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Professional multiparty mediation is a key ingredient in human–wildlife–conflict management for coexistence

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ABSTRACT

In the field of human dimensions of wildlife, managing the complexity of different perspectives on the natural environment is essential for achieving conservation outcomes. The aim of multiparty mediation is to find common ground and solutions over seemingly irreconcilable issues. While mediated processes to support this aim have been implemented in some cases, the full potential of mediation for conflict management is far from fully explored. This is partly due to a lack of opportunities to learn and specialize in this specific field and missing funding and setting up well-defined processes. Three needs to unfold the potential of mediation in human–wildlife conflict (HWC) scenarios to coexistence were identified by the Environmental Mediation Initiative (EMI): (1) an online platform for the search for multiparty mediation by neutral third parties, (2) sharing and transferring knowledge and building capacity within multiparty mediation and (3) targeted funding for the support by mediators.

KEYWORDS

Conservation conflict; environmental mediation initiative (EMI); human–wildlife conflict and coexistence (HWCC); international union for conservation of nature (IUCN); Kunming-Montreal global biodiversity framework (KMGBF)

Introduction

The human dimensions of wildlife research and management have emerged as an important concept in managing conservation problems by focusing on understanding of people and their behaviors (Manfredo et al., 1995). However, solutions are more challenging to find when different constituencies hold widely disparate beliefs and values regarding an acceptable management strategy (Manfredo et al., 2021). An increasing complexity of cause–effect relationships (Kugler & Coleman, 2020) and growing uncertainty about the trustworthiness of data may drive the likelihood of disagreement. In addition, as natural resources become increasingly scarce and demand for them grows, new tensions over the use and protection of the natural environment and its resources are continually emerging. At the European level, such tensions can be observed, e.g. in the energy transformation process, climate change adaptation in agriculture and forestry, and substantial adjustments along with those topics (Kirchner, 2022; Pallinger, 2024). Overall, there is a need to harmonize climate change mitigation measures, sustainable development goals and nature

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conservation to avoid conflict over natural resource management (Scheyl, 2020). The global biodiversity crisis requires species specific conservation actions, which may cause controversies between governmental organizations, civil society actors and the private sector (Tissier, 2017). Also, the return or population increase in large carnivores, such as wolves, bears, lynx or wolverine, in several European countries brings various groups into conflict of interest (Grossmann et al., 2020). The actors involved in these conflicts often lack the knowledge and skills to conceptualize and manage them, which may lead to high levels of frustration on all sides and in the worst-case further escalation with legal procedures.

Multiparty mediation (Marques Cebola et al., 2021) for alternative dispute resolution supports strengthening the capacities for dialogue among involved parties and helps minimizing environmental conflicts. While alternative dispute resolution in the fields of commercial arbitrations and interpersonal disputes has a long tradition (Sander, 1985) and generally involves two parties in conflict, mediation in the environmental sector needs to involve multiple parties with various viewpoints and power levels. A multi-stakeholder perspective implies complex processes in which multiple actors, representatives of different contexts and systems, come together to find a common approach to an issue that affects them all (Roloff, 2008). The involvement of multiple actors acknowledges the dynamic nature of sustainability, intended as a process emerging from the relations and the exchanges among different interest groups and the often conflicting nature of such relations and exchanges (Galuppo et al., 2014). Working constructively with a diversity of perspectives and interests can be supported by approaches and techniques such as conflict management and de-escalation methods (Glasl, 2023), nonviolent communication (Rosenberg, 2015), interest-based dialogue (Isaacs, 2002), professional negotiation tools (Fisher et al., 2011), attitude-based facilitation (von Korff, 2024) and systematic multi-stakeholder approaches (Hovardas, 2020, 2021; Salvatori et al., 2021).

While participatory co-design approaches (Cranston et al., 2022) facilitated by neutral third-party mediators enable increased social learning, e.g., through the co-creation of solutions and potentially co-implementation of measures (Hovardas, 2021; Hovardas et al., 2023; Van Epp & Garside, 2019), and the capacity for constructive dialogue across actors (Marino et al., 2023; Salvatori et al., 2021), it can also add social justice benefits and measures that redress the inequitable distribution of environmental impacts and policies (Marino et al., 2023).

One of the case studies reported in Hovardas et al. (2023), demonstrates how social justice benefits and tangible outcomes of mediation can look like, e.g., by facilitating the identification of shared interests, thereby fostering synergies in an Alpine region. Another case study in Hovardas et al. (2023) illustrates how the use of templates to strategically assess motivations and intentions rationalized negotiations and contributed to the restoration of working relationships between previously opposing parties in a human-bear conflict scenario. Despite these opportunities, conservation conflict mediation is still sparsely used in European countries, but recent emphasis on the human dimension of wildlife conservation may encourage this to change.

Mediation in the Field of Human-Wildlife Conflicts

In June 2023, the first global guidelines on human–wildlife conflict (HWC) and coexistence were published (IUCN, 2023). This document for planners and practitioners

explains that HWC involves recurring negative interactions between people and wildlife and is underpinned by social conflicts between groups of people. These guidelines also recognize that human–wildlife coexistence requires ongoing dialogue. It therefore advocates for collaborative approaches, strong involvement of actors and affected parties, long-term solutions, and the involvement of third-party neutrals or mediators. Its five principles for good HWC management practice are intended to guide action at the human–wildlife interface. While the principles relate to general HWC management practices, they also point to key skills and tools of mediation in the environmental sector. Professional mediators can be instrumental in the process of conflict resolution and moving toward constructive negotiations that consider the interests of all groups, including wildlife (Figure 1).

Principle (1) "Do no harm" – emphasizes the need to anticipate adverse effects and unintended consequences of HWC management actions. This principle is the same as that widely understood in the humanitarian and disaster relief sector (Anderson, 1999) and can be applied to any support system in sensitive social settings. Especially when working with groups of people in a difficult area of tension, conflicts may escalate if they are not well planned and professionally managed. In other words, the use of skilled third parties is often crucial. Thus, professional multiparty mediation could play an important role in restoring communication among interest groups, if they stopped communicating, as well as initiating and supporting collaborations with all relevant actors in conflict situations and preventing escalation.

Principle (2) "Understand issues and context" – explains the need to consider the human dimensions and underlying social, cultural, historical, and political contexts of conflict situations, alongside the natural, ecological or spatial contexts of HWC. By providing space for affected parties to share their diverse views and perspectives on

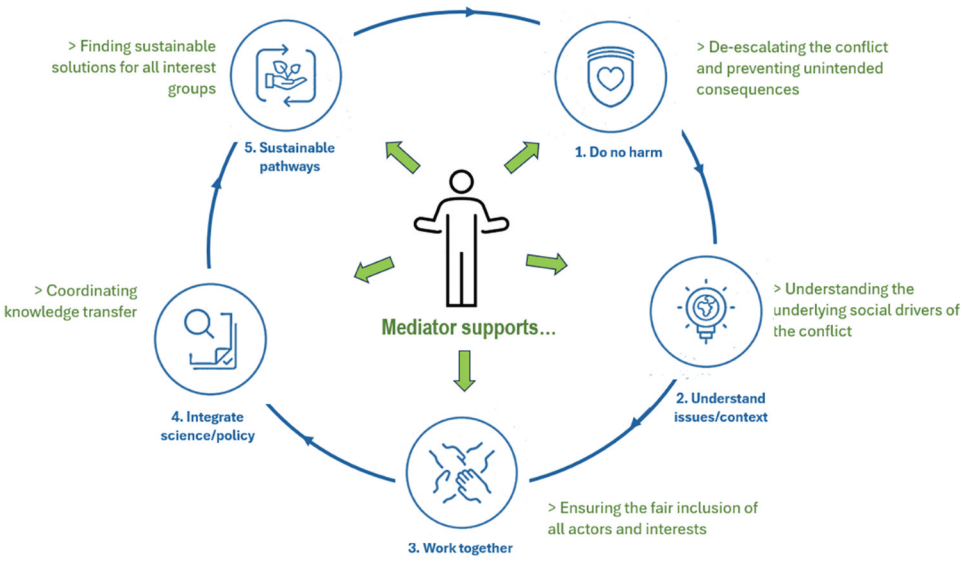

Figure 1. How mediators can support the five principles of the "IUCN SSC guidelines on human-wildlife conflict and coexistence" (https://portals.iucn.org/library/node/50756).

a situation, multiparty mediation may serve to increase understanding of overlaps and divergences to illuminate the background to conflicts. This may lay the basis for conflicting groups to move from fixed positions to the underlying interests and needs. Such a way of analyzing and reframing conflict is an optimized way of understanding complex issues and contexts.

Principle (3) "Work together" – highlights the need for collaboration and co-management and the development of multi-party dialogs and reflects the applied outcomes of the human dimensions of wildlife. While working with different interest groups, resolving conflict between people with the help of mediators as third-party neutrals may become essential. If needs and interests are recognized and elaborated upon, mutual agreements may become possible, paving the way for joint actions. Mediation may also enable actors to work together even if some disagreements are not fully resolved or if tensions resurface.

Principle (4) "Integrate science and policy" – points at the significance of research and monitoring to inform decision-making, and ensuring linkages to policy, which is also highlighted in the human dimensions of wildlife. Multiparty mediation sheds light on the different uses that scientific knowledge may have. It has the potential to improve communication and coordinate knowledge transfer among various actors and groups, e.g. through the involvement of experts, assessors or other specialists selected and accepted by all interest groups or by informing science and policy about data and information gathered within the preceding steps.

Principle (5) "Enable sustainable pathways" – presents a wide range of HWC management interventions to reduce costs of living with wildlife in the long-term and manage human behavior in HWC situations. Multiparty mediation guides decision-making processes by leading the identification of targets and feasible actions. This involves the co-creation of solutions that are accepted and supported by all interest groups, to augment their sustainability.

The lack of awareness among actors about the potential of mediation to reduce and manage conflicts hinders the development of mutual agreements and sustainable solutions – especially in the field of biodiversity conservation and other important environmental issues. In this context, the Environmental Mediation Initiative (EMI) was launched in 2023 as part of the Erasmus+ funded project "New European training curricula for facilitating environmental conflicts (KA210-ADU)." Intensive exchange experiences, good practices and experimental learning between researchers and mediators enabled the exploration of the potential of facilitation and mediation in environmental conflicts. A toolkit was developed with examples of tools and methods to bring clarity to a HWC situation and to create the basis for generating social learning (Hovardas et al., 2023). It also provides examples showcasing how the tools and methods have been used to achieve more equitable conflict resolution for all parties involved (Marino et al., 2023).

Conclusions

Understanding how human dimensions influence the acceptance of wildlife and what motivates people to coexist with species in human-dominated landscapes is fundamental to mitigating HWC. However, for these efforts to be truly effective, they must be embedded within a broader social engagement process, an aspect often overlooked in HWC management. The IUCN guidelines (IUCN, 2023) and related initiatives open new perspectives in

conservation and the way toward innovation and transformation in fields that are most challenging. By taking these paths, the great potential of mediation should be considered.

Three lessons learned within the intensive collaboration of the Environmental Mediation Initiative (EMI), where we analyzed different case studies from all over Europe and from the working field of all partners, were the following:

(1) As HWC often is a conflict between people over the management of wildlife (Madden & McQuinn, 2014; Zimmermann et al., 2020), conservation agencies find themselves entangled in challenging situations, in which they themselves are groups of interest. Involving third parties as mediators carries with it the potential to remain in the role of conservation actor and to have someone responsible for the process and co-design. One way of meeting this need would be to provide a platform, e.g. like a mediation hub to find professional support by neutral third parties as mediators.
(2) The potential for reaching agreements and supporting sustainable solutions by those involved in conservation conflicts, such as HWCs, is closely linked to the process developed by the mediator, their de-escalation skills and the ability to enable constructive dialogue. Therefore, mediation tools and methods for environmental conflict mediators (see, e.g., Hovardas et al., 2023; Marino et al., 2023) need to be further developed and broadly shared. To ensure the quality and durability of the mediation process, there is a need to certify the skills, capacity and knowledge of mediators.
(3) While HWC is a growing global challenge for biodiversity conservation, it also represents an opportunity for focused cooperation and collaboration toward Target 4 of the KMGBF to "[. . .] *effectively manage human-wildlife interactions to minimize human-wildlife conflict for coexistence*." Targeted funding to stimulate the use of mediators in the implementation of Target 4 actions would facilitate neutral access and help to set up processes for transformative change.

If these conditions are met, multiparty mediation can be successfully implemented and could play its role as a key ingredient for sustainable pathways to coexistence.

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Authors Contributions

Eva-Maria Cattoen developed the conceptual model of mediative support along the IUCN principles for gaining human–wildlife coexistence and coordinated writing of the manuscript. Eva M. Gross

delivered structure and content to the manuscript. Maria Bacher supported the internal review of the article. Anastasios Chovardas, Yorck von Korff, and Alexandra Zimmermann, contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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