




## ESSAY

# Creating constellations of coexistence through connections between people in human–wildlife conflict areas

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## Abstract

Human–wildlife conflict (HWC) is a critical challenge to human development and well-being and threatens biodiversity conservation. Ideally, HWC mitigation should benefit both wildlife and communities and limit the costs associated with living alongside wildlife. However, place- and context-dependent realizations of conflict are often overlooked in HWC mitigation. Social and systemic dimensions of human–wildlife relationships often receive limited consideration in HWC as a concept and in mitigation strategies implemented globally. In recognizing our collective symmetries as a diverse group of researchers, we pose the idea of constellations of coexistence, based on Atallah et al.’s “constellation of co-resistance.” Building on literature and our interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral experiences of working with diverse species inhabiting different sociocultural, sociopolitical, and socioeconomic landscapes, we considered evidence of cultural nuances (e.g., socio-cultural dimensions of human–elephant and human–lion interactions in East Africa and India) in HWC mitigation and argue that failing to incorporate them in mainstream practices poses a myriad of ethical and practical consequences. Locally situated but globally relevant, participation of local and Indigenous communities in HWC mitigation activities produces better conservation outcomes. Centering communities in the ideation, implementation, and evaluation of HWC mitigation promotes more equitable and sustainable management strategies for long-term human–wildlife coexistence.

## KEYWORDS

collaborative conservation science, cultural relevance, diverse voices in conservation, human–wildlife coexistence, human–wildlife conflict mitigation

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## INTRODUCTION

Colonialism and colonization are embedded in mainstream conservation science and practice (Domínguez & Luoma, 2020; Eichler & Baumeister, 2021), including human–wildlife conflict (HWC) mitigation, which has historically involved top-down exclusionary or extractive methods of separating people from nature (i.e., fortress conservation) (Chu, 2021; Sapignoli & Hitchcock, 2023). These dominant narratives often promote dispossession (Braverman, 2021; Mamers, 2020), exploitation (Kennedy et al., 2023; Vuola, 2022), and dehumanization of Indigenous and local peoples (de Jong & Butt, 2023; Kolinjivadi et al., 2023). The violent disruption of human–environment relationships through exclusionary tactics has rendered several mainstream conservation practices socially and environmentally unjust and anti-Indigenous (Whyte, 2018). Non-Indigenous communities also experience fractured human–environment relationships because of these practices (Abakari & Mwalyosi, 2020; Dawson et al., 2021; Doubleday & Rubio, 2022; Mahalwal & Kabra, 2023).

In the Anthropocene, HWC has increased sharply, posing an imminent threat to human lives, livelihoods, and wildlife conservation (Katju et al., 2023; Linnell et al., 2020; Mahato & Pal, 2021). Historically, HWC mitigation has often been ineffective owing to its nonparticipatory, top-down nature that has ignored place and context-dependent manifestations of conflict (Bhatia et al., 2020; Harris et al., 2023). Examples of such HWC mitigation include barriers that separate human and wildlife spaces (Hoare, 2012), alternate livelihood schemes (Dupain et al., 2010; He & Jiao, 2023), financial mechanisms (Mishra et al., 2003), and HWC education (Salazar et al., 2024) when implemented without recognizing the cultural sensitivities of the place (Hill, 2021). Such exclusionary (Brockington, 2015; Mahalwal & Kabra, 2023) and Western-based conservation practices (Eichler & Baumeister, 2018; Fletcher et al., 2021) limit the translation and accessibility of conservation to local communities, particularly when the people harmed by wildlife damage do not hold power (Bluwstein, 2018; Harris et al., 2023). For example, barriers often displace or burden human communities (Massé, 2016) without effectively resolving the underlying sociopolitical and economic causes and consequences of conflict (Fletcher & Toncheva, 2021), thereby failing to adequately address wildlife damages in the long term (Gupta, 2013; Johnson et al., 2018). The most successful conservation and HWC mitigation involve long-term and culturally relevant engagement with local communities (e.g., Cortés-Capano et al., 2020; Mishra et al., 2017; Pandya, 2022; Rai et al., 2021; Waylen et al., 2010). Time and again, conservation scholars and practitioners have called for the inclusion of place- and community-based narratives to augment current conservation and HWC mitigation practices sustainably (Harris et al., 2023; Zimmermann et al., 2020). Current literature emphasizes the critical need for HWC mitigation efforts to integrate local communities in project ideation, development, management, and implementation (Bhatia, 2021; Brondizio et al., 2021; Okafor-Yarwood et al., 2020; Treves et al., 2009).

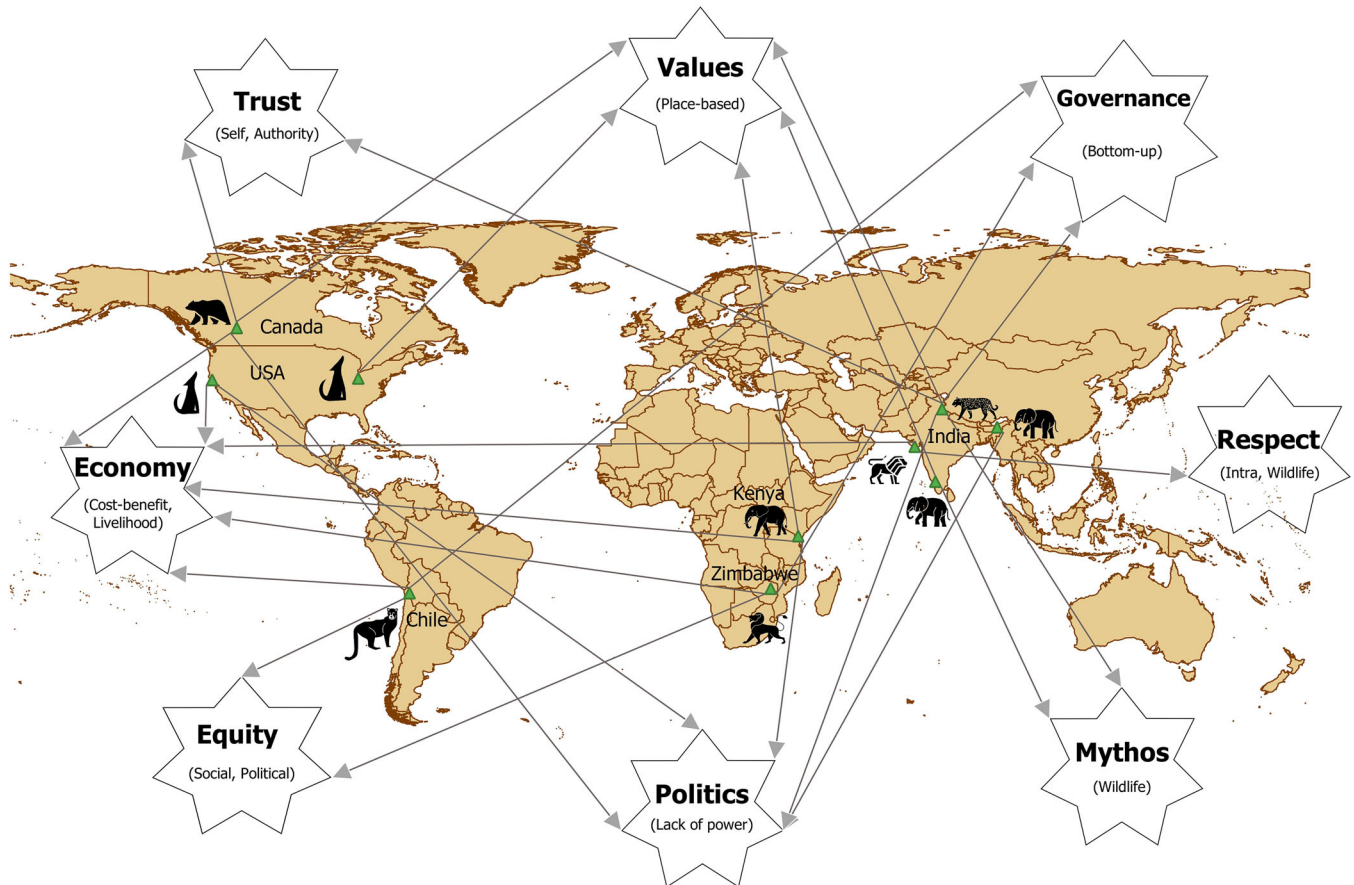
Addressing the colonial and capitalist paradoxes of conflict and coexistence in human–wildlife interactions requires reorienting human–nature relationships around Indigenous and local perspectives and experiences (i.e., Fletcher & Toncheva, 2021) and recognizing project failures to continue developing effective and acceptable HWC mitigation (Webber et al., 2007). The HWC literature shows the need for HWC mitigation and coexistence strategies to consider socioecological and political contexts (Madden, 2004). From this, one can consider ways for participatory initiatives (Asteria et al., 2024; Maru et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2021) to offer inclusive and socially relevant alternatives to mainstream practices (see Asiyanbi et al., 2019; Lynch & Turner, 2022; Sunam et al., 2015; Willow, 2015). However, the study of participatory and inclusive coexistence mechanisms is limited, lacks international voices, and has geographic biases (Bornatowski et al., 2019; Lozano et al., 2019; Venumière-Lefebvre et al., 2022). Thus, a more critical integration of sociocultural factors in HWC resolution is needed (Expósito-Granados et al., 2019; Manfredo & Dayer, 2004).

We drew on the concept of “constellations of co-resistance” (Atallah et al., 2022; Simpson, 2017) to examine local contexts of HWC. Our constellations emphasize coexistence and are rooted in our commitment to understanding and practicing conservation grounded in a global collective that offers a critical approach to HWC science and mitigation. We follow Pooley et al.’s (2021) definition of *coexistence*: the “sustainable though dynamic state in which humans and wildlife coadapt to sharing landscapes, where human interactions with wildlife are effectively governed to ensure wildlife populations persist in socially legitimate ways that ensure tolerable risk levels.” Our understanding of HWC is thus intimately connected to our identities and responds to the knowledge and realities of the people and wildlife we work with. Such understanding of HWC involves integration of positionality, transparency, and reflexivity in theory and practice, which can promote conservation objectives that are better for wildlife, people, and conservation (Boyce et al., 2021; Pienkowski et al., 2022).

We are a collective of diverse conservation scholars and practitioners and we seek to reorient HWC narratives and how avenues to coexistence are framed. By prioritizing local and Indigenous peoples, we link our shared HWC experiences as a means of fostering that is grounded in context-specific human–environment relationships. Based on our case studies, we propose possibilities for more equitable futures for the global–local collective of Indigenous and local communities.

## CASE STUDIES

We considered context- and place-based nuance and heterogeneity of HWC realization (and resolution) and examined species often found outside the formal boundaries of protected areas. The case studies represent diverse ecoregions and sociocultural landscapes across East and Southern Africa,



**FIGURE 1** Visual representation of constellations of coexistence, reflecting the species and geographies in our case studies. Conceptual linkages between study sites and species are emphasized, including economy, equity, governance, mythos, politics and power, respect, trust, and values. The concepts represent the commonalities among cases regarding sociopolitical, sociocultural, socioeconomic, and socioecological contexts of human–wildlife conflict and human–environment relationships.

India, and North and South America (Figure 1). A mix of case studies showcases sociocultural and political factors mediating coexistence versus conflict and how integrating local values, perspectives, and needs can strengthen mitigation approaches. We also considered and highlighted challenges. Although we did not perform a comprehensive review of cultural relevance in HWC mitigation, the cases reflect our lived experiences, professional expertise, and cultural connections to the people and wildlife in these landscapes.

### African elephants

Conservation and management of African savanna elephants (*Loxodonta africana*) are contentious due to polarized perspectives between right holders (Van De Water et al., 2022). Top-down management strategies (protected areas and wildlife corridors [Schauer, 2015]) do not adequately reduce human–elephant conflict (Mariki et al., 2015) or address underlying systemic processes, such as asymmetrical power dynamics that render local communities vulnerable and exacerbate tensions between

communities and conservation actors (Benjaminsen & Svarstad, 2010; Dickman, 2010; Garland, 2008).

In Sagalla, Kenya, elephants face retaliatory killings (KWS, 2021) by marginalized communities required by conservation organizations to coexist with elephants. Tensions have existed among conservationists over ideologies and priorities, and between conservationists and the local community over elephant management. Community involvement in decision-making is limited (Kamau & Sluyter, 2017; Schauer, 2015). Lack of participation has led to distrust and skepticism; conservationists are perceived as prioritizing elephant needs over those of people. The community is compelled to live with elephants despite livelihood restrictions, food insecurity, and safety concerns. Further, the community perceives mitigation measures (e.g., beehive fences) as deterring elephants only in small farmland areas but not from large community spaces. Insistence on human–elephant coexistence is perceived as coercion, leading to resistance. Through an inductive process, M.K. conducted interviews with the Sagalla community. These interviews were approved by the University of Edinburgh Research Ethics and Integrity Office (Ref 2022–675). Based on questions

regarding local understandings of coexistence, these interviews revealed deep-seated opposition to conservation agency directives to coexist with elephants.

...these conservation organizations ...prioritize wildlife and not human beings...they came to my farm and I told them to go away because our ideas do not match. They want me to protect elephants yet elephants...are destroying my crops....

This reflects a lack of cultural sensitivity and inclusivity in elephant management, contributing to conflict. Respondents overwhelmingly wanted physical separation from elephants, aligning with traditional beliefs and rituals that maintained human–elephant boundaries.

In contrast, the Mali Elephant Project embraced a living, complex system, actively working with local communities and partners to develop a shared vision of elephant conservation. Problems in Mali include acute resource competition between people and elephants and elephant crop raiding (Canney, 2021). The project's success stems from integrating Western data with local knowledge to address livelihood and elephant challenges. Despite political instability, the Mali Elephant Project has remained resilient due to its localized and inclusive systems. African elephant conservation thus requires embracing diverse perspectives and inclusive knowledge systems that can create culturally relevant solutions.

### African lions

Lions (*Panthera leo*) and other large carnivores often move out of unfenced protected areas and attack livestock (Brackzkowski et al., 2023; Treves & Karanath, 2003). In retaliation, local people kill suspected lions (Kuiper et al., 2015), a regular occurrence in the rural communities of northwestern Zimbabwe. In 2013, the Trans-Kalahari Predator Programme established the Long Shields Community Guardian program in partnership with Panthera and the Mabale and Tsholotsho communities (Sibanda et al., 2021, 2022). This community-based program aimed to minimize the risk of lions and local villagers' retaliatory killings (Sibanda et al., 2022). The program targeted lion and human behavior, actively involving the local community in program design and implementation. Villagers were encouraged to adopt better livestock husbandry techniques, and potential problem lions were monitored with satellite collars. Farmers were alerted when lions ventured near human settlements, and sound-making devices such as *vuvuzelas* were used to haze lions. Lion attacks on livestock were reduced by 50% and retaliatory killings by 43% (Sibanda et al., 2021). Although this example highlights the importance of participatory approaches to conflict resolution, challenges included generational and logistical barriers to technology access, such as to mobile phones used in the early-warning system. This particular challenge emphasizes the importance of combining modern methods with alternative practices that are locally relevant and accessible.

For generations, farmers and pastoralists across Africa have protected livestock from predators by enclosing them in *kraals*

(a traditional enclosure) at night (e.g., Wakoli et al., 2023; Weise et al., 2018). In 2021, Wildlife Conservation Action established a project in Nyaminyami district, Zimbabwe, in response to increasing conflicts with lions from Matusadona National Park (Jeke, 2014). Community consultations and engagement were undertaken to understand existing livestock husbandry systems and individual management practices (Pimenta et al., 2017). The majority of livestock predation incidents occurred at night in the kraals, which are weakly constructed. Subsequently, the local community and Wildlife Conservation Action codesigned a reinforced version of the traditional kraal with naturally available resources. The reinforcements proved effective in deterring night attacks in Zimbabwe and other African areas (e.g., Mkonyi et al., 2017; Wakoli et al., 2023). The success of this simple, cost-effective, culturally sensitive, and environmentally friendly lion conflict mitigation measure was achieved by recognizing the local resource availability and economic conditions of the local community.

### Asian elephant

The Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) typically ranges wider than most protected areas and is the most conflict-prone megafauna in Asia (Sukumar, 2003). A high degree of habitat fragmentation and loss caused by, for example, colonial and postcolonial commodity production have aggravated the intensity of human–elephant conflict in Asia. Human–elephant conflict management in Asia usually involves applying techno-managerial solutions, such as promoting alternative livelihoods for community members, fencing, and translocating problem animals or affected communities (Lenin & Sukumar, 2011). However, people living around wild elephants often adopt traditional ways of mitigating conflict that are embedded in their sociocultural relationships with elephants.

In Southern India, *Kattunayakans*, a forest-dependent Indigenous community, accept elephants as nonhuman persons (rational communicating beings, gods, teachers, kins) (Jolly et al., 2022). Similarly, in regions with intense elephant movement, communities with a rich history and association with the place were more tolerant of elephants than communities that had recently moved to the area (Thekaekera et al., 2021). In contrast, irrespective of ethnicity, local communities of northeastern India empathize with the elephants' act of raiding crops through a sense of shared marginalization in which both the rural populace and elephants were bound through a life of mirrored struggle and desperation (Banerjee & Sinha, 2023a, 2023b; Keil, 2016). Multifaceted cultural relations between people and wild Asian elephants have been widely reported from other Asian regions (De Silva & Srinivasan, 2019; Greene, 2021; Lim & Campos-Arceiz, 2022; Locke & Buckingham, 2016). Such modes of internalization of conflict, embedded in space sharing, empathy, communication, and critical observation, help people cope emotionally. A cultural engagement in handling conflict can promote sustainable coexistence, but it hardly finds space in conventional conflict mitigation policies.

## Asiatic lion

Economic compensation for the loss of human life and property by wildlife is prevalent in Asian countries (Karanth et al., 2018). Cultural predispositions of local communities, however, play a pivotal role in modulating the efficacy of mainstream compensation programs (Kshetry et al., 2021). One example is that of the relationship between local people and Asiatic lions (*Panthera leo leo*) in India. The Asiatic lion is endemic to the state of Gujarat, India, with more than half of its population living outside of the Gir protected area (Gir PA) in a landscape full of people and livestock (Chakrabarti et al., 2023; Jhala et al., 2019). Local communities connect to the lions as symbols of state and national pride, and they feature strongly in the culture and folklore (Chakrabarti et al., 2023; Jhala et al., 2019). Legal protection and established partnerships between the state government and local communities have protected this region's remaining habitats and corridors. This has collectively resulted in a recovery of lions, even beyond the protected area boundaries (Jhala et al., 2019; Ram et al., 2023).

The expansion of the lion population into the human-dominated landscape outside the Gir PA has also been facilitated by an abundance of feral livestock (Jhala et al., 2019; Ram et al., 2023). A high density of feral cattle can largely be attributed to local religious sentiments and the Gujarat Animal Preservation (Amendment) Bill 2017 that bans cattle slaughter in the state. Sociocultural norms that promote the worship of cattle and the dominance of dairy farming as a local livelihood create a scenario wherein unproductive cattle are not sent to slaughterhouses (Banerjee et al., 2013; Singh & Gibson, 2011). Instead, they are abandoned and form feral populations that are easy prey for lions. Depredation of owned livestock also occurs but is relatively low, and the negative attitudes of local communities to (low) livestock depredation are dampened by the cultural reverence of lions and prompt compensation from the state government (Jhala et al., 2019).

Inside the Gir PA, lions have coexisted with *Maldharis*, a multiethnic pastoral community, for nearly 2 centuries. Although lions are a threat to the Maldharis' livestock, their traditional preventive mechanisms, such as corralling livestock in thorn bomas at night and shepherds clapping while escorting herds through known lion areas, have resulted in minimal losses to depredation (Chakrabarti et al., 2023; Jhala et al., 2019). Furthermore, Maldharis graze mixed-species herds with a combination of domestic water buffaloes and young and old cattle. When these herds face a lion attack, the buffaloes group into a protective defense ring and the cattle flee (Chakrabarti et al., 2023; Jhala et al., 2019). Lions typically attack and kill scampering cattle, whereas the expensive and more productive buffaloes get spared (Jhala et al., 2019). This intimate knowledge of species' behavioral traits means Maldharis always retain sacrificial cattle in their herds to buffer attacks on their prized buffaloes. As lions continue to recolonize areas where they have been absent for the past century, traditional ecological knowledge of the Maldharis and the adaptive techniques of local communities who share space with lions will need to be incorporated into current mainstream narratives to extend coexistence.

## Indian leopard

The Indian leopard (*Panthera pardus fusca*) is a ubiquitous big cat thriving in natural and human-dominated landscapes (Kshetry et al., 2017; Odden et al., 2014; Surve et al., 2022). These shared spaces between leopards and local communities have resulted in mutual adaptations. Even though human-leopard conflict and subsequent retaliatory killings are one of the significant threats to leopards in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, India (Raza et al., 2012; Shivakumar et al., 2023), leopards grace local folklore and mythology, garnering positive attributions in the local community (Dhee et al., 2019). Dominant narratives surrounding leopards in this landscape include the ability of the local community to distinguish between so-called bad and good leopards (Dhee et al., 2019; Mathur, 2021). The bad leopard (*tendua*) is considered non-native and attacks people. Removal of such leopards is acceptable and expected by the community (Mathur, 2021). The good leopard, however, is native and is called by local names of familiarity, such as *mirg*, *bageera*, and *baragh*, has predictable behavior, and is often perceived as a "protector" (Dhee et al., 2019). In describing the leopard's behavior, Dhee et al. (2019) states that "[the leopard] moves away from a human when encountered on a path, makes the village dogs disappear, and is a smart cat". The process of knowing a leopard thus involves recognizing individual leopard behavior and accepting its presence as an entity.

Considerations for good versus bad leopards also have roots in the dissatisfaction of local communities with the protected area system. Himachal Pradesh forests hold a legacy of community forest management practices. However, these management practices were undermined through the demarcation of strict protected area boundaries where resource utilization by the locals were curtailed (Vasan, 2001) and traditional human-environment relationships were dismissed. The state government often translocates conflict leopards into new forested habitats (Athreya et al., 2011), and local people believe these leopards are released into the forests to deter subsistence-based timber extraction. People view these released leopards as non-native and bad (Dhee et al., 2019), resulting in constrained human-wildlife interactions. Thus, we suggest managing human-leopard relationships by managing conflict between communities and local administration over leopard governance in human-dominated landscapes.

## North American grizzly bears

Grizzly bears (*Ursus arctos*) are iconic but contested symbols of conservation (Hughes, Frank, et al., 2020). Given the cultural connection between grizzly bears and communities, including how people who live with grizzly bears perceive and experience conflict and coexistence, human-bear relationships must be accounted for in conservation policy and practice (Davradou & Namkoong, 2001; Hughes & Nielsen, 2019). Grizzly bears have been extirpated from most of their historic range in Canada, typically because of human-caused mortality (McLellan et al., 2017; Morehouse & Boyce, 2017; Nielsen et al., 2009). In Alberta,

bear mortality is primarily due to conflict with people, where instances of livestock depredation, property damage, or threats to public safety can result in retaliatory killing, including agency euthanasia, of so-called problem bears (Hughes, Yarmey, et al., 2020). However, in 2010, Alberta's grizzly bears were listed as threatened and protected under a provincial recovery policy (Alberta Environment and Parks, 2016). Despite extensive biological and ecological information, policy makers and wildlife managers did not understand different peoples' relationships with bears and their expectations for bear conservation (Chamberlain et al., 2012; Nielsen et al., 2006; Richie et al., 2012). By exploring the human dimension of grizzly bear recovery, Hughes and Nielsen (2019) found that different cultural histories and identities of people across Alberta influenced peoples' acceptance of bear recovery efforts, including adoption of conservation policy and implementation of conflict mitigations (i.e., installing electric fences in the case of livestock conflict, or carrying bear spray when recreating outdoors) (Morehouse et al., 2020, 2021).

Although Alberta's grizzly bears were often publicly positioned in a positive light as a charismatic species, they simultaneously evoked frustration, anger, and fear, given safety and economic risks (Hughes, Foote, et al., 2020). Peoples' willingness to adopt bear conservation actions is influenced by human–grizzly and socioenvironmental cultural histories (Hughes & Nielsen, 2019; Hughes, Yarmey, et al., 2020). This enables a more inclusive venue for people to participate in policymaking through collaborative working groups, citizen science, and various cooperative conflict mitigation projects.

Despite broad engagement with human–grizzly coexistence, a comprehensive understanding and integration of Indigenous perspectives and Alberta conservation policy remains inadequate (Hughes et al., 2021). Although Indigenous peoples were invited to participate in Hughes et al.'s study, conventional interview methods were not necessarily conducive to Indigenous knowledge systems. Some participants indicated they identified as Indigenous but specifically requested their perspectives not be categorized as Indigenous. Instead, these participants said they shared only their perspectives, which were not to be taken as representative of the community (Hughes & Nielsen, 2019). However, Alberta's Indigenous peoples have shared perspectives on their relationship with grizzly bears elsewhere, including the Piikani Nation's *The Grizzly Treaty: A Treaty of Cooperation, Cultural Revitalization and Restoration* (Piikani Nation, 2016). This document identifies the need for comprehensive considerations of place- and community-based narratives in wildlife coexistence. Future research is required in grizzly bear conservation policy to ensure equitable representation and consideration of indigenous governance models (Artelle et al., 2021; Corvin et al., 2023).

## North American coyote

The systematic removal of apex carnivores across the United States has prompted the coyote (*Canis latrans*) to fill unoccupied ecological niches, often near humans (Hody & Kays,

2018). Coyote expansion has brought about feelings of fascination, fear, and disdain—causing a distinct conflict between coyotes and rights-holder groups (Alexander et al., 2023; Estien, 2023). Coyotes threaten people's livelihoods through livestock depredation (Knowlton et al., 1999). To combat livestock loss, nonlethal and lethal management, such as selective removal (Blejwas et al., 2002), fences (deCalesta & Cropsey, 1976; Sayre, 2015; Thompson, 1979), audio and scent deterrents (Shivik et al., 2011), taste aversion collars (Ellins & Catalano, 1980; Hansen et al., 1997), and livestock guardian animals (Andelt & Hopper, 2000; Kinka & Young, 2019), have been used nationally. Despite strong suppression and lethal removal, coyotes' adaptability, flexible social bonds, lack of competition, and varying litter sizes have enabled their geographic expansion (LeSher, 2020).

Despite evidence supporting coyote–conflict resolution techniques in western United States, understanding of coyote–human interactions in other parts of the country is limited. Such limitations often result in negative effects. For example, in Ohio, attitudes toward coyotes vary. Some rural communities believe a “dead coyote is a good coyote” (A. R. Thiemkey, personal observation; Bovard et al., 2011; Merskin, 2022). Coyote killing contests are held annually across the state, with prizes for the most or largest animals killed (A. R. Thiemkey, personal observation; Merskin, 2022). In this context, predator killings are a form of discursive power that arises from urban–rural tensions and is further entrenched by entanglements of settler colonial identity (Alexander et al., 2023). The mass persecution and strong negative attitudes toward coyotes are perhaps a manifestation of the deep colonial divide between humans and nature (Alexander et al., 2023). Boesel and Alexander (2020) argue that the systems of oppression experienced by racially marginalized groups in the United States mirror the persecution against coyotes as a species. Coyote geographies and ecologies are thus implicated in broader matrices consistent with human–environment and historical relationships to coexistence. Therefore, these spatial–historical contexts are necessary to cultivate sustainable coyote–human relationships and should take precedence in management decisions. If conservationists are to advocate for coexistent coyote–human relationships, it is necessary to understand anticoyote rhetoric and how to communicate with rights holders (Alexander et al., 2023) and to strengthen relationships between rural communities and coyotes.

## Chilean puma

The puma (*Puma concolor*) stands as a symbol of the apex predator in the Andean Mountain ecosystem (Franklin et al., 1999; Walker & Novaro, 2010). Recognized as a keystone species (Ripple et al., 2014), pumas have been identified among the 6 felids requiring conservation attention (Dickman et al., 2015). Chile, in particular, has been earmarked as a priority for felid conservation efforts, reflecting the country's significance in the protection of these species (Dickman et al., 2015). However, the scarcity of studies focusing on puma populations in Chile challenges conservation efforts (Walker & Novaro, 2010).

Pumas threaten humans and their livestock in Chile, contributing to escalating conflicts and reports of human–wildlife encounters (Amar, 2008; Murphy & Macdonald, 2010; Ohrens et al., 2016; Silva-Rodríguez et al., 2007). The Indigenous Aymara people in the high Andean Plateau epitomize this relationship between humans and wildlife. Traditionally engaged in crop and livestock production (Gundermann, 1984; Moreno, 2011), the Aymara have coexisted with pumas for centuries. However, socioeconomic shifts, including widespread migration of the younger population to urban areas, have disrupted traditional agricultural practices (Fernández & Salinas, 2012; Grebe, 1986; Gundermann & González, 2008). Further, government-endorsed depopulation was proposed, undermining traditional livestock protection methods within the Aymara people's social organization (family unit), resulting in increased conflict between carnivores and livestock (Ohrens et al., 2016). The local government agency managing wildlife decided to fund a 2-year collaborative team composed of national and foreign researchers. The team engaged directly with the Aymara community through in-depth interviews to understand their experiences with pumas and opportunities for coexistence, recognizing the importance of local, culturally relevant perspectives. Their key findings include the community's desire for financial and technical support from external entities to implement conflict mitigations. The Aymara, however, harbored deep resentment toward government agencies for their perceived lack of support and capacity to allocate resources effectively to conflict-prone regions (Ohrens, 2018; Ohrens et al., 2016).

Responding to this study, researchers implemented a participatory and community-driven approach to conflict mitigation (Redpath et al., 2017). This engagement aimed to empower agricultural and wildlife agencies, researchers, and the Aymara people to cocreate culturally relevant and scientifically sound interventions to support coexistence (Ohrens, Bonacic, et al., 2019; Redpath et al., 2013; Roux et al., 2006; Treves et al., 2006). Prioritizing community empowerment, agency, and cultural relevance through sharing first-hand knowledge and experiences promoted trust between institutions and local communities. Additionally, this approach addressed power dynamics inherent in top-down conservation models, allowing for a more equitable distribution of resources and decision-making authority (Ohrens, Santiago-Ávila, et al., 2019; Redpath et al., 2017; Reed, 2008; Treves et al., 2009). This case study underscores the imperative for long-term community engagement in mitigating HWCs through an embedded understanding of cultural perspectives.

## DISCUSSION

HWC poses a significant challenge to the well-being of local communities and threatens biodiversity conservation (Bhatia et al., 2020; Braczkowski et al., 2023; Kimaro & Hughes, 2023). Mitigation measures have traditionally rested on models that have often failed to account for the lived experiences of local and Indigenous peoples, including their connections with wildlife, the complexity of social relations, and conservation-induced systemic marginalization (Brockington, 2015). The

disconnect between local peoples' HWC realities and conservationists' conflict-resolution motivations requires reflexive and pluralistic reconsiderations of what coexistence means to the people expected to live with wildlife.

Through our case studies that span diverse ecoregions, wildlife species, and sociocultural landscapes, we showed how HWC is dependent on place and context. Coexistence is continuously negotiated within that space. As with Atallah et al. (2022), our case studies underline the distinctly unique yet interconnected commonalities in addressing HWC in locally situated and globally linked ways. Disentangling global HWC strategies in this manner furthers the connections between ourselves as researchers and the people, wildlife, and spaces we study. In so doing, we emphasize the need to enable space for conservation science and practice to reflect the culturally mediated lived experiences of communities in their relationships with wildlife and their position in society. Broadening the pluralistic approaches to conservation science and practice (Brown, 2003), our proposed constellations of coexistence (Figure 1) emphasize the sociosystemic processes that influence human–wildlife relationships and our positions as researchers. This includes how our biases, values, needs, and relationships to our study systems have influenced our understanding of conflict and the strategies we suggest to address coexistence. We offer a framework for researchers and practitioners to consider coexistence as a global constellation, highlighting the connections between common threads in HWC.

One of the primary HWC concepts we emphasized here is the theoretical and practical expansion of what can be considered coexistence. Our case studies reflect the need to reconsider how local and Indigenous peoples are included in mainstream conservation and reimagine coexistence. That said, we also acknowledge that mainstream mitigation measures are sometimes valid and desired. However, these options must be determined in conversation and colearning with the communities. Ultimately, the effectiveness of HWC approaches hinges on the fair representation of diverse interests, values, and experiences (López-Bao et al., 2017). We also broaden the notion of coexistence by removing the assumption that coexistence always equates to life for wildlife. This reflects what Jordan et al. (2020) identify as the 2 primary obstacles to improving human–wildlife coexistence: “coexistence inequality (how the costs and benefits of coexisting with wildlife are unequally shared) and intolerance.” Respecting the disproportionate cost sharing of living alongside wildlife requires conceptions of coexistence representing the sociocultural contexts of the communities that share space and resources with wildlife. Coexistence is a moldable, reflective evaluation of human–wildlife relationships, and understanding these relationships requires broadening of current narratives if wildlife species and their relationships with people are to be preserved.

Further, we argue for shifting the narratives and strategies of mainstream conservation science to center on community-based and Indigenous-led HWC approaches. This would require that “current colonial institutions support, fund, and incentivize science, management, and governance of biodiversity shaped by rather than extracted from Indigenous communities” (Salomon

et al., 2023). The recentring of marginalized communities within mainstream conservation science's definition of *coexistence* requires critical reflection on and attention to the power dynamics that exist in conservation practice (Dietsch et al., 2021; Rudd et al., 2021; Saif et al., 2022). This includes being mindful as researchers of the privilege of conducting conservation work and of holding some degree of power over the communities one is working with, no matter how good one's intentions are. We are calling for greater reflexivity across researchers and practitioners to adequately assess and respond to the overarching power dynamics and how systems of power contribute to one's ability, or inability, to foster locally relevant and meaningful human–wildlife coexistence. To shift how coexistence is considered across individuals, communities, species, and geographies, we call for global recognition of the symmetries between HWC incidences. Although scholars have identified the need to integrate social sciences and humanities in mainstream conservation science (Bennett et al., 2022; Massarella et al., 2021; Sanborn & Jung, 2021), we suggest that identifying the global–local and macro–micro dimensions of HWC requires institutional support to recenter communities in conceptions of coexistence to counter systemic and environmental harms.

Through our constellations of coexistence (Figure 1), we make connections between our personal experiences as researchers and the species and people we work with. Many of us belong to communities and landscapes we study, and this connection fuels our engagement in this work. Identifying these personal connections and how they modulate our approach to HWC is emulated in our relationships with each other and the conservation community. Approaching HWC from this pluralistic perspective, which recognizes the parallels, overlaps, and contrasts across socioecological and sociocultural geographies, can help create complementary coexistence systems. We believe such a strategy would fit within the International Union for Conservation of Nature Human–Wildlife Conflict Task Force guidelines and would more adequately weave local and Indigenous knowledge into mainstream conservation approaches. Part of this weaving rests on the ability to create and forge connections, starting with open-mindedness, conversations, collaboration, and global support across researchers, practitioners, and communities committed to thinking differently.

Regardless of what systems one studies, HWC management and solutions are strengthened by multiple narratives of what it means to coexist and how these narratives make it possible for the constellations of coexistence to shine brightly. We call on researchers and practitioners to pay attention to conservation's cultural diversity, which goes beyond surveys and questionnaires or institutional and funding objectives. We call for a shift in the HWC discourse to seek locally and culturally relevant coexistence solutions that genuinely resonate with peoples' wants.

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