

## **CROSS CULTURAL COMMUNICATION: COMMUNITIES & CONSERVATION**

### **PART 1. ENHANCE AWARENESS**

#### **MODULE 3 SYNTHESIS BACKGROUND. Unfamiliar Cultural Lenses**

##### **1. Purpose**

The goal of this module is to enhance awareness of unfamiliar perspectives, which are often associated with tension that defines the cultural boundaries between social groups. By using a resiliency technique, conservation professionals can learn to better understand the beliefs of others. Speaking from the perspective of another can improve cross-cultural communication.

##### **2. Identify cultural boundaries**

The most blatant cultural boundaries are apparent when one group defines their own sense of group identity as contrary to any other point of view. For example, a comment “either you are with us or you are against us” communicates active boundary maintenance. In the role of a conservation professional, a stakeholder speaking from a green perspective might declare that if you do not believe conservation is a moral imperative, you are not “one of us”. This may come as a shock when the conservation agency you represent has asked you to find a compromise between developers and environmentalists within a community.

Your feeling that “this person does not understand my role” can be a clue that you need to examine the tacit, or underlying beliefs of the stakeholders with whom you work. These beliefs may be tacit, in the sense that insiders to the group understand each other’s beliefs based on shared experiences. Insiders may never have discussed their beliefs explicitly. Lacking their shared experience, you may not understand their perspective on an issue. However, by seeking to recognize the tacit beliefs, and by making the beliefs explicit, you may learn to better understand unfamiliar cultural lenses.

Resiliency training is one of the transferable skills available for conservation professionals working across cultural boundaries. It is a way of dredging up the implicit beliefs, making them explicit so that you can examine whether your beliefs may or may not match those of the person with whom you are talking.

What do we mean by resiliency training for conservation professionals? In the general sense, resiliency training helps a person understand how beliefs moderate an emotional response to certain trigger events that we experience in our lives. By examining the accuracy of our underlying beliefs, we may discover other perspectives that shield us from shock the next time a similar event occurs.

For example, you and your colleague might come out of a stakeholder meeting with distinctly different feelings. You might feel frustrated and angry about how the meeting went. Your colleague might feel connected with the stakeholders and satisfied with the dialogue.

Resiliency training is one way of helping you to examine how you and your colleague might hold different tacit beliefs. With the analogy we have been exploring of a “cultural lens”, it might not be accurate to assume that you and your colleague share a similar cultural lens. If you want to learn from the experience, you may choose to examine how the lens of your colleague is different from your own. That would be an example of resiliency skills because your decision will help you bounce back from the shock of frustration and become a more effective communicator.

Resiliency training has been applied in a variety of contexts. All share the understanding that resiliency means the ability to return to normal after a shock, in other words to bounce back after a challenge has pushed us beyond the edge of our comfort zones. This may be applied to individuals, groups or communities. Resiliency in Action is a website that explores this full range of applications, mostly in reference to communities in response to a disaster such as an earthquake or hurricane (<http://www.resiliency.com/>).

The Nature Conservancy has applied this concept in the context of ecological communities. Their Reef Resilience website examines how coral reefs respond to bleaching events (<http://www.reefresilience.org>)

The concept of resilience has been applied to emotional coping styles. At the Penn Resiliency Program the application is for reducing risk of adolescent depression (<http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/prpsum.htm>). The U.S. Army applies resiliency training in the context of post-traumatic stress disorder (<http://www.behavioralhealth.army.mil/prt/index.html>).

### 3. Interfaces between lenses

Lets explore further how this concept might be applied to better understanding cross-cultural communication in the context of conservation communities. An analogy for the boundaries between cultural groups, might be the interfaces between cultural lenses. Its hard to pinpoint these boundaries. However, you know when you have crossed a boundary when you get that feeling that someone doesn’t quite understand what was being communicated. Lets start with what we might predict when a stakeholder wearing a rosy lens meets someone wearing an amber lens.

We refer here to the research published by Packard et al. (in review). The complexities inherent in diverse perspectives may be unpacked by examining item-variables with high weights on more than one component. We labeled those with positive weights as agreements (Table 1) and those with both positive and negative weights as disagreements (Table 2).

**Table 1.** Agreements were item-variables that loaded both high and positive on more than one component. A dash indicates a loading less than 0.30.

Item-variable: statement in questionnaire	Component		
	C1	C2	C3
<u>High loadings on Components 1 and 2</u>			
The purpose of conserving some lands is to provide income from food, fiber, and timber production.	0.38	0.41	--
<u>High loadings on Components 1 and 3</u>			
Land conservation is about using resources wisely so that they will be available to meet the varying future needs of diverse landowners and communities.	0.62	--	0.38
It is important to conserve lands for recreation.	0.57	--	0.32
Land conservation could be integrated into growth and development if political, social, and economic systems worked the way they were supposed to.	0.42	--	0.59
Successful land conservation efforts start with building trust and good working relationships among stakeholder groups.	0.50	--	0.51
Land conservation should be integrated into growth and development.	0.45	--	0.53
<u>High loadings on Components 2 and 3</u>			
Land is a source of income in times of family crisis.	-	0.47	0.36
Land conservation efforts should prioritize activities that help people make a living off of the land.	--	0.53	0.36
Conservation is managing land for its highest and best use and that can change according to economic and social needs.	--	0.44	0.56

The Amber (C3) perspective showed more agreements with the Green (C1) perspective than it did with the Rosy (C2) perspective (Table 1). The Green (C1) and Rosy (C2) perspectives shared only one agreement: "The purpose of conserving some lands is to provide income from food, fiber, and timber production".

Ten disagreements explained the distance between the Green (C1) and Rosy (C2) perspectives (Table 2). One statement accounted for agreement between Rosy (C2) and Amber (C3) in contrast to Green (C1): "Conservation at all costs is unreasonable. Some costs cannot be tolerated".

**Table 2.** Disagreements were statements that loaded high on two components with a negative sign for at least one. A dash indicates a loading less than 0.30.

Item-variable: statement in questionnaire	Component		
	C1	C2	C3

<u>Disagree/Agree/Agree</u>			
Conservation at all costs is unreasonable. Some costs cannot be tolerated.	<b>-0.36</b>	0.44	0.36
<u>Agree/Disagree</u>			
Some land needs to be conserved where nature can be allowed to flourish with little or no contact from humans.	0.61	<b>-0.42</b>	--
Land conservation efforts should prioritize activities that conserve ecologically unique or special areas.	0.63	<b>-0.36</b>	--
Land is finite and damage to it can be irreversible, therefore we must protect it from over-use and abuse.	0.65	<b>-0.32</b>	--
We do not have the right to negatively impact other species.	0.48	<b>-0.39</b>	--
Preserving environmental resources is more important than preserving working lands (i.e., lands used to produce grain, livestock, timber, etc.).	0.34	<b>-0.53</b>	--
<u>Disagree/Agree</u>			
Humans are the dominant species and meeting our needs should be a priority.	<b>-0.38</b>	0.64	--
Land use decisions should be primarily governed by landowners.	<b>-0.35</b>	0.72	--
Land conservation limits land values.	<b>-0.38</b>	0.47	--
Land conservation may limit a landowner's ability to use his/her land in a way that is necessary to meet his/her short- and long-term needs.	<b>-0.33</b>	0.35	--

Our research suggested that there are several beliefs likely to be shared between a person wearing an amber lens and one wearing a rosy lens. Indeed, we could not identify any distinctive beliefs where they would be likely to disagree.

So let's apply resiliency analysis to a hypothetical event where Pat refuses to place a conservation easement on her land that lies adjacent to a National Park. A person speaking from the perspective of a rosy lens would be likely to feel a sense of understanding with a person speaking from the perspective of an amber lens. Both are likely to share the belief that land is a source of income in times of family crisis. They likely would understand why Pat would not want to give up "her nest egg", the family land, if she has little money in the bank and no health insurance.

Now let's explore how someone speaking from an amber perspective might respond to someone speaking from a green perspective. These two people might agree that it is a good idea to include diverse stakeholders at the table when a community is making a decision about land conservation. However, they would be likely to disagree and feel frustrated if the topic of discussion turned to whether conservation at all costs is reasonable. Speaking from the green

perspective, society should pay the cost if a wetland is filled, let's say by a highway project. However, from the amber perspective, the benefits of the same highway might be justified in terms of the larger social good even though there would be costs in terms of wetland destruction.

Let's apply resiliency analysis to this hypothetical situation of Pat refusing the option of a land conservation easement. Imagine that you overheard Lyn and Kim talking about this event and they expressed feelings of frustration with each other, a total lack of understanding why they disagree. Examining their beliefs, you might find that Lyn believes conservation at all costs is unreasonable. However, Kim believes that the ends justify the means, in this case the costs that might be experienced by Pat's family would be reasonable considering the greater benefits to society in terms of buffering impacts on biodiversity within the national park. The trigger event is the same. The feeling of frustration might be a clue to you that the tacit beliefs differed between Lyn and Kim.

Let's take this the next step and examine the interface between someone speaking from the green perspective and someone speaking from the rosy perspective. These two people might agree that land conservation includes sustainable agricultural and forestry practices that provide income for landowners. However, we would not be surprised if they disagreed on several issues such as:

- Some land needs to be conserved where nature can be allowed to flourish with little or no contact from humans.
- Land use decisions should be primarily governed by landowners.
- Humans are the dominant species and meeting our needs should be a priority.

Applying resiliency analysis to the interface between the green and rosy perspectives, might look like this. You would probably predict that Kim and Chris likely would feel frustrated in talking about their perspectives on Pat's refusal to take a conservation easement. Tracing back their differences in tacit beliefs, you might find some fundamental differences in their beliefs. For example, Chris might believe that landowners should be solely responsible for decisions on their own property. Kim might believe that the National Park Service has a responsibility to dialogue with the private landowners adjacent to the parks lands that they are mandated to protect. Again, the same event triggered a feeling of miscommunication between Kim and Chris. As a conservation professional, you can be better understood this emotional response by examining differences in the beliefs influencing how Kim and Chris interpret the same event. You may be placed in situations where it is not a matter of deciding which set of beliefs is right or wrong. However, it would be inaccurate to assume Kim and Chris have the same beliefs.

#### **4. Tacit understanding within a group**

Some conservation professionals who are very effective communicators, do not try to change the beliefs of the stakeholders with whom they work. Instead, they are very aware of the tacit understanding that members within a group are likely to share. Consider the power of speaking

from the same perspective once you have identified the beliefs of a group with whom you want to communicate. For example, the following snapshots might help you understand the perspective of stakeholders with viewpoints different from your own, based on the work of Packard et al. (in review).

*Green Component 1: Land conservation is important and a moral imperative because it maintains the quality of life (in terms of clean air and water, continuity in local communities, landowner equity, open spaces, a sense of place, rural identity, native species in healthy ecosystems) by protecting esthetically valuable sites from irreversible damage.*

Respondents who agreed with the statement that "Land conservation is important to maintain quality of life", also were likely to agree that land conservation provides benefits in terms of landowner equity, the character of local rural communities and the environment (clean air and water). Respondents were slightly less likely to agree that land conservation sustains a sense of place, native plants/wildlife, beauty and healthy ecosystems, by prioritizing areas threatened by development.

One value statement weighed high only on this Green Component: "it is a moral imperative to conserve land". Associated with this value were beliefs that (1) land is finite and should be protected from over-use, and (2) local governments are integral to success of land conservation, which can stem unwanted growth. Respondents were likely to believe that development should be limited to designated areas and people should be able to use the land as long as meeting the needs of their livelihood did not adversely affect the environment.

*Rosy Component 2. Land conservation is best accomplished through voluntary actions by landowners who are engaged in profitable production of natural resources (food, fiber, timber), thereby protecting economic assets for their families and communities, now and in the future.*

Respondents who agreed with the statement that "natural resource producers of food, fiber, and timber are the best land conservationists" also agreed that the best way to conserve land was through profitable production of natural resources (Table 1). They viewed the purpose of land conservation in terms of securing a livelihood for communities now and in the future.

They were likely to disagree that protecting environmental resources was more important than protecting working lands, and to agree that land was an economic asset for their families in times of crisis. An associated belief was that more land could be conserved if land protection was not "in perpetuity" and if landowners received fair and adequate compensation for relinquishing development rights. Profitable farming was preferred over purchase and donation of conservation easements.

*Amber Component 3. A balance of humans' and nature's needs should guide land conservation such that it is integrated into community growth, by using adequate planning and appropriate technology to allow communities to meet economic and housing needs through active inclusion of all interested stakeholder groups in the decision making process.*

Respondents who agreed that "Land is a resource to allow communities to grow to meet economic and housing needs" were also likely to agree that with adequate planning and technology, development can be accomplished in ways that are a net positive for the environment (Table 1). They were likely to agree that the balance of human needs and nature's needs should be considered in decisions about wise use of land.

Active stakeholder participation in the decision making process was a theme associated with the Amber Component 3. According to this belief, successful land conservation efforts could not be accomplished without including all interested stakeholder groups.

## **5. Listening for gaps between groups**

Conservation professionals often ask "how do I recognize that my cultural lens differs from other stakeholders with whom I speak"? In communication with someone from a different social group, pay attention to your intuitive feeling that there may be a gap in communication. Some of the clues may be non-verbal, including: silence, averted eyes, a frown or forced smile, crossed arms. You will also learn to recognize verbal flags that signal communication gaps, comments such as "whatever" or "no problem". Depending on your relationship to the stakeholder, verbal cues may even escalate to the assertion that "this is a waste of taxpayer dollars".

### ***a. Cognitive Filters***

Evidence from cognitive anthropology suggests that the diverse perspectives we have referred to here as analogous to a cultural lens, may actually filter the information that is exchanged during a dialogue. This may occur in several ways, including (1) blocking the message such that the listener does not receive the information, (2) distorting the message such that what is heard is different than the intent of the speaker, and/or (3) triggering resistance to the message and antagonism toward the messenger.

### ***b. Ethical Responsibilities***

From an ethical perspective, there are several reasons why conservation professionals have the responsibility to better understand unfamiliar perspectives. For example, the way that a media announcement is worded may unintentionally communicate that certain social groups are welcome and others are not welcome at a stakeholder meeting. Alternatively, all that effort that you put into devising an educational campaign may be wasted if you do not speak from the perspective of the stakeholder group who is causing the problem within a community. From a scientific perspective, it is also important to consider diverse perspectives of stakeholders. If the wording in your cover letter or survey instrument is unfamiliar to your target population, your mail-out survey may end up in the "circular file" of the trashcan. At a larger scale, policy makers need to be concerned that the public support for science may be undermined by public relations disasters where a study is critiqued as being part of an undesirable social agenda of academics.

## 6. Summary

In summary, this training module helps identify tacit beliefs that may underlie emotional triggers at the interfaces between social groups with different cultural lenses. You are encouraged to listen for the tacit gaps in communication when your emotional intuition alerts you to potential differences in beliefs. As a take-home message, the utility of resiliency training can be: use your own emotional triggers with hindsight to identify specific events and tacit beliefs that can help you better understand unfamiliar cultural lenses.

## SOURCES

### Websites

Resiliency Action (<http://www.resiliency.com/>).

Reef Resilience (<http://www.reefresilience.org>)

Penn Resiliency Program (<http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/prpsum.htm>)

U.S. Army (<http://www.behavioralhealth.army.mil/prt/index.html>).

### Publications:

Packard, J.M., Weeks, P. Paolisso, M., and M. Srinivasan. (in review). Use of principal components analysis to assess cultural models of land conservation. *Soc. & Natur. Res.*

## Acknowledgments

This material is based upon research supported by the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, under Award No 2005-35401-16012 to the University of Maryland and Grant No. 0551832 from the National Science Foundation's Science, Ethics and Society Program to Texas A&M University, with subcontracts to Houston Advanced Research Foundation. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation or any other organization acknowledged or referenced herein. We would like to thank all anonymous participants and our willing partners in this project, including: Maryland Center for Agroecology, TX Forest Service, NRC&D Council of SE TX, Texas Forest Landowners Association, Big Thicket Association, and Golden Triangle Sierra Club. We would also like to thank Michael Birt, Nicole Dery, Andres Esparza, R. Shawn Maloney, and Jodi Minon for their invaluable contributions to the research upon which this paper is based.



**AUTHORS:**

Jane M. Packard, Associate Professor, Texas A&M University, Wildlife & Fisheries Sciences  
2258 TAMUS, College Station, TX, USA 77843-2258, 979-845-1465, [jpackard@tamu.edu](mailto:jpackard@tamu.edu)

Mridula Srinivasan, Texas A&M University, Wildlife & Fisheries Sciences, College Station, TX, USA 77843-2258, 979-845-5777, [naitrab@yahoo.com](mailto:naitrab@yahoo.com)

Priscilla Weeks, Environmental Anthropologist, Houston Advanced Research Center, Social and Policy Analysis Group, 4800 Research Forest Drive, The Woodlands, TX, USA 77381, 281-364-6049, [pweeks@harc.edu](mailto:pweeks@harc.edu)

Michael Paolisso, Associate Professor, University of Maryland, Anthropology, 1111 Woods Hall, College Park, MD, USA 20742-7415, 301-405-1433, [mpaolisso@anth.umd.edu](mailto:mpaolisso@anth.umd.edu)