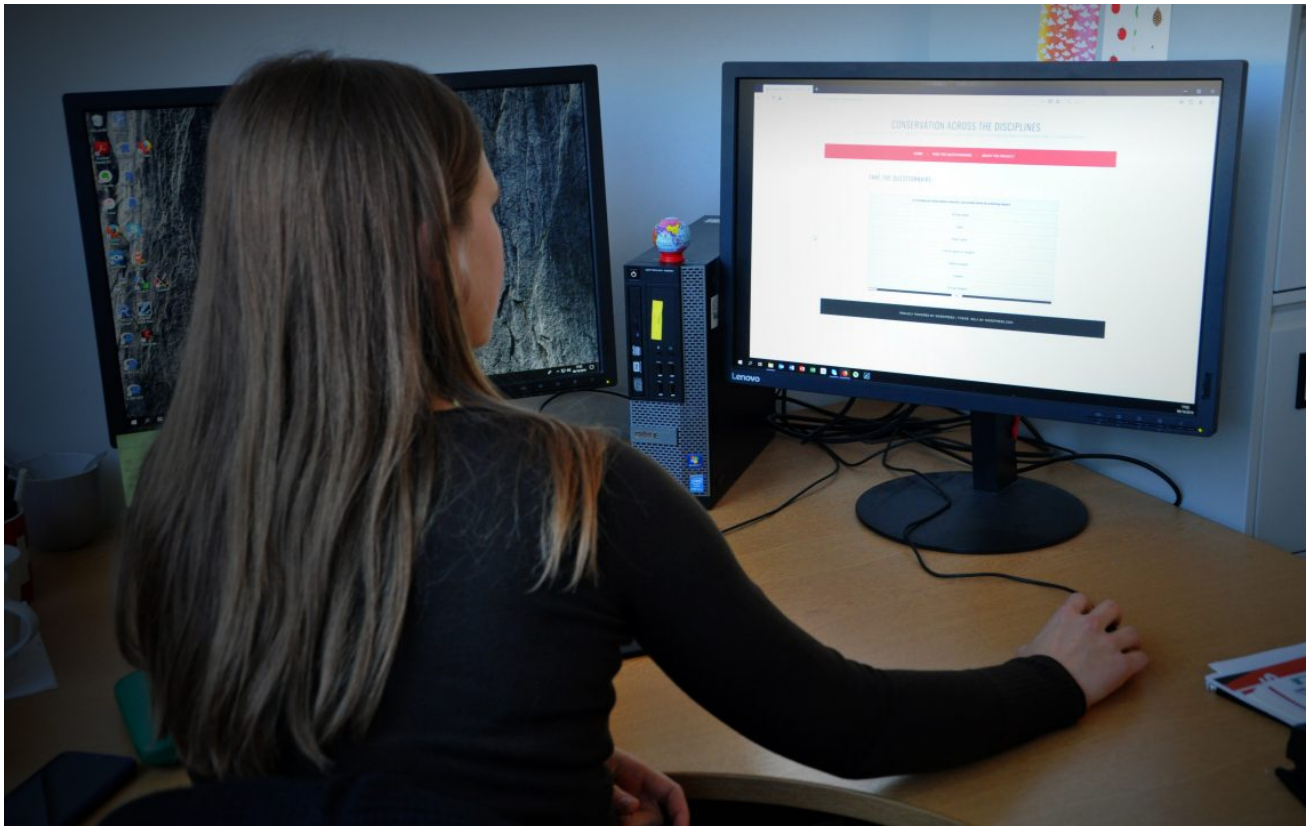
Oryx

When two conservation researchers walk into a conference

By Jasper Montana, 28th October 2019

What is the difference between a conservation social scientist and a conservation natural scientist? This question may sound like the beginning of a bad joke, but it is not. Labels such as these bring to mind a range of assumptions and stereotypes that function as shortcuts and influence how we perceive and interact with others. They also influence how we present and frame ourselves. It transpires that the psychology of conservation research is a lot messier than these two categories suggest—and this is good news for collaboration.

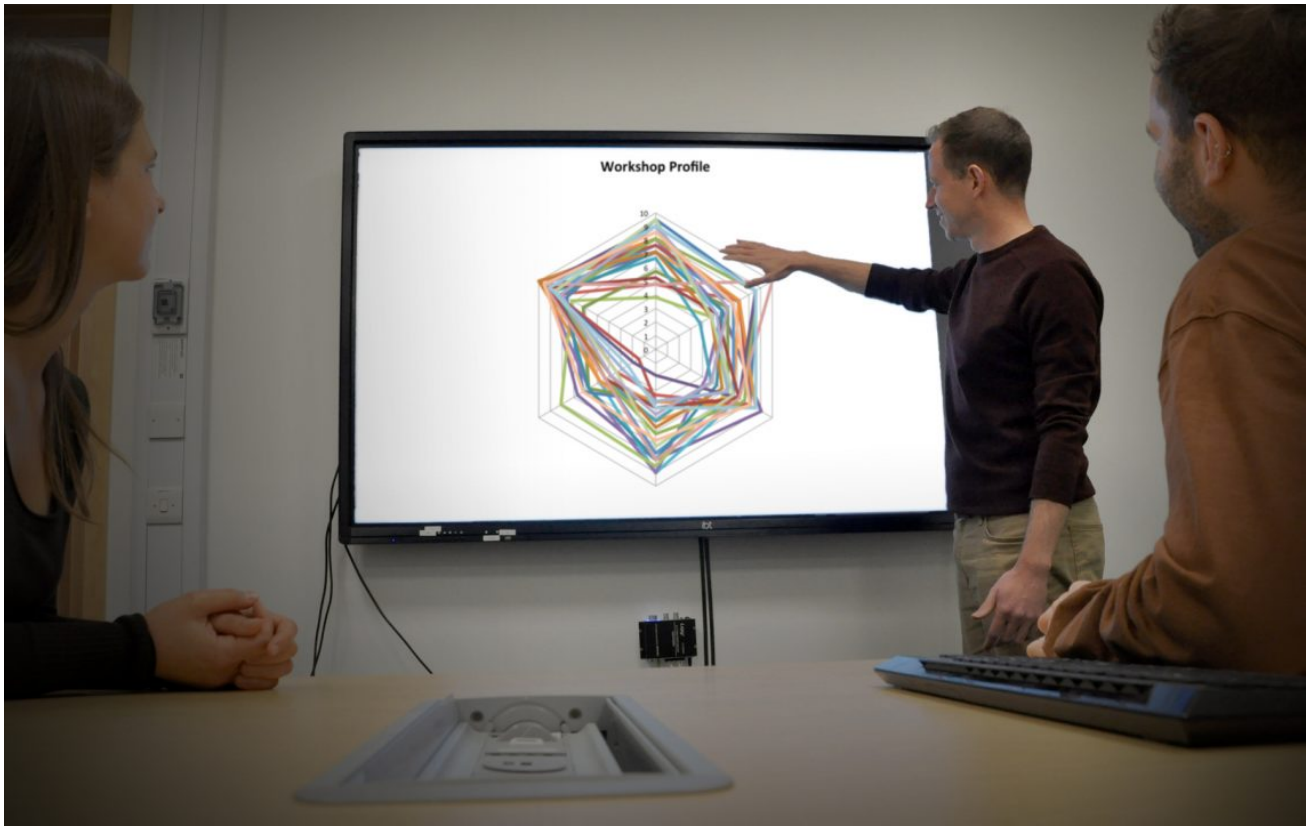
There is a growing interest in who we are as a conservation community, and how understanding ourselves could help us do conservation better. One example is the Future of Conservation initiative, which used an online questionnaire to explore where different people sit in relation to the debate between the so-called traditional and new conservations. Another example is the Toolbox Dialogue Initiative that has developed methods and workshops to foster mutual understanding between participants in transdisciplinary collaborative teams. What both of these initiatives have in common is that they show how established labels and polarized debates are often more complex than they seem. In doing so, they offer a way out of entrenched positions by overcoming perceived tensions that can prevent progress in working with others.



The online questionnaire was completed individually by conservation researchers.

It was from this starting point that we set out in Revealing research preferences in conservation science to examine whether conservation social scientists and conservation natural scientists were really all that different, exploring and questioning the utility and loaded nature of these labels to examine what undercurrents of similarity or disagreement could be usefully revealed rather than overlooked. With the help of a group of early career researchers from the Student Conference on Conservation Science at the University of Cambridge in 2017, we developed and tested a questionnaire that could explore this question. After whittling down a long list of 50 questions using statistical techniques, we produced a questionnaire with 19 questions that revealed six notable characteristics—or research preferences—that differentiated the 204 respondents of the questionnaire. These examined the extent to which each researcher:

- Was motivated or not by conservation outcomes/impacts
- Preferred to pay attention to local specifics or general trends
- Focused on humans or nature
- Recognized nature and society as linked or separate
- Saw reality as something that is personal to individuals or shared across them
- Were inclined to work only with others similar to them or to collaborate with those they disagreed with

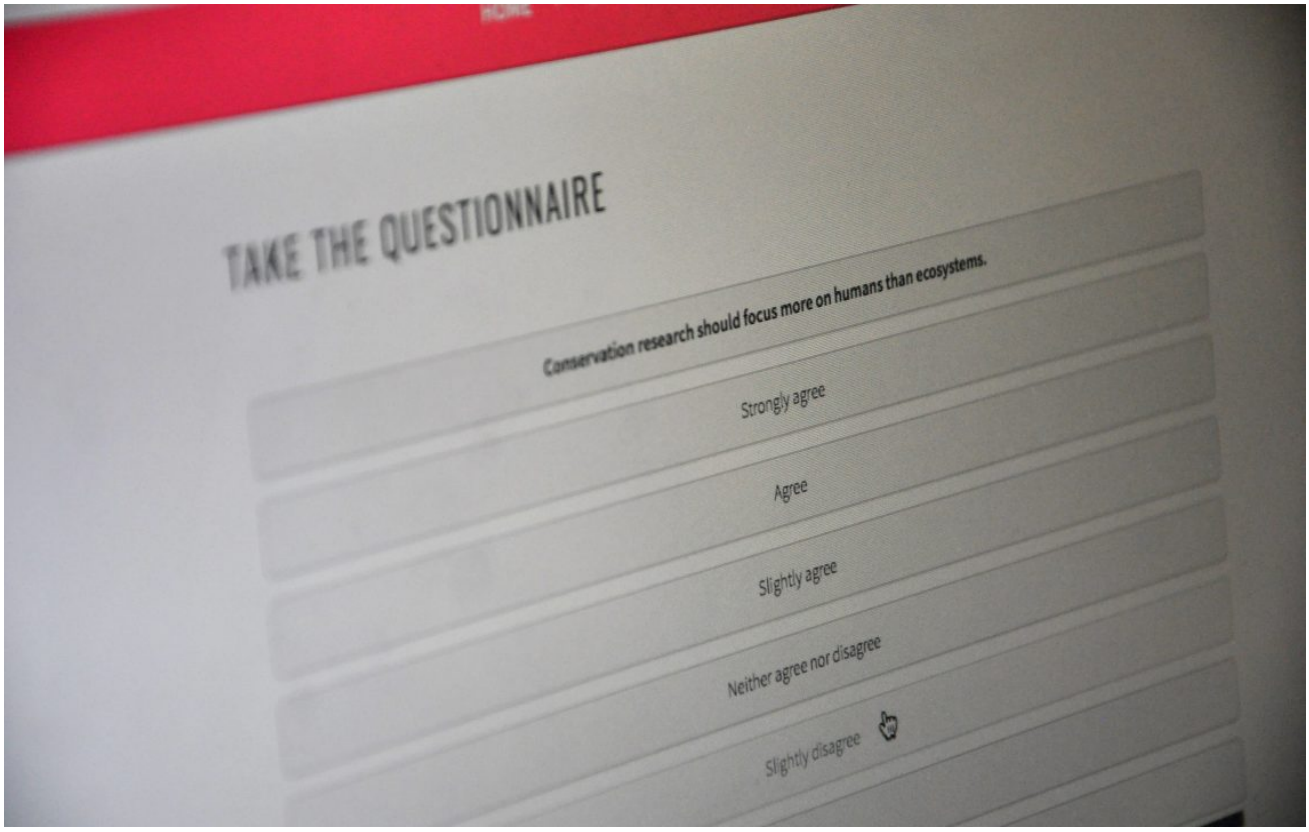


In order to explore research preferences, the online questionnaire posed questions such as “conservation research should focus more on humans than ecosystems?”.

Significantly, these different research preferences were relevant to all those researchers that self-identified as social scientists, natural scientists and those that identified as both social and natural scientists. However, the results of our research suggest that the psychology of conservation research is a lot messier than these categories suggest. While natural scientists in our sample were on average more inclined to focus on nature, see reality as universally shared, and recognize nature and society as separate, these were not defining features of this group. Both social and natural sciences had large within group diversity, meaning that we could not make assumptions about what each of them was like (i.e. how they saw the world and how they did research). We could however ascertain that individual researchers related to the six research preferences in different ways, and that discussing these differences was a possible way forward for facilitating collaboration.

The good news is that tools such as this offer new ways to gain insights about diversity in conservation science. The bad news is that we cannot rely on labels and stereotypes—we instead need to recognise our peers as nuanced and complex. Rather than relying on categories, we argue there is a need to consider and talk more with our peers about what we do and why we do it when we engage in collaborative conservation research. We offer the questionnaire as one starting point (amongst many possible) for these kinds of discussions. We have made the questionnaire available as an online tool for conservation researchers to explore their research preferences. In doing so, we emphasize the need for humility in recognizing that there are no right answers and that the questionnaire only explores a small facet of what it means to do conservation research. With this in mind, next time two conservation researchers walk into a conference perhaps they will have a greater awareness of themselves and how they can relate to the diverse ways of thinking about

and doing conservation research.



The results of the questionnaire could be displayed in a spider diagram and when completed as part of a research team could be collectively discussed in a workshop setting.

All photos: Jasper Montana

The article Revealing research preferences in conservation science is available in *Oryx—The International Journal of Conservation.*

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Jasper Montana is a Research Fellow in the School of Geography and the Environment at the University of Oxford. Jasper’s current research focus is on the structure and function of governance systems for sustainability and conservation. Jasper's research draws from and contributes to a broad range of scholarly traditions, including political ecology, science and technology studies, and the interdisciplinary environmental sciences.