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A photograph of a grey and black wolf standing in a field of purple flowers. The wolf is looking towards the camera with a serious expression. The background is a soft-focus field of purple flowers under a warm, golden light.

Softer Skills Can Help Mediate Harsh Conservation Disagreements

By TRACY O'CONNELL

Francine Madden wraps up project as wolf-conflict manager in Washington

Achieving agreement among people of opposing views is seldom easy. Examples on the national stage are rampant and often revisited in battles that rage year after year. In conservation arguments, people may be labeled uncharitably by opponents as “tree-huggers,” “gun nuts” or left- or right-wingers. At this depth of resistance, efforts to reach agreement may involve acknowledging underlying, unnamed issues well beyond those that appear on the table.

Enter Francine Madden, executive director of the Center for Conservation Peacebuilding (formerly Human Wildlife Conflict Collaboration) who has spent more than 20 years as what she terms “a third-party neutral” in conflict management around the world. Madden recently completed her most substantial assignment—a three-and-a-half year stint in the state of Washington, where she oversaw the development of an agreement on the future of wolves between pro and con forces that included environmentalists, ranchers and hunters.

Washington state had become a hotbed of conflicting views common in other locales, as well, where the presence of wolves is typically lauded by conservationists and general lovers of wildlife, and cursed by ranchers and others who fear for their safety and livelihoods. The Washington situation began to heat up in the 1990s after an experimental reintroduction of

wolves there caused wolf populations to rebound. By 2015 conflict had become so heated that Washington’s Department of Fish and Wildlife hired Madden to intervene and help cool hostilities within the state’s Wolf Advisory Group.

Madden’s work in this arena has been written up in the *Washington Post* magazine and the *Capital Press*, a weekly that, according to its motto, “empowers growers of food and fiber.” The *Post* article reports, “Madden spent 350 hours interviewing 80 people about wolves before she led advisory group meetings. She found anomalies in the ‘us-vs.-

concluded that Madden brought civility to the state’s contentious Wolf Advisory Group, noting that progress was made.

There will always be conflict, Madden says, so she sees her role as helping people work together effectively even as future challenges loom, rather than achieving a solution to an immediate problem, leaving underlying issues to foment and arise later.

In the Washington state experience, participants went on to discuss other topics, from handling issues around other carnivores, such as bears and cougars, to gender equity issues in the workplace.

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them’ narrative: a hunter who described seeing a wolf as a ‘religious experience’; environmentalists who supported, or at least were neutral about, the idea of a wolf hunt. Wolves, she found, were a proxy for other fears, such as fading traditions and a loss of control to Seattle progressives.”

The *Capital Press* covered her work in several articles, questioning the “hefty \$1.2 million price tag” and other expenses the contract entailed, and citing the lack of transparency in closed meetings. The writer agreed, however, with the need for an outside mediator, saying “The state’s wolf plan was unrealistic, agency leaders seemed caught in the crossfire between pro- and anti-wolf groups, and legislators and the governor were feeling the heat from all sides.” The series

After her success in Washington state, Madden says, she has been approached by a variety of interests in other states concerned with their role in managing wolves—people who want to know, “How can we scale this up?”

Madden calls her unique approach to achieving agreements *conservation conflict transformation*, or CCT. It’s a formula she has honed since seeing the need for a new approach while she was a Peace Corp volunteer in Africa. It gives her a role not unlike a group therapist, drawing out the unspoken and underlying needs of various participants to gain trust and establish a long-term solution. Her work since then has taken her to multiple places in Africa, to Asia and Latin America, and around the United States.



Fancine Madden (left) addressed peacebuilding as part of a panel last year.



Using a Conservation Conflict Transformation (CCT) approach, relationships are built, trust is repaired, and people begin to work together toward solutions that allow coexistence with each other and wildlife.

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Madden, based in Washington, D.C., draws upon models of conservation conflict resolution put forward by Christopher Moore (1986), and Gregg Walker and Steven Daniels (1997), which identify several levels of conflict, from mere disagreement to deep levels of mistrust that add layers of complexity—issues that must be dealt with before finding a solution to the surface problem. She draws from a toolkit of techniques to handle disputes, noting that the basic settlement is often the easiest to reach. The more difficult process is working through the underlying, unspoken issues and forming the relationships necessary for a lasting solution.

The need for Madden's work can be seen in conservation-related agreements

brokered in the past without attention to these more time-consuming, “softer” aspects of relationship-building that creates understanding of others beyond simplistic slogans and stereotypes. Accords reached that way can become mired in memories of past missteps by each opposing group. Research by Naughton-Treves, et. al. (in 2003, on tolerance to wolves in Wisconsin) and others pointed to failures in past agreements that were based on traditional tools such as compensation for predation, if those agreements didn't also include a path toward reconciliation of past hurts among the parties involved.

Madden cites listening as a core component of her method to uncover the resentments each side holds, and

to understand the complexities within each group. Individuals who have a common interest, such as those who identify as hunters, may hold differing perspectives. Some may favor a robust presence of predator species while others do not. Some may favor government-based solutions as opposed to those with a more libertarian view. People don't want to fight, she says; they want dignity and respect, so the process must be all about building trust. All sides need to be respected and valued and have their identity legitimized, Madden insists, and when that happens, “they will guide you” to what needs to happen in the process.

She believes time must be set aside to address these needs before a solution is reached *every time* a new group faces conflict, rather than assuming the interpersonal issues uncovered in one circumstance can be applied to another. Efforts where the trust-building stage is short-changed will not succeed in the long term; Madden calls that approach “go fast to fail.” While the Washington state experience spanned years, each encounter operates on its own timeline, she says. Her briefest interaction, in the Galapagos where parties addressed invasive species, required only two weeks on the ground.

Part of the listening, trust-building work can include measures many

would see as quite apart from a typical conservation-related agreement. In Africa, working with groups to seek an end to the poaching of elephants, stakeholders coached villagers in construction skills and helped them to build a mosque—efforts that addressed the human needs for connectedness, spiritual security and meaningful engagement, all of which are parts of an agreement that will be successful in the long term.

Madden emphasizes backgrounding in preparation for the diverse cultural and personal issues she encounters in her work—seeking information that comes from the participants themselves, as she asks them to come forward with topics they associate with the subject at hand. “We all have baggage,” she says, when coming into a group. Hers, in any given interaction, might include being an urban resident, or being white, or American or female. “I have to earn my neutrality by proving it,” she says. It comes with showing humility, a sense of humor, and a willingness to listen that can be equally effective whether the person in her role is a man or woman, she notes.

Madden has trained 500 professionals and conservation stakeholders in the past decade in “capacity-building” workshops that run for several days, in which participants gain or improve the knowledge and skills to improve professional competence. She apprenticed early on with Brian McQuinn, an Oxford-trained researcher in armed conflict who, while not working in conservation efforts himself, took her capacity-building ability to the next level, she notes.

She has recently taken on her first apprentice, who will work with her for 18 months to gain “journey person” status. She likens the process to the traditional role of workers learning from a more experienced person.

She doesn’t see herself as a master, but as someone with “a ton left to learn,” as she clicks off the skill sets upon which she draws—neurology, behavioral science, sociology, political science and several others. Still, she says, “It’s

not rocket science.” It often involves operating from the gut and remaining behind the scenes. She sees her organization as “the mother ship” from which she hopes to launch clients who can continue to manage future issues according to the process they have learned—even those individuals she finds initially resistant. Many, she says, turn out to be “really good.”

With Madden’s success, the old-style approach of listening to and honoring

each other might be making a comeback in a world where more technology and more laws have too long been seen as solutions—and have too often failed. ■

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