




# The role of social license in conservation

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## Introduction

“Threatened species programs need a social license to justify public funding” (Zander et al. 2014). Or do they? There is growing acceptance within conservation science that community support for and engagement in ecosystem management programs is likely to lead to better conservation outcomes (Marvier & Wong 2012). However, the language used to characterize relations between conservation and the community is important, and use of the term “social license” may not always be a useful way to describe this relationship. Since the mid-1990s, the term social license has been widely used in the mining sector to describe implicit acceptance and approval of a mining operation by the community in which it operates (Lacey & Lamont 2014). Other industries such as forestry, aquaculture, and agriculture have begun using the term in a similar way (Edwards & Trafford 2016; Ford & Williams 2016; Moffat et al. 2016). Now social license is beginning to appear in conservation discourse (e.g., Garnett et al. 2015; Oakes et al. 2015). At the same time, the use of social license in other sectors has been criticized (e.g., Owen & Kemp 2013) because it frames relationships with communities as more singular, binary, and tangible than is feasible or desirable (Parsons & Moffat 2014). The use of social license in conservation needs critical evaluation, particularly given the broad contextual differences between conservation and industries such as mining.

The term social license has intersected with conservation in a number of ways. Conservation programs have been funded by mining and forestry companies to earn a social license to operate (Sonter et al. 2014). The term has also been used in similar ways to describe the need for conservation programs to earn support from the community. Conservation nongovernmental organizations

(NGOs) that seek broader community support for protectionist conservation activities that modify or exclude traditional land use in development contexts have been described as needing a social license (Garnett et al. 2015). Now the term is migrating into the vocabulary of government-led conservation initiatives, where it is being used to describe the need for community support for conservation activities (e.g., Menz et al. 2013). For example, social license has been used as a proxy of support for management actions by visitors and managers of a national park (Oakes et al. 2015) and has been used interchangeably with social acceptability to understand local community response to the creation of a marine protected area (Voyer et al. 2014). The term is also being used in new ways that do not fit the license metaphor so easily. As quoted above, a social license has also been seen as a requirement for threatened species programs to justify public funding (Zander et al. 2014).

## The Use of Social License in Industry

The concept of a social license to operate was popularized in the mining industry in the mid-1990s and was motivated by businesses seeking community acceptance of their activities (Lacey & Lamont 2014). Calls for a social license can highlight the need for businesses to address social concerns, and the term is viewed by some as a useful rhetorical tool (Owen & Kemp 2013) and a starting point for fostering dialogue between companies and stakeholders (Moffat et al. 2016). The idea of a social license can raise deeper questions about development and society, such as the alignment between management activities and society’s values and expectations (Ford & Williams 2016), the nature of the relationship between

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Paper submitted November 23, 2016; revised manuscript accepted July 6, 2017.

a company and its stakeholders (Moffat et al. 2016), and social justice in the outcomes of development (Lacey & Lamont 2014). However, critics argue that social license can create the appearance of business accommodating community concerns to claim reputational capital while understanding and addressing the real complexity and dynamics of community concerns is avoided (Owen & Kemp 2013; Moffat et al. 2016).

Part of the appeal of the license metaphor is that it invites parallels with the process by which a company is granted a formal license by government to undertake operations (Moffat et al. 2016). On the surface, a social license alludes to an agreement that is similarly tangible, singular, and enduring (Ford & Williams 2016). However, acceptance of operations by a community is usually implied rather than expressed directly through any formal process, is difficult to define, and is open to multiple interpretations (Parsons & Moffat 2014). Relations between society and land managers are much more complex and dynamic than the license metaphor suggests (Dare et al. 2014; Ford & Williams 2016). Most communities are heterogeneous (Ojha et al. 2016), particularly in relation to environmental issues (Kendal et al. 2015; Ford & Williams 2016). The community may include local people with very different interests, as well as national and international stakeholders (Moffat et al. 2016). In practice this means it is not always clear who could legitimately grant a social license, and multiple social licenses could need to be negotiated (Dare et al. 2014). Societies and communities change over time (Ojha et al. 2016), which means a social license could need to be continually renegotiated as the community or its opinions change (Dare et al. 2014). For these reasons, the license metaphor has been criticized as a poor fit with the kinds of relationships that land managers need to maintain to achieve support and acceptance of programs (Ford & Williams 2016). This ambiguity can leave social license open to application for political purposes by different groups in society (Moffat et al. 2016).

### Conservation's Need for a Social License

The term social license is beginning to be used in the context of conservation programs run by governments and their agencies and partners (e.g., Voyer et al. 2014; Oakes et al. 2015). Because government has a different relationship with society than private companies, the role of a social license in this context is necessarily different (e.g., Moffat et al. 2016). For example, members of the public expect governments to act in the public interest, and increasingly the public sector is partnering with communities to help them articulate interests and values and direct resources accordingly (Denhardt & Denhardt 2000). In conservation governance is becoming ever more complex; volunteer groups, businesses,

and NGOs are taking on roles that were previously carried out by government (Lane & Morrison 2006). These models are not necessarily founded in the same kinds of legitimacy as traditional government initiatives because government, communities, and NGOs work in complex networks to achieve management outcomes (Ojha et al. 2016). Community members may be active participants in conservation actions (e.g., Reid et al. 2011) rather than passive observers who have an instrumental and distant role as approvers. The metaphor of a license is less appealing in these contexts than it is in a business one.

Yet some biodiversity conservation initiatives do invite parallels with the way social license has been used in mining and forestry. First, conservation programs are increasingly leading to conflict with communities, particularly where they involve land-use change (Redpath et al. 2013; Colvin et al. 2015). For example, protected areas created through structured technical processes (e.g., Voyer et al. 2014), may be based in a narrow set of scientific values and may not be well aligned with the broader values of local communities and existing land users. Second, the new hybrid models of governance have brought business concepts and market-based instruments to conservation (Lockwood & Davidson 2010) that can undermine the networks of trust that decentralized community-based approaches are founded on (e.g., Curtis et al. 2014). In these situations, the support of the local communities may need to be earned in ways that parallel the need for a social license for mining and forestry operations.

### Conclusion

In developing effective networks and relationships between communities and institutions, language is important. The social-license metaphor has been criticized in forestry and mining for overly simplifying the relationship between operations and local communities. In conservation, where communities are important and often active partners in complex governance arrangements, the term seems even less appealing. Promoting the need for a social license draws attention to the importance of public and community perspectives in conservation, but care must be taken to avoid undermining public and community support by adopting a language that is associated with a lack of desire for genuine relationships among the very communities that conservation wants to have on its side.

Language is dynamic and it is possible that social license will escape its metaphorical roots. Emerging academic research on social license usefully highlights important factors that support effective relationships with communities framed as a social license, such as trust and fair process (Moffat & Zhang 2014) and ethical alignment between business and civil society (Lacey & Lamont 2014). Other concepts such as social

acceptance (Stankey & Shindler 2006) and social values (Ives & Kendal 2014) explicitly recognize complexity and diversity in communities and could be used when engaging with communities and seeking support for conservation programs. Whatever terminology is used, it is important that conservation practitioners develop trusting, ongoing relationships with active participants, local residents, and the broader public that understand and recognize the diversity, dynamism, and complexity of views held by the community.

## Acknowledgments

D.K. is supported by the Clean Air and Urban Landscape hub of the National Environmental Science Program. We thank the anonymous reviewers who helped to greatly improve this manuscript.

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