

By Darron Collins

Hard data and human empathy

A few years after I finished a Ph.D. in anthropology, my World Wildlife Fund (WWF) colleague Yury Darman and I were in the Russian Far East, checking motion-sensing camera traps installed on a forested hillside. We were collecting data to estimate the population of the endangered Siberian tiger and the even more endangered Amur leopard. When we reached the summit, Yury pointed. “We stand here in Russia,” he said on that day in 2005. “One mile that way? China. One mile this way? North Korea. Our poor cats are the most diplomatically challenged animals in the world.” Thus began my career not only as a conservation scientist, but also as a cultural translator.

Yury went on to stress that these felines could come back from the brink of extinction if they had large blocks of forest with abundant prey. That, he emphasized, depended on the actions and influence of Russian timber companies, Chinese bureaucrats, U.S. consumers, and multinational corporations, to name just a few players. Ultimately, the animals’ survival hinged on translation among those groups, with their vastly different perspectives and motives. Identifying the right people and helping them find a common future that included big cats was exhilarating—almost as much as spying one of these endangered animals in the wild.

Over my 10 years with WWF, I sought that thin wedge of overlap on a complicated Venn diagram of groups that too often spoke right past one another. I would spend a day with a Walmart executive exploring what would persuade the company to change its strategy for procuring timber products, another with an undercover agent looking at patterns of illegal logging, and another with an architect eager to feature sustainably managed timber in a high-profile project. I learned that good conservation science needs to include equal parts hard data and human empathy. For our big cats to survive, all the players need not only to understand one another’s language, but also to put themselves in one another’s shoes.

More recently, I was reminded that translation is a critical skill regardless of discipline or position. About a year after I became a college president, a 50-ton sperm whale died near our waterfront campus. Researchers at the college dragged the whale to shore so that students, staff, and faculty members could perform a necropsy—valuable both as a learning experience for our students and as a way to



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determine whether entanglement with fishing gear is killing whales, a subject of heated debate in coastal communities. We then needed to compost the animal underground for 18 months to reduce it to a skeleton, which would offer further educational opportunities. I decided the college’s farm would be the perfect place for that macabre burial, but I failed to anticipate the perceptions and concerns of the 17 households abutting the farm and didn’t do the necessary translation before we announced the plan.

The neighbors weren’t at all excited about the prospect of a gigantic whale decomposing near their pastoral backyards. They imagined horrible odors, pest invasions, and lowered property values. So, I was left with a public relations nightmare and a flensed whale, rapidly rotting in the August heat. We composted the animal elsewhere, but it took years to rebuild those important relationships with our neighbors. And I quickly learned that translating is as important for running a college as it is for conserving large predators.

As a college president, I aim to inspire interest in translation not as a peripheral nicety, but as a core competency among our students. Traditional academic disciplines, especially in the sciences, have a long history of being siloed. But if scientists are going to help solve complex problems together, we must be able to talk to others with very different perspectives. Seeing students develop these translation skills early on in their academic careers gives me hope for humanity, and for the planet. ■

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