

## Summary 'WILD' IDEAS DIALOGUES | Session I | 7-1-2021

This session was [1 of 4](#) and hosted by Sierra Deutsch and Josie Chambers and functions more as an introduction to the topic and the series. Over 70 colleagues from all corners of WUR (and the world) participated in the first session. [Recordings of the plenary parts can be found here.](#)



**Opening** by Janneke Juffermans. When entering, the guests added which countries they lived for most of their lives (blue) as well as where they have done most of their research (green). [Full results of the world heatmap.](#)

**Sierra Deutsch** introduced the team, session, and series. She explained that the plan for the day was to demonstrate the incredible diversity of perspectives that we have at our fingertips at WUR with respect to people working on Human-Wildlife Interactions (HWIs). So the session was very fast-paced, but we plan to slow down in future sessions to allow more time to zoom in on some perspectives. The other sessions will also include more and more interaction and dialogues, culminating in the final session, which aims to map a way forward for HWI research at WUR together.

The series was formed to support biodiversity research and transformative change at WUR in general and to start bringing researchers together to form interdisciplinary collaborations. We decided to focus specifically on human-wildlife interactions since these have been identified as a significant factor in biodiversity loss. We specifically chose the term *interactions*, rather than *conflict* to stress that the framing of HW relations is important. We believe that research on HWIs should not just be about negotiating or navigating conflicts, but also about learning from healthy interactions.

We selected six speakers from across WUR to answer three questions from their perspectives (see below). We also emphasized that the list of speakers was not complete due to time constraints and that we therefore look forward to as much interaction as possible with participants – as your perspectives are super valuable.

Finally, Sierra explained the focus on diversity and inclusive discussions. To engage multiple perspectives seriously and reflectively, there needs to be an awareness that there *are* other perspectives and that many of these are masked by the assumptions made from dominant perspectives. This is also why we chose to put 'wild' in quotes. For some, 'wild' may refer to landscapes that lack human presence or influence, and are by implication considered to be *healthier* landscapes. For others there may be no 'wild' because the concept doesn't exist.

So, as we work through different perspectives and ideas in this series, we are bound to come across very different ways of viewing the world and this includes different ways of defining the problem and, hence, the solutions. This will very likely cause tensions at times, but we ask that, as we dive into these dialogues, that we all keep in mind that different approaches and solutions can be good, especially when they are derived from places of understanding and mutual respect. We need differences and multi-approach solutions. So, when selecting

speakers, we put a lot of thought into diversifying geographical focus, cultural perspectives, race, gender, career stage, discipline, and science group, among other things.

### **Transformative change by Josie Chambers and Kate Massarella:**

Josie began by asking: what is transformative change and why is it important? She explained how HWIs play an important role in transformative change, and introduced that the purpose of this series is to zoom in on this aspect of transformative change. Calls for transformative change are growing, following a general consensus that if we keep doing more of the same and pursue incremental changes, we cannot secure a sustainable and equitable future. Yet, while “transformative change” is a growing buzzword in policy and research, there are diverse views on what it means in practice - for example, is it structural, systematic, experimental, grassroots?


Two side by side Mentimeter polls to the audience revealed that while people almost unanimously view transformative change as essential for managing HWIs, in practice their work varies widely in terms of whether it actually aims to foster such transformative change. The purpose of this series is therefore to create more space for people to connect and explore more transformative directions in HWIs research and practice. Josie explained how recent research examining diverse perspectives on transformative change across groups in WUR (“71 Visions” - conducted with her colleague Jeanne Nel) has shown the importance of finding, hearing and discussing diverse voices (i.e. pluralization). The first two ‘wild’ dialogues therefore create space for such pluralization, while the later two sessions focus on producing transformative action.

Kate Massarella gave an introduction on transformative change in biodiversity conservation and human-wildlife interactions, looking at how people are conceptualizing transformative change. Three broad and overlapping proposed *goals* of transformative change are identified: naturalism (give half of the world back to nature), mastery (moving away from ideas of wilderness to focus on coexistence of humans and non-humans, bringing in the markets and finance) and just transformations (focus on justice).

The *means* of transformation were also considered. Three focus areas are identified (although not an exhaustive list!): transforming governance, transforming values and behaviour, transforming economic and political systems. These were mapped on a continuum with circular change (trying new things within the same overarching global social/political/economic/knowledge structures) and axial change (trying to change the structures themselves, question how we know and understand nature etc). A few examples were given of different approaches in relation to these different aspects.

**Malik Dasoo** (MSc student, International Land & Water Management, member Academics Unplugged) shared the results of a survey that Academics Unplugged conducted on WUR students and staff members on how they feel about how biodiversity and climate change are taught at WUR. Academics Unplugged is a student-staff initiative that explores possibilities to engage students and staff in a collaborative decision-making process at WUR regarding a climate action and biodiversity loss plan. Some of the main findings are presented here. We also included an overview of the input given on the question “Why is there a gap between what students want to learn and what is being taught about biodiversity loss?” by the attendees of the session.

- Climate change is more adequately addressed than biodiversity loss (especially as perceived among students)
- There are identifiable gaps between
  - what students want to be educated on and what they feel they are
  - what academics feel should be taught and what they believe is taught
- While at least 80% of academics believe biodiversity loss should be formally taught to all students, there is uncertainty about whether any base level of understanding on biodiversity loss is assured to all students.
  - Only 65% of students mentioned that it had been integrated
- To keep up to date with Academic Unplugged or find out more information, please contact us on: [academicsunplugged@protonmail.com](mailto:academicsunplugged@protonmail.com)



**Short talks were given by diverse people around WUR** to showcase some of the diverse perspectives on Human-Wildlife Interactions. The questions asked of the respondents were: Why is it important to transform human-wildlife interactions? What are the biggest barriers to transforming human-wildlife interactions? Where do you see the biggest potential to break through these barriers? A summary of their responses is provided here.



*Why is there a gap between what students want to learn and what is being taught about biodiversity loss?*

**Tania Eulalia Martinez-Cruz** (Postdoc on Anthropology, Public Health and Development Studies at University of Greenwich. Former PhD at Knowledge, Technology and Innovation, SSG): Tania began her talk with the story of Susanna, a 70 year old indigenous woman who shares her yield with people from her community. When Covid hit, Tania was worried about Susanna’s situation, but Susanna assured her that her community was still doing alright. How is that possible in a remote area without much medical care? Susanna’s community was able to cut off from the outside world as they were self-sufficient enough with clean water supply and sufficient yields. They have dealt with crises before and knew how to take care of themselves. However, this does not apply to many indigenous communities anymore, who are losing land and therefore possibilities to take care of themselves.

Focus on justice in biodiversity conservation. She highlighted the fact that indiegnous (and local) communities were stewards of some of the most biodiverse places on earth and yet they receive little support, are struggling, and in some cases are being negatively impacted by conservation efforts. Tania argued for more consideration of people living close to biodiverse

areas - both in terms of their extensive knowledge of how to coexist with wildlife, and in terms of recognising their important role in biodiversity conservation more broadly.

**Solen le Clech** (Assistant Professor at Environmental Systems Analysis, ESG): Global changes and crises such as climate change and biodiversity loss affect - and are affected by - complex socio-ecological systems. Impacts include social inequalities, hunger and increasing pressures like the global sanitary crisis. To tackle this issue, we as society should be aware that we are part of socio-ecological systems in which there are multiple interactions between nature and society. And we should be looking at the beneficiaries of these interactions, and those that are losing out. Governments around the world are implementing measures to set standards (on e.g. biodiversity and sustainability). But when implementing only (partial) measures without considering the people/environments it may affect, these measures may badly affect these people and the wildlife (that cannot be fully controlled). In order to transform effectively, we should be aware of the trade-offs and longer term effects that come with proposed measures. And be aware that decisions are often not clear-cut nor that there is one single solution. We need to take political, geographical and other dimensions into account when implementing research results into practice. Solene also argued for more consideration and integration of the knowledge and perspectives of people living close to biodiverse areas when making decisions.

**Ananda Siddhartha** (PhD candidate at the Sociology of Development and Change Group, SSG): To ensure a sustainable way of our interaction with the natural environment in the long term we shouldn't completely transform human-wildlife interactions, but build on existing approaches where both humans and wildlife are respected, taking into account the local situation. The strict division between land and forest as well as a technocratic top-down approach are barriers to achieve transformed human-wildlife interactions. We should have policies that do not limit to one single area, but we need to find a middle ground where humans and animals benefit. Transforming human-wildlife interactions does not occur in a bubble. Top-down technocratic solutions are often short term with a limited focus, which often also changes human-wildlife interactions for the worse. In our way forward we should include affected communities, protect marginalized groups and agree upon minimum standards. We also need to consider political economic systems within which decisions are being made and action taken, and which act as barriers to change.

**Mirte Bosse** (Researcher at Animal Breeding and Genetics, ASG): We are facing an alarming pace of biodiversity loss. We are far beyond the idea of 'let nature do its thing, it's all natural' seeing the impact we have on wildlife. As we are also responsible for the loss, we have a moral obligation to preserve and protect what we can. Genetic diversity within species and ecosystems is an important part of biodiversity, since it provides the fuel to adapt to a changing environment, but it's also essential for ecosystems and food systems now but also in the future. Awareness is one of the biggest barriers, but we shouldn't only be aware of the direct consequences, but also the longer term effects. The willingness to change for people comes with awareness and a feeling of responsibility: transformation is about changing people's perspectives and behaviour. The value of genetics is undervalued. Often people think that it's 'just' about keeping the different species alive, the importance of having diverse genetics to overcome a system collapse is often overlooked. Personal and recognizable examples are needed to create awareness. We should also show how everything is connected and that humans and wildlife interact globally on a daily basis.

**Nowella Anyango-van Zwieten** (Teacher at Forest and Nature Conservation Policy and Cultural Geography Group, ESG): Unprecedented loss of biodiversity should be stopped (as

said by IPBES). One of the big drivers of loss is the change of land use due to population growth. And the biggest barrier to stop biodiversity loss is conservation. Because of conservation, there is a barrier between humans and animals (sometimes even very literal through fences). By displacing communities, they will not only get detached from their original surroundings, but also lose their knowledge about living together with wildlife in a sustainable way. Sometimes communities even get the feeling (through policies) that conservation is even more important than humans. I am not against conservation, but we need to be more imaginative when conservation measures are being implemented. Let's aim for empathy-based conservation.

**Sander Koenraadt** (Associate professor at Medical & Veterinary Entomology, PSG): People might not think of mosquitoes or insects when talking about human-wildlife interactions, but it is also through insects that we interact with wildlife. Mosquitos play a major role in the spread of diseases from wildlife to humans. While we use poison sprays more and more, the mosquitos become more resistant to them. Therewith, today's solutions will be tomorrow's problem – how can we change that? We should be aware that there is much potential in nature itself (e.g. for pest control) which still receives too little attention. Many mosquito diseases have an origin in wildlife. Thus if we want to understand the long term impact of our changing environments on future disease risks and come with sustainable solutions we should focus on the bigger picture. We should think via a framework of OneHealth, also including social sciences that can tell more about the drivers of people's behaviour: e.g. We shouldn't just tell people why and how they need to change their behaviour, but let people participate in research to understand why they behave in the way they do. More room should be created for multidisciplinary research and education and the development of skills to interact with society.

**In an interactive break out session**, all attendees discussed which perspectives were missing, what stories appealed most to them, and how they might have answered the three questions on Human-Wildlife Interactions differently. A summary of the given input and the subsequent discussion is given here. [The original given input can be found on the Miro board.](#)

### **Perspectives that were missing:**

**Historical perspectives :** We are here because of where we come from and what we did in the past. When looking at the future, we often forget to also look at the past – while it may teach us valuable lessons.

**Economic perspectives:** Strong economic drivers are also influencing habitat change (tourism, etc.) We should be aware that nature/natural resources are also capitalized (putting an economic value on ecosystems) and that there are (conflicting) business/market perspectives . There is also a mental dichotomy between economy and development conservation – as if they cannot go hand in hand. And certain economic/financial ideologies do influence the engagement with wildlife.

**Poverty:** 'Forcing' people to use wildlife is often a non-sustainable way, especially when there are more urgent issues to take care of (e.g. when there's hunger).

**Commodification of nature**

**Power play:** Power dynamics and (conflicting) interest between different parties are important to consider. Also make the connection with politics. ‘We’ are up against big multinationals while focusing on local issues.

**Complexity of systems:** Systems are so complex, we need more data to really understand the possibilities for transformative change. There are also many different unspoken assumptions and values that influence what people do. These should be brought together and to the surface to tackle underlying issues. People should step out of their own bubbles – though dialogue and integration of perspectives is a constant struggle. But always be aware that everyone has ideological baggage.

**Biotechnology:** Biotechnology can also play a role in conservation.

**Natural capital:** We only look at the system from the perspective of humans, but what happens when you place nature central? Also the voices and behavior of the animals themselves are not really being heard. For example when managing elephants: If we know their behavior and intelligence better we become better in managing them to have (or have not) certain behavior.

**Ontology:** There are fundamental differences when it comes to questions on what things exist or can be said to exist, and how such entities can be grouped according to similarities and differences.

**Religious beliefs:** Interaction with animals/wildlife sometimes has religious foundations.

**Conservation versus daily interactions:** We shouldn’t only be talking about conserving what is there, but also about how to deal with new/changing situations individuals/communities find themselves in.

**Urban perspective:** We don’t only interact with wildlife in natural areas, it happens everywhere.

**Why versus how:** We shouldn’t get stuck in the conversation on WHY conservation/interactions is important, but focus on the HOW (without completely overlooking the WHY).

**Local support:** Why is there a need for institutions like WUR to develop new pathways/solutions, what support is locally lacking?

**Long-term versus short-term:** Why are certain decisions taken and how can they be taken more responsibly? Also relates to the economic aspect and more.

**Emerging infectious diseases:** Zoonoses from wildlife (like Covid) in an emerging globalized world. There is also a plea for more local action and solutions to counter the possible effects.

**Empathy:** The lack of attention to empathy and to be more imaginative when it comes to conservation is also true for our own bachelor and master programs on Forest and Nature Management. We talk about ecology and policy, but shouldn’t just focus our attention on large solutions and ‘global’ biodiversity.

**Empowering people:** There is too few attention for values and emotions when we want to empower people to take actions to realize political, social change. We need heart, head and hands. We need more attention for emotions and values in education and transformation. In

order to transform society we need to empower people, and solely knowledge is not enough to empower people. Even if you feel that the focus needs to be on systemic and political change, this happens due to lots of individual people taking action.

Ecological health *versus* Human health: This is often seen as a dichotomy, as if we have to choose. But it is not necessarily either-or, we need to find yes-and solutions. The OneHealth perspective is seen as something promising, we should also look at the expertise of other parties in this (e.g. Maastricht).

Personal relations: We shouldn't overlook the relations between humans, animals, cultures and societies. Both people and nature don't operate in a vacuum.

**The speakers concluded** in what way they were triggered or what take home message they had. Nowella as well as Solen express that the importance of biodiversity should be even more included in the educational programmes and that teachers should stress the importance of it more. According to Solen, it's also important that researchers should be more open to and discuss with multiple perspectives and do more cross-disciplinary work. Tania pinpointed that it was interesting to start from the youth and to take them on the ride and to inform them from early onward. We concluded with the observation by Ananda on the great amount of multidisciplinary angles and the diversity of all the perspectives mentioned during this session. It is very impressive but overwhelming at the same time to hear so many perspectives. It counts for probably all participants that we need some time to process it all. Integration of all these diverse perspectives is a huge challenge, especially when there are different power dynamics. But that's exactly what these sessions are meant for: To explore how people at WUR engage with questions on human-wildlife interactions, how they grapple with questions of broader societal significance, and how they may support deeper learning and transformative change. Give some time and space to digest all mentioned perspectives and join us for the next session.