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10 June 2022

Cooperation between people and wild animals poses unique conservation challenges



Yao honey-hunters harvesting honeybee nest in Niassa Special Reserve, Mozambique.

Photo: Jessica van der Wal

While pet dogs are often said to be “man's best friend”, less is known about the remarkable cooperative partnerships that exist between people and wild animals. In some African communities, people cooperate with wax-eating birds called greater honeyguides to find wild honey. In parts of Brazil and Myanmar, artisanal fishers cooperate with wild dolphins to catch fish. Unfortunately, these unique practices are under threat: people once

cooperated with orcas to hunt whales, and with wolves to bring down large prey, but these partnerships have already gone extinct.

A new [study](#) by an international, interdisciplinary team of over 40 experts published in *Conservation Letters* today, details the benefits of these fascinating partnerships, the threats they face, and the special conservation measures they will need to persist.

Dr Jessica van der Wal, lead author of the study and researcher in the [Honeyguide Research Project](#) at the University of Cape Town's (UCT) FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, said "human-wildlife cooperation is a key part of the cultural heritage and food security of these communities. The interactions also boost food availability for the animal partner, and could play a role in ecosystem function."

The study describes how a mix of environmental and cultural change is jeopardising these benefits. Human-wildlife cooperation faces a unique set of conservation challenges as it requires multiple components to function: a motivated human and wildlife partner, a suitable environment, and compatible inter-species knowledge. In some places, human engagement in the interaction has declined due to changing livelihoods or displacement from their lands. In other cases, the wildlife partner and prey numbers have decreased due to degraded habitats.

"If we are to protect this irreplaceable part of our connection to the natural world, we need to develop tailored conservation plans that consider the needs of both the human and the wildlife participants," said senior author of the paper Dr Dominic Cram from the University of Cambridge and also a researcher in the Honeyguide Research Project.

The authors recommend protecting habitats to conserve the animal partner and the prey species they seek in cooperation with humans. Local human communities need to be supported rather than excluded from the landscapes in which these partnerships operate. Campaigns to raise awareness will help affirm the value of local practices. Finally, the know-how must not die out. People learn how to cooperate with animals from their friends and elders, so opportunities to learn must be protected and cultural customs archived so they are not lost forever.

Similarly, the animals appear to "watch and learn" from each other, which means conservationists should protect those with the knowledge that demonstrate the skills, and the next generation that are ready to learn. "This places human-wildlife cooperation conservation at the interface between animal culture conservation and the preservation of human cultural heritage," says van der Wal.

The authors point out that while mitigating human-wildlife conflict has received extensive attention by conservationists, the value and vulnerability of human-wildlife cooperation have been neglected.

Protecting the biological and cultural diversity of human-wildlife cooperation will need safeguarding plans that are customised on a case-by-case basis. Further work is also required to identify examples of human-wildlife cooperation that may be occurring today but remain unknown to the scientific community.

[Download more photos.](#)

Acknowledgements

The Honeyguide Research Project, led by Prof. Claire Spottiswoode at UCT and the University of Cambridge, is funded by the European Research Council. Other core members of the paper writing team were Dr Natalie Uomini (Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Germany); Dr Mauricio Cantor (Oregon State University, USA) and Prof. Fábio Daura-Jorge (Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Brazil). The paper's authors included biologists, linguists, anthropologists, conservationists, and practitioners of human-honeyguide and human-dolphin cooperation.

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