

New study identifies barriers to conservation success

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Inability to find or retain skilled staff and issues around local community buy-in are just some of the hurdles preventing conservation charities from achieving their goals, a ground-breaking new study has found.

The research was the first of its kind to systematically catalogue and categorise the obstacles into distinct groups.

Some of the problems identified included funding issues, inadequate leadership, and a lack of strategy, with conservationists instead constantly having to operate in 'crisis mode'.

The paper's lead author, Michele Sanders, said: "We suggest that this typology could form the basis of heuristic tools that conservationists can use to identify and manage potential risks to their projects, thereby improving decision making, strategic planning, and, ultimately, overall impact—not just in the conservation sector but across all charities. Funders could also use it to improve their due diligence and expectation management."

The research was based on interviews with 74 conservation [charity](#) directors and senior officials, mostly working in South Africa and Kenya between October 2012 and December 2014. These countries were chosen because their rich wildlife is under increasing threat despite the large number of conservation charities operating there.

More than 80 per cent of those interviewed said finding and keeping skilled and experienced staff was a problem. They said ambitious conservationists often leave charities for better pay, perks, and a chance of travel in the private sector. One interviewee added conservationists are expected to be a jack-of-all-trades: understanding ecological processes while also comprehending complex socioeconomic and political interactions.

Nearly two thirds recognised the challenges of securing support from communities on the ground.

One interviewee pointed out the concept of 'conservation' could be alien

to locals, while another said poverty can prevent it from being a viable choice for them. Broken promises and displacement in the name of conservation were also highlighted.

A number of people—particularly in South Africa—felt it was extremely challenging to find effective leaders. Many described [conservation](#) efforts as lacking strategy, often operating in crisis mode.

Considering the urgency of new and emerging threats, they felt there was a lack of resources available to develop strategies. This meant that while charities were clear about what they wanted to achieve, it was less obvious how they could go about it.

The paper, which was the work of researchers from the University of Oxford, The Open University and Synchronicity Earth, has been published in *Oryx*, the journal of Fauna & Flora International.

According to Michele: "Conservation is essential because we need to protect what is left.

"In my lifetime, we've lost 60 per cent of wildlife populations, and still we keep taking and destroying. Not only are we crossing planetary boundaries that could be impossible to recover from, but it's just wrong to put ourselves so far away from nature to think we can just abuse and waste it.

"The sector receives \$1.1 billion dollars of aid from government and multilateral agencies annually, but biodiversity continues to dwindle. Perhaps if the sector was enabled to act more strategically by better allocation of funding, we could achieve so much more.

"Nature is wonderful and wildlife essential. We need to protect it both for ourselves and for the generations to come."

More information: Conservation conversations: A typology of barriers to conservation success. Michele Jeanette Sanders, Alex Rogers, Laura Miller, Shonil A. Bhagwat. *Oryx*. DOI: doi.org/10.1017/S0030605319000012

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