

# Book Reviews

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## PEOPLE SKILLS FOR THE CONSERVATION PROFESSIONAL

Bonar, Scott A. 2007. **The conservation professional's guide to working with people**. Island Press, Washington, D.C. xvii + 198 p. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN: 978-1-59726-147-0 (alk. paper); \$ 25.00 (paper), ISBN: 978-1-59726-148-7 (alk. paper).

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Conservation scientists are increasingly becoming aware of the importance of the human aspects of conservation, and in conservation circles, “social science” is the word of the day. There is a rapidly growing social science working group in the Society for Conservation Biology and it is hard to imagine a conservation project that does not have a strong emphasis on the importance of working effectively with local people. In fact, most of the challenges in conservation biology are not scientific, but diplomatic—in persuading people to follow the advice of conservation science.

However, the very fact that working with people is the next big thing in conservation is proof that it had not always been that way. Conservation training, both during and after university, has mostly focused on ecological, field work, quantitative, and writing skills. But having a successful conservation career in academia, in the government, in non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and in the private sector is as much about dealing with people as it is about being an effective scientist.

Most conservation biologists, including myself, could definitely use some good advice on how to work with people (including with one's self). However, the training of a conservation scientist rarely involves courses on social psychology, marketing, conflict resolution, and negotiation, which are more typical in business schools. We forget that conservation is a business of sorts, in which we are trying to sell the idea of preserving and promoting our natural heritage. Conservation often involves financial and other sacrifices for the society. To convince the public and decision makers of the importance of biodiversity, conservation biologists are working increasingly hard to “market” concepts such as ecosystem services, ecotourism, and the societal consequences of biodiversity loss.

Therefore, business skills are often essential to success in conservation. Thanks to Scott A. Bonar's book, *The conservation professional's guide to working with people*, you can now arm yourself with the most important people skills a conservation professional must have in his/her tool kit.

Scott Bonar has had a diverse career in conservation, working in the U.S. Geological Survey and in the private industry, in addition to being a faculty member at the University of Arizona. As such, he has had a lifetime experience in dealing with people in varied conservation settings. His book reflects this extensive experience.

Bonar's short and sweet compendium should be required reading for all conservationists and is an excellent resource for undergraduate courses and graduate seminars. It is also a practical guide for NGOs and can be covered in weekly group discussions. In fact, many of these techniques are already being

used by NGOs as part of training programs and in various conservation workshops, but are less familiar to students and academics.

By using examples from history, current events, personal events, and the natural resources profession, Bonar explains how to increase effectiveness with the use of social psychology, negotiation, influence, conflict resolution, and verbal judo, how to manage personnel and time, and how to obtain funding.

The preface introduces the idea that wildlife management is as much a social discipline as it is a scientific one because wildlife professionals have the responsibility to manage wildlife resources for the benefit of the people. As a result, there is a constant need for better people skills and more effective communication. Business' focus on customer satisfaction is provided as a model that conservation professionals often need to emulate.

From the get go, Bonar grabs the reader's attention by telling a personal story of a tense confrontation with local people, after he and his crew went to sample fish at a lake located in a part of Washington where residents had high animosity against conservation professionals. The chapter that follows is a summary of the human impact on the environment and of the need for conservation. The author states that the most successful conservation professionals often have good people skills, but unfortunately, natural resources and wildlife conservation programs have few requirements for psychology, marketing, public relations, or other similar courses. He then uses the confrontation in the first chapter as a real-world example in resolving conflict, especially by using “verbal judo” that combines agreement, empathy, stroking, and stating one's point of view consistently. The next chapter is on how to persuade people by focusing on their particular needs, such as safety needs, social needs, or esteem needs like recognition and status.

Although most of us do not think of conservation science as a profession with customers, Chapter 5 shows that we all deal with them on a daily basis and good “customer service” is key to getting along with your boss, winning research grants, and obtaining public support for conservation programs. The next chapter is on negotiation. Bonar opens with positional bargaining as the classical method of negotiation, but as this method can make enemies easily, he argues that interest-based bargaining as a better, more harmonious way.

Chapter 7 is about how to work with the most important person—yourself. This chapter provides useful advice on time management, organizational skills, and on maintaining good mental health at work. Next, Bonar provides suggestions on hiring and managing good personnel, getting rid of sub-par employees, and getting along with one's boss. Chapter 9 focuses on critical field skills, essential on their own, but also important in making a good impression on the people you work with. Idea thieves, mudslingers, backstabbers, and other devious people are an unfortunate part of life even in the conservation profession. In the final chapter, Bonar wraps up with valuable suggestions on defending one's self from dirty tricks, Machiavellianism, and other dastardly practices.

All throughout, the author builds on previous chapters and integrates previously described techniques into future chapters as new skills are introduced. Like any book with a lot of valuable advice, this book needs to be read and reread. The

advice makes good sense and sometimes even seems obvious, but most of us still need to be reminded of these valuable tips regularly. Keep this book handy so you can flip through it before being interviewed for a job, interviewing someone else, applying for a grant, starting an important project, or meeting with a landowners' association, or when you simply want to entertain yourself with good examples of how to and how not to work with people.

The book is peppered with fascinating examples, including many historical ones, which make it more readable and get the points across in an entertaining and informative manner. Each chapter has a few hypothetical or personal case studies that the author uses effectively to explain the principles in depth. Being a conservation ecologist, I could not help myself from counting and sorting the various examples. Of the roughly 170 non-hypothetical examples, about a third were personal, a quarter historical, a fifth environmental, and the rest were mainly from business and the social sciences, especially economics and psychology. This diverse mixture makes the book highly readable and thought provoking, and gets the points across successfully. The book can be read easily on a long flight, but it would also make a good textbook. It is highly pedagogical, ideas and concepts are repeated, and each chapter ends with a good summary.

Although I greatly enjoyed this useful volume, there are a few shortcomings. Some of the most complicated conservation issues are in the developing world, where most of the planet's biodiversity and the world's poorest people often live side by side. Although the impoverished Washington logging communities that depend on natural resource extraction provide some parallels, often the poverty in the developing world is much higher, the institutions are weaker, and corruption and other governance problems are widespread. There is often the additional problem of conservationists from wealthier nations having to effectively communicate with and "sell" conservation

to people with more basic needs and very different perspectives. Although most of the people skills are universal, this book would still benefit from the perspectives of conservationists working in the developing world, particularly in grassroots NGOs.

Perhaps the most important priority in conservation is educating the youth. This is an area where few conservation professionals have much experience. The unique challenges of communicating the value of biodiversity and conservation to young people, especially kids, require additional pedagogical skills, including an understanding of child psychology. This is also an area where the book could use an additional chapter, hopefully in a future edition.

*Working with people* is a "must read" for the conservation professional and you will recognize many of the issues and situations described. If you cannot relate to at least half the advice in Bonar's entertaining text in some way, than you are either clueless in dealing with people or are a theoretician who never leaves his/her office—and definitely need to reread this book!

I am almost reluctant to recommend the book because I'd rather not deal with more verbal judo masters! Then again, if this book makes more of us interest-based bargainers and helps us vanquish the dirty players, the conservation world will be a better place for everyone.

CAGAN H. SEKERCIOGLU

*Stanford University  
Department of Biological Sciences  
371 Serra Mall  
Stanford, California 94305-5020  
E-mail: agan@Stanford.edu*