

The role of behaviour change in biodiversity conservation

This document responds to the mandate of IUCN Members established in Resolution *WCC-2020-Res-064 Promoting conservation through behaviour-centred solutions* (Marseille, 2021) and Resolution *WCC-2025-Res-127 Strengthening human-nature connectedness to advance transformative change for nature* (Abu Dhabi, 2025), and outlines the stance of the IUCN SSC CEC Behaviour Change Task Force on the role of behaviour change in biodiversity conservation (Veríssimo & Pinho, 2023). The Task Force is an inter-commission group operating jointly across the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Species Survival Commission (SSC) and Commission on Education and Communication (CEC). It aims to support IUCN member countries and organisations as well as Commissions and partners in integrating ethical, effective, and evidence-informed behavioural approaches into their work.

Behaviour change is at the heart of IUCN's mission to influence, encourage and assist societies to conserve the integrity and diversity of nature and ensure that any use of natural resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable. As affirmed by IUCN Members in Res-064, used responsibly and grounded in evidence, behaviour change must be a part of all conservation actions.

Ultimately, the purpose of this statement is to build a shared understanding of behaviour change in conservation, to advance ethical practice, and to foster collaboration across disciplines and communities, all in support of IUCN's broader mission to halt biodiversity loss.

Why behaviour change matters for nature

All major threats to biodiversity, such as habitat loss, overexploitation, pollution, and climate change, are driven by human behaviours.

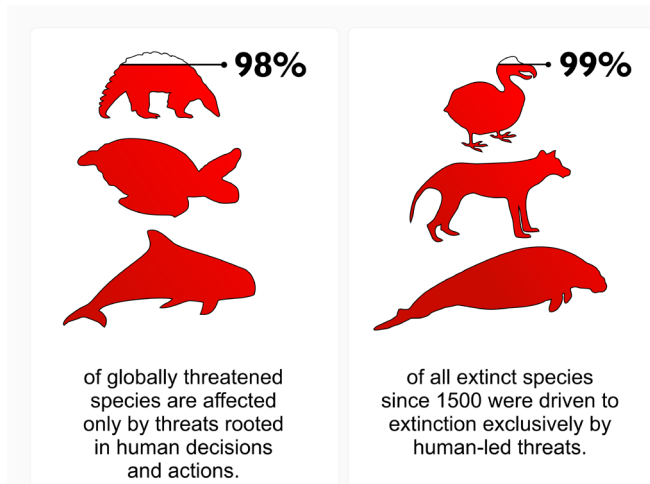


Figure 1 – Major threats to biodiversity and extinction rates.
Source: Veríssimo et al. (2024)

This means that conserving nature is, above all else, an exercise in human persuasion: in shifting the choices, habits, norms, and systems that lead to environmental harm (Veríssimo et al., 2024). Without changes in how people use land, consume resources, make policy, and shape markets, conservation efforts will remain confined to recording losses instead of reversing them. Behaviour change is therefore not peripheral to conservation - it is at its core (Veríssimo et al., 2025).

What is behaviour change?

Behaviour change is discussed in different ways across disciplines. In the context of biodiversity conservation and IUCN's mission we define behaviour change as the process by which human actions and decisions shift over time in ways that result in more desirable outcomes for nature. These shifts may occur intentionally or unintentionally, and can be influenced by a range of factors, including social norms, economic conditions, policy incentives, cultural values, or targeted interventions. In conservation practice, there is a growing emphasis on intentionally supporting behaviour change by identifying and understanding the actions that drive biodiversity loss and by fostering conditions that enable more sustainable choices and practices.

These behaviours can be at different scales, and the importance of each will vary with the threat and human context: from individual decisions in daily life, to the norms of groups, to the policies of organisations, and the wider systems that shape choices at scale.

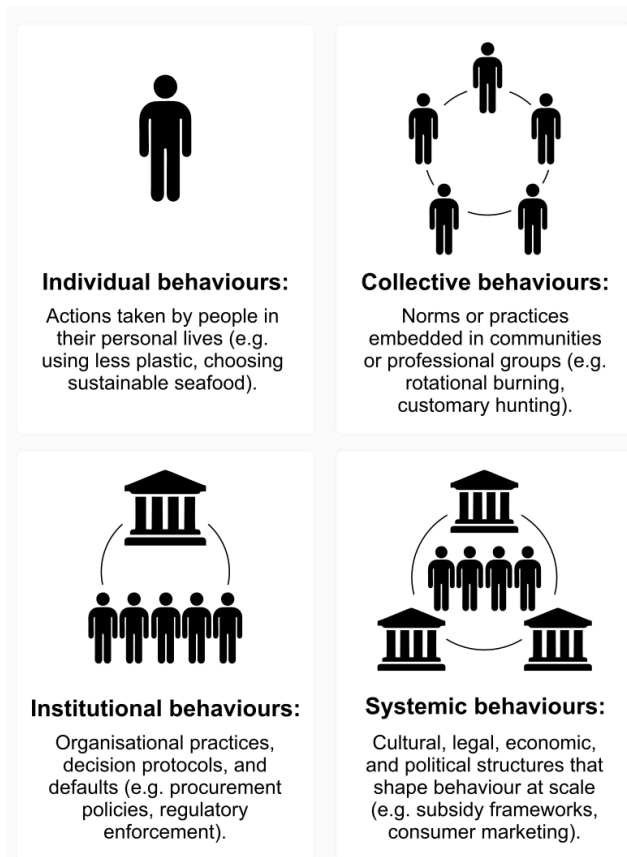


Figure 2 – Societal levels behaviour change interventions.
Source: Contributors

Ethics in behaviour change

As conservation increasingly draws on behaviour change tools, it becomes ever more important to consider not just what we seek to change, but how we pursue change and who is involved in that process. Behaviour change efforts, by their nature, involve influencing the decisions and actions of others. This requires grounding our work in core ethical values, such as transparency and honesty, care and fairness, responsibility and reflection, and respect and empowerment, that can serve as a compass for practice.

Ethical considerations are fundamental to the legitimacy, effectiveness, and long-term sustainability of behaviour change in conservation (Brittain et al., 2020). They help ensure that efforts to influence behaviour do not unintentionally manipulate, marginalise, or harm, especially when engaging with communities already affected by social or environmental vulnerabilities (Lades & Delaney, 2022). A behaviour change initiative that achieves its immediate goals but undermines trust, dignity, or fairness may do more harm than good in the long run.

The ethical terrain in conservation is especially complex because the field carries a dual mandate:

to protect biodiversity and to respect and safeguard human wellbeing. These goals often reinforce each other, but they can also come into tension, particularly when conservation initiatives influence access to land, resources, or livelihoods. Ethical behaviour change must therefore navigate these dual responsibilities with

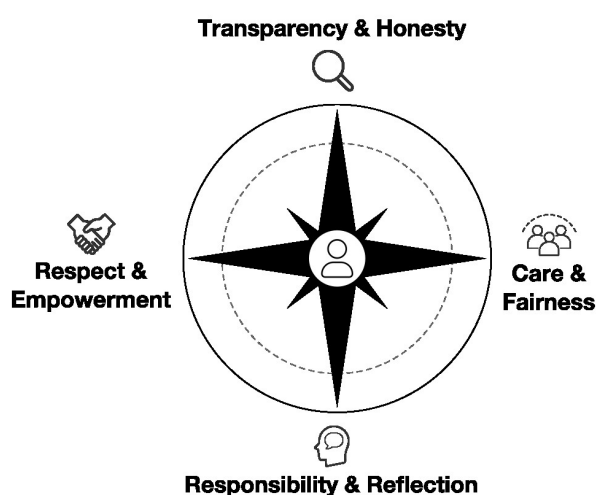


Figure 3 – Ethical guidance fundamentals for behavioural interventions. Source: Adapted from Kubacki et al. (2023) and Lades & Delaney (2022)

honesty, transparency, and a commitment to equitable outcomes for both people and nature (Szablewska & Kubacki, 2019).

Importantly, behaviour change interventions do not operate in a vacuum, they simply make existing influence visible. People already live in environments saturated with behavioural cues: social norms, marketing, pricing, subsidies, infrastructure, laws, and choice architecture (Nielsen et al., 2021). Many of these existing systems encourage behaviours that degrade the natural environment. In this context, rather than introducing influence, conservation efforts often aim to rebalance existing behavioural drivers, particularly those which currently incentivise actions that harm biodiversity.

To act ethically in this space is to recognise and respond to the power dynamics at play. It means approaching people not as problems to be solved, but as partners with agency, knowledge, and rights. It means avoiding coercive tactics or hidden agendas and creating space for participation, feedback, and revision. Ethical practice also requires asking difficult but necessary questions: Who defines what behaviour is desirable? Who benefits? Who might be excluded? What unintended consequences could arise? (Kubacki et al., 2023).

The IUCN SSC CEC Behaviour Change Task Force is currently preparing additional guidance on ethics in behaviour change. This document does not attempt to replace that work, but it affirms a clear stance: ethical reflection is not an optional extra (Igras et al., 2021). It is central to the way we engage with people in the pursuit of biodiversity conservation.

Moving forward

To strengthen the role of behaviour change in biodiversity conservation, the IUCN SSC CEC Behaviour Change Task Force, in accordance with Resolution WCC-2020-Res-064 and Resolution WCC-2025-Res-127, encourages IUCN Members, Commissions, conservation practitioners, organisations, and policymakers to:

- Integrate behavioural considerations into the design, implementation, and evaluation of conservation initiatives.
- Ground behaviour change efforts in an understanding of local contexts, stakeholder perspectives, and the best available knowledge.
- Ensure that behaviour change interventions are developed and implemented in ways that are ethical, transparent, equitable, and respectful of human rights and wellbeing.

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