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CORRESPONDENCE

A Clear Purpose is the Start Point for Conservation Leadership

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The leadership fundamentals identified by Bruyere (2015) miss a cornerstone of effective conservation leadership, namely a clear sense of purpose. Conservation often demands that we act fast (Martin *et al.* 2012), which requires clarity of purpose; "we are here to... (conserve species and ecosystems)," ahead of the long-term vision-building perspective emphasized by Bruyere (2015).

All leaders, knowingly or not, work in a system; an ecosystem is obviously a system, but so is an NGO, a farm, a protected area, or a species recovery project. The best models of leadership focus on understanding the correct "purpose" of that system and how that influences the way people and work are managed (Scholtes 1998; Game *et al.* 2014). For example, priorities for an offshore island reserve are different to those for a wildlife corridor.

Conservation recovery typically takes decades, yet conservation projects are often transient (Black *et al.* 2011), so although the future maybe unclear, conservation "purpose" must be enduring (i.e., "this programme exists to..."). Purpose guides our work today and tomorrow, our immediate priorities, our goals, our choices today, and our decisions for the future. A clear understanding of purpose is also a reference point for innovation and flexibility against the evolving demands of complex systems (Game *et al.* 2014).

While there can be many visions (i.e., "what things will look like") for a given purpose, there will be only one purpose for a given vision. A clear purpose will inform, test, and enable agreement on a relevant view of the future (from many possible permutations) to provide suitable direction. For example, black-footed ferret conservation in the 1990s focused on captive breeding and release of animals into sites in Wyoming, USA. Despite breeding successes which saved the species, few released ferrets survived and wild populations faltered; the vision was too limited and the purpose not delivered. Recognizing that habitat quality was critical, the vision was changed to include disease control, management of prey species, and land partnerships extending across eight states, plus Mexico and Canada (Black *et al.* 2011). The vision now engages a broader group of stakeholders and

possibilities, but the purpose of conserving ferrets remains unchanged.

While direction is important, understanding the underlying reason for a direction, its purpose, is paramount. Purpose is neither dependent nor solely identifiable with any one leader, so if the leader departs, the purpose of the work and the remaining team is unchanged. With a clear purpose in place, ego-driven or other value-laden perspectives are also less able to subvert more helpful commitments to species and ecosystems (Black & Copsey 2014). Furthermore, purposeful leaders avoid expending effort and resources on activities which do not deliver the principle focus of the program. Leaders set the tone through their behavior, goals, plans, vision, priorities, budgets, and performance measures (Black *et al.* 2011). All these elements should be guided by purpose; "how does this help us to... (conserve species and ecosystems)?" If conservation leaders make continued efforts to get this right, then the chances of success are improved.

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