to seek protection from cold steppe winds.

1.4 Problem Animals

In many settings, wildlife-caused damage is often attributed to “problem animals”. While this term is common in management language, it can oversimplify the issue and unintentionally shift blame onto individual animals rather than addressing the broader ecological and social context. While there are instances of individual animals or a particular age-sex category that cause disproportionate damage, in the majority of times the conflicts arise because there are “problem contexts or situations”.

Instead of framing wildlife as “problem animals,” it is more effective to view the situation as a “problem context” requiring adaptive management. Ultimately, problem animals are a symptom of shared space under strain, not animals with bad intentions. Effective conflict management focuses on the human and ecological systems that create opportunities for repeated incidents, aiming for coexistence rather than elimination.

1.5 Sex differences and risk taking

Males and females often face different evolutionary pressures that shape how they interact with their environment—and, consequently, how they might become involved in conflict situations. In many polygynous species (where males compete for access to multiple females), males take greater risks to gain resources, territory, or mating opportunities. They may roam farther and venture into new or riskier areas—such as crop fields or villages—in search of food. To compete effectively for females, males in such species prioritize food acquisition and maximizing body-condition, and in that process they may take relatively high risks. High testosterone levels and competition among males may drive boldness and aggression, increasing the likelihood of encounters with humans. Larger body size relative to females and metabolic needs might push males to exploit rich, human-provided food sources. These behaviours can make male individuals disproportionately represented in conflict incidents, such as livestock predation, crop foraging, or property damage. Females of such species, on the other hand, try to maximize their long-term survival (and that of their offspring) and, therefore, are expected to be more risk-averse and be generally less involved in conflict situations. However, encounters with females with offspring can be potentially dangerous for humans. In species like bears or elephants, females defending offspring may react aggressively to perceived threats. Understanding the ecological drivers behind male and female behaviour can help frame conflicts as natural, manageable phenomena rather than random or hostile events, guiding more nuanced coexistence planning.

1.6 What this means

Effective conflict management requires context-specific understanding: the “same” conflict type in two places may have completely different underlying causes. It is critical to study, understand, and document conflict situations through ecological, social, and traditional knowledge research frameworks, before they can be managed.

1.7 Human Dimensions of Conflict

Conflicts are not just ecological—they are profoundly human. Perceptions, attitudes, gender roles, cultural traditions, and power relationships all shape how people respond to wildlife-caused damage.



Perceptions and Attitudes

Conflicts may arise due to actual or perceived competition for natural resources, such as forage competition between livestock and wild herbivores. People's reactions to loss due to real or perceived wildlife-caused damage range from tolerance to anger, influenced by a range of factors, including personal experience, cultural meaning, perceptions, socio-economic context and trust in institutions.

Human Relationships with Animals

People's relationships with wildlife are complex. For example, a wolf (*Canis lupus*) may be admired as sacred and feared as a threat. Similarly, livestock may be a source of nutrition, livelihood and companionship.

It's not just about relationships with animals, but there is a similar strong need for understanding and empathy when it comes to crop damage by wildlife. When a farmer loses crops, it's much more than a livelihood loss. One needs to recognize how much effort raising a crop takes on the part of the farmer, as well as the opportunity costs when crops are damaged by wildlife. A farmer may also be able to ill afford a loss when their livelihoods are already under pressure from other stressors, such as globalisation and climate change.





Variable Human Responses and Socio-cultural Influences

People's responses to conflict situations are highly variable and can range from being neutral on the one hand to persecution of wildlife on the other. Cultural beliefs, traditions and value orientations can influence how communities interpret wildlife-caused damage. Local governance systems, ceremonies, and taboos, for example, have sometimes provided frameworks for coexistence long before formal conservation programs existed. These need to be recognized, supported, and celebrated, since human responses can change over time. On the other hand, cultures can also label species such as wolves, vultures, dogs, certain primates, or wild pigs as being sacrilegious or a bad omen. These impact how people view and respond to wildlife-caused damage.

Gender and Intersectionality

Within the same community or family, researchers report that men and women respond differently to wildlife-caused damage. It appears that women might, in general, suffer greater emotional, nutritional or other hidden costs of wildlife-caused damage, and therefore develop greater negative attitudes towards species involved in conservation conflicts.



Power, Equity & Governance

Conflicts are also shaped by who holds decision-making power. Indigenous Peoples and local communities often bear disproportionate costs of conservation decisions made elsewhere. Principles such as Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), Ethical Space, the First Nations principles of OCAP®, specific to First Nations in Canada, and the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance help affirm community authority over knowledge, data, and benefits.

The PARTNERS Principles* can enable conservation practitioners to work effectively and ethically with Indigenous Peoples and local communities. These principles together emphasize respect, dialogue, partnerships, consent, and reciprocity—foundations of ethical conservation.

** Visit resources page on ECA's website for a book, papers, and videos on PARTNERS Principles.*



Key Takeaways – Understanding Conflicts

- Conflicts labelled “human–wildlife” are usually human–human conflicts over competing human interests such as conservation, livelihoods, safety and lifestyles.
- Ecological realities make crops and livestock attractive resources for wildlife.
- Spatio-temporal overlap and animal learning behaviour make some losses inevitable.
- Human perceptions and values—shaped by gender, culture, or power—determine people’s responses to conflicts.
- Ethical and Indigenous governance frameworks (FPIC, Ethical Space, OCAP®, CARE) and conservation practices (PARTNERS Principles) can guide fair and inclusive collaboration.



Understanding Conflicts

Theme	Essential Insights	Field Application / Reflection Prompt
Terminology & Framing	<i>The phrase human–wildlife conflict misrepresents the problem; most disputes are among people over values, resources, and power.</i>	When describing a conflict, try re-phrasing it as a “conservation conflict.” Does this change how you would approach it?
Ecological Drivers	Crops attract herbivores because they are high in nutrients and low on herbivory defense; livestock attract predators because they are easier to catch than wild species.	Identify the ecological reasons specific to your region that make negative wildlife interactions likely.
Spatio-Temporal Overlap	Many conflicts occur simply due to timing and location—seasonal migrations, resource scarcity, or human expansion.	Understand local “hotspots” and seasons of high risk. How could activities be adjusted?
Human Dimensions	Perceptions, emotions, and culture shape responses; gender, class, and livelihood roles influence risk and tolerance.	Discuss within your team whose voices are missing when decisions are made.
Power and Equity	Governance structures and data control matter. Frameworks like FPIC, Ethical Space, OCAP®, and CARE can help ensure fairness and respect. PARTNERS Principles can help build respectful and effective conservation partnerships.	Note how consent and reciprocity are practiced in your projects. Analyse to what extent your projects meet the guidelines under the PARTNERS Principles*.
Overall Lesson	Conflicts are multi-layered—ecological, social, and ethical. Understanding all dimensions is a prerequisite to effective management.	Summarize the top three local drivers of conflict and rank them by importance.

* The Ethical Conservation Alliance will soon release a framework to help evaluate the extent of ethical and sustainable community engagement in any initiative based on the PARTNERS Principles. Feel free to get in touch through the ECA website if you need it urgently.

APPENDIX A Knowledge Check Quizzes

Part 1 – Understanding Conflicts

Section 1.1 – What is “Human-Wildlife Conflict”: Rethinking the Term

True or False: The term “human-wildlife conflict” accurately describes a situation where people and wildlife are trying to undermine one another.

- True
- False

Which of the following best describes the underlying cause of conflicts often referred to as ‘human-wildlife conflict’?

- Wildlife attacking humans
- Competition between human interests related to conservation and livelihood
- Wildlife-caused damage to human interests
- All of the above

Which of the following best describes why a shift to the term “conservation conflict” is preferable?

It attracts more funding.

It avoids blaming wildlife and highlights human value differences.

It helps attract media attention.

It has the same meaning but is shorter.

Short Answer: List two ways that language and framing can influence how people respond to wildlife-related problems.

Short Answer: Provide two examples of how humans have traditionally dealt with wildlife-caused damage.

Short Answer: A newspaper headline reads: “Villagers Battle Wild Elephants.” Rewrite the headline in a way that better reflects a nuanced and empathetic approach.



Section 1.2 – Ecological, Behavioural, and Evolutionary Drivers

Why are crop fields attractive to wild herbivores?

- They are farther from forests.
- Crops have high nutrition and low defense.
- They are harder to access.
- They offer shade and shelter.

Which factor makes livestock easy prey for carnivores?

- They have reduced anti-predator traits and abilities.
- They are faster than wild prey.
- They travel in small groups.
- They are nocturnal.

In polygynous mammals, why might males be more frequently involved in conflict situations?

- They are more cautious
- They seek higher risks to gain better access to food
- They have better camouflage
- They are less competitive

True or False: Females are never involved in livestock predation or crop damage.

- True
- False

True or False: Removing “problem animals” always resolves conflict in the long-term.

- True
- False

Short Answer: Describe one ecological and one evolutionary reason why wildlife might damage human resources.

Short Answer; A farmer believes leopards are attacking livestock “out of aggression.” How would you explain the situation from an ecological and behavioural standpoint?

Section 1.3 – Spatio-Temporal Overlap

What is “spatio-temporal overlap” in the context of conservation conflicts?

- The overlap of conservation projects and NGO activities.
- The coincidence of people and wildlife in time and space.
- The mixing of different animal species in the same habitat.
- The overlap between policies and funding cycles.

Short Answer: Provide one example of how timing and location might increase the likelihood of encounters between humans and wildlife.

Short Answer: In an area, crop damage by wild herbivores peaks in July–August. List three possible ecological or human reasons for this seasonal pattern.

What factor might increase the frequency of encounters between humans and wildlife?

- Better fencing
- Seasonal movement of animals in search of food or water
- Increased vigilance
- None of the above

Section 1.4 – Human Dimensions of Conflict

Which of the following influence people’s responses to wildlife?

- Personal experience
- Cultural and religious values
- Gender roles and livelihood dependence
- All of the above

Why might women or marginalized groups experience conflict differently?

- They are less informed.
- They may have different roles, motivations, emotions, risks, and responsibilities.
- They spend less time outdoors.
- They are excluded from data collection.

True or False: Indigenous frameworks like FPIC and Ethical Space apply only to research projects, not to the realities of conflict management in the field.

True

False

Short Answer: Explain how empathy and understanding social context can improve conservation and conflict management outcomes.

A herder loses livestock and blames the park authority for “valuing wildlife more than people.” As a conflict manager, describe how you would respond empathetically while upholding conservation values.

PART 1 Reflection Questions

- Think of a conflict area you know. Who are the key groups of people involved, and what are their differing interests?
- How does local language describe the conflict? Does that language frame wildlife as a “problem” or a “partner”?
- What traditional or Indigenous practices in your region already promote coexistence?

APPENDIX B Glossary of Key Frameworks and Principles

This glossary summarises the key frameworks, ethical standards, and guiding principles referenced throughout the toolkit. It is written in plain language so it can be shared directly with communities and training participants.

- **Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)**

A collective right of Indigenous Peoples, affirmed in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). FPIC requires governments and project proponents to consult in good faith through Indigenous Peoples' own representative institutions and to obtain consent before laws, policies, or projects that may affect their lands, territories, resources, or cultures proceed.

- Free: Given voluntarily, without coercion, manipulation, or undue influence.
- Prior: Sought and agreed upon before decisions or activities begin.
- Informed: Based on full, understandable disclosure of purpose, risks, benefits, and alternatives.
- FPIC is an ongoing process grounded in self-determination. Indigenous communities may condition, withhold, or withdraw consent at any time.

- **Ethical Space (Willie Ermine)**

A principled space for engagement between Indigenous and Western knowledge systems that acknowledges different worldviews and intentionally addresses power imbalances. Ethical Space is created through protocol, ceremony, humility, transparency, and shared decision-making; it enables co-design, co-stewardship, and accountability.

- **OCAP® Principles (Ownership, Control, Access and Possession)**

OCAP® affirms First Nations' rights to own their data and to control how it is collected, used, shared, and safeguarded; to access it; and to exercise possession within First Nations governance. OCAP® provides a standards-based pathway to First Nations data sovereignty and is implemented according to each Nation's laws, worldviews, and protocols.

OCAP® is specific to First Nations in Canada and is a registered trademark of the First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC). Inuit and Métis have parallel, though distinct, approaches. In other countries, equivalent Indigenous data-governance frameworks should be followed according to the rights and protocols of those Peoples and Nations.

- **CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance**

A people- and purpose-oriented guidance for Indigenous data sovereignty



(Global Indigenous Data Alliance). The CARE Principles emphasize collective rights, self-determination, and reciprocity.

- **Collective Benefit:** Data activities should enable self-determined wellbeing and tangible benefits for the Indigenous Peoples concerned.
- **Authority to Control:** Indigenous Peoples define how data about them are collected, accessed, used, and governed.
- **Responsibility:** Data users/stewards act with respect, reciprocity, and accountability to communities and relationships.
- **Ethics:** Data practices uphold dignity, rights, and cultural values and minimize harm.

- **PARTNERS Principles for ethical and respectful community engagement (Ethical Conservation Alliance):**

- **Presence:** Maintain continuous, respectful engagement.
- **Aptness:** Tailor approaches to each unique context.
- **Responsiveness:** Act quickly and empathetically when issues arise.
- **Transparency:** Communicate clearly and honestly.
- **Negotiation:** Seek solutions collaboratively.
- **Empathy:** Understand the feelings and perspectives of all parties.
- **Strategic Support:** Build systems and policy links that sustain coexistence over time.

- **Coexistence and Conservation Conflicts**

- The recognition that human–wildlife interactions are often rooted in overlapping needs for land, water, and security.
- Coexistence means more than tolerance—it is the active process of maintaining balance, respect, and shared benefit among species and people.

- **Gender and Intersectionality in Conflict Management**

- An inclusive approach that recognizes how gender, age, livelihood, social status, and cultural identity interact to shape risk, perception, and decision-making.
- Conflict responses must account for these differences to ensure fairness and effectiveness.

- **Trauma-Informed Practice**

- An approach that recognises that individuals and communities may have experienced emotional or physical trauma.
- It prioritises safety, empathy, and choice, ensuring that conservation actions do not unintentionally cause further harm.

- **Reciprocity and Fair Benefit-Sharing**

- Every partnership should return tangible and intangible benefits to participating communities—such as training, income, recognition, or restored ecosystems.
- Reciprocity builds trust and legitimacy.

Once you have read through this document and completed the video tutorials, move to Part 2 - Managing Conflicts.

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