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# On leadership for conservation implementation: A personal perspective

**Significance:**

The obstacles to implementing conservation projects are growing increasingly difficult. What then are the personality traits required for effective conservation leadership? Do we need strongly directed leadership driven by efficacy, or do we need consultative leadership driven by inclusivity? The short answer is that we need both, but the latter should take precedence. The divided brain hypothesis provides the biological basis of the trait profile required for effective leadership in conservation: leaders with left-hemisphere bias show algorithmic and competitive proclivities, while those with right-hemisphere bias show holistic and collaborative proclivities. Effective conservation leadership requires the input of both hemispheres, but the right hemisphere must dominate in decision-making.

I began seriously considering leadership for conservation in the early 2000s. This time was pivotal for conservation in South Africa: funding was pouring into the country from international agencies. The country had been isolated from such initiatives but was now firmly in the fold of global priorities, given its astonishingly impressive biodiversity. And there were many such projects at this time: Cape Action for People and the Environment (CAPE) focusing on the Cape Floristic Region hotspot, Subtropical Thicket Ecosystem Planning Project (STEP) dealing with the southwestern part of the Maputaland-Pondoland-Albany hotspot (both funded by the Global Environmental Facility), the Succulent Karoo Ecosystem Planning Project (SKEP) concentrating on the Succulent Karoo hotspot (funded by Conservation International) and several other lesser but related projects. In each project, the role of our team of conservation planners was to conduct research in such a way as to make the outcomes user friendly and useful.

Over the next decade or so, I was exposed to the styles of many leading the implementation of the conservation strategies arising from these projects, as well as many leaders from large international conservation organisations. My own leadership style was also revealed to me, sometimes with unsettling insights. Gradually, I began to get a sense of what I saw were key personality traits necessary for effective conservation leadership. While this perspective was grounded in personal experience, I was strongly influenced by Daniel Goleman's book *Emotional Intelligence.*[1] Thus, I conjured up an intuitive system of four leadership styles arranged along two axes, one representing self-confidence, the other representing emotional intelligence (Figure 1).

Nowadays, conservation leaders face a messy, complex world of insufficient funding, inadequate capacity and competing interests. Doing conservation is like swimming upstream endlessly and sporadically being swept downstream again by a flood of unanticipated events. This is not a world designed for step-by-step, linear workflows (or theories of change), but one where strategic opportunism[2] is often a key ingredient for success. Furthermore, in this era of rising global tensions, obtaining conservation funding is becoming increasingly more competitive. My experience tells me that good conservation leadership requires a particular mix of personality traits. Exploring this issue has consumed my curiosity for decades. In this Commentary, I describe my intellectual journey and its findings.

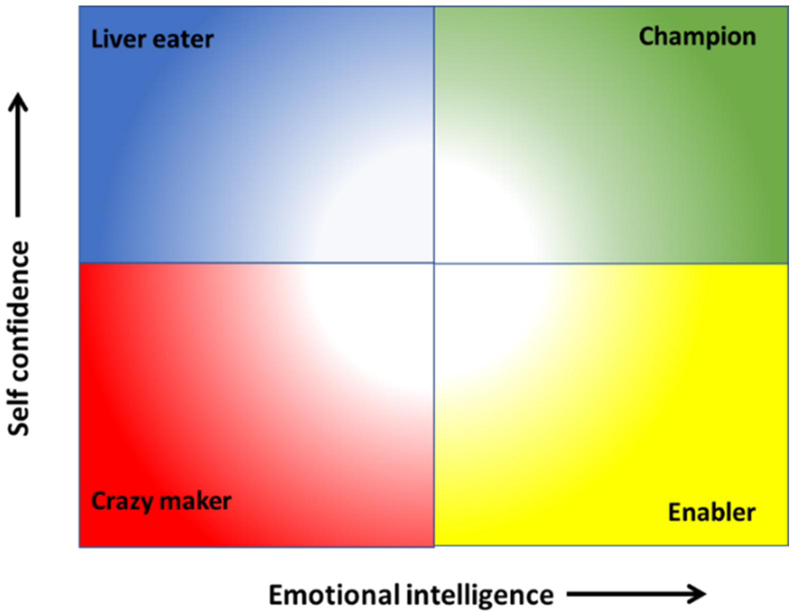


**Figure 1:** Four leadership styles identified using axes of self-confidence and emotional intelligence.

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## The four leadership styles

My intuitive, experience-based scheme is a two-trait, four-panel arrangement (Figure 1). The four archetypes identified are the champion, the enabler, the crazy maker and the liver eater. They are located at the extremes of their axes and make up a small part of any given population; most of us would be clustered towards the centre of the diagram. How does leadership under these different styles impact on the effectiveness of conservation projects? I elaborate below.

With a combination of high emotional intelligence and high self-confidence (Figure 1), *champions* are well suited for leading conservation projects. While having empathy for the needs of the wide and divergent groups of stakeholders in these projects, champions are capable of being strategic, opportunistic and decisive in the face of competing demands. Champion-led projects generate meaningful learning from both success or failure.

*Enablers* are highly agreeable as leaders, sensitive to people's feelings and needs but – having low self-confidence – they are unable to deal with the conflict, which is part-and-parcel of conservation projects. Under their leadership, projects are easily captured by powerful actors. Failure is likely and learning seldom happens. Enablers are best engaged in project support rather than leadership.

*Crazy makers* are incompetents steeped in bad traits. These are power-seeking, narcissistic disruptors; when in leadership, they overturn or dishonour all conventions that do not serve their interests directly. They co-operate only with those subservient to their whims. Their Machiavellian tactics force out of the enterprise all those with integrity. Projects may succeed in those aspects where the conservation outcomes coincide with the personal goals of crazy makers. Feedback-driven learning aimed at improving implementation effectiveness does not take place. Crazy makers should stick to crime or politics; they can make no meaningful contribution to conservation.

Imbued with self-confidence and self-efficacy, but lacking in emotional intelligence, *liver eaters* display a leadership style focused on achieving project milestones and targets. Like crazy makers, liver eaters are happy to marginalise and bully project participants to achieve their aims. Unlike crazy makers, liver eaters are diligent, strategic and efficient, and are successful in ticking boxes. They do not accommodate criticism, and learning is invariably on their terms.

The corporatisation of conservation organisations, which began in the 1980s[3], has resulted in the widespread emergence of liver eaters in leadership positions. This is a shame, because liver eaters are seldom team builders, and their impact has little legacy. Ideally, they should answer to champions, who can direct their energy to the technical components of a conservation project.

During my time as a scientific advisor to conservation projects, I served under leaders belonging to all four quadrants in Figure 1. Of these, a minority were champions or enablers, only two were crazy makers and most were liver eaters. The obsession of liver-eater leaders with maintaining control and concentrating power undermined collaboration and trust. They did this by consolidating and strengthening the support of project funders by projecting efficiency and effectiveness in achieving project goals, and by silencing through exclusion perspectives different from their own. Projects were "implemented" in full, on time and within budget. However, little real learning occurred – the "lessons learned" sections of the final reports were weak, often verging on fictional progress.

As leaders, enablers were good at involving diverse groups of stakeholders in implementation projects and initially presenting project visions and goals in a way that inspired participation. However, they were decidedly less successful in reconciling stakeholders' wide-ranging views into coherent strategies for implementation. The confusion that ensued provided a platform for project capture by crazy makers, and was the reason that demoralised stakeholders withdrew from active participation. Without project coherence, learning is difficult, if not impossible.

I was fortunate to experience the leadership style of only two crazy makers. They were adept at manipulation and soon created a clique of adherents, imbuing the project with a them-and-us conformation, which undermined collaboration. After alienating key stakeholders, momentum stalled, and the protagonists were forced to resign, but significant harm had already been done. Crazy makers appeared frequently among some stakeholder groups, where they did their best to derail progress, usually based on unreasonable demands underpinned by victimhood and exclusion.

Participating in champion-led projects was a delight. Here high empathy and efficiency coincided to produce leaders who appreciated project complexity and dynamics, encouraged learning from both success and failure, and could resist disruption by malcontents. Champions were transparent about their intentions but always willing, when convinced by stakeholders, colleagues or themselves, to change course. Many of the projects that were initiated under their leadership remain active today.

I presented the leadership scheme at a few conferences and then let it lie dormant for more than a decade. Later, I was to learn that I had not come up with anything original. Almost a century ago, psychologists had concluded that, in collaborative workplace settings, good leaders prioritised human needs over production outcomes and were highly confident in their leadership roles.[4] However, the impact of different leadership styles on conservation projects continued to pique my curiosity. I knew there was a huge scientific and popular literature on leadership and felt compelled to read some of what others have written. So, I took a splash into the literature.

## A splash into the literature

On approaching my retirement at the end of 2020, I decided to start reviewing the leadership literature – an overwhelming task. A relatively recent meta-analysis, based on a review of 864 papers, identified 40 leadership styles.[5] By sampling papers, books and podcasts on different approaches to understanding leadership, I hoped that some useful generalisations would be revealed to me. And, indeed, a pattern emerged for two dominant and contrasting leadership styles: corporate and compassionate (Figure 2).

The corporate leadership style invariably identifies self-confidence (or self-efficacy)[6] as a key trait (Figure 2). It relies on a hierarchical management structure, crystallised at the height of modernism in the late-18th century. It was underpinned by the materialistic, individualistic and technocratic norms adopted by the industrialising countries of the West at that time. Corporate leadership developed hand in hand with capitalism but was tempered by the post World War II era of welfare. It returned with renewed vigour in the 1970s, when market liberalisation ushered in the neoliberal era, characterised by increasing globalisation of trade and growing consumption. A form of corporate leadership that is autocratic, hypercompetitive, hubristic and narcissistic, prevails among political and social movements on the far right.

Compassionate (or servant) leadership is underpinned by an ability to act cognitively upon the emotions arising from empathy in a way that contributes to the well-being of others; emotions arising from empathy alone are not always benevolent, at least to the outgroup.[7] In many ways, compassionate leadership is a reaction to corporate leadership and is strongly espoused as the style of the liberal left. This leadership is imbued with caring and collaboration, focusing on the process rather than the outcomes, and puts the common good above individual needs. It seeks to reduce hierarchy in the management structure.

Is compassionate leadership what we should be seeking in conservation champions? Well, actually, no. A champion certainly needs sufficient emotional intelligence to inspire an inclusive, collaborative process, and to limit the impact on project progress of manipulative power seekers. But a champion also needs sufficient confidence and efficacy to ensure the delivery of explicit project goals in full and on time. In short, a champion needs to marshal the best of both corporate and compassionate leadership styles.

There is a large literature on the expression of the "Big Five" personality traits in different leadership styles (see, for example, Bartone et al.[8]). This literature shows, unsurprisingly, that corporate-style leaders are highly extravert (bold) and conscientious (efficacious) and have low agreeableness (compassion) and emotional stability. The more extreme forms of this style may promote dark triad personality traits of Machiavellianism,

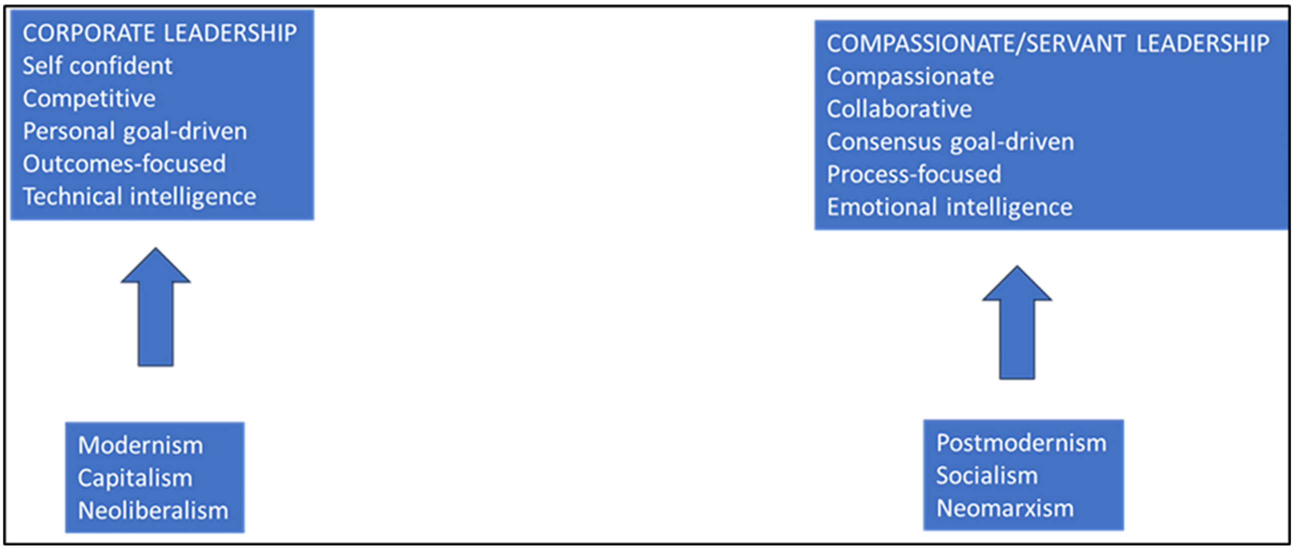


**Figure 2:** Two contrasting approaches to leadership fostered by different cultural traditions.

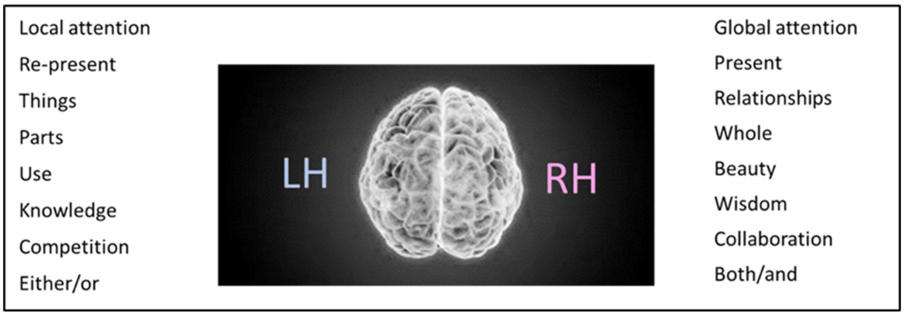


**Figure 3:** The divided brain hypothesis: the different ways the world is perceived by the left (LH) and right (RH) brain hemispheres.

narcissism, and psychopathy. Such leaders are autocratic, domineering and nasty people. On the other hand, compassionate-style leaders have high agreeableness and openness to novelty.

I was intrigued by the research on leadership in evolutionary psychology (see, for example, Gilbert and Basran[9]). This approach, informed by Darwinian evolution, explains this dichotomy of styles – conceptualised as antisocial and prosocial leadership – in terms of different strategies for achieving status, protection from enemies, and other benefits that improve survival and reproduction. Antisocial leadership, which is hypercompetitive and selfish, is driven by inferiority avoidance and has been linked to dark triad traits. Prosocial leadership achieves social status by adopting a compassionate and inclusive approach.

I am only too aware that my delving into the literature is superficial and selective; the few paragraphs above do not, by a long shot, do justice to the massive literature on personality traits and leadership styles. This notwithstanding, I found little in theory and practice on how these dichotomised leadership styles could be synergised to reveal the combination of traits required for a conservation champion. Was there a theory rooted in biology that could explain the trait profile required for effective leadership in conservation?

## Enter the divided brain hypothesis

A few years ago, I was introduced to Iain McGilchrist's *The Master and His Emissary.*[10] I devoured the book and his subsequent masterpiece: *The Matter with Things.*[11] This is not the place, nor is there the space, to discuss the vast and profound findings revealed by these books. Suffice to say that McGilchrist's exhaustive review of the scientific literature shows that the left and right hemispheres of our brains attend to the world in entirely different ways and perform very different roles in our survival (Figure 3). This divided brain hypothesis, which is now widely supported by neurological and neuropsychological research, posits that both hemispheres are required to successfully surmount life's challenges, but to do so, the right hemisphere must lead decision-making.

The left hemisphere, which controls the right side of the body, is focused on acquiring resources; its attention is local. It also comprehends the world as disembodied – a machine-like perspective focused on the explicit, deconstructed world of things and bits that are useful for survival. In a sense, it operates like an algorithm, driven by logical, rational rules (either/or) that it is ever reluctant to abandon (it is stubbornly optimistic). The only emotion housed in the left hemisphere is anger, so it is little surprise that it is the locus for competitive behaviour. To summarise: the left hemisphere represents a grasping, machine-like world, focused on extracting resources without moral constraint. Its evolutionary importance is in ensuring survival in the face of limited resources.

On the other hand, the right hemisphere is aware of the broader context of experience (it attends globally). It perceives the unsaid (what is implicit and intuitive) and the embodied; the right hemisphere is the seat of our prosocial emotions – the temple of emotional intelligence. This hemisphere perceives a world where the whole is different from the sum of its parts, where interconnected relationships among humans are cherished, and a world of beauty and wisdom that acknowledges the coincidence of opposites (both/and). In summary, the right hemisphere perceives a cautious, connected world where co-operation provides the selective advantage for survival.

Looking through the lens of personality traits, the left hemisphere is associated with high self-confidence (high extraversion), high conscientiousness for routine tasks (to which its algorithmic wiring is ideally suited), an absence of compassion (low agreeableness), and low emotional stability (or high neuroticism). The left hemisphere is also the seat of the dark triad. Moreover, the left hemisphere is not open to experimenting with novelty; as pointed out above, it prefers sticking to the known. This bundle of traits effectively describes many features of the hubristic, command-and-control, corporate and antisocial leadership.

The right hemisphere is open to novelty (high openness), is compassionate (high agreeableness), emotionally stable (low neuroticism), and shows high conscientiousness for embodied tasks. It thus sees and responds to the world very differently from the left hemisphere. Actions spawned in the right hemisphere are responsive to context, are influenced by the implicit, are often intuitive, and place great emphasis on the integrity and well-being of the group. The modus operandi of the right hemisphere strongly resembles the hallmarks of compassionate or prosocial leadership.

Where does this biological, brain hemisphere based understanding of traits get us? If corporate leadership resides principally in the left hemisphere, and compassionate leadership in the right, conservation leadership requires the contribution of both. For example, effective conservation leadership requires an ability to operate in both abstract and embodied modes, and in the appropriate context, to prioritise group needs by withholding compassion for troublemakers. So how would a good conservation leader's brain operate to bridge these hemisphere-based perspectives?

McGilchrist provides a solution. In the left hemisphere, whatever is perceived is re-presented to the right hemisphere where decisions are made based on context and experience. In this sense, as conceptualised by McGilchrist[10], the left hemisphere is the Emissary and the right hemisphere is the Master (Figure 3). Humans (and most other animals) need the input of both hemispheres for their survival, but it is the role of the right hemisphere to decide what to do with the data provided by the left hemisphere.

In cases where the left hemisphere is in control of the right hemisphere – through right hemisphere trauma, mental illness (notably schizophrenia) and a host of genetic, environmental and cultural factors – there is a clear bias for left-hemisphere behaviours. Political leaders with left-hemisphere dominance are prone to authoritarianism, tyranny and brutality – think of Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Mao Zedong, PW Botha, Donald Trump and Jacob Zuma, to name a few from the past 100 years.

In a fascinating and richly researched account, McGilchrist[10] shows that there have been shifts in hemispheric dominance over the course of Western civilisation. For example, the Renaissance (15th and 16th centuries) was a time of great cultural and scientific innovation, when leaders fostered the arts and sciences and philosophy flourished. Clearly, the cultural and environmental context of the time encouraged the adoption of right-hemisphere worldviews (and the decline of left-hemisphere ones that dominated the preceding Dark Age). This right-hemisphere perspective then spreads, meme- or virus-like through the population, largely via imitation of peers for status-seeking.[12,13]

A way of visualising this process of shifting patterns of hemisphere dominance is shown in Figure 4. Imagine assessing for compassion among a randomly chosen sample of a population wherein each individual is exposed to the same environmental and cultural forces. Under these conditions, the potential proclivity for this trait should be under strong genetic control and be normally distributed (centre panel in Figure 4), with a minority of the population showing a strong left-hemisphere (antisocial) bias, a similar minority with a strong right-hemisphere (prosocial) bias, and the majority being somewhere between these extremes. It is this middle majority that is vulnerable to the cultural and environmental forces that underpin a shift in hemispheric dominance. Powerful leaders unleash memes that reflect their hemispheric biases, and these are spread rapidly among their beneficiaries.

## What does this mean for conservation leadership?

Today the West finds itself in a state where the social fabric is being shredded by a contest between two increasingly authoritarian and polarised ideologies: neoliberalism on the political right and postmodernism on the political left. Both, however, are associated with left-hemisphere bias. Postmodernism denies the existence of enduring values related to science, reason, truth and beauty – all values that are strongly associated with the right hemisphere.[10] In its view, all these values are socially constructed, transitory and relative – a view that depletes them of their meaning.[11] Postmodernism's focus on deconstructionism and group identity reflects a left-hemisphere bias for reductionism in contrast to right-hemisphere holism. Neoliberalism is an outgrowth of the modern era that has promoted greed and exploitation on an unprecedented scale, fosters competition as the driver of progress, and has enthusiastically adopted the abstract and disembodied world of digital technology. All of these are left-hemisphere perspectives. Both ideologies are framed in terms of victimhood: Postmodernists view power as the currency of oppression by an unjustly empowered elite, and Neoliberals view social justice as a threat to personal freedom for accumulating capital.

Conservation projects being implemented today will likely not avoid confronting the opposing claims of both the authoritarian far right and far left. Both provide different perspectives on conservation – the former

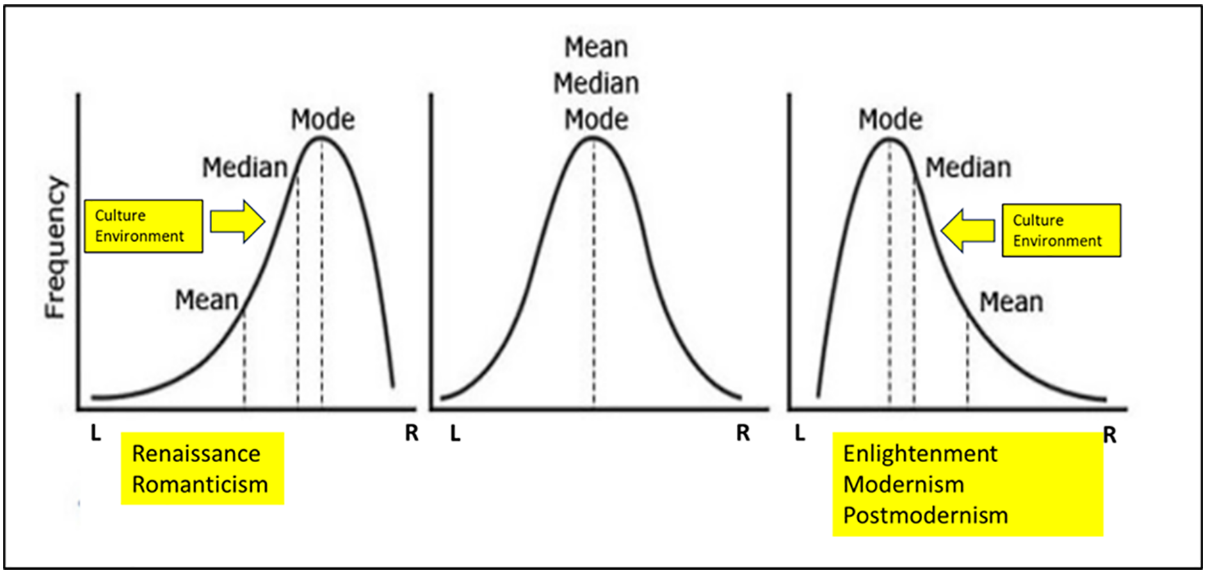


**Figure 4:** Central panel: distribution of a trait associated with poles of left-hemisphere (L) and right-hemisphere (R) dominance in a model population. Right panel: a population subject to cultural and environmental forces that promote left-hemisphere bias. Left panel: a population subject to forces that promote right-hemisphere dominance.

focused on exploitation and the latter on environmental justice. Given this socially and politically fraught context, it is most important that those who emerge as conservation leaders should have right-hemisphere dominance but be capable of using the information provided by the left hemisphere wisely. Invoking again McGilchrist's[10] metaphor, the Master should rule over the Emissary. This implies a coincidence of opposite leadership styles, where compassion, collaboration, flexibility and openness (right hemisphere) are informed by focus, knowledge, explicit strategies and attention to detail (left hemisphere). A conservation leader should also have the emotional intelligence (right hemisphere) and confidence (left hemisphere) to counter disruptions imposed by those seeking to manipulate participants and processes for gaining power and influence.

Circling back to Figure 1, conservation champions combine left-hemisphere-biased, corporate leadership (high self-confidence) with right-hemisphere-biased, compassionate and emotionally intelligent leadership. However, this is insufficient: the prosocial mind must control the efficacious, target-driven mind. Given their mix of hemisphere biases, champions should be able to direct the energies of liver eaters (efficacious, antisocial) to tasks not requiring prosocial proclivities. They should also be able to marshal the empathy of enablers to lead those parts of the project requiring strong interpersonal relations. The high self-confidence and emotional intelligence of champions enable them to counter the devious machinations of crazy makers and neutralise them before they cause further disruption.

I recommend that only champions should be appointed to lead conservation implementation projects. The perils of appointing leaders with psychopathic tendencies (crazy makers and liver eaters) are large. They rapidly amass power and adherents through patronage, propaganda and exclusion, and, if unchecked, can ruin institutions. While seldom garnering more than 30% of the populace's support, psychopathic authoritarian leaders are prone to using unethical means to retain and expand their power. They should never be appointed to leadership positions requiring collaboration.[14]

## Concluding remarks

Research indicates that a divided brain is deeply embedded in our evolution. This makes evolutionary sense. The left hemisphere is focused on prey (seeds, worms, leaves) while the right hemisphere is focused on the predator (lions, eagles, snakes). Survival means using them both but letting the right hemisphere decide when it is time for fight or flight.

Only humans seem capable of creating cultures that enable shifts in hemisphere dominance. Graber and Wengrow[15] show that, throughout prehistory, tyrannical (left hemisphere) and egalitarian (right hemisphere) cultures have coexisted in space and replaced each other in time. McGilchrist[10] has shown that this pattern of hemisphere shift is a feature of Western history, and the same likely applies to the East.

What these histories tell us is that it is possible to shift hemisphere dominance. It behoves on all to spread conservation memes consistent with right-hemisphere values about nature. There are inklings in the air and flutterings in the leaves that the *zeitgeist* is shifting as right-hemisphere perspectives on common sense, meaning and freedom are gaining ground in many institutions. If this is true, then conservation leaders with right-hemisphere dominance will find an implementation context that is increasingly conducive to wise resolutions to conservation problems. If this is not true, then *a natação continua*!

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## Declarations

I have no competing interests to declare. I have no AI or LLM use to declare.

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