

Understanding conflict is a key to conservation

by Hannah Harrison

Why do people fight over how to conserve wild Atlantic salmon in Europe, and how do we discover the answer to such questions?

These are exactly the questions I hope to answer within my PhD. Understanding why conflict occurs over wildlife conservation is important. Previous studies have shown that when people disagree about wildlife management for prolonged periods of time, the management of that species (and its ecosystem) becomes unsustainable. It's a situation most people would like to avoid.

Atlantic salmon are considered an iconic species throughout much of Europe but pressures from aquaculture, pollution, dams and overfishing have decreased its numbers across the continent. As concerns grow about the future of this important fish, people disagree about how to conserve the remaining populations.

Like all students within the IMPRESS program, I study how fish conservation can be improved. But, unlike traditional lab-based sciences, my studies focus on challenges experienced by everyday fishermen, fisheries managers and conservation activists. In particular, I am interested in how hatcheries are being used by different stakeholder groups to conserve wild salmon – a topic that has become increasingly controversial as new science emerges showing that hatcheries may have overall negative effects on wild salmon populations.

My research takes me into the field to work with the people doing salmon conservation on a day-to-day basis. I use methods like in-depth interviewing and participant observation to study people and their relationships with salmon, including their beliefs about how salmon conservation should best be accomplished. This research is applied, meaning that while some of my findings could be generalized to other similar conservation scenarios, the results are meant to address problems in specific case studies.

Science that looks at how humans fit into the environment and interact with nature presents many challenges to researchers like me. First, it requires that I have a strong understanding of ecology, biology and other environmental disciplines related to salmon. And I also must understand people and their behaviors and preferences. This requires an understanding of important anthropological and sociological concepts, as well.

Of course, even with this training, working with people is always a bit unpredictable. Often, the people who participate in my studies are surprised to find a young woman studying salmon, and it can take a lot of time and effort to develop a rapport with research participants before I can collect good interview data. These challenges are part of the reason I like human dimensions research – I never know who I will meet or what interesting twist a fieldwork experience might lend to my research!

Overall, my research has the potential to uncover new perspectives that will improve salmon management, conservation practices and reduce conflict over how this species should be protected in the future.

