

Human Dimensions:

Working in conflict zones toward a transboundary peace park

In some parts of the world, people have had the luxury to think about protecting wildlife species and endangered spaces, however, in many places on our planet the environment and the wildlife may not be the immediate priorities for the local people and national governments.

Many ecosystems are under siege and many regions under immense conflict between people and their respective nations. Most of these conflicts result in human poverty, displacement and death of many, especially the most vulnerable, children. Some of these conflicts have their origins from many years ago, but have remained as deep scars to the people of the various countries involved. Such conflicts result often in depleted species, degraded environments, poverty for those living in the border areas, and closed borders.

It is in one of these conflict border zone areas in Armenia where people drive in the meadows as it is easier than travelling on the "road", where water lines need to be fixed so clean water supplies can be guaranteed, where rare vipers still exist, where there is a very high density of livestock and grazing pressure, and also where wolves do kill the very livelihood for these poor people. However, it is also in this place where people are incredibly generous with food and alcohol, friendly, and in contrast to many conflict border zones have protected their landscape to some degree. More importantly, residents of small villages with incomes of little more than \$25 USD per month are willing to strive for coexistence and a bigger vision of a "peace" park, unifying nations, ecosystems and families. Wolf-human interaction, while perceived as a conflict initially, has also been seen as an opportunity, and hence wolves could become a small "peace" in a big puzzle toward a transboundary peace park involving Armenia, Turkey and Georgia.

The UKWCT has provided some monies to better understand and address the concerns of the people in this region and specifically to help in reducing wolf-livestock conflicts in the area. You, as members of the UKWCT, are contributing to a project that is an immense journey toward achieving conservation of cultural landscapes, natural environments, birds, fish, wolves and most importantly sustainable livelihoods for families living in a conflict zone.

In an earlier UKWCT Wolf Print (Issue 37, summer 2009) conflict from a human dimensions perspective was defined as either cognitive (about beliefs we have), values (what's really important to us), economics (who pays and who benefits) and behavioural (about trust and credibility of different individuals and groups). In a border zone in Armenia, what does a "conflict zone" really mean? According to the Canadian Travel Advisory for Armenia, potential visitors are told to "exercise a high degree of caution in the land border areas. The land border with Turkey is closed. The border with Azerbaijan is closed." Such statements would seem major obstacles to working with local people toward a transboundary peace park. The Travel Advisory also states that "a cease-fire has been in effect since May 1994, however, armed clashes along the border and cease-fire line may occur sporadically".

With such background information about this region, a human dimensions project that involves listening, learning and working with people toward a possibility of a transboundary peace park begins.

Healthy environments and ecosystems which include wolves and people have been linked before with peace initiatives. In fact one of the first international peace parks created between Canada and the USA, Glacier-Waterton, now protects a border population of wolves that travels between northern Montana and southern Alberta. On a much larger scale, this relationship between peace and a healthy environment was demonstrated through the Nobel Peace prize in 2004 when it was awarded to Wangari Maathai who initiated a grass-roots tree planting scheme in Kenya.

Peace Parks are much more than conserving environments

Peace Parks are not a new idea, but an idea that is continuing to grow around the world. In 1988, there were only 59 but today there are over 170 peace parks. Such protected areas are becoming an integral part of forging agreements between countries that have traditionally been in conflict. Much though still needs to be done worldwide as less than 12% of the planet's resources are protected. The



creation of a transboundary peace park between Armenia, Turkey and Georgia, although a challenge, could provide, as in many other places, the beginnings of forging better relationships between countries, and new opportunities for conserving wildlife, including wolves which will become a small "peace" in this complex jigsaw puzzle.

Armenia is located between Europe and Asia known as the TransCaucasus. The country has a short history, being established on September 23rd, 1991; before it was part of the former republic of the USSR. The country is 29,743km² in size with a population of approximately 3 million people. It has a relatively long border of 1,254km of which most lies with unfriendly neighbours (Azerbaijan - 566km, Az-Naxican Exclave - 221km and Turkey - 268km). Georgia to the north (164km) and Iran to the south (35km) are friendly open borders. The history of conflict lies in the Armenian genocide which was carried out by the "Young Turk" government of the Ottoman Empire in 1915-1916 and again in 1922-1923; approximately 1.5 million of 2.5 million Armenians are believed to have been killed during this period. Mount Ararat, now located in Turkey but very much visible from the Armenian capital of Yerevan, is a constant reminder of the losses suffered by the Armenian nation. The Armenian flag colours symbolize this history with red being the bloodshed of the Armenian people, blue the clear sky of Armenia, and orange the fruitfulness of the Armenian nation. Creating a peace park in this region may help in building trust, credibility and understanding between nations and be a small first step to addressing these much bigger issues that have become culturally entrenched.



Lake Arden
in the proposed
park area.

Wolves and people: opportunities for peace

The "wolf" component of this project as you can clearly see is a small piece, but an exciting opportunity to forge environmental cooperation in the border area. The proposed park area on the Armenian side would involve a core area around Lake Arpi and a buffer zone a little further away in the Shirak province. Shepherds and local villagers say they see wolves every day in the core area. The human dimension project in the area has focused on understanding the values and attitudes of these local people toward nature, the environment, the idea of a protected area, and also toward wolves. Through personal interviews with local residents in the core area (n=79) and the buffer zone (n=320), I have begun to understand some of these attitudes toward wolves, and realise that opportunities do exist to find compromise and coexistence possibilities between people, who need a livelihood based on livestock, and wolves.

On a scale from strongly disagree, disagree, neither, agree and strongly agree, these local residents within the core area and buffer zone were asked to respond to statements focused on the impact of wolves on livestock, various management options ranging from complete protection within the park area, protected seasons during the breeding season, hunting during specific seasons, hunting year round, perceptions of whether wolves could bring tourists to an area, willingness to learn more about wolves, and perceptions of whether it is possible to protect livestock from wolves.

Despite the poor economic conditions in the area, attitudes of local residents suggest there is room to forge coexistence between wolves and people.

In the core area, 73% of residents strongly agreed that "wolves cause significant damage to livestock in the area", the remaining 25% agreed. Attitudes in the buffer zone were not as strong, however 82% still agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. The reality is that wolves kill livestock regularly in the core area and in the surrounding buffer zone, sometimes taking animals right next to people's homes. On a positive note, most residents (68%) in both areas believe it is possible to protect livestock from wolves. Particularly in the core area, a large percentage (75%) strongly agrees that they would be interested in learning how to protect their livestock from wolves. Preventative measures such as electric fences powered by solar panels, guard dogs and additional shepherds are potential solutions but these require monies in a place where very little extra money is available.

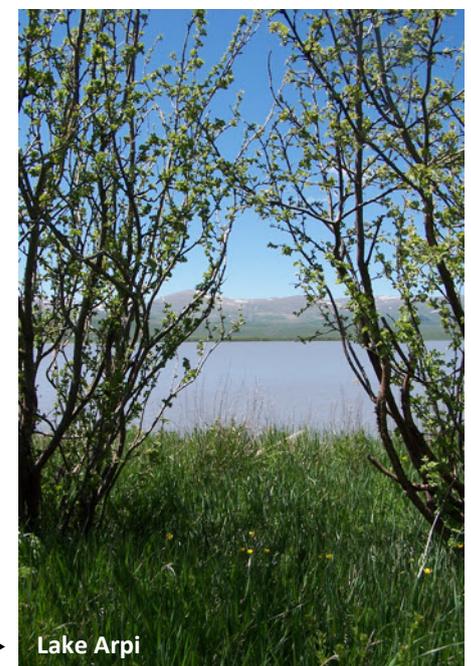
Attitudes are significantly different from those residents who live inside the core area of the proposed park and in the proposed buffer zone. Those living in the buffer zone tend to agree (58%) that wolves should be completely protected in the national park area whereas in the core area 41% agree and 47% disagree to some extent. These differences become more pronounced when exploring attitudes toward whether wolves should be protected during the breeding season (February to May). While residents inside the buffer zone support this management option (58%), those living in the core area are mixed. Approximately 43% agree but 53% disagree with such protection. ▶



Armenian
Shepherd



Armenian
Shepherd
willing to
co-exist
with
wolves



Lake Arpi

◀ What, however, is very interesting is that when options of hunting are discussed, those in the buffer zone are in fact more supportive of year round hunting (66%) than core area residents (57%) and more supportive of hunting in specific seasons than core residents (61% compared to 54% respectively). Given the large numbers of livestock losses and potentially the large number of wolves in the area (no research is available at present), these attitudes especially of core area residents are not as negative as one might have hypothesized.

Where is there room for coexistence? Most residents in the core and buffer zones (approximately 60%) believe that having wolves could bring tourists to the area. A similar percentage also believe that tourists will come to an area where wolves are protected; approximately 28% were neutral suggesting opportunities to target communication messages on this item and possibly create more positive attitudes. Within the core area, more than 80% of residents agreed to the statement: "I am interested in learning more about wolves in the area". Interestingly, only 67% of buffer zone residents expressed the same view. Some sustainable tourism is needed in the region and this is an overarching objective of the much larger project.

At present, it is extremely difficult to find a place selling bottled water, never mind providing accommodation suitable to western standards, so tourism infrastructure is severely limited. Where do we go from here on this immense journey of conservation?

Future direction needed to continue to make a difference

Unfortunately, educational materials about wolves are non-existent in the region and materials, particularly in English, limited in the region to help students willing to learn English in the schools. This does create a huge opportunity to provide English materials for children to learn more about wolves, and materials for teachers to communicate such messages within their communities. The UKWCT as an educational trust can be instrumental in increasing public awareness of wolves in the area and in increasing English skills of the future generations. Working toward a transboundary peace park may appear to some members of the UKWCT as far removed from a mandate to conserve wolves and increase tolerance of this large carnivore, however,

conservation today involves so much more than just biological research. I am finishing this article while in Kenya where I have been understanding human-elephant conflicts and where scientists here realise that elephant conservation is part of such bigger issues as sustainable livelihoods and climate change. Addressing the conservation challenges we face today and wolf conservation on a much smaller scale, requires everyone to think much broader and bigger than we ever have. I am encouraged with the continued understanding of the UKWCT that working with people and understanding the human dimension is the only way collectively we can create conservation successes.

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Alistair is a world leading expert in human dimensions in the field of wildlife management. He has contributed to an exciting new series of books called 'A New Era for Wolves and People; Wolf Recovery, Human Attitudes, and Policy', the first of which is now available from the UKWCT shop (details opposite).