

Patterning Conservation Flows: How Formal and Informal Networks Shape Transnational Conservation Practice

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Abstract

Conservation Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are crucial actors in global conservation governance. They shape resource flows, establish cross-sector and cross-scale networks, and influence conservation discourses and practices. While research on conservation NGOs is growing, less attention has been paid to how conservation NGOs structure their networks. In this article, we interrogate the interpersonal social relationships that underpin the organisational dynamics of conservation NGOs engaged in transnational activities. Drawing on 45 semi-structured interviews with conservation professionals at NGOs based in Cambridge (UK), Bangkok (Thailand), and Vientiane (Lao PDR), we sketch two parallel and interacting dimensions: (a) the bureaucratic and institutional infrastructures that condition conservation flows and actor interactions; and (b) the interpersonal social relationships that pattern conservation flows between distant places and actors. We illustrate how such relationships are important for managing activities, responding to unexpected and unforeseen events, capitalising on funding opportunities by quickly mobilising an existing network, integrating new actors into project activities, enhancing cross-sector dialogues to mainstream biodiversity conservation, and accessing and influencing funders. Social relationships serve a crucial function due to the uncertain conditions in which conservation NGOs operate. Our results point to an important dimension of exclusion in transnational conservation networks.

Keywords: conservation NGOs, transnational conservation, social networks, organisational studies, telecoupling

INTRODUCTION

Conservation NGOs play a constitutive role in the increasingly global practice of biodiversity conservation (Brockington et al. 2018; Redford 2011). They partner with donors, governments, and civil society organisations, and spearhead

the design and implementation of a range of conservation initiatives across the world (da Fonseca 2003; Geldmann et al. 2015; Nuesiri 2018). They connect distant actors via organisational chains that stretch across scales in efforts to reshape human-environment relationships (Heyman 2009; Pieck 2019). This prominence of NGOs in conservation has been attributed to processes of neoliberalisation and a gradual hollowing out of state functions (Castree 2008; Harvey 2007). Often seen as representing civil society and offering a flexibility not available to government bodies (Armsworth et al. 2012; Levine 2002), conservation NGOs have grown in size and influence since the Second World War to occupy dominant positions in global environmental governance (Adams 2017; Brockington et al. 2008; Hutton et al. 2005). International

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organisations like World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and Conservation International have amassed substantial financial, discursive and technical resources and wield considerable clout in global environmental governance (Challender and MacMillan 2019; Corson et al. 2019; Holdgate 1999; Tahkokallio and Nygren 2008). Conservation NGOs have become the largest spenders on conservation (Larsen 2016) and are generally regarded as the most effective arbiters of global conservation ambitions, adopting corporate branding and structures to achieve organisational goals (Holmes 2011; Rodriguez et al. 2007; Sachedina 2010).

A long history of organisational interactions has created intricate networks of actors and flows that stretch across the planet, making biodiversity conservation a global phenomenon (Andonova and Mitchell 2010; Armitage et al. 2012; Boillat et al. 2018; Corson et al. 2019; Eakin et al. 2014). Within these networks, the organisational and social context in which conservation professionals design, plan, implement, monitor, produce feedback, and obtain funding profoundly shape how conservation interventions are rationalised and materialise in organisational practice. In other words, the sectoral conditions of conservation NGOs (Brockington and Scholfield 2010a,b), and the organisational chains in which they are embedded (Heyman 2009; Wahlén 2014), matter. Although scholars have tended to oversimplify the practices of conservation NGOs (Larsen 2016), these are in fact highly diverse and dynamic entities (Partelow et al. 2020), often consisting of a loosely constituted portfolio of projects, and best thought of as “boundary organisations” that are porous and malleable (Brockington et al. 2018). The practices of conservation NGOs are thus highly contested and diverse. Despite this, we agree with Brockington et al. (2018, 48) that we can treat “conservation NGOs as being part of a larger group of organisations that share sufficiently common interests, goals, passions, personnel, funding sources, methods, meetings, practises and so on” (Brockington et al. 2018, 47) to make them a bounded domain of enquiry.

While there has been an increasing focus on measuring effectiveness and management implications of conservation (Chape et al. 2005; Ferraro 2009; Geldmann et al. 2015; Kapos et al. 2008; Pullin et al. 2004), there is a need for more research on the “organisation of conservation” (MacDonald 2010a 270), including “the surrounding social and political processes constraining or enabling specific forms of action” (Larsen 2016, 38) in order to understand the rationales and relationships that shape conservation policies (Thaler 2021). In this paper, we examine the logics, organisational networks and bureaucratic infrastructure that underpin the transnational practices of conservation NGOs. We illustrate how the social worlds of conservation practitioners embedded in these entities influence day-to-day practices, which has often been overlooked in accounts of transnational biodiversity conservation (Kiik 2019). Conservation NGOs are marked by cultural tensions and conflicting institutional logics, operating under uncertain and dynamic conditions that require continuous navigation by their members (Wahlén 2012; Botetzagias and Koutiva 2014; Scholfield 2013; Wahlén 2014). As a result, “conservation

NGOs are in a constant process of reinventing themselves, redefining mission statements and fine-tuning strategies into new forms of action” (Larsen 2016, 23). It is therefore important to acknowledge the sociological complexity of organisations and individuals that mediate transnational conservation flows and pattern related practices.

After highlighting previous work on the social interconnections that affect conservation, we describe the methodological lens of the study and the approach to interviews. We then present the results, detailing the ways in which informal social relationships shape organisational practices. We demonstrate how cultivating social connections are crucial for managing the dynamic and uncertain environments in which conservation NGOs operate, whether in responding to interpersonal conflicts in a different geographical context or quickly mobilising a network to respond to a funding opportunity. In addition, we show that social networks operate as extensions of trust that provide an interpersonal basis for engaging new actors and activities and underpin cross-sectoral dialogues for mainstreaming biodiversity conservation. This is followed by a discussion of the implications for conservation and the value of telecoupling as a methodological lens to make sense of complex organisational interconnections that drive land-use change and shape environmental governance.

Social Connections in Transnational Conservation

Though global environmentalism is often misconstrued as a monolithic, unidirectional process, anthropological research has shown that related flows are multidirectional and that interactions occur through contested processes involving a broad range of actors working towards multiple finalities (Lowe 2006; Vivanco 2006; West 2006). Transnational conservation can be distinguished from national environmental governance by State entities as the former involves actor networks that proactively link to global discourses and institutional mechanisms established via bilateral and multilateral processes (Brosius and Hitchner 2010; Heyman 2009; Persson and Mertz 2019). Fostering networks across national boundaries, scales and sectors has become part and parcel of the organisational practice of conservation (Bottema and Bush 2012; Holmes 2011, 2012; MacDonald 2010b; Tedesco 2015), involving what Hathaway (2013) calls “transnational work” in building connections through social practices and a growing reliance on information communication technology to access informational flows and manage relationships at a distance (Wahlén, 2013). Strategic positioning in such networks has become embedded in the strategies of large conservation organisations and is increasingly shaping organisational practices, including for instance relocating offices near headquarters of multilateral donors and government agencies (Anyango-van Zwieten et al. 2019).

In-depth examinations have shown how conservation NGOs remain adaptive to changing external pressures by fostering relationships with various organisational actors (Vivanco 2006). Sachedina (2010) describes how the

African Wildlife Foundation fostered relationships with bilateral donors and, later the Central Government when different organisational aims were pursued, at the expense of relationships with local communities and field staff. In addition, intermediary organisations play an important role in tightening the informal social networks and formal institutional relationships between actors across levels. In one case, the continuous interactions by the director of a national NGO with contacts in community-based organisations and supporting international organisations were critical in fostering such relationships (Schröter et al. 2018).

Much of the research on social networks in transnational conservation has focused on intergovernmental processes and elite networks (Büscher 2014; Campbell et al. 2014; Corson et al. 2014). This has highlighted how international conservation NGOs strategically foster connections in government agencies to place issues of organisational interest on intergovernmental agendas (Challender and MacMillan 2019). Moreover, they actively cultivate relationships with business elites and philanthropists to access funding, consequently helping to spread the adoption of corporate practices (Büscher et al. 2012; Holmes 2011, 2012). This research has also demonstrated how market-based approaches are circulated within transnational epistemic communities (Blanchard et al. 2016; Dempsey 2016). In addition, work on global conservation events examining shifts in dominant conservation approaches has documented how the rise of market-based approaches, institutional processes for setting global targets, and advancing area-based measures are reinforced through informal interactions at global events and via relationships that persist across events (Corson et al. 2019; MacDonald 2010a).

Much of the work on social connections at local scales is tangential to anthropological studies of conservation interventions in the Global South. These highlight how often unexpected and spontaneous interpersonal relationships and experiences can create path dependencies for the evolution of conservation programmes in particular locales. For instance, the creation of the Crater Mountain Wildlife Management Area in Papua New Guinea originated largely because of one scientist's fascination for birds of paradise (West 2006). In addition, concerns of North American scientists and residents in Monteverde, Costa Rica led to the establishment of an organisation whose members utilised their personal connections to launch a successful fundraising campaign to purchase forestland, setting the scene for future fundraising and shaping the organisation's approach (Vivanco 2006). This scholarship also highlights the dynamic interchange between employees in state, civil society and NGOs, whose movements may lead to strengthening or weakening of organisational ties and the exchange and exclusion of specific ideas (Haenn 2016; Holmes 2011; Scholfield 2013).

However, less attention has been given to the views and practices of mid- and lower-level professionals embedded in conservation NGOs (Kiik 2019; Sandbrook et al. 2019), with a few important exceptions. Scholfield's (2013) thesis on mountain gorilla conservation in Rwanda and the Democratic

Republic of Congo lays a foundation for examining how the (lack of) social connections influence the circulation of ideas on conservation between actors at different levels. The thesis presents examples of how interpersonal relationships can lead to the exclusion or disconnection of some groups, particularly local field staff and communities (Sachedina 2010). Similarly, Wahlén (2013) investigates how organisational processes shape individual behaviours, focusing on organisational culture around demonstrating success and competing institutional logics between different levels of the organisation. The primary concern of this scholarship is how conservation manifests in the sites of intervention, providing a vital bottom-up perspective. However, this misses an important mid-way perspective that attends to the social connections underpinning transnational organisational practices.

METHODS

The research applies a network perspective by focusing on what actors are doing and why (Bodin and Crona 2009). This includes attending to the informal dimensions of organisational actions through qualitative analysis of actor perceptions and detailed accounts of organisational experiences (Hauck et al. 2015), which is useful when investigating transnational policy networks (Ahrens 2018). Semi-structured interviews provide insights on organisational logics and linkages that lead to specific interventions and how relationships across organisations are managed (Albrecht 2018; Larner and Laurie 2010). Such an approach corresponds with an organisational ethnography for "revealing how institutions, discourses, and policy processes are produced and translated through bureaucracies and organisational cultures" to develop insight into the "cultural infrastructures of transnational power and uneven spatialities of global environmental governance" (Thaler 2021, 129).

Telecoupling as a heuristic lens shaped the methodological approach. Telecoupling emerged to account for the spatial decoupling of land-use change from its causes (Friis et al. 2016). Based on the recognition that "the noneconomic and nonmaterial flows and linkages may be more instrumental in the telecoupled outcomes and feedbacks", examining the distal mechanisms that generate change is necessary to understand land-use change, including the "potentially aspatial social networks, institutions, and governance structures" (Eakin et al. 2014, 142). This has led to calls for greater attention to the actor- and flow-based linkages that drive environmental governance (Gasparri and de Waroux 2015; Munroe et al. 2019; Oberlack et al. 2018). We conceptualised the interconnections involved in transnational conservation actions as flows between distant sending and receiving systems mediated by sets of actor networks (Munroe et al. 2019). We developed the interview guide to gain in-depth accounts of experiences in transnational conservation activities (see supplementary material) and conducted 45 in-depth interviews with programme managers and conservation practitioners at international and national NGOs based in Vientiane, Laos (nine in total), Bangkok, Thailand (10) and

Cambridge, UK (26). We asked for details on how specific projects emerged, how partners and funders were integrated, what feedback processes exist, and important connections and forums. Participants thus provided narrative descriptions of personal experiences in organisational practices. We analysed the transcripts and interview notes and coded emergent themes using NVIVO 12, synthesising experiences across organisational and national contexts. Social networks emerged as important for patterning activities, to which we developed several sub-codes.

We sought a broad representation of organisations with projects and networks that have a transnational dimension in terms of their organisational practices and missions. The three cities serve as examples of centres with a different position in transnational conservation networks: Vientiane reflecting mainly implementation of activities with few resources; Bangkok hosting regional offices and controlling more resources for conservation; and Cambridge hosting EU headquarters with the most resources while being spatially disconnected from the sites of many of their activities. In Vientiane, these include World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the Lao Biodiversity Association, and the Lao Wildlife Conservation. In Bangkok, we interviewed representatives from the IUCN national and regional offices, Birdlife Conservation Society of Thailand (BCST), Freeland, Raks Thai, the Regional Community Forestry Training Center (RECOFTFC), and the Thai Environment Institute. In Cambridge, finally, we interviewed the global secretariat of BirdLife International, Fauna and Flora International, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), the World Conservation Monitoring Centre (WCMC), WCS, and UN Environment.

These are either specifically conservation NGOs or they host projects aiming to conserve biodiversity and are mainly or entirely project funded. The larger international organisations employ over 200 people, partner with organisations in more than 100 countries and maintain annual operational budgets of \$40-50 million (Blanchard et al. 2016), while the smaller organisations might have a handful of employees and a highly intermittent budget size. They have vastly different remits in transnational conservation as well as organisational structures, where for instance WCMC focuses on global policymaking while BirdLife International is a membership-based organisation. This breadth was important to get a sense of how practices are structured in vastly different organisational and national contexts. Although we sought to include all the major international organisations, the diversity of conservation NGOs across the three sites means that several key organisations are missing. However, the sample allowed us to gain insight into the qualitative mechanisms that help to structure transnational conservation.

All interviews were conducted in English by the first author in the participants' organisation, lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. The interview location was decided partly for the convenience of the participant, always in a meeting room or separate from colleagues, which did not appear to influence the

interview since the discussion topics centred on organisational practices. The first author gained ethical approval from the faculty ethics committee, and research in Laos and Thailand underwent prior approval through partner universities. We sought written informed consent prior to all interviews, explaining the research purpose, participant selection process, the participant's role, and an option to withdraw at any time. We provided assurances of individual anonymity and explained how the data would be handled. Most interviews were recorded and transcribed, and otherwise a detailed protocol was taken. Interview data was complemented by analysis of organisational documents and information found on websites. The first author undertook empirical work in Cambridge during a six-week stay at WCMC in May-June 2019 as part of their PhD research. Interviews in Vientiane took place during a visit in July 2019 and in Bangkok in February 2020.

RESULTS

Organisational Structures in Transnational Conservation

Through in-depth accounts of individual and organisational experiences, participants sketched the institutional and bureaucratic infrastructure that enabled conservation-related flows between distant actors. Descriptions of the organisational structures and interactions with various actors and institutions revealed a considerable diversity in organisational forms and logics (Figure 1). Though the illustrations do not correspond exactly to a single organisation, "ideal types" serve as a heuristic to conceptualise the relationships between individuals within the organisational networks of transnational conservation and were derived from descriptions by participants. Participants often highlighted the rationale of their organisational structure compared to others in terms of organisational efficiency, durability, and relationship-building.

The cross-scale structure of a particular organisation has important implications for how transnational conservation actions are managed. Conservation NGOs with a structure resembling (a) maintain relationships differently from NGOs resembling (b), for instance. The former emphasises partnerships between international/regional headquarters and national NGOs without necessarily maintaining an organisational presence in the country or the spaces where interventions are implemented. The latter on the other hand will maintain loose links with international offices/secretariats while emphasising an organisational presence in the subnational and local spaces of intervention. Type (d) organisations, meanwhile, operate on a membership basis and transnational links are fostered for the purpose of specific organisational functions such as developing funding proposals. This diversity of organisational structures has critical importance for nuancing how conservation practitioners build inter-organisational relationships. Participants characterise transnational conservation actions as a social process relying on sustained interpersonal interactions across scales, sectors,

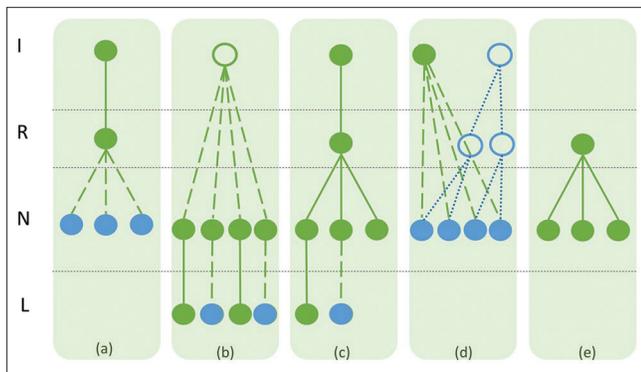


Figure 1

Heuristic typology of formal vertical networks of international conservation organisations. Connections are characterised at four levels (I: international; R: regional; N: national; L: local). Solid dots: offices of organisations (green: of the NGO; blue: of partner organisations). Circles: secretariat or councils (green: of the NGO; blue: of partner organisations). Solid line: direct reporting; Dashed line: partnering/electing. (a) focus on capacity building and context-specific local-scale projects with partners; (b) separate legal entities in countries with links to an HQ, for instance; (c) emphasise programme implementation across scales and policy work; (d) emphasise democratic partnerships with national partners; and (e) regional organisation with national offices

and sites. In the following sections we demonstrate how interpersonal social relationships underlie the bureaucratic machinery of transnational conservation.

Interpersonal social relationships in transnational conservation

The emergence of new transnational conservation activities

Interpersonal social relationships are seen as decisive in managing existing and creating new project activities and collaborations, a common pattern across organisational and national contexts as well as at primary scales of operations. Practitioners characterise their work as an “expanding network in practice”, utilising social contacts to expand into new sectors, domains of work, and geographical areas. This often occurred via contacts from previous activities or personal networks within the organisation and was described as an organic process taking place through social events and various media. The consortium for one multi-regional project, for instance, was constructed through “networks upon networks”, whereby the initiator integrated partners from prior experiences who integrated further contacts. Although participants characterised setting up transnational actions as a balancing act between constraints, funder interests and organisational capacities, social relationships were considered as extensions of trust in these networks.

Another prominent channel is through affiliation with an institutional network. One illustrative example is when the BirdLife Asia regional office contacted the Thai BirdLife partner to link them with a Japanese multinational corporation interested in funding spoon-billed sandpiper conservation. Without access to this network, the project would not have

materialised. The Thai NGO has since tried to position itself within business networks to access similar opportunities, though with limited success due to the challenges in accessing corporate boardrooms. However, one interviewee considers it more feasible to collaborate with Thai corporations as opposed to foreign corporations due to the challenges of accessing the right social networks. In addition, IUCN membership provides access to an important social network in Bangkok. Members hold regular informal meetings to share opportunities and mobilise resources to capitalise on funding opportunities. In Vientiane, meanwhile, strict government regulations for the civil society sector and NGO registration means that there are relatively few conservation NGOs. This provides space for each to carve out a niche in transnational conservation networks, where for instance IUCN claims to focus more on policy processes, WWF on implementation of interventions, and WCS on strengthening relationships with the government and targeting efforts in the same landscapes where they have maintained a presence for many years.

This strategic inter-organisational positioning was a common pattern across contexts. Conservation NGOs fit into transnational conservation networks by maintaining multiple projects that link to a range of donors and partners, often on an intermittent basis. In these networks, national NGOs in Thailand and Laos actively market their role as mediators of transnational conservation ambitions, government agencies, and local communities when networking with (potential) international partners. Overall, however, for Thai and especially Lao national NGOs, there is a tendency for new project activities to emerge from being contacted by external organisations, sometimes unexpectedly, whereas participants in Cambridge actively seek new contacts to expand existing portfolios of activities through strategic, opportunistic positioning. This has important implications for organisational practices around accessing social networks.

An important space for consolidating such ties are meetings and events. Accessing these allows NGOs to strategically position themselves around opportunities for new activities, even in formal events and processes tied to multilateral environmental agreements. Referring to such meetings, lacking access makes you “one step removed” from the decision-making process and opportunities to access new networks, according to one programme manager. The director of a Thai NGO stressed that she would often participate in national and regional events exclusively for such opportunities, despite the costs involved. In general, however, Thai and Lao participants did not describe international events as important mechanisms for expanding activities and discussed much fewer contacts with other organisations, signalling that access is not shared equally. For instance, a Lao government representative involved in the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), a multilateral environmental agreement, stressed that participation in international meetings has never led to any new project activities. Meanwhile, Cambridge-based NGOs actively promote participation in such events and meetings for the potential networking opportunities involved. This

suggests that active networking must not only be integrated into organisational practice; access and power dynamics at such events also matter.

Embedded in organisational linkages are thus social relationships that constrain the integration of actor networks. Prior experiences create networked legacies in that they make actions with certain actor combinations more feasible than others. We found a strong tendency for conservation professionals to retain links across organisational and geographic contexts throughout their career and develop work according to those links. For instance, a programme manager in Cambridge who had worked in Tanzania has been continuously integrating contacts into subsequent project activities. Several other participants, especially in Cambridge, provided examples of project activities that emerged via movement of employees across organisations in different countries. Part of the driving logic is capitalising on emergent funding opportunities within narrow time frames since building on existing networks is more resource-effective than crafting new ones. The greater international mobility of employees in Cambridge meant that such transnational ties were much stronger at these organisations compared to Thailand and Laos.

Conversely, negative or discontinued interpersonal relationships can exclude certain actor combinations or lead to a break-down of project activities. For instance, a programme manager described how their key contact in a Sub-Saharan African country “has some difficult relationships with certain NGOs [that] are therefore not well represented in the project portfolio that he then delivered to us, and it may well be that the project can be strengthened by bringing them on board”. In this case, the programme manager had to balance the value of fostering social ties with the contact with the risk of excluding key organisations. In another example, contacts with potential partners were lost because a CBD focal point changed position, suggesting that social connections even underpin relationships and responsibilities of formal positions within institutional networks such as the CBD focal points. Moreover, the director of a Thai NGO highlighted that they actively work to avoid interpersonal conflicts with project partners to maintain access to diverse organisational networks, recognising the importance of relationship-building, albeit not always with success. However, the examples provided suggest that these patterns reinforce pre-existing organisational networks in ways that may hamper effectiveness of transnational conservation actions.

Adapting to dynamic circumstances

Social relationships provide access to the information flows considered crucial to adapt to shifting socio-political conditions. Participants mentioned many types of events that required continuous navigation, including complications arising because of political crises, corruption, and government blacklisting of partners because of the current political climate. Other events include government restructuring of the environment sector and limited inter-ministerial communications that could lead to sudden changes, for instance in national economic directives by the government.

The logic of maintaining a continuous organisational presence to build social relationships and adapt to unforeseen events is built into transnational programme management, but this depends on the structure of the organisation (Figure 1). One regional programme manager reflecting a type (a) organisation emphasised that,

“You can’t do it completely at a distance [...] You can provide technical inputs to something happening anyway, but when things get complex you need to be there yourself [...] So much depends on being able to talk to people, phone them up and knock on their door.”

The participant emphasised the importance of having a contact person who can transmit relevant information to the headquarters in a timely manner. Thai and Lao NGOs with limited resources to employ staff on a permanent basis are disadvantaged in this respect as they tend to rely on volunteers and short-term contracts with relatively low salaries leading to a high staff turnover. When an unexpected event occurs, they are often not able to respond effectively as they may lack contacts within the government, although several participants considered cultivation of social relationships with government staff an important part of organisational practice for this purpose.

Engagements with non-environmental actors

We distinguished between different logics of connecting with partners within and outside of conservation networks (Figure 2). The figure is not comprehensive but is intended to illustrate why conservation practitioners prioritise cultivating social relationships at different levels. For instance, practitioners in national offices often seek to influence policy processes of environmental and other development sectors and may engage with private sector actors in the pursuit of funding or changing business practices.

There is a strong recognition that the success of biodiversity conservation hinges on integrating across and influencing actors in other sectors, and we found that this is increasingly shaping organisational practices across the three contexts. Though the vertical integration of networks connecting scales can be strong for a particular organisation, horizontal integration to access non-environmental sectoral actors tends to be weak. Participants provided several examples of recent project activities that aimed at engaging multinational corporations and non-environmental actors, such as the national roads or energy authorities. However, abilities to do so depend on organisational resources and the context of government regulations. In Laos, accessing individuals within non-environmental ministerial bodies is difficult because NGOs are bound by Memorandums of Understanding that specify such interactions must take place via the environmental ministry. Related conversations would instead mainly be engaged opportunistically through social networks and events, again highlighting the importance of ensuring a continuous presence in these spaces.

Social connections also underscored opportunities to influence funders, access funds, and manage relationships

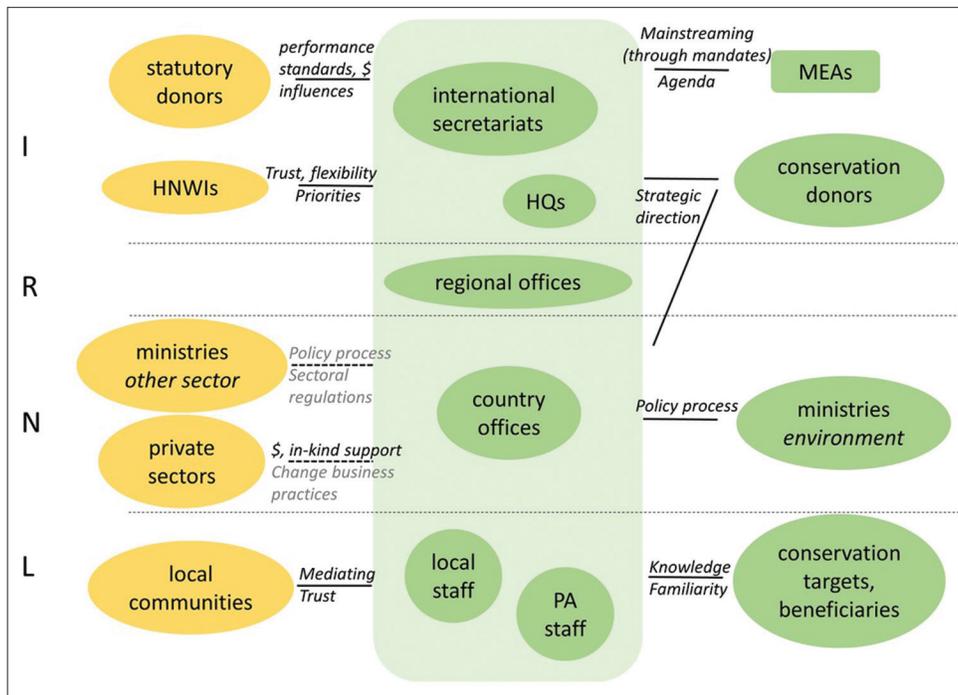


Figure 2

Logic of horizontal interpersonal networks between conservation NGOs (centre shaded area) and other mechanisms (rectangle) or actors (bubbles - green: conservation actors; yellow: actors of other sectors). Solid lines and text in black indicate interactions maintained between the NGO and the entities, and the goals and benefits of such connections; dashed lines and text in grey indicate aspirational benefits for international conservation. HNWI: High Net Worth Individual; MEA: Multilateral Environmental Agreement; PA: Protected Area

with donors. Such considerations influenced the distribution of functions along the organisational chains as well as the geographic dimensions of organisational structures. For instance, a programme manager in Cambridge explained that, “because I work with French government and with industry and with other people in Europe, it’s very useful for me to be somewhere close to Paris”. Several participants highlighted a trade-off between proximity to (mostly Western) funders and activities in implementing countries, and others highlighted the importance of being close to network clusters to maintain social ties with individuals in donor organisations. Hence, the strategic location of offices and organisational functions close to centres of political decision-making commented on by other scholars arguably applies across scales and organisational levels.

The potential for social interaction, however, depends on the nature of the funder. In general, government funds for domestic conservation work, especially in Bangkok and Vientiane, are perceived to be restrictive, cumbersome, and limited, with a high administrative burden. In addition, there is a very limited possibility to influence large statutory donors like the EU. However, ongoing discussions with bilateral donors are important to steer funding directions over the longer term. One INGO employee in Cambridge explained:

“We have someone in our Washington office who deals a lot with US government grant-giving agencies, so those kinds of relationships are really important in terms of discussing options and ideas, and if they trust you and are happy with the work that you produce and the projects you manage

already, then that makes a real difference to whether you get more money”.

Another group of funders are more conservation-specific, such as the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF), which provides a greater level of flexibility. As explained by a regional programme manager, the funders,

“invited representatives from all the NGOs [...] to sit down at a number of sessions and go through the existing strategic directions of the call to see if they’re appropriate or whether they need to be modified at the next call. And obviously being at the table and inputting into that, means that we modify the strategic direction to suit our needs, but also if that isn’t the case, the aim of the discussion, what it has done is got us forefront in the mind of the people doing that. So if they get them from [our organisation], they know who [we are] because they’ve spent time with us, for a week, talking and having a beer in the evening. [...] Quite often if you know the people you can contact them and say ‘we’re thinking of putting this call in, we’re thinking in doing this, is that going to be of interest to the call’, and they would say ‘sort of, but if you did this, this, this and this, then it would be more of interest’. And you can only do that if you know them well enough that you can contact them personally”.

As for private, philanthropic, or charitable foundations such as Arcadia and A.G. Leventis Foundations, some organisations have fundraising staff dedicated to building relationships with alumni, philanthropists, and high net worth individuals.

Certain charitable foundations do not have any formal calls for proposals but rely exclusively on networks and contacts to identify projects to fund. Consequently, “they are based on personal relationships built up over time”. This flexibility and potential durability, compared to statutory donors, helps explain why conservation NGOs invest resources in cultivating relationships. As the examples above suggest, however, experiences with actively influencing funders through informal interactions were dominated by Cambridge-based participants, whereas participants from Thai and Lao NGOs did not discuss this possibility beyond gaining information on possible funding opportunities at events.

DISCUSSION

The organisational infrastructure for advancing transnational biodiversity conservation is embedded in sets of interpersonal social relationships that stretch across distances and pattern organisational practices. While other scholars have shown the importance of social connections in shaping conservation practice on the one hand (Hathaway 2013; Scholfield 2013), and have highlighted the organisational practices involved in transnational conservation on the other (Anyango-van Zwieten et al. 2019; Wahlén, 2013; Brockington and Scholfield 2010a), our results indicate a striking importance of fostering social relationships in the diverse domains that constitute transnational conservation. By drawing on the experiences of conservation professionals in multiple organisational and national contexts, we gained insight into the mechanisms through which such connections shape organisational practices. While this suggests a broader application of observations by Scholfield (2013), we showed how nuances in organisational structures shape social connections by enabling access to certain networks and spaces of social interaction, and the importance of not simplifying organisational chains across scales.

Scaled up, social interconnections help to pattern flows of conservation resources in ways that contribute to uneven conservation support by shaping the spatial-geographic patterning of NGO actions. This helps to explain an important dimension of Brockington and Scholfield’s (2010b) observation of uneven protected area support in Sub-Saharan Africa and the findings of Waldron et al. (2013) and Armsworth et al. (2012) on uneven financing in conservation. Interpersonal social relationships and related power dynamics embedded in organisational structures across countries and scales constitute one dimension of this spatial patterning.

The study of transnational conservation networks has important synergies with the study of international development practice (Kiik 2019; Thaler 2021). The latter focuses on the rationales, logics and networks of aid and how they shape the uneven distribution of development intervention (Bebbington’s 2004), paying particular attention to the role of aid organisations and practitioners (Lewis and Mosse 2006; Mosse 2011; Steiner-Khamsi 2008). Some scholars argue that methodological and thematic insights from

this literature can valuably contribute to an understanding of conservation NGOs and practitioners, especially given the convergence of conservation and development in sustainable development discourse since the 1990s and the rising prominence of NGOs in conservation (Brockington and Scholfield 2010a; Brosius and Hitchner 2010; Kiik 2019). Although we agree that this can help trace the emergence of the geographies of conservation NGOs at multiple scales, there are important distinctions between the two fields. First, conservation as a socio-technical practice is informed by a natural science discipline with an explicit value orientation, focusing on intervention to resolve threats to biodiversity (Lowe, 2006). This is reflected in the scientific training of the vast majority of practitioners in conservation NGOs (Sandbrook et al. 2019). Second, the organisational and discursive legacies of biodiversity conservation are distinct from development and aid in ways that continue to be reflected in dominant organisational approaches (Brosius and Hitchner 2010), for instance in the legal-discursive and institutional processes around multilateral environmental agreements. Third, within conservation there remains a strong discourse that promotes strict human-nature separations and a highly ambiguous relationship with capitalism, macro-economic development, and approaches to resolving tensions between poverty reduction and conserving biodiversity (Büscher and Fletcher 2020). As such, the diversity of values held by conservation professionals is reflected in a diversity of organisational practices, including a growing attention to philanthropic and corporate funding to circumvent state entities, and the use of eco-regional approaches and spatial tools to map and target interventions. A fruitful area of study would therefore be how organisations respond to the diverse actor linkages at the intersection between conservation and development, and how these shape the day-to-day organisational practices of transnational conservation.

Transnational biodiversity conservation is fundamentally concerned with changing land and natural resource use practices, with important implications for telecoupling research. While the actors that create linkages across spatial, institutional and social distances are crucial for understanding telecoupling processes (Eakin et al. 2014), studies have only marginally integrated organisational actors and have yet to explore how specific cross-scale linkages shape the geographic unevenness of actors’ activities. In seeking to understand how transnational conservation actions are established and patterned across geographical contexts, the telecoupling heuristic provided a valuable lens for framing the research enquiry by distinguishing between various types of flows, activities, and processes and how they manifest in inter-actor relationships.

Conservation is increasingly confronted with distant socioeconomic and environmental causes of biodiversity loss (Kuemmerle et al. 2019; Lenzen et al. 2012), and a vast literature demonstrating the trade-offs between conservation and development highlight the challenges of creating synergies between biodiversity conservation and other sectors (Beauchamp et al. 2018; Hirsch et al. 2010;

McShane et al. 2011; Messerli et al. 2015). This necessitates a broader set of practices than traditional area-based measures, including expanding dialogue across sectors and initiatives in countries that displace land-use pressures to other biodiverse areas through trade (Hoang and Kanemoto 2021). While the importance of cross-sector engagement is gaining considerable traction in transnational policy circles such as the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES 2019), less recognised is the potential of harnessing interpersonal social relationships between actors on multiple levels. There are efforts to do so at national levels but there is potential to cultivate connections on subnational and local levels, where the trade-offs between conservation and development manifest in context-specific ways, by investing in forums and channels for dialogue. This is reflected in emerging approaches to “network governance” and landscape approaches to conservation (Bixler et al. 2016; Scarlett 2016). Explicitly focusing on integrating parallel actor networks stretching from local to international domains would complement processes of decentralising conservation and natural resource governance (Andersson and Ostrom 2008; Oberlack et al. 2018). Similarly, promoting opportunities for conservation professionals in the Global South to access spaces for consolidating social connections across all levels would promote more equitable transnational conservation.

There is major scope for research that interrogates organisational responses to diverse external and internal pressures, particularly in contexts where intensive ethnographic work is not feasible (Brockington et al. 2018; Marcus 1995). Tensions between competing values in conservation (Sandbrook et al. 2019), the relationship between conservation and private sector actors (Robinson 2012), the militarisation of conservation enforcements (Lunstrum 2015), and the appropriate role of philanthropic funders and elites (Holmes 2012), all manifest in inter-organisational relationships as individuals adapt to changing circumstances. These are fruitful areas of research that would advance our understanding of the contested processes of global environmental governance (Thaler 2021). We believe that such research would contribute to a more productive exchange between conservationists and social scientists, as has been repeatedly called for (Bennett et al. 2017; Chua et al. 2020; Redford 2011).

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we demonstrated how interpersonal relationships are pivotal to multiple dimensions of transnational conservation by shaping day-to-day interactions and organisational practices and the emergence of new project activities. These range from responding to unexpected events to enhancing the value of cross-sector dialogues. Greater attention to how dynamic external and internal conditions manifest in organisational change would shed light on how transnational conservation networks shape global conservation governance. We urge a greater need

to nuance global conservation dynamics through in-depth empirical investigations of the actor networks that shape global environmental governance.

Supplementary material: <https://bit.ly/3rDeutI>

Author contributions statement

All authors contributed to the conception of the study, the analysis and interpretation of the data, and revising the manuscript. Joel Persson conducted the data collection and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors contributed critical, intellectual content to the drafts and gave final approval of the version to be published.

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Declaration of interests

The authors declare no competing interests in the conduct of this research.

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Research ethics approval

The research was approved by the Ethics Committee at the faculty of the first author on 18 January 2018. Related approval was obtained from institutions in which the research was carried out. Written or verbal informed consent was sought for each interview, following an explanation of the research objectives, data use, anonymity and confidentiality.

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