

The Christian Science Monitor

SCIENCE

Could conservation provide ground for peace in conflict zones?

BRIDGING DIVIDES Some things, like birds, transcend political boundaries. That's why some scientists say conservation of the natural world could promote peace among humans.



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MARCH 22, 2017 — A farmer's field in Israel was being overrun by rodents. As was common practice, the farmer used poison to deal with the little unwanted animals that were snacking on his crops. But the poison wasn't just killing the pests. It was also killing owls that would snack on the rodents and jackals that would eat the toxic owls.

Then, in the early 1980s, the farmer decided to try something different. Instead of poisoning the whole food chain, he looked to the rodents' natural predators to take care of the pests and began installing nesting boxes for barn owls throughout his fields. With up to 11 offspring born to each pair of owls and each eating 2,000 to 6,000 rodents each year, the birds could do the same job as the rodent poison.

But, as birds don't distinguish between one farmer's field and another's, the owls were still ingesting poisoned rodents from neighboring fields. That's when the farmer began talking to his neighbors about building nesting boxes, too.

The flow of information didn't stop with this handful of Israeli neighbors. Once Tel Aviv University's Yossi Leshem got involved, the effort became a national – and then international – project. And now Dr. Leshem and his colleagues say their project could be a model for the way that conservation efforts might plant seeds of peace among people divided by conflict.

"Ecological problems know no boundaries," says Alexandre Roulin, a biologist at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland and first author on a paper published Wednesday in the journal *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* highlighting the potential of nature conservation for peacebuilding.

That's why the project to use barn owls and kestrels, another common rodent-eating bird, as rodent control has attracted the interest of Jordanians and Palestinians. So Leshem, Dr. Roulin, and coauthors of this new paper have been working to bring Israelis, Jordanians, and Palestinians together for such ecological education and to share knowledge.

This project is part of a larger effort in the region to use birdwatching as a way of promoting cooperation. And these efforts have brought people from all three regions together in spaces where they share jokes and even visit each other's religious sites.

"Conservation dialogues – and conservation work generally – can indeed be a good way to bring people in conflict together, especially in highly polarized situations (like the Middle East) where there is pressure against peacebuilding and conflict resolution and where there is extreme lack of trust," Diana Chigas, who teaches international negotiation and conflict resolution at The Fletcher School at Tufts University, and who was not an author on the new paper, writes in an email to *The Christian Science Monitor*. "The environmental area generally has been a good 'entry point' because there is recognition among people concerned with the environment that environment does know no borders."

Roulin and Leshem aren't the first to point to environmental issues as a way of bringing people together. Saleem Ali, an environmental diplomacy expert currently at the University of Delaware, has spent years advocating for

environmental peacebuilding and science diplomacy in cross-border conflicts.

Still, where this kind of diplomacy has been employed, Dr. Ali tells the Monitor, "there haven't really been peace dividends as much as you would hope."

That's not to say that science can't still be a mechanism for cooperation, he explains in a phone interview. But the challenge is scaling up such cooperation from the local level – like, say, among farmers – to the political level where peacemaking negotiations are made.

Professor Chigas agrees that key leaders must be engaged in conservation dialogues for them to be effective peacemaking tools. She points to an example Roulin and Leshem outline in their paper of how such relevant leadership in a conflict could be engaged with scientific issues to build toward peace successfully: the story of peace between Israel and Jordan around the neck of a wolf.

The story goes that Israeli researchers were using radio collars to track wolves when one of the wolves crossed into Jordan in 1993. When the wolf was killed, the radio collar ended up in the hands of Jordanian soldiers who were concerned about spying.

Israeli General Baruch Spiegel and Jordanian General Abu Rashid Mansour (who is also a co-author on the new paper) were already in contact to discuss a peace treaty. General Spiegel asked for the collar back for scientific study and General Mansour was able to return it. Then-Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin took this as a sign of mutual trust from Jordanians. The peace treaty was signed just 8 months later, in 1994.

Roulin points out that he and Leshem are working with government officials for the bird project and advocate for a top-down perspective as well as a local one for any other conservation cooperation projects.

"By integrating the needs of national leaders, scientists can substantially increase the impact of cooperation around nature conservation," they write in the paper. "The involvement of governmental interest can favor the long-lasting success of joint projects between nature conservation and peacebuilding."

It's not just the political entities that need to stay engaged long-term, Ali says.

He points to a situation in Ecuador and Peru in 1998. One of the factors in their peace agreement, he says, was the need to conserve the biodiversity in the Cordillera del Condor border region. And although the peace between the countries has held, Ali says that the region is now unmonitored for conservation and things like illegal mining are threatening the supposedly protected area.

Other such jointly protected, cross-border parks, dubbed Peace Parks, have been proposed as a way to protect biodiversity along other violent borders, too. For example, Ali says, the Siachen region between Pakistan and India is a disputed area, and the ecosystem there has been profoundly impacted by the political strife. As a result, Ali and others advocated for a Peace Park there, and the idea received support from high-level officials, he says. But "then we had an election in India, everything changed, and now it has fallen off the radar."

Chigas notes that peace won't come easily from simple cooperative conservation efforts. "Relationship improvements do not flow automatically," she says. "Broader impacts on peace also do not flow automatically. The projects also are affected by the larger context, which limit their potential for impacts."

As such, Chigas says, there need to be a number of pieces in place for conservation projects to promote peace.

"These conservation efforts can be important entry points, and in the current situation, for example, in Israel and Palestine, might be one of the few areas where conflict resolution can happen," she says. "It is important, however, not to oversell its impacts or to expect too much from these efforts."

"They can be a very effective way (where there is concern, interdependence, and constituencies that care about and are active on environmental issues, or where environmental issues affect people's lives) to create space for bringing people together, to generate cooperation, and generate results that give some legitimacy to cooperative efforts in some areas."

i Did this story deliver on 'bridging divides'?  

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