

DIFFICULT DECISIONS: COMMUNICATING CONSERVATION PRIORITISATION

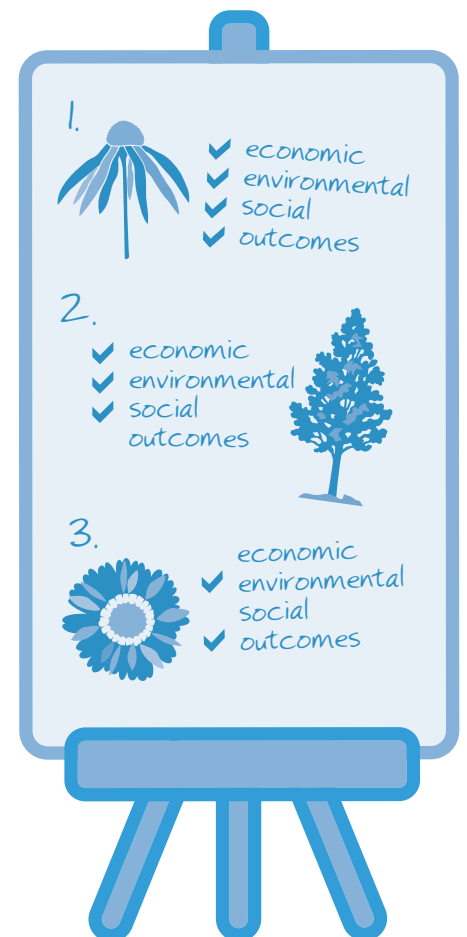
Multifaceted topics, such as conservation prioritisation, can be challenging to communicate to the audiences of botanic gardens and arboreta. However, it is vital that we offer reliable insights into the global environmental issues that we face in modern times. Whether that is through fully fledged campaigns or bite-sized chunks of information – we can help improve the overall understanding of conservation throughout our audiences and their networks, and perhaps help to meet the ever-growing needs of global conservation projects.

Let's start at the beginning. There are so many different terms and environmental jargon that are used in the conservation sector, which, although useful, can mystify those who aren't 'in-the-know'. Conservation prioritisation is one such term. So, let's demystify it.

Conservation Prioritisation is the process of identifying species which require conservation action and ranking them in order of priority. This is a vital process in modern times, due to the sheer number of species that need protection. It all comes down to the age-old question of how can we decide the best way to use the limited resources available for conservation, in a way that will do the most amount of good? (BGCI, 2024). To do this effectively, we need to collate numerous tools, expert opinions, and information sources to evaluate and prioritise which species should be the focus of conservation action.

In 2024, BGCI will complete their ambitious project to assess the extinction risk of all tree species. This project, known as the Global Tree Assessment, has been years of work, from hundreds of partners and individuals, assessing 57,000 tree species for the IUCN Red List. Collating this information on extinction risk is a vital first step in conservation action and it is this type of project that should be utilised by botanic gardens when communicating about prioritisation.

However, to undertake these projects, funding is an ongoing challenge across conservation, with many organisations acknowledging that more investment is needed to halt the current environmental and biodiversity issues that the world is facing (Solberg, 2021). Therefore, there are numerous decisions to be made surrounding which species, which habitats, and which locations to invest the limited time and money in. Consideration into several factors is pivotal, including economic, environmental, and social objectives, alongside various potential outcomes, to ensure that informed decisions are made. This then needs to be evaluated to ensure it is appropriate for all stakeholders and mitigates a variety of the ever-evolving threats facing the natural world (The CPG, 2017).



To effectively communicate the complexities surrounding conservation prioritisation to botanic garden audiences, we need to address the natural world as a whole - with humans included within it. Everything is interconnected, and although the full complexity of this can be difficult to grasp, as communicators, we can pull specific examples that help to better highlight the need of plants. We need to take them from the background into the spotlight, by showcasing them as a vital part of the natural world and as the building blocks of habitats. This will help the public to view them as part of the solution of how to protect the “poster-species” that are often more popular to conserve due to their charisma or importance within popular culture.

Communicating the importance of conservation prioritisation within botanic gardens and arboreta, may include speaking about non-plant species to help put facts into a context that visitors and audiences can better understand. For example, explaining that biodiversity loss isn't just an issue for the 'natural world' but for the 'human world' too. If we lose pollinators, then this will seriously impact global food security (Solberg, 2021), or if deforestation continues, not only will we lose the iconic species that call forests home, but we risk another global pandemic from increased exposure to zoonotic diseases (Tollefson, 2020). This is a far more tangible outcome for most people than the loss of an already rare plant species that they may not have come across previously and have no context for within their daily lives.

Effective communications can help to reduce misunderstandings surrounding conservation prioritisation amongst the non-scientific community. As scientific organisations which are accessible to the public, botanic gardens and arboreta are ideally placed to communicate complex ideas, such as conservation prioritisation, even if only at a basic, ground-floor level. We are lucky enough to have several communication tools available, which should be utilised fully for important work such as this. They include in-person communication, online platforms, storytelling, lectures, workshops, lessons, events, marketing materials, citizen science projects, interpretation, awareness campaigns, and advocacy initiatives within gardens. The audiences that we already have are primed to learn more about the issues that are facing our planet, so it is up to all of us to offer reliable information about these complex ideas.

It is important to note that communications don't have to “big budget” to be effective. To be honest, the only 'make-or-break' criteria which make science communications a success or not is whether we have been able to make the big, scientific topics easy for non-scientists to understand in a meaningful way (Bijl, 2022). This could be in a full campaign with printed materials and accompanying web-series, or a short video that is posted on Instagram – the important thing is to know what we want the takeaway to be, and then connect with our audiences.

Like most environmental issues, there is no single answer for how best to communicate the complex nature of conservation prioritisation. There is a lot of uncertainty that can be equally difficult to understand and to explain, even by those actively involved in the sector. However, one thing that can be easily understood and explained is the need for us to all work together towards a common goal, and if conservation prioritisation can help us to refine that goal and protect the greatest amount with the limited resources available, then that must be a positive thing.

So, I guess that's always a good place to start when it comes to communicating big ideas. At the end of the day, the one thing that we surely all have in common, both within the conservation sector and across our engaged audiences, is a wish to make the world a better place for all who call it home.

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