

What makes collaborative conservation work? Aligning private landowner values with wildlife agencies in Texas

Where private lands constitute the majority of land cover, the success of wildlife agencies in accomplishing conservation mandates depends on their capacity to create and maintain collaborative relationships with private landowners. Agencies employ a suite of conservation tools to facilitate collaboration, yet these tools may generate insufficient participation and weak long-term commitment when they misalign with landowner values (i.e., meanings landowners attach to relationships with their land). Despite scholarly attention to the nexus of landowners and conservation tools, a knowledge gap remains regarding how agencies can leverage landowner values to reduce value conflict and increase collaboration.

To address this gap, my research program examines two core research questions: 1) How do landowner values shape the formation and durability of collaborative conservation relationships with agencies? And 2) How do specific conservation tools (e.g., programs and communication strategies) (mis)align with landowner values across environmental contexts and over time? In this seminar, I synthesize findings from three TPWD-funded projects where I employ qualitative, quantitative, and experimental methods to address the questions posed above.

Qualitative findings show how a diversity of landowner values interact with conservation tools like voluntary incentive programs and when these interactions support or stymie collaborative relationships. The quantitative and experimental results identify strategies that agencies can use to incorporate values into conservation tools. Specifically, we use a strategic communication approach to demonstrate how audience segmentation and landowner-centric messages can be used as conservation tools that support value alignment between landowners and agency staff. Together, these findings illustrate that wildlife agencies can increase collaboration with private landowners by incorporating landowner values into existing and new conservation tools (i.e., strategic communication plans). What remains to be determined is whether wildlife agencies have the capacity to adapt to landowner values and, where capacity is deficient, how future research can address this shortcoming.