GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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This research serves as part of the Center for Collaborative Conservation policy brief series *Policy and Practice for Wolf Reintroduction in Colorado.* You can find the entire series here.

Research Focus

I conducted a study to identify a potential pathway forward to assist in managing social conflict over wolf recovery in Colorado and help mitigate further conflict escalation and backlash. Wolf recovery is a notoriously polarizing issue that is steeped in vitriol and stakeholder conflict, which poses added challenges to wildlife managers. My goal here was to identify guiding principles, that could be implemented in a stakeholder engagement process, specific to reducing conflict and fostering intergroup reconciliation.

Approach

In Summer 2020 I developed these principles from a synthesis of various primary and secondary resources. This included interviews with conflict and peace-building theorists, decision science analysts, and practitioners from the conflict resolution, public deliberation, and collaborative conservation fields. I then conducted an academic literature review across several relevant disciplines, such as general conflict theory, environmental conflict resolution, public deliberation, and negotiation and mediation theory. Furthermore, I completed a policy review relevant to environmental collaboration and conflict resolution and reviewed practitioner-oriented conflict resolution training materials.

Key Findings

My synthesis revealed six thematic areas, the guiding principles, that are important to incorporate into broader stakeholder engagement processes to effectively manage and resolve social conflict.

Guiding Principles for Conflict Resolution

1. Use of a Professional 3rd-Party Facilitator

To guarantee fair implementation of the guiding principles and ensure effective conflict engagement, it is necessary to contract a facilitator, practiced in conflict resolution, to govern the process.

2. Extensive Stakeholder Analysis & Selection Transparency

Extensive stakeholder analysis by process hosts to identify all parties who should have a seat at the table is of the upmost importance. Selection of participants should be transparent, clearly articulated, and include an open application process.

3. Identification & Targeting of Underlying Conflict Drivers

Conflict between groups is driven by values and by various perceptions and assumptions of the issue and of others. Identifying these underlying drivers associated with the conflict, and addressing them in the process, is necessary for reducing conflict.

4. Early Stakeholder Involvement & Co-Development of Outcome Objectives

Process details should be determined by participants' shared vision, and goals must be co-developed. Stakeholders need to work together to build a shared narrative of concerns, common ground, and core needs.

5. Stakeholder Empowerment

A good process should empower actors to guide the process and desired outcomes, and to work energetically and cooperatively to achieve their goals.

6. Process & Agency Transparency

It is vital stakeholders understand their potential degree of decision-making power and their role in the process, therefore decision-makers need to be transparent about their goals, intentions, and restrictions.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Emphasizing stakeholder conflict management efforts in stakeholder engagement processes for contentious natural resource management issues, such as wolf recovery and management, is critical to the long-term success of such an initiative. Unmanaged conflict often results in prolonged and costly litigation, loss of trust in and hostility towards agencies, persecution of the species and groups involved, delays in executing management objectives, and aggressive stakeholder lobbying.

It is of upmost importance to conduct extensive stakeholder and conflict analyses when initiating collaborative stakeholder processes related to divisive issues. Using stakeholder analysis to ensure all affected parties have a seat at the table, particularly traditionally marginalized groups or those that have felt marginalized from decision-making, is vital to reducing conflict and increasing trust. Moreover, understanding the conflict from the perspective of those groups involved is necessary for affecting change. Conflict between groups is driven by deeply held values related to the issue and by perceptions of the nature of the conflict and assumptions about members of one's own group and outside groups. These values, perceptions, and assumptions lead to strong emotions that fuel the conflict. Identifying these underlying drivers associated with the conflict from the perspectives of all relevant groups, and addressing them in stakeholder engagement processes, is necessary to achieving conflict resolution.

To effectively manage conflict, it is important that engagement processes lead to some degree of influence in a management plan, and that stakeholders feel empowered by the process to make a real impact in decision-making. Further, a transformative process should encourage openness, empathy, and perspective-taking and put the power to guide the process and outcomes in the participants' hands. However, this empowerment should not be limited to self-determination and dispute settlement. Conflict engagement should be an opportunity to explore differences, air past grievances or perceived slights, and build recognition and empathy for others' needs and values. This type of intergroup contact has been shown to reduce prejudice, facilitate reconciliation, encourage agreement on solutions, and prevent future conflicts from arising.

A condition of effective conflict management is transparency by decision-makers regarding participant selection and for both agency and process goals, intentions, and restrictions. Stakeholder groups are more likely to accept and cooperate with plans and policies, even those not fully in line with their views, when they feel their needs and concerns have been listened to and incorporated to some degree. However, if stakeholders feel ignored or exploited, in that they perceive the process and their participation a farce, reactance can occur and trust in agency can diminish. Deciding stakeholders' roles in decision-making may be an iterative process that develops over time and the degree of stakeholder influence can be up to the discretion of the ultimate decision-makers. However, it is vital stakeholders understand early on their potential degree of decision-making power (or at what stage of the process that will be decided upon) and their role in the process

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More Information

For more information about this project, and to review the "Guiding Principles for Conflict Resolution" report, contact:

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