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A methodological assessment and reflection on member checking as a form of participant validation for conservation social science

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Abstract

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Qualitative approaches are increasingly applied in conservation social science, yet methodological reflection remains limited. Member checking, a process of returning findings to participants for feedback, is widely recognized outside conservation as a means to enhance rigor and reciprocity, but it is rarely reported in conservation research. This paper assesses and reflects on the implementation of member checking within a participatory study on conservation crime prevention in Pù Mát National Park, Vietnam. The member checking process involved 18 sessions with 88 participants representing community members, park staff, nongovernmental organizations, and university researchers. Member checking was used to revisit and refine preliminary interpretations of data collected during previous fieldwork phases. Findings indicated that the process strengthened credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability of results while fostering transparency, accountability, and mutual learning. Challenges related to linguistic diversity, power asymmetries, and logistical constraints revealed limits to its universality as a validation tool. The future of member checking in conservation social science lies not in confirming findings but in fostering mutual learning. Member checking can help bridge methodological rigor and ethical practice, contributing to more equitable and

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of reflexive and participatory research into conservation practice.

INTRODUCTION

Conservation science has its roots in the natural sciences, with a strong emphasis on ecological patterns, species declines, and biodiversity metrics (Brittain et al., 2020; Teel et al., 2018). Decades ago, it became clear that the success of conservation hinges on social processes (Iwamura et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2025). Today, for conservation science and practice, there is unequivocal evidence that Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs), resource users, and other local relevant actors, such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), protected area management, or law enforcement, play a central role in shaping effective conservation outcomes (Bennett et al., 2017a; Fidler et al., 2022). Multilateral environmental agreements and international conventions and frameworks such as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES, 1975), the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations General Assembly 2015), the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES, 2019), and the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (CBD, 2022) call for systematic recognition, mainstreaming, and involvement of IPLCs in decision-making, as well as improved collaboration and inclusion in conservation research (Dawson et al., 2021; Iwamura et al., 2018; Newing et al., 2024).

In addition to mainstreaming conservation social science, qualitative and participatory methods have been increasingly used in conservation (Bennett et al., 2017b; Drury et al., 2011). For example, interviews and focus group discussions are widely used to support measurement of human values, beliefs, attitudes, and behavior in diverse conservation contexts (Bennett et al., 2017a; Nyumba et al., 2018). Qualitative approaches have expanded the toolkit available to researchers so that they can more holistically explore lived experiences, values, and social dynamics that drive or constrain conservation outcomes (Rust et al., 2017; Sutherland et al., 2018). Building on many qualitative traditions, participatory approaches aim to coproduce knowledge with, rather than about, local actors, emphasizing collaboration, reflexivity, and the integration of multiple knowledge systems (Khanyari et al., 2023; Newing et al., 2024; Reed, 2008). However, the strengths of qualitative and participatory approaches in conservation social science can be degraded when local actors perceive the research as being extractive (Massarella et al., 2024; Nyumba et al., 2018). Extractive means that data and insights are collected from local actors for the researcher's analysis and aims.

Extractive research may erode trust in science and scientists, reduce IPLCs' willingness to collaborate, and debase the legitimacy and relevance of scientific findings (Engen et al., 2019; Newing et al., 2024; Sterling

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of 170 focus group studies in conservation social science found widespread shortcomings in methodological reporting and concluded that the importance of participant validation had not been sufficiently recognized to ensure resonance with lived experiences (Nyumba et al., 2018). Such shortcomings may compromise the trustworthiness of qualitative findings—reducing confidence that results accurately represent participants' realities and perspectives. Conservation scientists and practitioners have called for increased publication of reflective work on methods and positionality, rather than outcome-only publishing, to both strengthen ethical practices and guide future research (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012; Brittain et al., 2020). Overcoming these shortcomings is possible through participatory methodologies that explicitly address trustworthiness through reciprocity, transparency, and member checking. These are mechanisms that also foster mutual learning and build resonance between researchers and participants (Baldauf, 2020; Newing et al., 2024).

Member checking, a form of participant or respondent validation, involves returning preliminary findings to participants for review, clarification, or correction (Guba, 1981; Thomas, 2017). Member checking can take several forms, such as returning transcripts for verification, inviting feedback on interpreted data or preliminary results, or re-engaging participants through open conversations to refine meaning (Birt et al., 2016). In qualitative research, member checking is widely regarded as one of the most powerful techniques for enhancing the trustworthiness of data and interpretation and for avoiding extraction (Kornbluh, 2015; Lincoln & Guba et al., 1985). Member checking allows participants to review and refine researchers' interpretations, thereby reducing bias, strengthening reflexivity, and deepening understanding of the research topic and its complexities (Birt et al., 2016; Motulsky, 2021; Schafer & Phillippi, 2025). In practice, member checking typically occurs after initial data collection but before final analysis, serving as a bridge between interpretation and validation rather than as an independent data collection step. Although it can complement mixed methods, member checking is most often associated with qualitative inquiry. However, qualitative research encompasses diverse epistemological and ontological positions, and a researcher's methodological approach shapes how member checking is designed and interpreted and which dimensions of research quality it is intended to strengthen (Motulsky, 2021; Urry et al., 2024). Across research disciplines, member checking centers on processes of meaning-making—how participants interpret, negotiate, and respond to a researcher's representations of their lived experiences. Its purpose is twofold: to enhance the credibility and reflexivity of qualitative interpretations and to ensure resonance with participants' realities (Nyumba et al., 2018). However, member checking remains debated, some scholars argue that participants may not be positioned to assess theoretical interpretations and that the process can generate new

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Member checking is widely used in education, psychology, and medicine (Motulsky, 2021). Similar to medicine, conservation relies heavily on practitioner experience and often operates under time pressure. In both medicine and conservation, without critical reflection and monitoring, temporal pressures can increase the risk that researchers rely on ad hoc practices or treat personal positive experiences as sufficient evidence of methodological value. Alternatively, methodological innovations may be judged against anecdotal impressions rather than evidence (Pullin & Knight, 2001). Member checking may fall into this pattern when its potential is assumed or ignored without empirical reflection on its actual effectiveness. Despite its documented benefits in other disciplines, it remains rarely applied in conservation research, leaving its contributions and limitations poorly understood: a systematic review of 227 interview-based conservation social science studies found that only 14% reported returning results to participants (Young et al., 2018). This information helps illustrate the rarity of such validation practices and the lack of detailed reporting on their design and outcomes. There is also a notably small knowledge base of studies exploring how participatory research methods can improve the credibility, ethics, and utility of scientific findings, particularly in rural or marginalized communities affected by conservation policy (Anney, 2014; Gregg et al., 2022; Khanyari et al., 2023; Tisdell, 1995).

This study aimed to assess and reflect upon member checking for conservation social science with three interrelated objectives: describe the design and implementation of member checking in a conservation social science research context; assess how member checking affects the trustworthiness of findings; and reflect on member checking by comparing common, published critiques with insights from practical implementation. The conservation research study was grounded in a constructivist epistemology (Lincoln & Guba et al., 1985), which assumes that knowledge is co-constructed through interactions between researchers and participants rather than discovered as an objective truth. Within this paradigm, the quality of research was evaluated by the trustworthiness criteria of credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability. Although systematic procedures such as triangulation and peer debriefing were used to enhance trustworthiness, member checking was not intended to test findings against positivist notions of validity or replicability. Rather, it examined whether interpretations resonated with participants' experiences while enhancing transparency and reflexivity in the analytic process (Schafer & Phillippi, 2025).

METHODS

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Aim and design

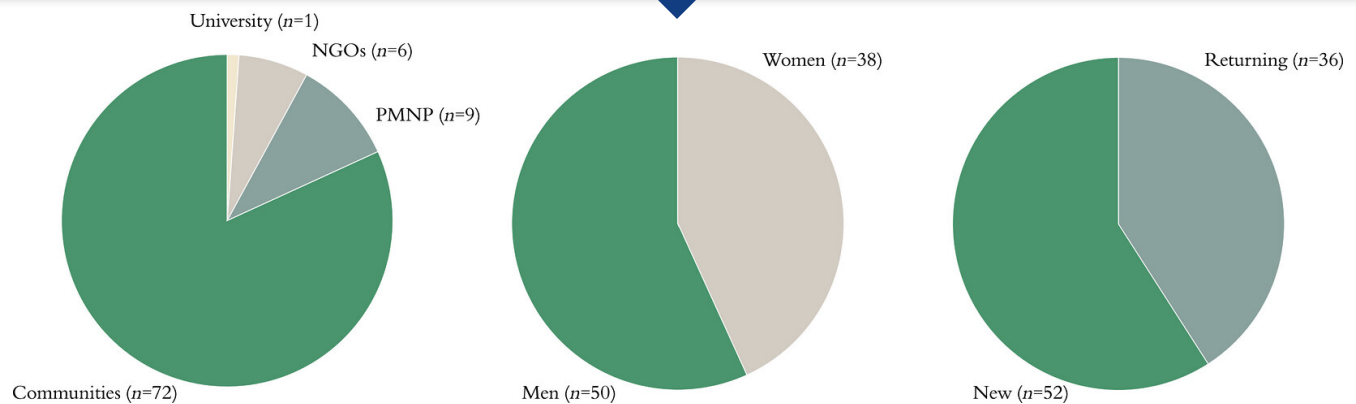
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the project's research objectives was to assess how negative stressors (hereafter strains) impact community members and pressure them to use illegal or deviant behavior to cope with the strains. The project followed a three-phase research design. Two early fieldwork phases (January and October 2023) generated preliminary qualitative interpretations and served as the basis for the third member checking phase (2024). Synthesized findings, rather than raw data, were returned to participants for review, clarification, and refinement (see Appendix S3). The specific objectives and contextual details of the research project are not presented in this paper to maintain focus on the methodological assessment (see Xu et al. [2026] and Rakowski et al. [2026] for additional information).

Member checking was designed to include actors involved in or affected by conservation efforts in PMNP. Participants were selected to represent diverse perspectives and build on scientist–community research relationships established during earlier data collection phases. Four actor groups were included in the member checking sessions: community members, park staff, conservation NGOs, and local university researchers (Figure 1). Including these actor groups served both analytical and research ethics purposes, ensuring a diversity of insights across social positions and institutions and fostering transparency and trust for potential future collaborations. All sessions were designed to follow a similar structure yet leave room for adaptations tailored to actor groups (Appendix S1). The format of the sessions was designed with local collaborators, considering the cultural and contextual situations of the participants, no harm, and inclusivity as best as possible (López-Zerón et al. 2021). The codesign process included two online preparation meetings and one in-person meeting at Vinh University the week before member checking data collection to discuss the questions, prepare visualization materials, and train interpreters and research assistants (Appendix S2). All research activities were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Maryland (#1993659-1). Required Vietnamese permits and authorizations, as well as informed consent procedures, were followed.

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[< Back](#)**FIGURE 1**
[Open in figure viewer](#) | [PowerPoint](#)

Composition of participants in member checking sessions conducted in and around Pù Mát National Park, Vietnam (December 2024; $n = 88$).

Sampling and implementation

Member checking sessions were conducted in November–December 2024, following two data collection phases in 2023 with 109 participants (see Rakowski et al., 2026). A total of 18 sessions were conducted: 14 in seven communities across PMNP and four with members of the park staff, two NGOs working in PMNP, and Vinh University. We attempted to include participants who had participated in at least one previous data collection phase, yet this was not always possible. Because the aim of the member checking sessions was to obtain feedback on preliminary findings at the community and park levels, the primary inclusion criterion was participants who either lived in the communities or worked at the park level. Each individual was assumed to possess relevant knowledge based on their residence or work and was therefore well-positioned to comment on the preliminary findings. Inviting new participants to join the session was also conducted to foster inclusivity, participation, and additional contextual depth. Thus, participants and session characteristics varied (Table 1). Across all groups, member checking sessions followed a consistent core structure: introduction; clarification of the theoretical strain concept; presentation of preliminary interpretations and findings; feedback on the accuracy and completeness of previously identified strains, including their presence or absence in the community; and discussion of their spatial distribution with the community. Have questions about this content? **Try AI Companion.** BETA of the ranking of strains according to their perceived importance and discussion of interrelationships among them. Every session was followed by a closed-door face-to-face peer debriefing among the

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(Appendix S1). Procedures were adapted (Barber & Walczak, 2009; Lincoln & Guba et al., 1985) to address potential dataset or result mismatches, such as contradictory statements in terms of illegal activities or stated versus observed behavior, or necessary adaptations (e.g., in methodology or timing of the sessions to not interfere with women's care duties).

TABLE 1. Overview of participants, durations, and locations of member checking sessions conducted in and around Pù Mát National Park, Vietnam (November–December 2024).

Participant type	Participants	Number of participants, men/women	Duration (h)	Member checking session location	New participants absolute	New participants %
Community members	Community 1	10, 5/5	1.25	Village head's house	10	100%
	Community 2	11, 5/6	1.5	Village head's house	7	63%
	Community 3	8, 4/4	1	Community center	3	37%
	Community 4	9, 4/5	1	Community center	3	33%
	Community 5	13, 7/6	1	Community center	8	62%
	Community 6	12, 6/6	1	Community center	10	83%
	Community 7	9, 5/4	1.25	Community center	6	67%
Institutional	NGO 1	1, 1/0	0.75	Cafe	0	0%

We used a purposive sampling strategy to select participants (Forest Protection Department, FPD) or staff members of the scientific department. The target group size was 10–15 participants. Although selection criteria were communicated to a designated

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PMNP. The 2-h session was more formal than the community sessions and followed a presentation-style format using PowerPoint. It covered aggregated findings from previous data collection phases. Following the presentation, participants broke into two self-selected groups to review strain maps and rate the importance of each of the nine individual strains on a Likert-type scale (1 = *low importance*, 4 = *high importance*), while also noting perceived interconnections (Croasmun & Ostrom, 2011; Joshi et al., 2015). A 4-point Likert-type scale was chosen to prevent a neutral midpoint and thereby reduce ambivalence in interpretation (Nowlis et al., 2002; Weijters et al., 2010). Each breakout group was facilitated by two research team members. Breakout groups were conducted to elicit feedback on the accuracy and reliability of previously collected data, particularly the spatial distribution of strains; facilitate a comparison of strain importance across the park; and generate discussion on any interconnections between strains and conservation crime. Breakout groups were engaged via guiding questions on the relevance of the findings and the value of returning data to local actors. The session ended with a short gathering of the large group to thank participants.

Community member sampling and recruitment focused on villages that had participated in at least one earlier data collection phase. Geographic representation was another criterion, ensuring inclusion of all seven communes of PMNP. The sampling design included all major ethnic groups living in the area. Within each selected village, participants were chosen to ensure gender and age diversity. Typically, 10 participants per village were invited—five women and five men—preferably individuals who had participated in earlier data collection activities. Member checking sessions were conducted in seven villages and lasted between 60 and 90 min. Although village heads were asked to recruit participants based on the inclusion criteria, group composition varied due to logistical constraints and changes in collaborators, resulting in a mix of returning and new participants (Table 1). All sessions used a focus group format that was structured yet conversational and that began with an introduction, followed by the division of the members into two smaller, gender-segregated breakout groups (approximately five participants in each group, chosen by the participants themselves). This structure was intended to help mitigate potential power dynamics between genders and encourage open participation. Within each group, the concept of strain was clarified using pictorial representations of individual strains codeveloped with the research team. The strains were discussed individually for clarity, followed by invitations for participants to share how these strains manifested in their communities and whether any were missing. To help validate and deepen earlier findings, participants were asked to rate the importance of each strain based on frequency count and perceived interconnections. Discussions were guided toward identifying relationships between strains and, where appropriate, connections to coping mechanisms such

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participation (discussion prompts and session questions are in Appendix [S1](#) and adapted from McKim [[2023](#)]).

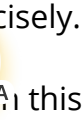
For NGO and academic representatives, opportunistic and purposive sampling was applied depending on availability and expertise. Participants included staff responsible for community engagement, individuals with in-depth knowledge of illegal wildlife activities, and those familiar with the cultures of the ethnic groups living in the park. Where possible, participants with prior involvement were prioritized for inclusion. Sessions with NGO and university partners were more informal and adapted to participants' time constraints and expertise. Each session lasted approximately 1 h and followed a conversation-based format. After a summary of findings, participants reviewed the strain maps and were invited to reflect on spatial patterns, rank strain importance freely, and discuss potential relationships between strains and conservation crime. These sessions were less structured than the community or PMNP sessions but provided complementary, targeted insights due to participants' professional experience. Together, the 14 sessions provided a process for revisiting earlier findings with diverse actor groups, allowing for verification, reflection, and refinement of the previously collected data and preliminary results. By engaging participants across community, institutional, and academic levels, member checking not only enhanced the inclusiveness of the research but also generated insights into its methodological value.

RESULTS

One of the main aims of member checking is to help strengthen the rigor and trustworthiness of findings from previous data collection phases, using the four trustworthiness criteria: credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba et al., [1985](#)). Collectively and independently, these criteria help assess whether findings are well-grounded in participants' experiences, consistently derived, and transparent in their interpretation (Table [2](#)). In this study, which involved three fieldwork phases, our cumulative data collection and analysis progressively sharpened our understanding of both the local context and the broader knowledge gaps surrounding conservation crime prevention. By comparing and synthesizing findings from earlier phases, we were able to identify where information was still missing, such as how different issues related to one another and how people perceived their relative importance. Thus, this iterative process informed the design of the member checking sessions, allowing us to refine our findings more precisely.

TABLE 2. Trustwo

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		concept		checking)
Credibility	Confidence in the truth of the findings; ensuring results are accurate and believable from the participants' perspective.	Internal validity	Prolonged engagement, persistent observation, thick descriptions, negative case analysis, triangulation of data sources, reflexive journaling, and member checking.	Participants reviewed, confirmed, refined, or corrected earlier interpretations; added examples that clarified categories; and improved resonance between findings and lived experience. Member checking directly tested interpretive accuracy and increased confidence in the findings.
Confirmability	Degree to which findings are shaped by participants rather	Objectivity	Reflexive journaling, triangulation, maintaining an	Peer debriefings conducted with interpreters and research assistants,

As many participants knew the research team from earlier data collection phases, most participants engaged openly, including on sensitive topics such as illegal activities and emotional experiences, during member checking sessions compared to during previous visits. The feedback and additional information helped enhance the research both for the participants and for the scientific audience: participants expanded the breadth and depth of the dataset, whereas their validation strengthened the transparency and reliability of interpretations. Incorporating these inputs also helped refine the inductive coding framework used for the overall research analysis (Rakowski et al., 2026). Participant contributions helped clarify ambiguous categories, add additional examples, expand on thematic aspects, and address new themes and issues. These iterative inputs helped create a credible and internally consistent representation of local experiences in the research. Documenting these adjustments and how they shaped subsequent analysis improved confirmability by making the

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contexts, further supported their transferability to other communities facing similar challenges. Collectively, these outcomes showed that member checking strengthened all four dimensions of trustworthiness, enhancing the validity, reliability, and ethical grounding of the overall study (Table 2).

Member checking, although widely recognized as a valuable tool for enhancing rigor, is also sometimes associated with concerns about epistemological assumptions, feasibility, and ethics (Angen, 2000; Birt et al., 2016). Although our member checking was conducted within a conservation social science research project in PMNP, we also considered it within the context of the relevant literature to reflect on how common critiques of the approach were encountered in practice. Thus, we were able to examine both the potential for and limitations of member checking and identify applications and recommendations for conservation science and practice.

Balancing validation and coproduction of meaning

One critique of member checking concerns an epistemological mismatch between the intent of the researcher and the capacity or interest of participants to evaluate theoretical constructs in pursuit of validity (Angen, 2000; Morse, 1994; Sandelowski, 1993). As anthropologists have long documented, simply belonging to a culture does not necessarily confer the analytical distance or conceptual vocabulary needed to interpret it in scientific terms—just as being alive does not make one a biologist (Reynoso, 1998). This points to a broader issue of epistemological and even ontological mismatch between academic and local ways of knowing (Blaser, 2009). Here, we used coproduction to refer to the coproduction of meaning within member checking encounters—a dialogic process of jointly refining interpretations—rather than coproduction as a research methodology across the full study design. Coproduction varied among participant groups' abilities to engage with the theory that was part of our research: institutional actors were comfortable discussing conceptual frameworks, whereas these concepts were less accessible to community members. Although theoretical language sometimes posed a barrier for the latter, participants from all groups readily engaged with the central question of whether relationships existed between experiencing the strains and illegal coping behaviors (e.g., conservation crime). These differences in capacity and interest shaped how participants engaged with the process: coproduction enabled each group to contribute from their own point of view through theoretical reasoning for institutional actors and through concrete, experience-based examples for community members. Several key research themes proved effective in connecting abstract concepts to lived experience. Several participants added examples that broadened our understanding. The sessions also shifted the lead researcher's role from interviewer to

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their views, and everyone seemed to conclude that the research activities were more satisfying than previous fieldwork sessions. Overall, coproduction and the use of visual tools helped reduce—but could not fully eliminate—epistemological mismatches among participants. We assessed this critique to be moderately applicable to conservation social science, as differences in theoretical accessibility persisted despite efforts to bridge them through coproduction.

Data consistency and iterative learning

Another critique associated with member checking is the risk of data inconsistency, which occurs when participant feedback contradicts findings based on previous measures. However, published studies rarely report how researchers respond when such discrepancies arise (Birt et al., 2016; Caretta & Pérez, 2019). In our conservation research context in PMNP, some feedback from member checking sessions challenged previous interpretations, particularly regarding the perceived importance of different themes and issues. For example, qualitative analysis of earlier interview data identified certain topics as prominent, but during member checking sessions, participants reranked their importance and introduced additional examples that had not emerged before (Rakowski et al., 2026; Appendix S3). We did not interpret these differences as contradictions but as reflections of earlier methodological limitations. Specifically, the initial content analysis was conducted under conditions that limited rapport and included the presence of authorities, which likely constrained discussion of sensitive topics. Member checking, in contrast, allowed for a more open environment and iterative dialogue, helping contextualize and refine the earlier results. Feedback that diverged from earlier interpretations was documented and incorporated into the subsequent interpretation process. The sessions added explanatory depth, linking themes more clearly and revealing how priorities shifted when participants were engaged as co-interpreters of meaning rather than respondents to questions, as in the previous phases. Although the new data differed in emphasis from the earlier findings, we determined that this was not an inconsistency but evidence of methodological complementarity. Member checking helped address the limitations of the original approach by validating, expanding, and situating interpretations through participant feedback. Apparent discrepancies reflected the evolving and reflexive nature of qualitative understanding, supporting the argument that rigor derives from transparency and iterative refinement rather than stability alone (Nowell et al., 2017). We assessed this critique as low to moderate in relevance, as discrepancies arose but ultimately strengthened rather than undermined inter

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the research team and participants and among participants themselves, reflecting differences in gender, age, and social role. Older men or those in leadership positions often spoke more, whereas younger participants and women tended to defer responses. To help address this issue, we organized gender-disaggregated sessions with facilitators of corresponding genders and used interactive formats to encourage contributions from quieter participants. Conducting sessions without NGO or law enforcement representatives, meeting in local homes rather than ranger stations, and relying on a university-affiliated team also helped enable a more neutral environment. Intensive interpreter training proved critical for preventing the reproduction of power asymmetries; interpreters were encouraged to use inclusive facilitation styles that engaged participants regularly and equitably. In addition, we reflected on the importance of ensuring that member checking was not merely performative, recognizing that researchers must be prepared to meaningfully integrate participant feedback and adjust interpretations accordingly (Thomas, 2017). The extant literature has noted that participants rarely disagree with researchers' findings due to hierarchies of authority and education (Birt et al., 2016; Motulsky, 2021). In contrast, our participants appeared comfortable reranking the issues, suggesting that disagreement was possible. We attributed this openness to the visual materials, which made abstract findings tangible; the repeated visits and trust building; and the Vietnamese research assistants taking the leading role in the sessions. This structure may have reduced perceived authority and encouraged more candid dialogue (Urry et al., 2024).

Although we designed session formats with participants' needs and comfort in mind, the process was still organized around our own research objectives and timelines, reflecting another possible layer of researcher control and power within the participatory process. This approach also meant that the research team ultimately retained analytical authority, determining how the feedback was interpreted and incorporated (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009). Session strategies improved participation but did not eliminate underlying hierarchies. The positionality of the lead author, research assistants, and interpreters also may have shaped how participants perceived and responded. These power relations shaped who spoke, what was spoken about, what was considered legitimate knowledge, and how feedback was filtered through translation and interpretation. Participants familiar with the research team tended to speak more openly, even on sensitive topics, whereas new participants were more cautious. This contrast underscores how power structures are inevitable at the outset of fieldwork but can be mitigated through rapport-building and repeated engagement. Although our design and iterative approach

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shape interactions (Corbett et al., 2024; Eshjouw, 2021; Massarelli et al., 2021; Shackleton et al., 2023). Member checking created space for dialogue and recognition but could not fully

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and protected area management continue to privilege external perspectives (Corbera et al., 2024; Lanjouw, 2021). Acknowledging these tensions is vital for situational awareness and ethical reflexivity: participation alone does not automatically equal equity, and humility in interpretation is key to avoiding performative participation (Thomas, 2017). We assessed this critique to be moderately to highly applicable, given that structural and epistemic hierarchies persisted despite targeted efforts to mitigate them.

Participant fatigue and ethical responsibility

Member checking requires participants to re-engage with a research project to which they have already contributed, raising ethical and practical questions about potential fatigue and cognitive burden (Lloyd et al., 2024; Motulsky, 2021). Our sessions were voluntary, allowing participants to self-select and thereby reducing possible research fatigue. Many returning participants expressed appreciation across all groups, responding with enthusiasm. Some community members, NGO staff, and PMNP employees remarked that we were the first researchers to return with results and invite feedback, noting that such follow-up was unusual. This novelty may have superseded any sense of fatigue. To prevent overburdening participants, the research team designed sessions collaboratively with Vietnamese partners, testing timing and phrasing in advance. Each session lasted approximately 1 h to intentionally balance engagement with desired respect for participants' daily responsibilities. Workshops relied on printed visualizations rather than on electronics to maintain inclusivity for all literacy levels, and reciprocity gestures, such as small financial compensation and sharing printed photographs from earlier fieldwork, were appreciated as signs of recognition. Nonetheless, some community members appeared to experience greater cognitive burden, particularly those less fluent in Kinh Vietnamese, indicating that participation was not equally effortless across groups. These differences highlighted how linguistic and educational barriers can quietly shape comfort, comprehension, and energy levels in participatory settings (Amano & Berdejo-Espinola, 2025; Lee et al., 2014; Negret et al., 2022; Scheyvens, 2014). Recognizing these asymmetries underscored the importance of returning to share findings as an act of transparency and reciprocity, allowing participants to see how their contributions were interpreted and to clarify or refine them. In doing so, the sessions helped counteract the extractive nature of research that often characterizes conservation fieldwork (Caretta & Pérez, 2019). Transparency through sharing preliminary findings was widely valued, and for the first time, park authorities expressed interest in our results and recommendations.

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Practical adaptation and methodological flexibility

Member checking is criticized for being resource- and time-intensive and difficult to implement consistently across settings (Espedal, 2022). Fieldwork in PMNP confirmed these challenges but also underscored the value of adaptation and reflexivity in maintaining methodological rigor. Obtaining local permits and adhering to rigid fieldwork schedules limited flexibility, and cultural obligations, such as a period of mourning after a death in one community, required canceling a planned session that could not be rescheduled. We also had to adapt the ranking activity after the session with park staff: the Likert-type scale proved confusing, so we switched to open rankings. The inability to directly select participants, which depended on local gatekeepers, led to the inclusion of some new participants, affecting consistency. However, our findings suggested that including new participants from the same relevant actor group still yielded valid and meaningful feedback. In contexts where reconnecting with former participants is logistically difficult such as at remote, multilingual, or internationally situated field sites, participants with comparable experiences and roles can effectively represent shared perspectives (Urry et al., 2024). Despite these challenges, maintaining detailed documentation of such adjustments ensured transparency and dependability. Returning to present findings also shaped the research process more broadly by fostering scientific rigor through accountability and researcher humility. This approach encouraged novel opportunities for triangulation, reflection, and consultation with collaborators. Simplifying complex theoretical concepts into accessible visuals improved our own conceptual clarity, and the expectation of accountability strengthened long-term relationships with local partners. As the literature suggests, such reflexive accountability is central to maintaining rigor and ethical integrity in participatory research (Hamilton, 2020; Nowell et al., 2017). We assessed this critique to be highly applicable, as logistical, institutional, and temporal constraints repeatedly challenged consistent implementation and required ongoing adaptation. However, these challenges are not unique to member checking but characteristic of fieldwork in remote, multicultural conservation settings. Practical adaptability and flexibility are integral to conducting ethically sound and context-sensitive conservation research.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this Member checking as a method for conservation science to both rigorous science and

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Implications for conservation science

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2016; Sutherland et al., 2018). Understanding the quality of research depends on clear methodological principles and indicators, such as the widely used trustworthiness criteria credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability, that make qualitative work transparent and comparable across studies (Anney, 2014; Hammersley, 2007; Lincoln & Guba et al., 1985; Stahl & King, 2020). Applying these criteria is not merely procedural; without rigorous, transparent research, conservation decisions risk causing irreversible social or ecological harm (Cifdaloz et al., 2010). Our results showed that member checking can directly strengthen credibility and confirmability by validating interpretations with those whose experiences underpin the data, while enhancing transferability through the resonance of findings among new participants. Dependability was improved through systematic documentation of feedback and changes made throughout the iterative process. Documenting methodological reflections such as ours contributes to an emerging evidence base that will help allow cross-case comparisons and meta-analyses on participatory rigor and ethics in conservation research.

At a broader level, conservation science benefits from embracing diverse ways of knowing (Reed, 2008). Although traditional conservation research has relied on (post-)positivist assumptions suited to ecological inquiry, social dimensions of conservation often require reflexive and relational approaches (Moon & Blackman, 2014). Qualitative research spans multiple epistemological traditions, but many qualitative approaches emphasize plural and situated ways of knowing and foreground reflexivity in the research process. Member checking helps bridge these paradigms by embedding accountability and pluralism into data interpretation, thereby strengthening both the scientific and ethical foundations of conservation research. As interdisciplinary collaboration expands, maintaining explicit attention to qualitative rigor and epistemological diversity will be essential to sustain the credibility of conservation science (Anney 2014).

Implications for conservation practice

In practice, member checking underscored the importance of feedback loops between researchers and local actors, including IPLCs, NGOs, other researchers, and park authorities. Iterative exchanges can help ensure that conservation strategies such as livelihood alternative support or crime prevention are grounded in lived experience and local priorities and improve legitimacy and uptake (Bennett & Desautels, 2014; Reed, 2008; Yoniss et al., 2013). In many ways, the member checking process is a tool for reflection and recalibration, one that can help foster continuous learning within conservation systems (Gillson et al., 2019; Kaplan-Hallam & Bennett, 2018; Urry et al., 2024). This process aligns with broader participatory principles such as local

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Corpuz et al., 2020; Young et al., 2013; Zafra-Calvo et al., 2017). Because member checking is episodic, it offers a pragmatic middle ground between extractive one-off research and continuous coproduction, which can be resource-intensive or burdensome for participants (Urry et al., 2024).

When facilitated with humility, member checking can help support equity and epistemic justice by inviting reflection and disagreement rather than assuming consensus. In many conservation contexts, IPLCs have long been stigmatized, marginalized, or framed as obstacles to conservation, and their knowledge has often been coopted or devalued within scientific and management systems (Brockington et al., 2012; Holmes, 2007; Massarella et al., 2021). Engaging participants in critical dialogue about interpretations and inviting contestation—rather than passive validation—can help counter these colonial continuities, which are key to transformative change in conservation (Gurung et al., 2025). Member checking can therefore serve as a mechanism for recognition and voice, helping elevate perspectives historically excluded from decision-making and strengthen mutual understanding among relevant actor groups. These practices align with collaborative and transdisciplinary approaches, in which diverse perspectives and shared ownership are seen as prerequisites for socially just and sustainable conservation outcomes (Bennett et al., 2017a; Fidler et al., 2022; Latulippe & Klenk, 2020; Newing et al., 2024).

Member checking has the potential to evolve into a form of collaborative reflection (Urry et al., 2024), in which participant feedback informs future project stages, joint interventions, or comanagement initiatives. Framing member checking as an ongoing dialogue rather than a single validation step may open pathways to more transformative, power-aware conservation practices. Such approaches move toward what Brear (2019) describes as transformational validity, which is an emancipatory form of rigor grounded in shifting power relations and participant agency. Although still aspirational, this direction points to a future in which methodological rigor and social justice are not competing aims but mutually reinforcing goals for conservation science and practice.

Recommendations for member checking in conservation social science

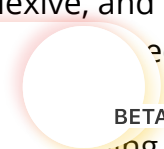
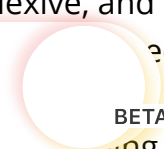
Our experience affirmed that member checking can be both feasible and valuable for conservation social science. Functioning as both a validation practice and a learning tool, member checking enhanced the trustworthiness and ethical grounding of our research, deepened rapport, and generated new insights that improved both data quality and local relevance. For future applications, we

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genuine reciprocity and accountability. Although not all projects may achieve coproduction, integrating structured feedback cycles from the outset can help shift research toward more participation and collaboration. Second, embrace reflexivity as rigor and integrate it throughout the process. Treat member checking not as a final verification step but as part of an ongoing, iterative research cycle that values learning, adaptation, and shared responsibility. Third, adapt methods to context and capacity. Use visual and dialogical tools that fit local realities and reduce linguistic or cognitive barriers, ensuring inclusivity across participants and actors. Whenever possible, pretest and codevelop these tools with local collaborators and interpreters. Finally, attend to power asymmetries. Acknowledge and mitigate hierarchies within and beyond the research team to avoid reproducing exclusion.

Although member checking is well accepted and commonly used in disciplines such as psychology, health, and education, it remains rare in conservation research. This gap likely reflects both limited training and exchange between qualitative social scientists and conservation practitioners, as well as the logistical, financial, or institutional challenges of returning to remote field sites. In some contexts, particularly where research is led by local institutions, the barriers may be less logistical than conceptual, indicating a broader need to strengthen theoretical and methodological integration between conservation and the social sciences. Our experience demonstrated that the benefits—enhanced rigor, reciprocity, and trustworthiness—outweighed the costs. Our assessment and reflections illustrate that although member checking strengthened the trustworthiness and ethical grounding of the research, it has limitations as a universal validation or coproduction tool in complex field settings. Its value lies less in confirming truth than in fostering iterative dialogue, mutual learning, and shared understanding. Approaching member checking as a participatory reflection process rather than a simple verification step may help align the tool more closely with the goals of equitable and inclusive conservation research. The member checking fieldwork also provided a deeper understanding of how conservation-related challenges manifest across diverse local contexts within and around the park and among different gender, ethnic, and actor groups. This approach offered reflexive insights that resonate with experiences and findings from other protected areas. These perspectives may support the transferability of lessons to conservation settings facing similar social and institutional dynamics. At a time when a crisis of trust in science threatens public confidence and policy legitimacy, the need for conservation research to be transparent, reflexive, and relational has never been greater. Have questions about this content? **Try AI Companion.**  **BETA**  **edibility, documenting** **competence, go** **immenting** **processes and sharing results with those affected, may contribute to rebuilding this trust, not only within conservation but also across science more broadly.**

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Supporting Information

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