

Conservation and the real world

1. Conservation as a savior of a pink world

Six years ago, I started my biology studies with the intention to eventually have enough knowledge to represent the “voice of nature”. Constantly hearing about ongoing global change and the sixth mass extinction, surrounded by biologists and NGO activists during my studies, I have never questioned my career dream to become conservation biologist and contribute to nature protection. There was nothing more self-explanatory than the need to safeguard life on this planet. Putting up a fence, declaring a protected area, and banning the excess human disturbance and overexploitation of the dwindling patches of “untouched nature” on this planet seemed like the only sensible solution available in the current global system. I would root for all conservation measures I read about and imagine my future in some remote¹ nature reserve, fighting the battle against the rest of the world to save some species from the extinction. Being wired as a pessimist, finding my place within some conservation project or NGO was a driver of my decisions, as it seemed like the only meaningful contribution I could make as a biologist to a world that is falling apart.

Not so long ago, however, the clarity and rightness of my dream vanished, once I stepped outside of the biological circle. Nothing seemed so straightforward once I became aware of the multidimensionality of problems related to conservation, encompassing social, political, ethical, and ultimately even biological aspects.

If my brain was a lake, this is how I would explain the situation in ecosystem terms, a book example. The influx of nutrients² created disbalance in the food chain in the lake, led to the bloom of toxic algae and eventually to their decomposition and creation of an anoxic environment. Being an aerobe like many other creatures on this planet, I started suffocating. Continuing in the ecological terms, in order to bring back functionality, I need to restore my ecosystem; the question is, to which state? Unconditional support of conservation actions, with a policy of whatever it takes to save non-human lives, or...

This essay is the beginning of me rethinking conservation and exploring the potential alternatives. As my awareness about the following topics is rather new, the essay is organized as (hopefully) somewhat structured pieces of a puzzle.

¹ far from too crowded places

² information

2. Looking under the surface—conservation and capitalism

The conservation I have been exposed to through my “biological filter” promotes saving species and ecosystems from the negative effects of people by establishing protected areas and ultimately leaving nature be with minimal management. In the subtext of successful conservation stories, I would sometimes encounter emphasis on promoting democracy, protecting rural communities, encouraging conservation-oriented local initiatives. I would see images of uncorrupted landscapes, species roaming around in untouched wilderness, local people taking selfies with conservation activists—amazing stories from around the world. What I was missing, however, were inequalities, power relations, and tight links to corporate interests hiding beneath the surface of what is addressed in literature as neoliberal conservation practices (Igoe & Brockington, 2007), or current mainstream conservation (Brockington, Duffy, & Igoe, 2008; p. 5). As someone who turned out to be rather ignorant of the big picture, the following are just the bits and pieces of the real world emerging under my pink perception of conservation, mainly focused on the concept of protected areas.

2.1. Funding

Although the establishment of protected areas and management of animal populations for hunting have a long history, the origin of the mainstream conservation is usually traced back to the last century, during which an increasing number of conservation NGOs were established with the peak number in the eighties and nineties (Brockington, Duffy, & Igoe, 2008; p. 155). Funding for mainstream conservation comes from the global north. International conservation NGOs, usually representing a mediator between donors and the region, established protected areas, which are mostly in developing countries in the global south. As conservation NGOs became “vehicles for redistributing wealth to the poor areas” (p. 149), their increasing dependency and interconnection with corporate interests came to be alarming during the last few decades and sparked many critiques.

Among the attention-grabbing critiques was the article *A Challenge to Conservationists*³ published in 2004 in the *World Watch* (Brockington, Duffy, & Igoe, 2008; p. 150). In his “wake-up call” for conservationists Chapin (2004) drew attention to the trends he observed in mainstream conservation. Despite the rise in the number of conservation NGOs at the end of the last century, the field became dominated by the three biggest organizations: World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Conservation International (CI), and the Nature Conservancy (TNC). As they grew and expanded their influence, the Big Three needed ever more funds to run their facilities and projects. Along with receiving a significant part of

³ I based “Funding” paragraph entirely on the Chapin’s article, since it is a well-known (and still highly relevant) critique which offered me a good overview of the topic

governmental funding devoted to conservation, they have been supported by private foundations, bilateral and multilateral agencies, corporations, and individuals. Receiving funds from donors who are collaborating with national governments, such as USAID, the World Bank, and the Global Environmental Facility, the activities of the conservation NGOs became more restricted. They could no longer publicly voice their opposition to the corruption and inaction of governments, which are usually the source of the environmental problems in developing countries. Moreover, they started receiving funding from the very same multinational corporations accused of the ecological degradation, such as Chevron Texaco, ExxonMobil, Shell International, Weyerhaeuser, Monsanto, Dow Chemical, and Duke Energy. Being more dependent on corporate and governmental funding, conservation NGOs became increasingly reluctant to support indigenous people in their battles with the big oil and pharmaceutical companies, miners, and loggers. Chapin (2004) observed the shift in the way conservation goals of these NGOs were formulated with changing financial schemes; from highlighting the importance of collaboration with indigenous people on establishing and protecting conservation areas (p. 20) to claiming to be apolitical (p. 21) and emphasizing the central role of biological—not social or political—criteria in their agendas (p. 23). By promoting dichotomy between conservation and social engagement, external funding started bypassing local, indigenous, and traditional people and their conservation initiatives, while the actions of the NGOs would often favour the corporations that are taking their land and causing ecological havoc.

2.2. Colonialism?

Under the umbrella of conservation, local communities have been displaced, while the space around the protected areas was cleared for facilities for the leisure industry, wealthy tours, and research centers (Brockington, Duffy, & Igoe, 2008; p. 150). A demonstrative example is a case of Nechasar national park in Ethiopia, which was taken under management of African Parks Foundation in 2005 (Brockington, Duffy, & Igoe, 2008; p. 161). A year before the park was enclosed and opened for sustainable tourism around 10,000 people were displaced from the park and surrounding area. Although the Ethiopian government claimed that the relocation was voluntary, Refugees International reported that homes were burned to force around 2,000 families to move from the park area. African Parks Foundation tried to disassociate itself from the process by not officially taking over and investing in the park until the eviction was completed, emphasizing that was a matter for people and their government. Despite the massive translocations, park facilities employed only 90 local people. Because of the controversy, the foundation withdrew from the management of Nechasar National Park in the end. At the time, the African Parks

Foundation managed seven national parks in 5 different countries in Africa. Today they manage 17 national parks and protected areas in 11 countries, with the goal of reaching 20 parks by 2020 and becoming “the largest and most ecologically diverse portfolio of parks under management by any one NGO on the continent.”⁴ I wonder what the story behind all the other parks is, knowing that the estimates of conservation refugees on the African continent alone exceed 14 million people (Dowie, 2005; p. 23).

Africa is not the only continent where people are relocated in the name of conservation. In fact, conservation refugees are present on all continents except Antarctica, and their numbers on a global scale are estimated to range from five to tens of millions of people (Dowie, 2005; p. 25). Even the creation of one of the world’s most famous national parks, Yellowstone, was marked by clearing indigenous people from the area, employing the force of U.S. cavalry. As Yellowstone represents a groundwork for modern conservation, and a role model for wilderness protection, this part of the park history is often erased from the books (Brockington, Duffy, & Igoe, 2008; p. 116). Ever since, the history of protected areas is often associated with inequalities and problematic social consequences (West, Igoe, & Brockington, 2006). Protected areas restrict access and use for local people, while handing control over their resources to elites. Local people experience alienation from the land and sea, and are often criminalized for their land-use. Mainly through tourism, protected areas and their surrounds experience an increase in foreign land and sea usage, which significantly alters the relationship of local people with their environment and affects their livelihood (West et al., 2006; p. 257). Ultimately, these processes sometimes lead to disappearing cultures and local people being forced to assimilate into the lowest ranks of the national economies, becoming park rangers, porters, waiters, and ecotour guides. It is no wonder that conservation NGOs have been accused of representing the main threat to the integrity of indigenous people in the modern age and being just a new form of colonizers (Dowie, 2005).

2.3. Tourism

Almost as a rule, protected areas become associated with some form of nature-based tourism and ecotourism, two fast-developing sectors, attracting progressively more people from the global north who seek “pristine nature and cultures untouched by the westernization, industrialization and even mass tourism” (Brockington, Duffy, & Igoe, 2008; p. 135). Profit from tourism has driven the debate about conservation away from the terms of intrinsic or ecological values of species, ecosystems, and biodiversity, and closer to market economy values. Nature has become a profitable attraction, and thus conserving it made long-term financial sense, and entangled conservation goals with capitalism and the neoliberal economy. Ecotourism is promoted as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the

⁴ From the website of African Parks foundation: <https://www.africanparks.org/about-us/our-story>

environment, sustains the well-being of the local people and involves interpretation and education.”⁵ By creating value from species, ecosystems, and landscapes, ecotourism is claimed to be beneficial for both nature conservation and poverty alleviation. These claims, however, seem sometimes to be more dogmatic than empirically confirmed. To raise some of the questionable aspects, Brockington, Duffy and Igoe (2008) refer to few cases, among which is the critique of Monkey Mia Dolphin Resort in Sharks Bay, Western Australia (p. 136-137). Dolphins visited the bay daily and were fed by the tourists, which, according to some critiques, changed dolphins’ behaviour. They became reliant on food provided by humans, which as a homogenous source might ultimately have caused shorter life expectancy and birth rates within the local group of dolphins. On the website of Parks and Wildlife Services, today, they explain, without referencing any study, that by providing only a limited number of fish they ensure dolphins still continue to forage⁶. There are undoubtedly other examples of tourism promoted under the “eco” umbrella with more severe consequences. The example of Monkey Mia looks benign but still raises questions about the widely accepted perception that ecotourism is an unconditionally good source of funding for conservation without any negative aspects for the wildlife.

Recent development in ecotourism is the flourishing of privately-owned luxury eco-lodges, such as the resort of Anjajavy on Madagascar (Brockington, Duffy, & Igoe, 2008; p. 140). Although the resort is privately owned by South African businesspeople, it is marketed as community oriented. Resident people are employed within the resort, and the profits have been invested in the local development by building a clinic and a school in the area. By staying in the lodge, tourists have an opportunity to directly contribute to poverty alleviation and conservation. There are a few potentially dubious social aspects related to this marketing. First, the greatest level of profit in these situations often goes to the foreign owners, as the local people rarely reach central positions in the management process. In addition, development of the luxury eco-lodge in fact narrows the choice of development options for local community, as it dominates the local economy and deprives the community of the possibility of creating different initiatives for their own livelihoods, and so raises the question of whether that is ultimately the best option (Brockington, Duffy, & Igoe, 2008).

Be it in the form of luxury resort or budget travelling, tourism associated with protected areas fundamentally affects how we and the people living around the protected area perceive and value the surrounding world. Brockington, Duffy and Igoe (2008) refer to the concept of “ecotourism bubble” (p. 144), from which people see the environment in simplified way. We see “untouched nature,” “wilderness,” and smiles on the faces of local people who sell hand-crafted souvenirs. Outside of the bubble, however, are hidden complex interactions between the social, historical, and ecological factors and inequalities

⁵ From the website of The International Ecotourism Society: <https://ecotourism.org/what-is-ecotourism/>

⁶ From the website of Parks and Wildlife Services (Government of Western Australia): <https://parks.dpaw.wa.gov.au/park/monkey-mia>

related to the establishment and management of the protected area. From the inside of the bubble, people tend to neglect the fact that they often reach their destination by airplanes, a habit responsible for the ongoing climate change which is becoming the main threat to biodiversity they want to save (p. 145). Finally, ecotourism, together with other forms of the greening of the global economy,⁷ integrates conservation goals with the existing neoliberal framework. It does not confront, indeed, it supports, the very same structures that caused the ecological crisis (p. 135).

2.4. NatureTM Inc.⁸

Ecotourism is an archetypical example of the omnipresent trend of the intensification of neoliberal agenda in mainstream conservation (Fletcher, 2014). Fletcher (2014) “witnessed the real-time materialization of ideology before his eyes” (p. 333), on the 5th World Conservation Congress (WCC) organized by the conservation NGO the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). He describes the process of “orchestrating consent”⁹ that creates an appearance of there being no dispute over the place of neoliberal logic in conservation. The “consent was staged” in the speeches of IUCN representatives, by using terms such as “we,” “all of us,” and “together”. The participants “synchronized discourses” by repeatedly stressing the undisputable need for conservation to engage with businesses to succeed. IUCN “expanded alliances” and institutionalized the neoliberal agenda in its body partners, which among others included representatives from Shell, Rio Tinto, Mondi, Hitachi, Puma, Weyerhaeuser, Dell Duke Energy, and Coca-Cola in the workshops during the conference. By rigorously controlling and channelling question sessions during the conference, they managed to “discipline dissent.”

It seems that the neoliberal agenda is making a big and public entrance into the most relevant world conservation NGOs and this might soon be set in stone. Fletcher warns:

“we stand at a pivotal moment in the historical progression of the conservation movement, in which neoliberal rationality seems to be on the brink of retreating from the space of public discussion and debate, and instead becoming merely the underlying ‘common sense’ of mainstream conservation policy” (p. 330)

⁷ other “green” forms of engagement with capitalist markets: ecotourism, payment for environmental services, carbon markets, biodiversity and wetlands banking...

⁸ since mainstream conservation increasingly tries to monetize *in situ* natural resources, critiques address it as NatureTM Inc. (Fletcher, 2014)

⁹ Fletcher (2014) names and describes the processes that are part of “orchestrating consent”, which are here mentioned in italics.

3. Undisciplined dissent—emerging perspectives

It is becoming apparent that mainstream conservation cannot offer solutions for the ecological crises we are facing. As a result of growing discontent, alternative currents are rising on the horizon. Not to finish in despair, I will briefly address the proposed alternatives. As my guiding source was the paper by Büscher and Fletcher (2019), I will address the proposed alternatives that dominated their argument.

3.1. Recap—mainstream conservation

Although I implicitly communicated it previously, I hope the two tendencies of mainstream conservation are evident. First, as it is rooted in the idea of protected areas it implicitly imposes dichotomy between people and nature. It aims to preserve pristine nature and produces an image of “untouched” wilderness which is often accessible to tourists. Secondly, mainstream conservation is entwined with corporate interests and operates within capitalism. This trend is evidently intensified and institutionalized through various collaborations between NGOs, corporations, and governments during the neoliberal era. Conserved nature tends to be turned into “natural capital;” biodiversity is often solely valued within the global economic system for the ecosystem services it provides. Conservation initiatives are often incorporated within “consumerist ideology” through various initiatives of green economy (Brockington et al., 2008; Büscher & Fletcher, 2019).

Some critics¹⁰ blame these two tendencies for the inefficiency of mainstream conservation in halting biodiversity loss. Proposed alternative conservation approaches aim to address some of the problems.

3.2. New conservationism¹¹—people as gardeners of the Earth

In the Anthropocene, when human footprints are found even in the most remote places on Earth, we can no longer talk about untouched nature and wilderness. New conservationists criticize protected areas and the idea of saving pristine nature. By focusing on protected areas, mainstream conservation neglects and does not inspire people to establish meaningful relationship with surrounding nature in their everyday life. Secondly, it seeks to restore nature to some previous state, which in the age of rapid global change seems like a doomed mission (if it was not always a doomed mission, as the world always changes).

Accordingly, we need to abandon the dichotomy between natural and anthropogenic in order to save

¹⁰ From my biological perspective, I was only aware of some of the debates between conservation biologists regarding different conservation approaches. So I am not aware of all the wider critics of mainstream conservation.

¹¹ The short summary of the movement was based on the New York Times interview with Emma Maris, proponent of the new conservation and the author of the book “Rambunctious Garden: Saving Nature in a Post-Wild World”: https://green.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/07/28/q-and-a-the-rambunctious-garden/?_r=0. (Büscher & Fletcher, 2019) reference other authors, as well.

biodiversity and embrace the emerging new “touched” nature that surrounds us. New conservationists propose that humans should become gardeners of the Earth. People should manage nature both on the small scale, in their backyards, and on the global scale, by supporting emerging ecosystems.

One conservation strategy that is currently being debated in conservation circles and seems to be in line with the new conservationists’ approach is assisted migration. Assisted migration, as a climate adaptation strategy, aims to translocate threatened species to areas that are predicted to be suitable for them under the future climate scenario. The most extreme example used in the ethical and ecological debates on the topic is translocating polar bears to Antarctica. Despite the debates, assisted migration is already in practice, including in the form of self-organized enthusiasts.¹² Proponents of assisted migration advocate abandoning the outdated concept of pristine nature and the practice of nature restoration. They see assisted migration as the only solution to save species, and under the slogan “move it or lose it,” call for a more pragmatic approach (Minteer & Collins, 2010). Opponents, on the other hand, perceive assisted migration just as a techno-fix that does not address the roots of the problem (Fazey & Fischer, 2009). It seems that the main critique of the new conservationist approach is the same. Although I could get enthusiastic about the idea of assisted migration in waves, the idea of some people taking the role of “planetary managers” scares me¹³ and seems rather arrogant. The same applies for new conservationists: it seems amazing as a local solution for rewilding our surrounding.

3.3. Neoprotectionism¹⁴—leaving half of the planet to nature

Neoprotectionists assembled on the 9th World Wilderness Congress and launched the movement “Nature needs half” with the support of the WILD Foundation. They call for strict protection of half of the planet by 2030 “while it is still functioning,” by enforcing more protected areas and setting aside 50% of the Earth’s surface for wild nature. Only by pledging this radical action, which they call Survival Revolution, could we combat climate change, extinction, and defend livelihoods for millions of people. Ecosystems need on average 50% of the landscape intact to sustain their critical life-supporting functions. By keeping these functions, we would ensure the survival of the wild nature and save habitat for millions of threatened species. This will protect natural carbon sinks, such as forests, grasslands, and peat bogs, which will ultimately aid in tackling climate change. They also address the need to save wild nature for the 1.6 billion people that depend on it for their livelihoods and aim to support and empower local and indigenous people in the sustainable management of their land.

¹² The website of a group that actively engages with assisted migration and promotes saving endangered conifer tree, *Torreya taxifolia*: <http://torreyaguardians.org/>

¹³ Although it is actively happening right now anyway; planetary managers are active already without bearing that title.

¹⁴ The summary of the movement is based on the website Nature Needs Half: <https://natureneedshalf.org/>

If I saw “nature needs half” a month ago, I would probably wholeheartedly promote it. Having become aware of problems related to protected areas, however, I see that it seems to neglect them.

3.4. Convivial conservation

According to Büscher and Fletcher (2019), the two mentioned alternatives are still partially embedded in the framework of mainstream conservation. Consequently, they are not revolutionary enough to efficiently tackle the current ecological crisis. New conservationists portray people as an integral part of nature with a role as its managers. They do not, however, oppose the idea of “nature capital,” moreover, some explicitly promote it. Neoprotectionists, on the other hand, stress the need to separate nature from humans, in order to save it in time from the expansion of infrastructure and overexploitation. They are implicitly or explicitly critical of capitalist economy and consumerism but seem to be unaware of the adverse social consequences such proposal could bring.

Büscher and Fletcher (2019) advocate the third integrative alternative, convivial conservation. Convivial conservation is built around five elements that promote politics of equality, structural changes and environmental justice.

1. **Promoted areas.** Like new conservationists, they condemn the dichotomy between nature and humans. Instead separating nature from humans, conservation areas should promote and celebrate the diversity of the relationship between the two. Promoted areas should preserve good features¹⁵ of the existing protected areas without inheriting their adverse social consequences and damaging economic valuation. They should be built around the deeper intrinsic and “existence” value of nature, which encompasses social, political, ecological, cultural, and economic perspectives.
2. **Celebrating human and nonhuman nature.** Convivial conservation is depicted as a discipline that saves and celebrates both human and nonhuman nature. We should desert the neoliberal concept of “*homo economicus*”—destroying nature is not the essence of being human. Human behaviour and our relationship with our environment are products of the interplay of social, political, economic, and historical contexts. Understanding and altering the current context would bring about different associations between humans and nature.
3. **Engaged visitation.** Conservation funded by nature-based tourism and ecotourism is in conflict with itself. Experiencing “untouched” nature in protected areas seems to be an elite activity that is mostly used as escape from the destruction of everyday global capitalism. Instead of the short-term visitation of remote nature, promoted areas should reinforce “long-term *democratic* engagement” with nature in our vicinity, which would generate social and ecological justice.

¹⁵ Although not evident from my essay, protected areas do indeed have some good features. After all, conservation measures did manage to preserve some species and ecosystems from the brink of extinction.

4. **Everyday environmentalism.** Mainstream conservation is promoted through exotic, spectacular images of nature, which seem to exist only in virtual reality. Such a depiction of nature is alienating and lacking in political, historical, and social context. Convivial conservation promotes an everyday nature that is accessible, around which we can build new a social and political context. The value of nature does not need to be made visible; it emerges from our interaction with it.
5. **Common democratic engagement.** Management of nature should be more democratic and less technocratic. Technological solutions tend to deprive species of a broader social, cultural, and environmental context. Meaningful solutions for biodiversity can only be reached by considering the value of species within the multiplicity of existing contexts. Conservation measures should be prioritized and evaluated locally and democratically, taking “daily life, non-capitalistic needs, wants and actions” into account.

After setting up the elements of convivial conservation, Büscher and Fletcher (2019) propose get “from here to there.” First, we need to change current power dynamics, by engaging in both micro-resistance and organized efforts to alter the underlying structures of the current distribution of power. Capitalist logic should be attacked on state, non-state, and individual levels, leading to community changes. In addition, large-scale efforts are needed to build alternative economic system based on equality, radical ecological democracy, and bioregional economics. Büscher and Fletcher stress that our approach to conservation can change only with radical political actions that attack the root of the ecological crisis.

Reaching convivial conservation means addressing all actors responsible for inequalities inherent to the current economic system. Actors should be targeted according to their different responsibilities and accountabilities. Political, economic, and other elites, who have the most power in the current system and are usually left untouched by conservation measures, must arrive at behavioural and livelihood change, and thus should be addressed first. On the other hand, rural people that live around the conservation areas should not be targeted for behavioural changes, as they hold the lowest responsibility and contribute least to the ecological crisis. They should, however, be the main actors in the democratic process of conservation-related decision-making. Local, indigenous, and other marginalized groups should get their land back, at least in the form of co-ownership or co-management. Communities living around conservation areas should receive “conservation basic income (CBI)” which would support their livelihood and enable individuals to lead decent

lives. CBI would support the autonomy of local communities and allow more democratic management of resources. Convivial conservation should be supported only by corporations that want to abandon an economy based on capitalist accumulation and economic growth, especially by those that are focused on degrowth. Although this would inevitably lead to fewer funding opportunities, especially for big NGOs, other forms of cooperation are evidently inefficient and contra-productive. On a global scale, a new form of coalition should be established. A Convivial Conservation Coalition would hold actors accountable for putting ecological pressure on specific areas.

In summary, convivial conservation aims to challenge structural powers and the nature-society dualism, both innate to mainstream conservation. It imagines conservation outside of the capitalistic box and endorses an alternative realism: that should awaken the positive energies and inspiration needed to fight the contemporary crisis. Büscher and Fletcher encourage development of alternative scholarship that could adequately respond to the world we live in and political challenges we face.

4. Reality check

Although my studies have not specialized in conservation biology, it has been my main driver and represented the dream of a meaningful career in the face of often gloomy predictions about the future. I imagined retreating to nature and participating in the effort to save species that can not choose the system they want to live in. I realize now that my naivety would have just perpetuated the very same system which is driving them to extinction, while also threatening humans. I had been for years convinced that conservation actions often empower indigenous people, and yet I learned about conservation refugees in one day. I never viewed conservation from political and financial perspective—everything seemed justifiable provided it aided nature protection. I realize, now, the danger of being apolitical, although I had been sure it was a safe bet.

The clarity of my dream is gone, but awareness brought new perspectives. Maybe, after all, I don't have to retreat to nature, but find it in my vicinity and contribute to its protection, surrounded by other people. Returning to the toxic lake from the beginning, today restoring it to its previous state doesn't seem like an adequate reaction, but I still don't know what its future will be. Let's be optimistic for now!

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