

WORKING ACROSS THE RURAL-URBAN DIVIDE: MESSAGING FOR LARGE CARNIVORE CONFLICT REDUCTION





Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) wolf biologist, Abby Nelson, and landowners install turbo fladry in Tom Miner Basin.
Photo by Louise Johns.

Conflicts between large carnivores and livestock can be polarizing. The words used by people providing assistance around large carnivore-livestock conflict reduction can either further polarize a sensitive situation or bring people together in a common purpose around common goals, including reducing livestock losses and stewarding the land and improving wildlife habitat. The purpose of this guide is to share alternative terminology identified by the Conflict Reduction Consortium to address the use and context of sensitive words that are commonly used in discussing large carnivore conflict reduction. These alternatives are intended to build a mutual understanding of the issues involved with these words to help reduce social conflict between rural and urban communities.

Words evoke emotions or are sensitive to different people for a wide variety of reasons related to their personal histories and cultural contexts. The words listed as sensitive were identified by Conflict Reduction Consortium members as evoking intense responses among some people and communities when used in certain contexts. In many cases, alternative or related terms are provided for sensitive words. The context section provides information about the nuance associated with these words and the contexts that trigger more intense responses, which are often rooted in the history of use or differences in wildlife values. It is important to seek to understand the context of our audience when choosing words. This approach can be valuable in conflict reduction work to avoid words that may trigger emotions, heighten pre-existing barriers and in some cases end conversations when other words will do the job.

Cover photo: Sheep are herded down Main Street during the annual Trailing of the Sheep Festival in Ketchum, Idaho. Photo by Steve Dondero.

The sensitive words identified in this document mean different things to different people; therefore, we do not attempt to define them here. Most of these words require explanation in their first presentation. A careful explanatory introduction, including the intended definition within the particular conversation, can help reduce tension around the use of these words. The messaging alternative or related terms are not intended to put an end to the use of words listed as sensitive, but instead provide context so they can be used with care and intention when needed.

In many cases, previous experience with these words has created sensitivity. This experience is not static. This document is part of a constantly evolving conversation. The hope is that this guide gives people the context and some tools to enter into this conversation with the background available at the time of its publication. These recommendations may allow stakeholders to be more effective in their work and aid in assisting new employees working across this aspect of the rural-urban divide. It may be useful to use this list as the basis for your own organization's messaging toolkit, adding sensitive words and alternatives that are specific to your context. While words are important in spanning the urban-rural divide, people respond to multiple layers of information when communicating, including body language and tone. This document will not focus on these aspects of communication and rather on the meaning certain sensitive words convey to different audiences.

What audience does this document serve? Both rural and urban audiences value wildlife. Urban in this context means people removed from agricultural production. Rural means people whose livelihoods are dependent on the open space characteristics of the American West, including agricultural production, and/or whose culture is intertwined with agriculture. Some of the suggested alternatives are better for rural audiences than urban audiences or vice versa. However, a large diversity of perspectives exists both within urban and rural communities. It is imperative to keep this diversity in mind as we engage rural and urban audiences in conversations about large carnivore-livestock conflict reduction.



SENSITIVE WORD(S)

Coexistence, Coexist

SUGGESTED TERM(S)

Living and working with wildlife [(large) carnivores/predators - depending on audience]

CONTEXT

Coexistence comes across as humans having to make sacrifices to achieve shared landscapes with wildlife while experiencing minimal conflict.

FROM URBAN AUDIENCES

When constraining discussion to large carnivores, there is a limited point of reference for urban communities who do not encounter those species.

We suggest using the broader term wildlife (ie. living and working with wildlife) to keep the topic relatable. Residents of urban communities do encounter wildlife - skunks, coyotes, raccoons, rats, gophers, hawks, pigeons, etc. The goal is to build mutual understanding through shared experiences.

Further, urban audiences do not face the same coexistence challenges because they are not often asked to coexist with large carnivores around their homes. The developed areas inhabited in urban communities have removed habitat and the large, mobile species that depend on open space from the landscape.

FROM RURAL AUDIENCES

While coexist is more concise, it has become polarizing due to its primary use from, and association with environmental groups. Using it creates difficulty building relationships across the rural-urban divide.

In the case of wildlife, coexistence often feels like an 'imposed risk' with those imposing the risk not supporting the use of some effective risk management tools, and leaving the cost to be borne by the land-owner/producer.

Further, coexistence simply means wildlife and humans are sharing the same space at the same time with minimal conflict. However, from a livestock producer's perspective, this term implies harmonious existence, which may not be the actual experience in rural communities.

SENSITIVE WORD(S)

Tolerance

SUGGESTED TERM(S)

No alternative necessary

CONTEXT

Tolerance means different things to different people, and building tolerance is a goal for some people and not for others.

Tolerance seems to suggest some level of acceptance, which may not be true for some people. Some people are not okay with living with or bearing the costs of wildlife, or are unwilling to “tolerate” them.

To some, tolerance can be understood as a value—not necessarily associated with mitigation measures—rather than a goal. A goal might be framed as accepting the presence of wildlife and tolerable levels of wildlife-related conflicts.

Well devised, reasonable and fair management builds the tolerance of rural and urban stakeholders towards wildlife and associated conflict-reduction efforts.

FROM URBAN AUDIENCES

No additional context.

FROM RURAL AUDIENCES

The word tolerance can create the impression that rural communities do not appreciate wildlife; that ranchers have to learn to accept or live with wildlife. In fact people who live in rural areas do value wildlife and often take pride in stewarding the land where wildlife resides. While this may not in all circumstances extend to large carnivores, sensitivity to the use of this word is warranted.

Tolerance is something that happens if mitigation (including helping people be safe), compensation, conflict reduction, and lethal control are working together. Further, tolerance may happen when losses attributable to wildlife occur at a level considered acceptable by the affected individual

If rural communities are being asked to tolerate large carnivores, then urban communities should be asked to tolerate all of the available tools to live with large carnivores including lethal control.

SENSITIVE WORD(S)

Incentive, Subsidy

SUGGESTED TERM(S)

Benefit for providing wildlife habitat

Cost-share

CONTEXT

Incentive implies that there is not an innate desire to be a good steward and that money is the primary motivation for stewardship, such as implementation of a conflict reduction practice. On the other hand, it can serve as a recognition of economic interests and also imply a fair exchange of value.

FROM URBAN AUDIENCES

No additional context.

FROM RURAL AUDIENCES

Livestock producers want to be paid for the value of their products and services. When part of the value they provide is maintaining or enhancing habitat, they have provided an important service to society, and that service comes at a cost.

SENSITIVE WORD(S)

Removal, Lethal, Kill, Control, Harvest

SUGGESTED TERM(S)

Lethal removal

Selective removal

CONTEXT

Some think removal is not transparent, as it could include translocation. To some, “lethal” makes it more transparent and specific.

There are two types of lethal removal; management response to livestock loss (selective removal) and legal hunting.

Selective removal, also referred to as targeted removal, can be used to open up dialogue with rural audiences, while other terms (like kill) can shut down dialogue. Selective removal needs to be used very specifically, when individual animals are verified as the cause of depredations and removed. This is often the case with bear and mountain lion management and can, some say should, apply with wolves. Selective removal is tied to science-based management and moves away from the imagery of a target.

FROM URBAN AUDIENCES

In urban contexts, wildlife are viewed as part of the natural environment and therefore the use of nonlethal tools and strategies in response to conflicts with wildlife are preferred to killing wildlife.

FROM RURAL AUDIENCES

No additional context.

As a result, some people disagree with killing native wildlife under some or any circumstances, so there will always be controversy over these terms and concepts, regardless of the term used. For some, the term “kill” is used for clarity but it can be used by others to evoke an emotional response for wildlife. Further, harvest is associated with crops and domestic animals and so can feel inappropriate for wildlife.

SENSITIVE WORD(S)

Nonlethal

SUGGESTED TERM(S)

Conflict reduction

Conflict mitigation tools

Conflict prevention

CONTEXT

The term nonlethal focuses on the outcome for the wildlife versus the intent of the solution to protect a resource. Additionally, nonlethal also inherently emphasizes the lethality of other activities.

The contrast to lethal can make it appear that nonlethal is the better alternative, when that is not consistently the case. Yet, the terms nonlethal and lethal are appropriate when there is opportunity for more nuanced/in-depth conversation.

Additionally, conflict prevention can imply that all conflicts can be avoided by nonlethal means, where conflict reduction does not. Yet, the term conflict prevention may be appropriate when there is no history of conflicts.

FROM URBAN AUDIENCES

No additional context.

FROM RURAL AUDIENCES

Nonlethal can give the impression that the lives of wildlife are valued more than domestic animals.

SENSITIVE WORD(S)

Advocacy

SUGGESTED TERM(S)

No alternative necessary

CONTEXT

We all may show up as advocates for different things at different times. An important consideration is whether we advocate from a place of shared understanding or from a single/limited-perspective.

FROM URBAN AUDIENCES

No additional context.

FROM RURAL AUDIENCES

Advocacy has become a loaded word and has come to be seen as an all-or-nothing term. Yet, the intention of an advocate is the trigger, not the word in itself.

SENSITIVE WORD(S)

Education

SUGGESTED TERM(S)

Shared understanding/learning

CONTEXT

Stating that a rural or urban community needs to be educated on a particular topic can be seen as condescending to either community. As a result, it is often how “education” is presented that can result in sensitivities surrounding this term.

FROM URBAN AUDIENCES

No additional context.

FROM RURAL AUDIENCES

Education can imply that urban or rural audiences are ignorant. Or that “environmentalists” are trying to show that they know more about management or land stewardship than landowners and managers. This can come across as condescending.

SENSITIVE WORD(S)

Compensation

SUGGESTED TERM(S)

Depredation payment

CONTEXT

Compensation is not seen as a solution in itself. Compensation can lead urban audiences to believe that the impacts to rural communities have been addressed and no further work is needed.

When discussing depredation payments, there should be some shared understanding around the fact that depredation payments are not the only tool and that the best outcome is not payment for losses but to reduce depredation.

FROM URBAN AUDIENCES

Some outside of agriculture are focused primarily on how compensation might be abused by producers, or on the implied cost to themselves. In discussions of whether compensation is appropriate, focus on whether loss is occurring and whether the burden should be shared.

Compensation may imply being bought off and raising cows for predators.

FROM RURAL AUDIENCES

Compensation means “to make up for,” but for many livestock producers money can not replace livestock lost to predation.

Compensation promotes the “welfare rancher” stereotype. It suggests that producers are more interested in collecting for losses rather than stewarding the habitat.

Further, the word “compensation” only applies to dead stock killed by a carnivore, but there are many more costs, such as reduced rate of weight gain and cost of conflict reduction tools, that direct loss compensation programs do not directly address.

SENSITIVE WORD(S)

Pay for presence

SUGGESTED TERM(S)

Habitat lease

CONTEXT

Pay for presence or a habitat lease are potentially very broad in their application and more difficult to define than simple compensation. People like defined rules and boundaries in programs. There needs to be some understanding of the outer limits of this term.

Further, habitat leases could be used to pay for the added costs of providing for wildlife, a public resource, on private land, and could be combined with compensation for direct losses.

FROM URBAN AUDIENCES

No additional context.

FROM RURAL AUDIENCES

No additional context.

SENSITIVE WORD(S)

Confirmed

SUGGESTED TERM(S)

No alternative necessary

CONTEXT

Confirmed implies that a kill was definitely able to be classified as a kill through evidence when in some cases and contexts there is the perception that confirmation may be based on a “best guess”. In all cases, a determination should be based on evidence.

FROM URBAN AUDIENCES

Some skepticism may exist around the reliability of the determination whether livestock death may be attributed to carnivores for different reasons, due to lack of evidence, or authority making the decision.

FROM RURAL AUDIENCES

There are many other situations where cattle may have been killed but never “confirmed,” which doesn’t change the fact that they were killed. Compensation is dependent on the status of confirmation. These two concepts are interlinked.

Confirmed kills are sensitive when the criteria to confirm the kill is seen as too restrictive, and people perceive that confirmation seldom happens.

Conversely, confirmed kills can be sensitive when the bar to confirm the kill is seen as too broad, and people perceive that confirmation occurs too often.

There is also a difference between probable and confirmed kills. Kills classified as “probable”, “possible”, and “unknown” could all be killed by a carnivore, but a lack of evidence can prohibit that animal from being classified by agencies as “confirmed”, thereby enabling compensation.

SENSITIVE WORD(S)

Science

SUGGESTED TERM(S)

No alternative necessary

CONTEXT

The scientific method is to develop a hypothesis, test a hypothesis and refine the hypothesis based on data. There is a misconception that once a scientific study is published, it is not okay for a subsequent study to get different results. In fact, part of the scientific process is for new research to improve upon previous studies.

People in rural America and in other contexts are aware of the high number of variables in studying ecological systems and the difficulty that brings to testing hypotheses that can be broadly interpreted.

Repeated observations that lead to conclusions (whether made by scientists or those living and working on the land) are valid ways of knowing, and could serve to inform which questions/methods/tools we explore through these other scientific methods or studies.

FROM URBAN AUDIENCES

The requirement that government decisions be based on the best available science prioritizes knowledge acquired through the scientific process over other ways of acquiring knowledge.

FROM RURAL AUDIENCES

Perhaps if the term science only means the science coming out of academia, which may be separated from the experience of land-owners, the term can be sensitive. If science more broadly means something that is measured, or demonstrated, by some amount of data or experience, then it should not be a problem to use the word.

SENSITIVE WORD(S)

Collaboration

SUGGESTED TERM(S)

No alternative necessary

CONTEXT

For a lot of people, collaboration is viewed as their only option to change their situation. For others, resentment can build when they experience a lack of control or feel that they have not been adequately included in the collaborative process.

Collaboration is inherently slow and labor intensive. Without a perception of progress towards outcomes, or individual benefit, it can be considered a time sink. Collaboration has many benefits as well, including but not limited to fostering mutual understanding, problem solving, social learning, and empathy among diverse stakeholders.

FROM URBAN AUDIENCES

No additional context.

FROM RURAL AUDIENCES

Collaboration can mean an agenda-driven process to some. Tension in collaboratives can arise when some members are paid to attend and others donate their time. Acknowledging this difference is the first step in easing the tension.

SENSITIVE WORD(S)

Wildlife/migration corridor

SUGGESTED TERM(S)

No alternative necessary

CONTEXT

Connectivity is important from both a habitat standpoint and a management standpoint. Wildlife benefits from corridors supported by habitat management on private and public lands that are at scale and coordinated across jurisdictional boundaries.

When communicating with urban audiences, defining wildlife or migration corridors may be helpful, for there may be a notion that corridors don't include people or mixed-use and working landscapes

FROM URBAN AUDIENCES

No additional context.

FROM RURAL AUDIENCES

Corridor is sensitive because it makes people think of lines being drawn on a map across their property. For a lot of people it makes them fearful that some kind of regulation will be imposed on their land from a top-down approach and that they will not have a say in how it is implemented. As a result, landowners should be included early in discussions of corridor conservation.

Further, policy makers should be cognisant about how corridor designation and associated legislation affects landowners.

SENSITIVE WORD(S)

Endangered

SUGGESTED TERM(S)

No alternative necessary

CONTEXT

The legal definition for endangered species is: “any species which is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range.”

FROM URBAN AUDIENCES

To some, listing a species as “endangered” is in most cases a good thing because the designation brings resources, attention, and capacity towards saving an animal or a species.

FROM RURAL AUDIENCES

It is hard or slow to de-list species. If people have confidence (through good science) that these terms are being applied correctly, it will not be as problematic.

It is associated with regulations and restrictions under the ESA.

Endangered species regulations have been wielded against private landowners in some cases, rather than rewarding them for the stewardship that allowed those species to occur on private lands.

SENSITIVE WORD(S)

Conservation, Preservation

SUGGESTED TERM(S)

No alternative necessary

CONTEXT

Conservation is largely viewed positively, and to some is an umbrella term that has taken over for the term preservation or environmentalism.

For the purposes of this section, conservation may be defined as sustainable use of nature by humans that incorporates resource extraction, while preservation means protecting nature from human uses.

FROM URBAN AUDIENCES

Some urban audiences equate conservation with more everyday actions like carpooling, reducing water use etc. and not necessarily with natural resource or wildlife management.

FROM RURAL AUDIENCES

Livestock producers often find offense when “environmentalists” refer to themselves as conservationists as if they are the only ones “conserving.” Livestock producers consider themselves conservationists, as conscientious stewards of the land looking to leave it for future generations.

The word conservation has taken on additional/new meaning as the word environmentalist has been increasingly replaced with conservationist. The concept of use is at the core of the definition of conservation and we should work to be sure the definition is understood, valued, and not confused with other terms e.g. preservation.

Some groups that formerly called themselves “environmental groups” are now calling themselves “conservation” groups where the former may be more appropriate. Though, this distinction may be to differentiate “conservation” groups from more litigious organizations.

Discussions of large carnivore conservation can be challenging in diverse audiences when not all of the audience is supportive of those conservation efforts. (See Endangered for more context.)

SENSITIVE WORD(S)

Rewilding

SUGGESTED TERM(S)

Wildlife restoration

Wildlife reintroduction

CONTEXT

This term has different implications in different geographical and historical contexts. Rewilding is contingent on the time period and conditions to which an individual or group refers as the base-line to work towards.

The term demands further discussion in all contexts, urban and rural. Rewilding to what state? When was the place “wild?” Is this a binary, as in completely “domesticated,” or completely “wild,” or are we willing to consider the spectrum along this scale? It may also force people to discuss frankly what is the “appropriate” or desirable role for humans within ecosystems.

FROM URBAN AUDIENCES

Within urban communities, rewilding can feel unrealistic, as it implies a return to natural states devoid of humans that currently populate urban ecosystems. Rewilding lands can also be an idealized concept, supported by a belief that “perfect” wild places don’t include humans to account for the vast, sometimes negative impacts, humans have incurred to ecosystems.

FROM RURAL AUDIENCES

This can be seen as a threat to rural communities and working lands. Rewilding implies the removal or absence of humans and is strongly associated with “wilderness” as a concept. Anything referring to “wilderness” as a concept can be contentious, as it denotes the absence of humans.

SENSITIVE WORD(S)

Rancher(s)/Livestock producer(s)

SUGGESTED TERM(S)

No alternatives necessary

CONTEXT

You do not need to produce livestock to experience conflict with wildlife on a ranch. Rancher may be a better term to capture conflicts that may arise with conflicts not including livestock loss.

FROM URBAN AUDIENCES

The term “rancher” is most associated with cattle, and signifies both positive and negative values associated with cattle production. But, ranch activity can be diverse, generating income by providing guest amenities, hunting opportunities, etc.

On the other hand “livestock producer” is a more generic term, covering all livestock including cows, sheep, llamas, goats, etc. In the context of wildlife-livestock conflict, the term livestock producer is more value neutral.

FROM RURAL AUDIENCES

For those who raise livestock, the term livestock producer is sometimes preferred because it is value neutral and defines the economic relationship between the livestock and the steward. Livestock is intrinsic to the term and producer implies diligent, productive economic activity.

Yet, there is an understanding that whether one uses rancher or livestock producer, it does not make a difference in some individual’s negative connotations associated with these words. Some shared that there needs to be a greater emphasis on conveying the benefits of livestock producers/ranchers to society.

SENSITIVE WORD(S)

Population management

SUGGESTED TERM(S)

No alternatives necessary

CONTEXT

We need to increase understanding that the landscape looks very different today than it did even just a decade ago with our increasing human population.

Population management is the management of a population as a whole towards a specific objective. Population management is sometimes misconstrued with “lethal control”, thereby giving the term a negative connotation to certain audiences.

Population management can benefit people and wildlife by keeping wildlife and people healthy and minimizing intraspecies and zoonotic disease transmission.

FROM URBAN AUDIENCES

This term may need definition or explanation for urban communities. Some urban residents who focus on “rewilding” do not think wildlife should be managed at all. Some people want wildlife to be able to live freely without human management.

“Population Management” can be sensitive because some people think that nature/wildlife doesn’t require management and interference from people. The assumption is that nature, if left to go back to its unmanaged state, will find its natural balance.

FROM RURAL AUDIENCES

Many rural residents have witnessed unmanaged lands transitioning to a degraded state. People in rural communities often recognize that ongoing stewardship of the land and wildlife is necessary to maintain healthy, intact ecosystems.

SENSITIVE WORD(S)

Human-wildlife conflict/interactions

SUGGESTED TERM(S)

No alternatives necessary

CONTEXT

Human-Wildlife Conflict requires three different factors: humans, wildlife and conflict. Conflict implies that there is damage to a degree that the person cannot tolerate it.

Human-Wildlife Interactions is a broader term that may be used to describe interactions between humans and wildlife that may include conflict, but also makes space for positive interactions.

Human-wildlife interactions leaves space for both positive and negative interactions between humans and wildlife. Human-wildlife conflict is a more specific term used to describe situations where conflict occurs between humans and wildlife. When used as an umbrella term, human-wildlife conflict implies that all relationships and interactions between humans and wildlife result in conflict.

FROM URBAN AUDIENCES

No additional context.

FROM RURAL AUDIENCES

No additional context.