

## Trusts role in conserving biodiversity and reducing conservation conflict: Case in Nepal

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**Project summary:** This project examines the role of trust in biodiversity conservation and how trust can be promoted to reduce conservation conflict, through a case-study with National Trust for Nature Conservation, Nepal.

**Project background:** Trust between conservationists, land managers and local communities is crucial if conservation is to have positive outcomes both for biodiversity and society, in fact it has been suggested that “*Building and maintaining procedural trust and strong working relationships with landowner and managers may be the most important aspect for country agencies responsible for managing and sustaining biodiversity*” (Young et al. 2016, p.201). Despite a vast literature on community-based natural resource management and on conservation conflicts, the nature of trust in conservation settings, the ways in which trust develops between actors, how it facilitates collaboration and helps to deliver conservation goals, and how it can be actively promoted, remains poorly understood. This PhD will examine the role and promotion of trust in conservation, and through a case-study and collaboration with conservationists in Nepal will deliver evidence-based guidance for responsible environmental management. It will achieve this through a novel interdisciplinary and mixed method approach that brings together conservation science and experimental games with human geography and qualitative techniques.



Within conservation science, Stern, Coleman and colleagues provide a framework which focuses on the role and importance of trust in collaborative natural resource management (Stern & Baird 2015, Stern & Coleman 2015, Coleman & Stern 2018). Four distinct forms of trust are highlighted in their typology; ‘dispositional trust’ based on an individual’s pre-disposition to trust or distrust; ‘rational trust’ based on evaluations about the likely outcome of a situation, often based on past performance; ‘affinitive trust’ based on feelings of shared interests, connections and identities; and ‘systems-based trust’, reflecting trust in a system or set of rules, as opposed to in an individual or organisation (Stern & Baird 2017). The authors argue that a richness and evenness of these four forms of trust will promote the efficacy and resilience of natural resource management institutions (Stern & Baird 2015). Gathering data to test these ideas presents methodological challenges, however. Through the novel use of experimental games with conservationists and communities in Tanzania, Baynham-Herd et al. show different forms of trustworthiness predict the likelihood of cooperation within interventions aimed at reducing conservation conflicts. Geographers offer further insights into trust, calling for an understanding not only of what trust *is* (i.e. its different forms), but also of what *it does*, *where* and *how* it works and to *what end* (Withers 2017). They draw attention to the ‘technologies’ of trust’, or the things in which trust is inscribed, such as words, numbers, instruments, as well as space (Withers 2017, Livingstone 2003). Feminist geographers and those working within the field of political ecology point to the importance of the *ir-rational*, of emotions, of informal spaces and of embodied everyday encounters and practices in the building of subjectivities, of relations and thus of cooperation around the environment and

natural resources (Nightingale 2011, Nightingale 2013, Wynne-Jones 2017, Pickerill 2009). Such work is instructive as it advances a perspective attentive to the situated, relational and emergent properties of trust, along with its historical, social and cultural dimensions and its material and symbolic expression.

**Key research questions:** How is trust conceptualised in a resource-scarce, environmentally-fragile context? How does trust emerge in conservation settings between the range of actors present? How is trust maintained/lost over time, and how is it expressed? What factors, processes, spaces and ‘technologies’ facilitate the building of trust? What role does trust play in on-going conservation efforts and how does it intersect with other facets of conservation e.g. monitoring, management, collaboration? How might trust be actively promoted and enhanced in order to generate greater benefits for conservation and society?

### **Methodology and timetable:**

Integral to the novel contributions of this PhD is an innovative interdisciplinary approach and methodology, drawing on conservation science and human geography/political ecology, and employing mixed methods to generate both quantitative and qualitative data and insights. Methods will include experimental games and a range of qualitative approaches including oral histories and other narrative approaches. These methods reflect the diverse and complementary expertise of the supervisors, who will provide on-going training and advice on them, including with regards triangulation. The PhD will be based on a case-study of Nepal, working in collaboration with the National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC) (<https://www.ntnc.org.np/>). The NTNC work on protected area management, on species conservation and for sustainable development across Nepal, from the sub-tropical plains of the lowlands to the high Himalayas and trans-Himalayan region.

**Year 1.** Literature review; Training and skills development; Case-study development with collaborators; Pilot testing field methods. **Year 2.** Field work. **Year 3.** Data analysis and writing-up; Dissemination activities e.g. in-country with collaborators, international conferences.

### **Training:**

A comprehensive training programme will be provided comprising both specialist scientific training and generic transferable and professional skills. Given the mixed-method approach of the study, training will be provided to ensure the student is proficient in all methods and analyses to be employed. Given the Nepali case-study, training will also involve language, country context and cultural sensitivities. Training will also be provided by NTNC in Nepal.

### **Requirements:**

We are looking for an enthusiastic and creative student with strong field experience, ideally in challenging or tropical environments, and a proven track record of working independently, who is keen to develop innovative and mixed-methods approaches in their work. We are also looking for someone who is sensitive to cultural differences and who is able to build good working relations with a wide range of people including collaborators, communities, and other researchers. An ability to learn languages would be advantageous (if not already fluent in Nepali).

### **Further reading:**

Stern M.J. & Baird T.D. (2015) Trust ecology and the resilience of natural resource management institutions. *Ecology and Society*, 20, 14.

Redpath, S. M., Keane, A.,... Travers, H. (2018) Games as Tools to Address Conservation Conflicts. *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*, 33, 415–426.

Nightingale A. (2011) Beyond design principles: Subjectivity, emotion, and the (ir)rational commons. *Society & Natural Resources*, 24, 119-132.