

Good practices for community-based conservation in the Anthropocene

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Key Points

- Discover the opportunities presented to practitioners of community-based conservation in the Anthropocene.
- Learn about the historical developments of the practice and study of conservation and community-based conservation.
- Understand theoretical and applied principles of community-based conservation practices.
- Reflect on five good practices for effective and impactful community-based conservation in the Anthropocene.

Abstract

Community-based conservation (CBC) emerged in the 1980s as part of a paradigm shift from unpeopled protected areas to people-centered efforts to connect conservation and development. Although well intentioned, the change prompted a focus on communities as either passive subjects or secondary participants of mostly top-down, externally-initiated interventions—many which framed people as separate from nature and, therefore, as a threat to it. As conservationists embrace a new paradigm first characterized by geologists as the “Anthropocene,” conservation priorities and successes increasingly emphasize the inseparability of human-environment relationships. We argue that this new paradigm reframes prior aspirations and assumptions about conservation by cementing “community” as the gold standard for conservation effectiveness. We draw from recent literature to highlight five good practices emerging from CBC in the Anthropocene. These practices emphasize shifting from top-down “people-centered” CBC to bottom-up “people-driven” CBC to empower communities to position themselves as active agents of conservation. Conservationists have a growing body of knowledge to draw from to enact fair CBC practice and research in the Anthropocene.

Introduction

Contemporary challenges associated with environmental change and biodiversity loss can most effectively be solved with integrative thinking and multi-sectoral collaboration. As the conservation community recognizes that social and ecological problems are interlocked and mutually dependent, scientists, practitioners, and other holders of knowledge increasingly work across worldviews, frameworks, and methods (Petriello et al., 2024a). Conservation of ecological systems, for example, frequently demands that practitioners and researchers collaborate across complex social institutions, cultural norms and traditions, especially in relation to plants

and animals, economies, and political regimes (Berkes, 2004). Social systems are similarly defined and influenced by fundamental parameters and dynamics of climate, ecosystems, and the diversity of life on Earth (Ostrom, 1990). Scientists now widely understand that just as biologically diverse ecosystems are the most resilient in the face of ecological perturbations, so too are inclusive human communities working across varied social regimes (Holling, 1973).

Challenges to conservation in a new era

In this period widely known as the Anthropocene, a time of unprecedented human impact over the Earth and its diversity of life, humans are understood to be both drivers of change and holders of potential solutions of that change. The Anthropocene has been used as a concept dating back to the 1980s. Although it was rejected as an official geological epoch in March 2024, scientists continue to use the term to describe human-induced and rapidly-accelerating changes to environments across the globe. Scientists named this period in recognition of humans as the most pervasive ecosystem engineers on the planet. However, scholars increasingly argue that our understanding of *who* is responsible for engineering the planet merits re-examination given that different people are differentially responsible for anthropogenic emissions and biodiversity loss (Poulton Kamakura et al., 2024). Now more than ever, scientists are called to learn from success and failure in resource management and conservation at all scales, including at the community level (Ostrom, 2010). To address environmental change and other similar global challenges of the Anthropocene, multi-scalar efforts combining community-based approaches with regional, national, and global initiatives may be most impactful.

One important local-level approach is community-based conservation (CBC), defined as the bottom-up management of natural resources “by, for, and with the local community” (Western and Wright, 1994, p. 7). CBC represents a shift in biodiversity management and conservation, focusing on the resource-dependent communities who have vested interest in sustainable resource management and often bear the burden of top-down or state-led conservation interventions (Western and Wright, 1994). In the decades since it was first introduced as a concept, CBC has increasingly been used by conservation non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governments, scientists, and funding agencies to strengthen the rights of human communities for environmental stewardship with a goal of improving economic and social wellbeing (Western and Wright, 1994; Berkes, 2004).

Community-based conservation has also challenged and refined longstanding assumptions about collaboration. For example, CBC in the Anthropocene has long been positioned as an antidote to strict protected area (PA) management. Yet, CBC and PAs have been equally contested or supported with scientific evidence over the decades, with results finding that either including or excluding people from land management can lead to better conservation outcomes (e.g., Berkes 2004; Huber et al., 2023). This led us to ask in Redmore et al. (2018): how is CBC relevant in the post-industrial Anthropocene? One answer to this question is that collaborative paradigms in conservation continue to adapt to a growing understanding of the interlinked social and ecological realities of the Anthropocene by expanding the philosophies, practices, and ideas of CBC.

In this revisited chapter on CBC in the Anthropocene, we briefly summarize the shifting terrain of the conservation landscape over the past century. We provide an overview of more recent changes to CBC as they relate to the Anthropocene and conservationists’ anticipation of future change. We then draw from recent conservation scholarship to distill five good practices emerging from the shifting terrain of CBC in the 21st Century Anthropocene to guide practitioners seeking to empower communities in lasting conservation efforts.

Sea change in conservation philosophy and practice

Colonial views of a pristine nature have long ensured that conservation policy and practice separate people from their environment (Nash, 2014) (Table 1). During the early periods of preservation-oriented practice, Indigenous peoples (IPs) and local communities (LCs) were forcibly removed from their land, especially in the creation and maintenance of PAs like Yellowstone National Park (Table 1). This kind of preservation became pejoratively referred to as “fortress conservation” (Brockington, 2002) or “fences-and-fines conservation” (Brandon and Wells, 1992) because of the forced exclusion of people who traditionally or historically lived in the environment.

The 1960s and 1970s marked the start of a new environmental movement, accompanied by concerns for grassroots mobilization, community conservation, and Indigenous rights. By 1975, the IUCN and World Parks Congress formally recognized the role of IPs and LCs in sustainable land and resource management (Colchester, 2004). This shifting scale of conservation approach also paralleled a spectrum of novel advances in collaborative philosophies and scientific practices rooted in peoples’ lived experiences extending into the 1980s. Some examples of these burgeoning collaborative approaches included participatory planning (Arnstein, 1969), conscientization, rapid rural appraisal and participatory rural appraisal, participatory action research, and co-production (summarized in Petriello et al., 2024a).

By the 1980s, this change in conservation philosophy and practice was well underway. Conservationists began to question the wisdom of top-down, state-led nature preservation projects (Agrawal and Gibson, 2001). Concerns about the effectiveness of protected areas as islands compelled collaboration between social scientists, like geographers and anthropologists, and natural scientists, especially ecologists and biologists, on conservation and development projects (Brandon and Wells, 1992). At the same time, large development projects sponsored by multinational organizations (e.g., World Bank) were criticized for prioritizing developing countries’ gross domestic production at the expense of fragile ecosystems and Indigenous land rights (Schmink and Wood, 1987). In

Table 1 Notable events, policies and publications in a timeline of CBC.

Date	Notable event, policy, or publication involving CBC
1872	Yellowstone National Park signed into creation, leading the world in a new model of preservation for the people and a case study of the effects of traditional PA models
1948	Establishment of the International Union for the Protection of Nature, now the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), in Fontainebleau, France
1962	<i>Silent Spring</i> published by Rachel Carson, helping inspire and ignite the environmental movement
1962	First World Conference on National Parks held in Seattle, WA, USA
1968	"Tragedy of the Commons" published by Garrett Hardin, helping justify shifting control of resources from communities to states or private sector to overcome environmental challenges
1973	Second World Conference on National Parks held in Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks, USA
1975	Kinshasa revolution in Congo, recognition of local communities in sustainable resource use
1980s	Large-scale deforestation in the Amazon, fueled by World Bank development projects, calls for sustainable development; US Agency for International Development initiates community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) programs throughout southern Africa
1980s	Early use of the term Anthropocene
1982	Third World Conference on National Parks and Protected Areas, held in Bali, Indonesia
1987	Brundtland Report published by United Nations, signaling a new paradigm of sustainable development and intergenerational fairness and dignity
1989	<i>Fate of the Forest: Developers, Destroyers, and Defenders of the Amazon</i> published by Susanna Hecht and Alexander Cockburn
1990	<i>Governing the Commons</i> published by Elinor Ostrom, recognizing role of local institutions in overcoming the "Tragedy of the Commons," and drawing attention to social-ecological systems
Early 1990s	International conservation NGOs begin to promote CBC approaches
1992	Fourth World Congress on national Parks and Protected Areas, held in Caracas, Venezuela
1994	<i>Natural Connections: Perspectives in Community-based Conservation</i> published by David Western and Michael Wright
1999	<i>Sacred Ecology</i> published by Fikret Berkes, characterizing significance of traditional ecological knowledge for sustainability, and connected rather than divided human-nature relations
1999	<i>Requiem for Nature</i> published by John Terborgh, challenging sustainable development, helping spark resurgence of preservation approaches
2000	Creation of Sustainability Science as a field of study
2002	First call for knowledge co-production with and for indigenous peoples
2003	Fifth World Parks Congress held in Durban, South Africa
2010	Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures included in the Convention on Biological Diversity Aichi Target 11
2013	IUCN Natural Resources Governance Framework
2014	Sixth World Parks Congress held in Sydney, Australia
2016	Planet at a Crossroads IUCN World Congress, focused on planetary directions in the Anthropocene
2019	30 × 30 movement proposed

response, donor agencies such as the World Bank, US Agency for International Development, and the United Kingdom's Department for International Development made funding available for community-based approaches to conservation and natural resource management (Roe, 2008).

Concurrently, the publication of *Our Common Future*, referred to as the Brundtland Report, ushered in a new perspective on the imperative for a future of sustainable development, defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland, 1987, p. 41). After years of focusing on people-free parks and PAs grounded in the concept of uninhabited wilderness, IPs and LCs gained hard-won roles as biodiversity stewards, knowledge holders, and important partners for a more sustainable future (Lefthand-Begay et al., 2025). Conservation scientists, likewise, increasingly embraced community-based approaches sustained by local institutions, as opposed to large-scale conservation efforts, as a strategy for biodiversity conservation (Souto et al., 2014). Community-based Conservation, therefore, was positioned as both a cost-effective alternative to expensive conservation and a pathway toward resource rights and cultural autonomy for IPs and LCs (Goldman, 2003).

Over the following decades, the metaphorical pendulum has swung between PAs and community-based approaches numerous times, in particular as concerns over human rights have become a pressing issue for funders and implementing partners (e.g., Duffy and Massé, 2023). Now in the Anthropocene many scholars situate their work within social-ecological systems and seek to advance a better understanding of the role of IPs and LCs in creating and maintaining landscapes and biodiversity (Toledo, 2001). In turn, scholars are reconsidering the long unquestioned Western wisdom of humans as separate from nature, especially as remote parts of the globe are subject to the impacts of faraway human activities (Nash, 2014).

For communities and for conservation

Community-based conservation has gained significant traction in research in recent years (Fig. 1). An apparent growth in job postings for community liaisons, social safeguarding practitioners, and other similar roles across international, national, and local governing bodies and NGOs indicates the potential mainstreaming of CBC in conservation practice. These trends suggest a growing awareness of the overlap of cultural and biodiversity hotspots. For example, the integral roles of IPs and LCs in increasing or maintaining biodiversity through traditional practices, governance regimes, and knowledge systems are widely recognized, such as itinerant agriculture, fishing, collection of non-timber forest products, and hunting (e.g., Toledo, 2001). For these and other reasons, concerns for the loss of Indigenous and local cultures and worldviews are intrinsically connected to concerns over the loss of biodiversity and ecosystems—concerns that are magnified in the context of globally expansive human rights abuses carried out in the name of people-free conservation (Newing and Perram, 2019). Many scholars of CBC therefore believe that scaling-down management and governance to the local level can, when purposefully pursued, address issues of engagement, fairness, and human rights among IPs and LCs in conservation (Russell and Harshbarger, 2003).

A goal of CBC is to ensure IPs and LCs have access to, voice over, and benefit from the management and long-term conservation of a wide-range of ecosystems and plants and animals—from forests and grasslands, marine or freshwater areas, single species, water, and more. Conservation projects aim for these goals by leveraging community values, policies, and economies, ideally while reinforcing pre-existing conservation behaviors and livelihoods. Sometimes this means CBC happens at the local-scale, truly of, by and for the community, while other projects might be more top-down in their funding and initiation, driven by big donors and/or managed by external NGOs with well-funded projects (Petriello et al., 2021). As a result, different approaches to CBC are tested in the field, spanning diverse project types and geographies from economically or culturally incentivized efforts at local to global scales (Table 2). Potential outcomes include low-cost and effective enforcement of conservation rules, rural economic development, and empowerment of local communities in decision-making processes (Petriello et al., 2024b).

Community-based conservation principles are underpinned by common pool resource management theory. Common pool resources are managed through de facto (in practice) or de jure (in law) management institutions, defined as “rules of the game in a society or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction” (North, 1990, p. 3). Local community member participation in prioritizing and developing those rules may influence the outcomes of CBC. For instance, Persha et al. (2011) found that when community members participated in rulemaking, both social and ecological outcomes associated with community forestry improved. Genuine and legitimate leadership are also key to ensure that community members respect established rules, and community members must face consequences (e.g., fines, social consequences) for violating the rules (Ostrom, 1990).

Monitoring on-the-ground conditions and adapting rules over time to changing conditions also matters. In some cases, community management may be associated with high levels of harvest of a particular species, resulting in species decline (Shahabuddin and Rao, 2010). When community members are involved with or responsible for resource monitoring, they can more readily identify changes and adapt management practices accordingly—an important aspect of CBC that can be more effectively achieved through the braiding of Indigenous and local knowledge with Western knowledge (Ostrom, 1990; Carney, 2024). As a result, partnerships of

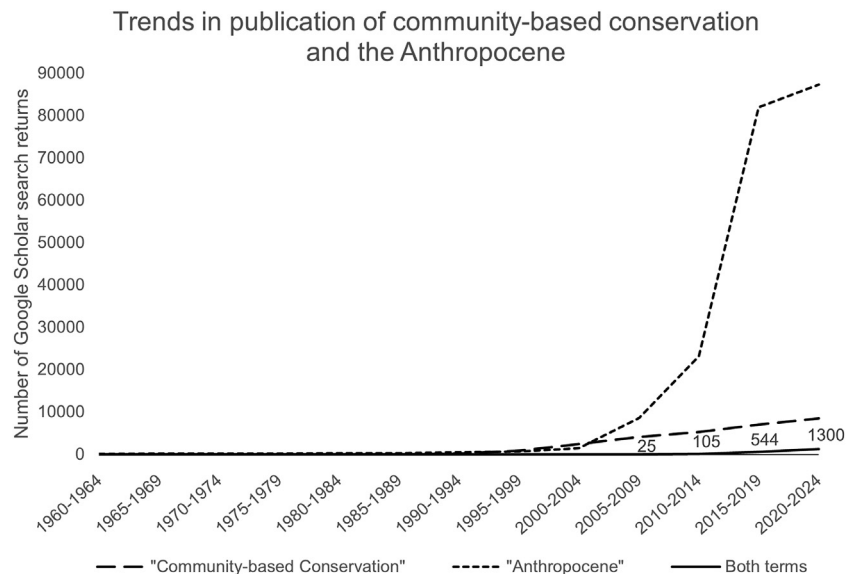


Fig. 1 Google Scholar search returns for “community-based conservation”, “Anthropocene”, and both terms used together. Both CBC and Anthropocene, used independently of each other, begin to increase in use starting from 2000, while the combined use of terms starts to grow starting around 2010.

communities, researchers, governments, or NGO partners may increase the success of CBC. This is particularly evident when long-lasting, trusting relationships drive the co-development of objectives and outcomes and when all parties feel heard and respected (Petriello et al., 2024b).

Regardless of CBC outcomes, outside organizations may struggle to implement CBC projects when community leaders and members are not sufficiently involved in project development or management (Huber et al., 2023). Communities are complex and composed of people with varied classes, capacities, perspectives, and backgrounds, meaning that power imbalances may be pervasive within even seemingly homogenous communities (Agrawal and Gibson, 2001). Recent research has highlighted that involvement of external actors, in particular those with funding and staff capacity, may actually lead to better social and ecological outcomes of projects (Huber et al., 2023). Yet critics argue that even well-intentioned efforts may unintentionally disempower local communities as passive recipients of conservation projects when attempting to enforce CBC philosophies (Petriello et al., 2021). External conservation actors may fail to recognize or address issues related to identity, power, trust, and other “invisible” social forces that contribute to conservation failures (Poteete and Ribot, 2011). However, awareness of these factors is beginning to grow as scholars recognize that motivations of engaged community members may be a key consideration in the success of CBC efforts (Souito et al., 2014).

Community-based conservation may not always be a “perfect” management solution, but it can allow for better institutional fit of governance over resources across space and time. Take the case of non-timber forest products that are locally harvested, marketed, and consumed. Resident community members are more likely than distant state bureaucrats to be attuned to seasonal and long-term changes in the forest, such as whether their neighbor is using culturally-accepted and sustainable harvest practices (Guariguata

Table 2 Typology of example CBC project types by governance scale, from global to local, including a brief description, rationale for use, and example.

<i>Governance scale</i>	<i>Project approach</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Rationale</i>	<i>Example</i>
Global	Payment for ecosystem services (PES)	A contractual payment mechanism used by large companies or governments to reinforce sustainable use of environmental goods and services	Communities are paid by investors for conservation outcomes	Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries (REDD/REDD +)
Global-to-local	Ecotourism	Community groups incorporate conservation activities within a nature-based tourism experience, marketed to individuals or groups from outside the community, local participation ensures empowerment and benefits	Economic benefits provided by tourism and other market activities provide incentives to manage and protect resources	Sea turtle ecotourism in Costa Rica whereby visitors pay to stay with local families, learn about sea turtles, and swim with sea turtles, all while contributing money to local economic activities
	Community-based natural resource management (CBNRM)	Formally decentralized rights to local groups to allow resource management within accordance of the state law	Communities receive state-granted rights to manage resources or income generated from resources	Communal Areas Management Program for indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE) in Zimbabwe whereby local communities benefit from sustainable use of wildlife
	Co-management or shared stewardship	Formal or informal agreements between landowners, in particular state and local communities, to enable cultural, ecological, or social practices for the betterment of land management	Local communities have particular knowledge and practice of land or resources that can be returned to better management of state-owned land	Prescribed fire associations in the southeast of the United States that conduct regular, local-level burns to reduce wildfire risk and improve forest conditions
Local	Traditional management schemes	Community conservation of species or spaces because of tradition or religion	Traditional ecological knowledge/ local knowledge	Sacred groves in Madagascar where stands of woodlands hold spiritual or cultural significance and are thereby conserved
	Land Back	Land rights are formally reacquired by sovereign nations or local communities, including through purchase, land exchange, or gifting	Land or resources were taken by the state from sovereign nations or local communities	Tribal Nations in the United States actively reacquiring traditional homelands through purchasing of private lands

et al., 2017). Additionally, the risks of social ostracization from community or neighbors may have a greater self-policing effect than risks of fines or threat of jail time for community members who violate rules (Western and Wright, 1994). CBC approaches that consider economic benefits as interlinked with social and ecological benefits may also prove to be longer lasting, especially when adaptive learning is employed to navigate changing conditions on the ground (Mahajan et al., 2021). Community-based conservation may also reinforce commitments to fairness and decolonizing conservation practices by supporting local governance, bolstering decision-making capacities, sustaining cultures, and maintaining other ways of knowing (e.g., Petriello et al., 2024a). Outcomes measured across social and ecological parameters may better ensure that communities are empowered in the process of achieving sustainable resource use (Berkes, 2004; Petriello et al., 2021).

Good practices for CBC in the Anthropocene

The Anthropocene presents scientists and conservation practitioners from all disciplines with new challenges. In response, many researchers have proposed innovative approaches to address changes to Earth systems, including sustainability science and sustainable finance. These innovations present opportunities to build a “good Anthropocene” in which the future can be more ecologically and socially resilient (Bennett et al., 2016). In particular, community-driven approaches like CBC are seen as a commitment to redress issues associated with the impacts of top-down conservation on human rights and dignity (Friedman et al., 2018) (see Table 3 for key terms for CBC in the Anthropocene).

As CBC work continues to transcend disciplinary practices, we recognize the potential value of sharing good practices for CBC that are applicable in the Anthropocene. By using the term “good practices”, we draw inspiration from Reid et al. (2024) who described practicing ecological research approaches with IPs, LCs, and lands “in a good way”—meaning work that is prioritized by IPs and LCs, reinforces their values, is informed by their worldviews, and yields benefits to them. Recognizing the importance of CBC to advance fair and dignified conservation, we provide a cursory review of five good practices that can apply broadly to CBC with both IP and LCs in the Anthropocene, including recognition that: (1) Context is everything; (2) Relationships are everywhere; (3) Participation is a matter of degrees; (4) Trade-offs are necessary; and (5) All goals have a socio-environmental component (Fig. 2).

Contextual framing

Context is the single most complicating factor of CBC, and it is impossible to fully grasp at once given that it morphs as soon as conditions change. We define context as the suite of factors that shape social-ecological circumstances as they interact across time and space. Practitioners who consider time and space together may more effectively understand social and environmental relationships (Lefthand-Begay et al., 2025). For example, many CBC efforts are situated in communities that have participated in past

Table 3 Key concepts for CBC in the Anthropocene, including a definition and application.

Term	Definition	Application to CBC
Fairness	A concept that encompasses ethical concerns based on processes of engagement of communities and the distribution of costs and benefits, and the recognition of context (Friedman et al., 2018)	Fairly developed CBC will have considered and carefully weighed processes of engagement, historical and present-day context, and cost/benefit outcomes for engaged or impacted communities
Empowerment	A process whereby individuals or groups of people gain power to enact change over their lives, livelihoods, and/or environment; as well as an outcome whereby individuals or groups have more power than previously to enact change over their lives, livelihoods, and/or environment (Petriello et al., 2024b)	Empowerment of community members and communities to enact positive change over their lives, communities and environments is both a potential process and outcome of CBC, and is worthy of monitoring overtime to reduce unintended consequences
Relationality	A framework used to identify and understand the interconnectedness and interdependencies of individuals and groups, spanning human, nonhuman, animate and inanimate beings and things (Lejano, 2019)	CBC projects that incorporate a relational view may be more likely to succeed in both social and ecological terms, in particular by decentering both the eco-centric and anthropocentric worldviews
Free, Prior and Informed Consent	The rights of IPs and best practices for LCs to give or withhold consent for projects impacting their lands and resources based on full information that is provided without coercion (FAO, 2016)	Ensures IPs and LCs are fully aware of the costs and benefits of any CBC project, and that they are able to fully and freely engage in decision-making
Rights-based approaches	The integration of human rights into conservation and development projects, requiring the full respect, protection, and fulfillment of rights to impacted peoples (UNDP, 2006)	Centering social safeguards, human and nature rights, and dignity in CBC projects, emphasizing process in addition to outcomes

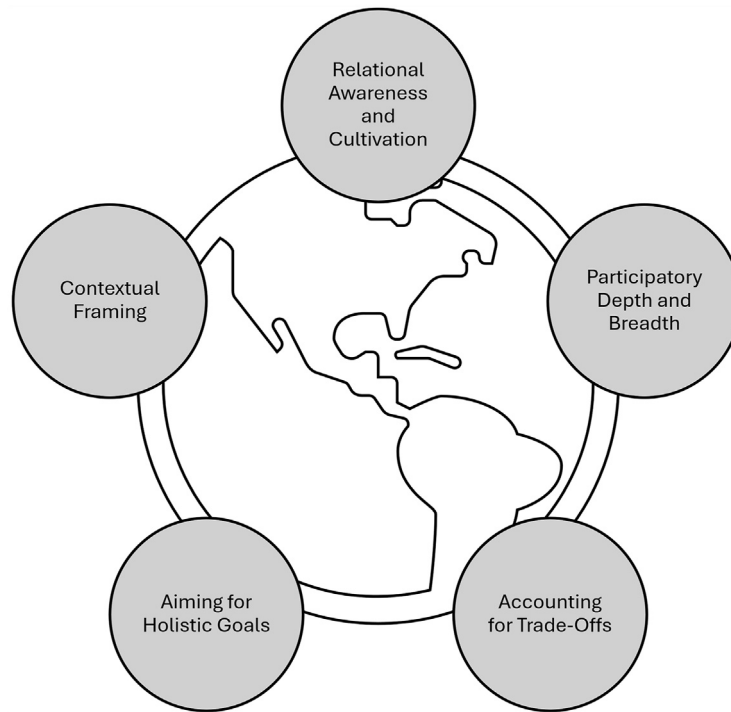


Fig. 2 Five good practices for CBC in the Anthropocene include contextual framing, relational awareness and cultivation, participatory depth and breadth, accountability for benefits and costs, and aiming for holistic goals.

conservation projects. These past experiences may not only have shaped community social and environmental relationships, but likely shape social acceptance of future conservation efforts. Knowledge of what has been tried and where it was attempted should inform future effort and investment.

Context also includes intersecting issues of governance and trade-offs as CBC extends to different resource types, often spanning public, private, common, and club goods. For instance, CBC has long focused on commonly-held or government-controlled resources (Western and Wright, 1994). Yet its principles can be applied to work with individual landowners with similar management goals such as in the creation of corridors to assist with species movement. Nonetheless these points of synergy are subject to context-dependent and resource-specific governance arrangements. Community-based ecotourism presents an instructive example of these considerations. One case emerges from Stronza et al. (2019) who emphasized the importance of considering the larger economic and governance contexts, particularly in relation to alternative livelihoods and economic vitality, to more rigorously conceptualize the relationships and trade-offs among ecotourism and conservation. Thus, having a comprehensive understanding of context is not only critical for implementing good CBC practices, but also for evaluating the relative strengths and weaknesses of these good practices.

Relational awareness and cultivation

Knowledge of CBC contexts can often be gained, interpreted, and refined through an understanding of the multifaceted relationships that comprise them. Relationships are the connective tissue of CBC. They bind CBC across all aspects of context, from scales (e.g., across time, across society) to systems and species (e.g., wetlands, chimpanzees) to social movements (e.g., Earth Day). Relationships direct and sustain CBC efforts, whether one-to-one connections built on shared histories and government-to-government partnerships, or interspecies dependencies (e.g., symbiosis) and species-to-ecosystem relations (e.g., koalas mostly eating eucalyptus species). For this reason, the Anthropocene focuses on human-environment relationships in a way that fits squarely within past and evolving CBC approaches.

Participatory CBC research and case studies continue to advance and illustrate the central importance of relationship building and maintenance to conservation success. Recent work, including a conceptual proposal by David-Chavez et al. (2024), indicates that relational framing may amplify the methodological reach, contextual depth, ethical accountability, and transformative potential of conservation. For conceptual clarity and brevity, here we divide relationships into two camps: human-to-human relationships and human-environment relationships. Within this first camp, human-to-human relationships frequently focus on research. By extension, they largely emphasize interdisciplinary relationships between researchers or transdisciplinary relationships among researchers and non-researchers (e.g., community members, private sector partners) that break down the divides between disciplines, different forms of knowledge, and different ways of understanding the world (Petriello et al., 2024a). The second camp

expands these framings to include the many ways that humans relate to their environment across time and place. For example, the recently proposed working model for relational science research places values, historicity, and context at the forefront of researchers' accountability to each other and Indigenous communities (David-Chavez et al., 2024).

Both relational camps can be thought of as interacting circles that overlap with each other and coalesce to generate a relational tapestry that holds CBC together. One example of this interplay is seen in the Co-Production Good Relational Practices Framework proposed by Petriello et al. (2024a). Structured on six relational pillars (people, purpose, power, politics, pathways, and progress), the framework shares 28 relational principles and 22 relational practices. Examples of practices include supporting long-term community relationships beyond project efforts and funding periods, learning how external interventions have and can still harm communities, and abiding community governance frameworks and research protocols. Yet these interpersonal and interorganizational relational practices may not be sufficiently accessible without other practices such as understanding and reciprocating multiple worldviews and environmental relations. In this way, relational awareness and cultivation requires frontloaded and ongoing effort to ensure that CBC can meet the participatory demands of its work.

Participatory depth and breadth

Regarding participation, there is no singular approach to ensure full and meaningful community engagement. Some participation can be exploitative whereby communities are considered only at the end of the decision-making process when practitioners seek to *inform* rather than *consult* or *engage* (Arnstein, 1969). This is often seen when communities are presented with shallow and few choices for how to engage with a project (e.g., would a community rather benefit from wildlife with trophy hunting or photographic safari tourism?). On the other end of the spectrum, CBC projects that are fully driven by the community or driven in equal partnership with a community offer deeper, more meaningful engagement. This is because participatory depth and breadth are multidimensional. For example, they can be based on the time and resources invested in multiple participatory modalities (e.g., regularly scheduled community meetings, wide-ranging research methods that tap into the strengths of an array of community partners) or the depth of commitment made by select individuals to keep a CBC effort going (e.g., community leaders and key informants who are financially compensated for data collection and community consensus-building activities).

When external CBC practitioners, researchers, or funders have time-tested, strong, and honest relationships with communities, often built during iterative processes of free, prior, and informed consent, it can move the needle from shallower forms of participation to more robust, engaged forms of participation (FAO, 2016). When a CBC project is truly driven by and for the community, the impacts may be longer-lasting, and are likely to include not only conservation outcomes, but increased self-determination and empowerment (Lefthand-Begay et al., 2025). The more fully community members can participate, facilitated through respectful and fair compensation and decision-making power, the more power they have to account for and make decisions about project design, goal orientation, and outcomes (Sabin, 2024).

Accounting for trade-offs

Desired project directions and goals are ideally shaped with full community participation (FAO, 2016). The more participatory a project, the more complex potential benefits and costs become given that relationships and context underlie trade-offs (UNDP, 2006). Not all benefits or costs are fully knowable prior to beginning a CBC effort, and many of the trade-offs between the benefits and costs vary based on who is doing the accounting. Costs and benefits also may not be felt immediately, but may occur over time. Yet it is possible for CBC practitioners to strive for the benefits to outweigh the costs, and to be ready to account for the costs.

In practice, there are a range of benefits that may span anything from increased local access to resources, financial benefits to individuals and the community, reinforcement of cultural connections to place, and improved local ecosystems management or more (e.g., when a headwaters is conserved and carefully managed to the benefit of the whole watershed). Costs, on the other hand, may be born at the local level, with livelihood or cultural costs being widely documented. Costs may also include people in distant places (e.g., people paying to protect forests as a carbon offset). Such trade-offs also influence choices about which species to conserve and why. A practitioner who brings a rights-based approach can employ a cost-benefit analysis iteratively with community members to identify and account for the trade-offs and to ensure progress toward desired goals (Russell and Harshbarger, 2003). Conversely, an ecologist may need to weigh the costs and benefits of protecting select species based on community priorities, biological status, or development interests. Each trade-off yields practical and ethical implications for practitioners and researchers seeking to implement good CBC practice.

Aiming for holistic goals

Monitoring, evaluation, and learning play a critical role for not only for the cost-benefit analysis process, but for overall direction toward desired futures (Russell and Harshbarger, 2003). In CBC, desired futures are not only social, ecological, or economic, but they are often multidimensional and inter-related, making them especially difficult to understand and track. When CBC practitioners and scholars have strong community relationships, they can improve the assessment process, capture more authentic outcomes, and readily adapt to improve those outcomes through a learning culture. This may be particularly the case when mixed methods and qualitative evidence are integrated to capture not only change over time, but to understand more about the processes

used and whether and how community members were engaged or empowered to improve their own lives beyond the project (Petriello et al., 2021).

As a rule of thumb, CBC goals are more impactful when they connect with as many components of the system as possible, including the social and ecological, but economic and spiritual dimensions (Toledo, 2001; Mahajan et al., 2021). For instance, ecotourism is often promoted for both conservation and economic purposes (Stronza and Gordillo, 2008), but may carry additional outcomes, ranging from improved self-confidence, changing division of labor, and the strengthening of community capacity and institutions (Stronza et al., 2019). Despite these outcomes, other components of the system, such as class inequalities, may not shift. This suggests that a positive change to a system may not equally reverberate across all of its components. However, the likelihood of broader social and environmental progress through conservation is increased through holistic framing (Stronza et al., 2019). Therefore, practitioners, community-based partners, and ecosystems alike may most likely benefit when CBC is structured on a holistic framework—a framing that also improves the potential to recognize and respond to the wide-ranging impacts of CBC efforts.

Conclusions

Community-based conservation is a conservation paradigm that offers opportunities for genuine partnership, community empowerment, and myriad forms of disciplinary collaboration focused on actionable change. There is reason to hope that genuine community-focused collaboration and partnership will enable stewardship and resilience. In the face of great uncertainty in the Anthropocene, the Earth needs more and better stewards if we are to see ourselves into the next era. With the five good practices we offer, we aspire to greater stewardship through CBC. In building from the strengths of CBC and adapting them to new research in a broad range of fields, conservationists can meet the challenges presented in the 21st century.

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