

How to save trees: It's all about conflict resolution

August 14 2019, by Kristen French



Land recently cleared for gold mining in the mining zone known as “La Pampa”, Madre de Dios, Peru. Credit: Joshua Fisher

The Madre de Dios rainforest in southeastern Peru is one of the [biodiversity capitals of the world](#), with more species of plants and animals than [almost anywhere else on the planet](#). This giant patch of Amazon rainforest is also home to some of the last uncontacted indigenous tribes on earth. But its rich heritage has made it a center of escalating conflict.

To protect the forest ecosystem and watersheds as well as the cultures of local indigenous communities, the Amarakaeri Communal Reserve was established in the Madre de Dios forest in 2000. And yet, since then,

[illegal and informal gold mining](#) in the region has exploded, leading to rampant deforestation and pollution of air and water that threaten the survival of the forest and its inhabitants. The competing interests of indigenous tribes, mining and oil and gas developers, conservation organizations and government agencies have led to entrenched and at times [violent conflict](#). While these disputes are in many ways specific to the Amaraeri, similar echoes can be found all around the developing world.

Today, effective conservation often requires putting [conflict](#) resolution first, said Dr. Joshua Fisher, a researcher at Columbia University's Earth Institute, director of [AC4](#), the Advanced Consortium on Cooperation, Conflict and Complexity, and adjunct faculty at Columbia University's Negotiation and Conflict Resolution center, NECR. "In natural resource management, conflict is inevitable. The question is how to equip organizations and resource managers to actually take conflict seriously and engage in better conflict management, which should then have dividends for conservation management." But while excellent theoretical guidance and tools for managing conservation conflicts exist, little research has addressed how to implement these tools in wildly variable contexts. "There's not a lot of work out there on the nitty-gritty of how to implement something," he said.

To fill this gap, Fisher and colleagues from the Amazon Conservation Association in Washington, DC, recently worked together with two Peruvian conservation NGOs and an indigenous coalition from the Amaraeri to implement conflict resolution approaches in the region and generate lessons that could be applied in other contexts. The researchers chose the Amaraeri due to escalating conflict in the region, the expiration of the reserve's "Master Plan"—which sets conservation priorities, provides management and action strategies and delineates zoning uses—and the announcement of a unique funding opportunity for conflict management and mitigation from USAID, the

United States Agency for International Development.

The researchers set out to answer three questions: 1) How can elements that aid or frustrate collaboration best be identified? 2) What are the tools and methodologies that can advance the measurement of processes and productivity of collaborative governance? 3) How can scholars, practitioners, and students be prepared to step out of their silos and embrace deep collaboration?

The Amaraeri project, which ran from November 2014 through January 2018, was the first to examine implementation of something called "conflict sensitive conservation" outside of Africa, where most conservation conflict resolution projects have been implemented successfully. Conflict sensitive conservation is built upon the assumption that conflicts are more likely to arise in situations where expectations are unmet, information is unavailable and stakeholder engagement is inequitable. Thus the intervention sought to increase understanding of conflict drivers among stakeholders, improve conflict-related communication and improve technical capacity for [natural resource management](#) among all participants.

The first lesson the researchers drew from the project is that successful collaboration requires ongoing, integrated and continuous engagement in problem solving. Stakeholders must establish dialogue before decisions need to be made or new actions need to be taken and incorporate constant feedback throughout the process, in an effort to build trust and create actionable strategies. This "deep" collaboration requires focusing first on team dynamics, making sure that everyone understands how the different stakeholders define the problem they seek to resolve, as well as potential solutions and the timeframe for implementing those solutions.

The biggest surprise of the research study, said Fisher, was that these lessons applied even to the initial basic unit of the research team itself,

which, in the beginning, suffered from poor communication and engagement. "You had to start within the smallest unit of collaboration, then carry it outward," he said. "We couldn't assume that all of the team members were working together toward the same goal."

The second lesson the research team drew from the project is that stakeholders must continually adjust project timing and the expectations of communities and donors and stakeholders, so that expectations are realistic. In the Amaraeri, this meant developing an annual plan with predetermined meeting dates, plus biweekly or monthly shorter term plans so that all groups could adapt to new agendas.

The third lesson they drew from the project is highly intuitive, said Fisher: it's essential to build multidisciplinary expertise among all participants. In the specific case of the Amaraeri, this meant training participants in the legal rights of indigenous communities, available conflict resolution institutions in the area, rights and responsibilities of various stakeholders related to natural resource use and governance, and technical resource management issues, such as safe and legal mining and how to assess and monitor impacts on biodiversity and water quality. Because these gaps in technical knowledge were highly specific, the group recruited academics, NGOs, legal consultants and others to develop specific training modules tailored to various stakeholders' needs and learning styles. (These materials are publicly available [online](#).)

As for tools and methodologies of data collection and evaluation, the research team found that a mixed-method approach worked best. They used traditional tools of "[logical frameworks](#)," which help set clear program objectives, define indicators of success and outline critical assumptions on which a project is based, together with biodiversity assessments for the collection of performance level data. They also applied "outcome harvesting," a participatory process by which the implementation team identifies plausible outcomes, investigates them

using a variety of data collection methods, and then triangulates these data sources to verify reported outcomes.

As to methods that can enable scholars and practitioners from distinct fields to engage in deep collaboration, Fisher and his colleagues found it useful to use "conflict sensitive conservation" as an explicit theory of change to guide the intervention. In addition, they built adaptive management strategies into implementation. These strategies allowed the project to achieve a balance between the rigor required for research with the flexibility required for solution of dynamic multiparty conflicts.

Ultimately, the lessons Fisher and his team drew from their work will be particularly useful when applied to [conflict resolution](#) efforts in areas with weak governance, a mix of public, private and indigenous interests, limited state capacity and high value extractive resources to exploit, he said. The supplemental materials that accompany the published journal article include a series of templates meant to help other projects do the deep engagement and capacity building better.

"Everybody's trying to figure out how to best manage the resources and develop sustainable livelihoods for people living around protected areas. So everybody's grappling with these same sets of questions," said Fisher.

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