Defining Leadership in Conservation: a View from the Top

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Introduction

Leadership is arguably the most important attribute in the tool kit of a conservation biologist. Ideally, academic programs in conservation biology and related fields recruit and train those individuals who are or are likely to become conservation leaders of the future. Also ideally, students in these programs strive to improve their leadership attributes so as to maximize their chances of “making a difference” in conserving Earth’s biodiversity.

In contrast with the staggering amount of information on improving leadership skills in financial and business contexts, the specific skills necessary to become a successful leader in conservation have received relatively little study and comment (Cannon et al. 1996; but see Snow 1992).

Working under the assumption that a better understanding of conservation leadership can be garnered by studying top practitioners, or “maestros” (Westrum 1994), students in the University of Maryland’s Graduate Program in Sustainable Development and Conservation Biology conducted individual, face-to-face interviews with 10 leaders in the conservation field. The interviews were designed to gain knowledge regarding respondents’ leadership styles and to learn which steps in their academic preparation and careers led them to their current positions. We then conducted a crosscutting analysis to identify common leadership themes and points of divergence in their perspectives. Our objectives were to improve our own leadership skills and develop recommendations for identifying (e.g., from a pool of applicants to a graduate program in conservation biology) and training future conservation leaders in academic or other settings.

Interviewees were chosen nonrandomly and included senior executive officers or chief scientists from state and federal agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and academic institutions, all headquartered in or near Washington, D.C. (Names and affiliations are provided in the Acknowledgments.) All have distinguished careers in conservation and are known for the impact they have had on the way the public views and participates in conservation activities. We recognize that a variety of categories of leaders in conservation were not included in our sample, especially those who do not have traditional educational backgrounds—for example, local, indigenous spokespersons. We also recognize a gender bias in our respondents: nine men and one woman.

Interviewees were asked a series of open-ended questions encouraging them to elaborate on various facets of leadership in conservation. The questions were similar across all interviews, although tailored to the background of each participant. Four aspects of leadership were considered.

First, we examined the background and influential experiences of the respondents. What was their inspiration for entering the conservation field and what early experiences shaped their career choice? Did they have specific role models or mentors? Moreover, what steps did they take during their careers that brought them to a leadership position? Second, we explored the personal characteristics of a leader and how our interviewees defined leadership in conservation. This aspect included a look into different styles of leadership within conservation organizations and state and federal agencies. Third, we discussed the leadership skills necessary to accomplish day-to-day tasks within a conservation organization or agency, including skills used in coalition building and overcoming...
obstacles. Fourth, we considered the future of leadership within the conservation movement and which aspects of leadership can be taught and which are innate. In addition, we asked interviewees if there is a need for a global leader of the conservation movement.

Questions and Responses

Why Did You Become Involved in Conservation?

Most respondents identified childhood enjoyment of exploring nature as a primary factor influencing them to pursue a career in conservation biology. Several interviewees stated that an early interest in biology made for an easy transition to conservation biology. A few mentioned the importance of their first exposure to another culture, abject poverty, or the loss to development of natural sites. Daly and Jones cited humanitarian concerns, including human dependence on natural resources, as a primary motivation for pursuing a career in conservation.


All respondents acknowledged the value of interdisciplinary training in their career development. Even those who emphasized the need for grounding in a traditional discipline also identified a need for leaders to avoid “tunnel vision” and think about the variety of perspectives that different disciplines bring to a problem.

Respondents also identified field experience in both ecology and policy as helpful in their professional development. Fieldwork in biology was seen by some as the best way to understand both ecological reality and the challenges facing conservation practitioners on the ground. Fox defined fieldwork in the policy arena as “stepping out of the ivory tower” to work with people of diverse backgrounds and getting behind the scenes to see how social systems such as the U.S. Congress function. Wemmer gave a useful example: working with long-time employees at the U.S. National Zoo, many of whom had considerable practical experience but little formal academic training, changed his perception of how to effect change among professionals in his field.

Several respondents emphasized the value of traveling and working abroad. Cited benefits of foreign travel included an expanded conservation vision, foreign language skills, and a better grasp of intercultural perspectives and ecological and social realities.

Most respondents also considered contact with inspiring and supportive mentors as instrumental to their career development. Several stated that the success of conservation leaders should be measured in part by their success in advancing the careers of future leaders in the field. Effective mentors can serve as role models and train colleagues and students in skills such as diplomacy, patience, and interpersonal skills (attributes not necessarily taught in academic institutions). Another recognized role of mentors was helping potential leaders identify jobs for which they would be competitive.

Closely related to mentorship is networking. As explained by Jensen, a network of people you can call upon to get things done can greatly increase your efficiency as a leader and makes work more fun. Women and minorities, in particular, need to invest in building networks to help them achieve leadership positions in conservation.

Finally, all respondents stated that a Ph.D. is not necessary to become a leader in conservation, particularly to achieve leadership positions in local communities or in developing countries. A Ph.D. was generally recognized as less necessary for policy work than for science. However, respondents did note several benefits of a Ph.D. First, the process of earning a Ph.D. teaches critical thinking, hypothesis-testing skills, and perseverance and can help build confidence as well as humility. An advanced degree may also be a necessary credential for some conservation employment opportunities, particularly in the United States. Finally, a Ph.D. can provide grounding in a specialty area, increasing a leader’s ability to recognize quality ideas in that subject.

Were There Specific Role Models Who Provided Direction in Your Conservation Thinking or Activities?

Respondents identified a variety of mentors, former professors, and colleagues as role models. In some cases respondents did not have a personal relationship with these role models. For example, several were inspired by the work of Rachel Carson. Fonseca resisted naming a specific role model, but he did describe interactions with an inspiring colleague. Mittermeier reflected that there were few role models in conservation when he was growing up; thus, he emulated fictitious characters in period literature.

Following is a list of attributes that characterize the 35 role models specified by our interviewees (numbers in parentheses represent the number of persons mentioned that fit each category, and role models who fit more than one category were counted multiple times):

- ability to inspire and influence the way in which respondents thought about specific issues—such influential people were described using words such as “inspiring” and “able to see outside the box” (18);
- courage necessary to vocalize controversial opinions and ideas (12);
- strong interpersonal skills—people described as “charismatic,” “able to earn respect,” “having an ability to work with others one on one, in coalitions or between agencies” (6);
What Skills or Characteristics Are Useful to Leaders in Conservation?

We tallied all conservation leadership characteristics mentioned by respondents and ranked them according to the number of the 10 respondents who cited each (in parentheses): communication and other interpersonal skills (6); long-term vision and the ability to see the “big picture” in conservation issues (6); an organized and systematic way of thinking that includes the ability to prioritize and focus on important issues on the conservation agenda (6); and the ability to build coalitions and consensus and negotiate when conflicts appear (5).

The following characteristics were mentioned by two to three respondents: passion or intensity of character, love for nature, ability to influence others, persuasive, a knowledge base in science and/or policy, diplomacy, ability to inspire and motivate others, persistence, willingness to take risks, resiliency, ability to know when to compromise, integrity or consistency, and hope (rather than optimism).

What Leadership Skills Are Necessary to Direct a Conservation Organization or Agency?

Respondents agreed that all organizations, regardless of their scope or mission, require similar management skills in their directors. For example, it is generally the leader’s role to prioritize tasks and issues and to motivate individuals to pursue organizational goals. It is no surprise that micromanagement was not seen as productive. Rather, the leader must provide inspiration and guidance for his or her colleagues while allowing team members to find their own niche. The leader of a conservation organization was seen as a person who can match talent to tasks, develop trust among coworkers, treat staff with respect and equality, empower coworkers to become effective members of the team, and be ready to participate at all levels (e.g., even doing her or his own photocopying).

Respondents stressed that a leader should be able to bring needed change to the programs and goals of their organization while maintaining and supporting current organizational strengths. To make progress in an organization one must be comfortable with its cultural model. For example, the only female interviewee noted that women moving into leadership positions in conservation might find themselves working within a “masculine” organizational culture. Within the government bureaucracy, it is important to be able to make decisions even when complete internal consensus is not possible and it is necessary to tell some people things they may not want to hear.

Leaders in conservation organizations were seen as visionaries who help others overcome obstacles and “keep in mind the bigger picture of a restored world.” A useful tool of leaders in conservation is to identify cultural symbols in nature that can be used to rally support for conservation at local and national levels. One interviewee remarked that the conservation community has done a “lousy job of selling biodiversity,” especially the fundamental link between biodiversity protection and poverty alleviation.

Are Coalition-Building Skills Important to Conservation Leaders?

Study participants agreed that coalitions are often essential to achieving complex conservation goals, but several provided words of caution. Coalition-building is growing in popularity among conservation organizations, yet coalitions can act as a distraction that dilutes a group’s time and energy. An effective leader has the ability to determine when it makes sense to invest organizational resources in collaborative conservation efforts.

Several respondents described the tasks and skills of a leader in a conservation coalition. The leader often must first convince staff, board members, and donors that a partnership is necessary. Although the agendas of different organizations will rarely dovetail perfectly, it is the leader’s task to focus coalition’s efforts on areas of common interest and to move the agenda forward, beyond the goals of individual institutions. The leader must ensure that all sides and views are heard, that groups are equitably engaged, and that recognition for accomplishments is provided to each member group. Finally, it is important for a coalition leader to know when it is time to dissolve a coalition or to limit its size.

How Did You Deal with Experiences That Tested Your Skills as a Leader?

When asked about experiences that significantly challenged their skills as leaders, interviewees responded with examples that tended to fall into one of two broad categories: organizational/management concerns or issue-based obstacles. Examples of problems of an organizational or management nature included restructuring an organization, dealing with personnel issues, and finding common ground among individuals working together within and between organizations. Strong interpersonal skills were seen as important in meeting all these challenges.

Most respondents cited specific issues as challenges to their leadership skills. One example involved presenting controversial viewpoints to a variety of audiences. By way of solution, one interviewee tailored the presentation to
the interests of each audience. Another interviewee highlighted a challenge specific to women in the conservation movement. She felt that the dearth of women in management positions in general, and especially in the scientific arena, can make it difficult for women to identify mentors and role models. A third cited the lack of qualified people—with science and cultural/language training—a major obstacle in international conservation. Identifying and training “homegrown” leaders was suggested as a solution to this problem.

Is It the Task of a Leader to Pursue His or Her Own Vision or the Vision of the Organization?

Eight of 10 respondents believed that a leader’s task was to pursue both his or her own vision and to give voice to the goals of the group. One stated, “A leader has a vision that others want to be a part of and needs to be surrounded by people with good ideas.” Two acknowledged that, although individual vision is important, it is just as important to create a sense of shared vision within the group. Several respondents felt that although input from others and a consensus of all parties is optimal, it is ultimately up to the leader to make the decision regarding resource allocation. This was thought to be especially important in government, where leaders are often faced with daunting bureaucracy and may have to tell people things they do not want to hear. One interviewee emphasized that it is the leader’s job to be a good listener and gather input from others and then set the organization’s agenda, picking and choosing the items to open up for feedback. It is then the leader’s responsibility to sell everyone else on these ideas. Another respondent believed that, to be effective, leaders of nongovernmental organizations need to “see beyond individual egos” and pursue a common goal.

Does the Conservation Movement Need a Global Leader, a Gandhi of Conservation?

Five respondents addressed this question. Two thought that a global leader would be helpful, especially to provide a unified voice and reach more people. Three respondents didn’t think a global leader was needed or likely to appear. The latter felt that each organization, region, or culture requires leaders familiar with the political, social, and economic landscape and who fairly represent the interests of their constituents. Given the extreme cultural diversity of the people involved in the conservation movement, it is unlikely that one or a few individuals could become global leaders without offending some parties along the way.

Discussion

Given that leadership is the ability to influence others, it is not surprising that interpersonal skills such as effective communication, listening, and the ability to resolve conflict were seen as important abilities in conservation leaders and their role models. The importance of interpersonal skills noted by our interviewees is in agreement with findings of a broad survey of conservation organizations and agencies (Cannon et al. 1996) and analyses of species recovery efforts (Westrum 1994; Moonsbrucker & Kleiman 2001; Clark & Wallace 2002). Respondents in our survey also agreed that effective conservation leaders generally have a large-scale and long-term vision and are able to focus resources on that priority. However, they were also seen as capable of voicing the views of the organization or group they represent.

Conservation leaders were seen as people with a clear vision of a large-scale action plan. They possess the interpersonal skills necessary to garner support within and outside their organization. They have a realistic view of what can and cannot be accomplished, and they strike compromise as necessary to keep the organization moving forward.

How can we identify and train conservation leaders of the future? Most of our respondents had childhood experiences exploring nature and were exposed to other countries and cultures in their youth. Most were able to recall specific people and events that inspired them to become involved in conservation. These results suggest that interest in conservation may be fostered by introducing students to nature and the outdoors and to people who serve as conservation role models. Leadership in conservation may be promoted in the academic environment by organizing seminars in which students are given the opportunity to interact with local conservation leaders and by providing internships that allow students to interact with conservation professionals on the job.

Respondents were also in agreement that interdisciplinary training and help in networking are important in the development of conservation leaders. Conservation professionals and graduate programs can contribute in both respects, providing employees and students with broad-based exposure in areas such as environmental policy and economics as well as conservation biology, and by helping students and associates make the professional contacts that will allow them to achieve their leadership potential.

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Literature Cited


