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From wildlife-ism to ecosystem-service-ism to a broader environmentalism

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What is your vision for a desirable future for this planet?
—Anchor to panellists at *Global Land Programme plenary, April 2019*
A future in which half the planet is set aside for nature.
—Eric Dinerstein (*Global Deal for Nature*)
A future in which all human beings live a dignified life.
—Tania Li (*anthropologist*)

The concept of ‘biodiversity conservation’ includes diverse notions of what part of ‘nature’ one is trying to conserve. Moreover, the conservation discourse is part of a wider discussion on what kind of world we want for both humans and nature. Over the past few decades, debates have erupted on both fronts: what nature is worth saving and how to link concerns for nature with concerns for larger societal well-being. But proposals such as the Global Deal for Nature (www.globaldealornature.org) articulated by Dinerstein and others suggest that mainstream conservation thinking has not changed much. I argue that acknowledging multiple values about conservation and about society, rejecting the biocentric high horse, pragmatic pluralism and simplistic ‘win–win’ arguments, and embracing a broader set of societal concerns is a more tenable approach towards achieving a balanced society–nature relationship.

What and why: from wildlife to biodiversity

‘Biodiversity conservation’ spans a variety of objects of and rationales for conservation (Owens 2008, Sandbrook 2015), underpinned by different ethical perspectives (Minteer & Collins 2005, Batavia & Nelson 2017). In brief, ‘wildlife’ and ‘wilderness’ conservationists focus on charismatic megafauna and ‘pristine landscapes’, respectively, primarily for aesthetic or spiritual reasons. Concern for ‘all sentient beings’ is driven by concern for animal rights or feelings of stewardship. Biocentric or ecocentric perspectives demand that all biotic and abiotic elements in pristine ecosystems be conserved, because such ecosystems have intrinsic value or moral standing. Alternatively, global ecosystem processes may be ‘valued’ for ensuring human survival.

These different rationales do not necessarily converge to a compatible set of objects of conservation. Animal rights thinking or ‘compassionate conservation’ (Wallach et al. 2018) makes an equal case for wild animals and domesticated animals, whereas wildlife-lovers would likely recommend culling stray domestic dogs to prevent them from spreading rabies (Home et al. 2018). But animal rights concerns do not generally extend to mosquitoes or pathogens (Dalton 2020), and although ‘deep ecologists’ talk about holism and including all self-organizing nature, they do not typically include human beings, because then urban landscapes would be a part of nature.

While philosophical debates on the ethical positions are possible and scientific reasoning can highlight overlaps in their implications for action, monotheistic approaches are untenable. Unfortunately, the mainstream of conservation, largely based in the Global North but including many urban conservationists in the Global South, has clung to the notion of the ‘intrinsic value’ of wilderness and wildlife and has not accepted pluralism wholeheartedly (Sandbrook 2015). The tendency is to resort either to fuzzy terms, to a ‘pragmatic’ ethic or to an intolerant ‘scientism’.

‘Biodiversity conservation’ is a classic fuzzy term. In theory, diversity can be the property of all kinds of ecosystems, including agriculture and animal husbandry. But in practice, it focuses only on ‘wildlife/wilderness conservation’ (Adams 2019). Calls to stop philosophical debates and focus on ‘what works’ (Tallis & Lubchenco 2014) are even more problematic, because their pragmatism sidesteps the debate about ‘what works for whom’ and ‘from which perspective’ (Batavia & Nelson 2017). In addition, criticizing alternative ethical formulations as ‘science denial’ (Driscoll & Watson 2019) is a form of scientism, imposing a pseudo-objectivity on a fundamentally normative debate.

Engaging with ‘use values’: the mirage of ecosystem services

Mainstream conservation has even greater difficulty with other values that humans hold. Human survival requires the use of biotic nature, and such use inevitably leads to the

modification of ecosystems, making them ‘non-pristine’. By only focusing on the intrinsic value of ‘pristine’ nature, mainstream conservationists become blind to the equally intrinsic value of human life (Batavia & Nelson 2017), or to the fact that both values originate in the human mind (Hayward 1998). Attempts to reconcile conservation and human development then flounder because of their half-hearted engagement with developmental concerns based on fuzzy terms or a cynical use of science.

The replacement of ‘conservation’ with ‘conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity’ (www.cbd.int) is an example of fuzzy terms, suggesting that a simple conjunctive makes them compatible. But the broader term cloaks an unchanged conservation focus, as when WWF-India (www.wwfindia.org) executes this wider mission through three conservation-orientated themes (viz., ‘critical regions’, ‘priority species’ and ‘reducing footprint’), or more generally when sustainable use is misinterpreted as use that maximizes pristine-ness (Lele & Norgaard 1996).

The ‘ecosystem services’ (ES) framework was perhaps the boldest ‘scientific’ attempt to link conservation with the use values of nature. The framework proposes an ambitious ‘win–win’: that sustaining ‘life on earth’ can produce direct use value (provisioning services) and indirect use value (regulatory services) to ensure economic development, even while safeguarding wilderness values, now termed ‘cultural services’.

This win–win argument, however, has many holes (Lele et al. 2013). Firstly, the ES framing ignores trade-offs. Maximizing conservation values such as pristine-ness and wildlife is often incompatible with maximizing use values. Direct use values are often maximized and can be sustained under ‘far from pristine’ conditions, such as the millennia-old rice terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras. Conversely, much of the wild nature treasured by wildlife conservationists has little direct use value and only limited indirect benefits (Adams 2019).

Secondly, wild nature is often downright dangerous: nearby communities face death from carnivores, reptiles or pathogens, as well as crop or livestock damage from pests and wildlife. Arguably, all of human history has been a balancing act between maximizing ecosystem services and limiting their ‘disservices’, whether by clearing jungles, building fences or killing predators.

Thirdly, much of current human well-being, especially in the Global North, is based upon massive use of abiotic resources, such as petroleum and metals, not biological ones. Indeed, mainstream conservation is premised upon the conservationists having first solved the challenge of living comfortably using abiotic resources. A safe distance from wilderness is a precondition for the current urban love of megafauna.

Finally, while some users of the ES framework stop at showing that biotic nature provides multiple but incommensurate values, others use economic valuation to aggregate all values into economic welfare. This leads to two fundamental problems: the reduction of intrinsic values to their ‘willingness-to-pay’ equivalents and the inequity embedded in the one-dollar-one-vote logic of benefit–cost analysis.

Consequently, the ES approach has faced stringent criticism from both ends: the believers in nature’s intrinsic value upset at its commodification (Cafaro & Primack 2014) and supporters of social justice upset at ‘neoliberal’ conservation (Büscher et al. 2012). Instead of finding other ways to reconcile conservation and development, mainstream conservation has split into one camp that continues with the ES approach (often instrumentally) and another that has retreated to biocentrism.

Pitfalls of returning to biocentrism

Unfortunately, as the exchange at the Global Land Programme plenary quoted earlier shows, the biocentric vision of a ‘good society’ is shockingly one-dimensional. Completely missing are other concerns that society legitimately holds, and that mainstream conservationists take for granted in their own lives.

First is the concern for basic material well-being. How many modern-day conservationists live a US\$2/day lifestyle, with no laptops, refrigerators or cars? None. Biocentrism’s claim to a moral high ground vis-à-vis anthropocentrism ignores the fact that ‘valuing’ nature requires ‘humans’ be distinct from ‘animals’. This is not an argument for economic growth, but for dignified livelihoods for all (see Tania Li above).

Second is the concern for justice. Minimally, this means that if I want a US\$200/day lifestyle, I must allow it for others. Moreover, if conservation requires ‘cutting back’ on the use of nature, who should make this sacrifice? Socially marginalized forest-dwellers living a subsistence lifestyle? Or we urban conservationists whose high levels of consumption cause climate change and drive wilderness-destroying mining, dams and highways?

Third is the concern for sustainability. Sustaining human life and well-being into the future requires sustainable management of renewable resources, limiting the use of non-renewables and averting or limiting the impacts of pollutants, both local (e.g., insecticides) and global (e.g., CO₂). But sustaining well-being while limiting fossil fuel use will likely involve more intensive use of biological resources, rendering ‘pristine-ness’ a far cry.

Finally, once we recognize that conservation itself contains divergent values, that non-use values are not somehow superior to use values, and that there will inevitably be trade-offs between values and therefore between value-holders, one needs a ‘procedural ethic’ about how these trade-offs are to be decided upon. Truly democratic decision-making – participatory, informed and deliberative – is the only reasonable procedural ethic available. And most modern-day conservationists actually live in democratic societies that guarantee a modicum of life, liberty and due process. But conservationists sometimes forget this when they hobnob with dictators elsewhere in their pursuit of conservation (Graham-Rowe 2005) or compromise on indigenous people’s rights and due process when pushing for the creation of protected areas (Brockington & Igoe 2006).

Re-engaging with a broad-based democratic environmentalism

Conservation thinking brings several important values to the environment–development or environment–well-being discourse (Lele 2013). One strand asks us to broaden the definition of well-being, to go beyond material possessions and include the intangible benefits of biotic nature. Other strands challenge us to expand ‘justice’ beyond intra-generational justice, to include both future generations and non-humans. But faced with a multiplicity of values within and outside, mainstream conservation has tended to retreat to biocentrism, pragmatism or scientism. It would be more tenable to embrace a broad-based and democratic environmentalism.

Such environmentalism embraces multiple societal goals, including material and spiritual well-being, justice, sustainability and democracy. It acknowledges that both biotic and abiotic nature play a role in meeting these goals, but that there is no one way of managing nature that will achieve all goals for everyone. Given the

fundamentally normative and incommensurable nature of these goals, how much and what forms of biota (whether wild, managed or domesticated) are absolutely essential cannot be ‘objectively’ or a priori determined. Decisions regarding the what, for who and how of conservation and development have to be made through a participatory, informed and transparent process.

Such environmentalism demands that conservationists in the Global North reduce their own environmental footprints before they demand conservation from others and that they engage with the structural causes of these footprints, including capitalism, technology-fetishism and undemocratic governance (Lele 2020). They should refuse funding from speculative capital or dictatorships and engage non-paternalistically with communities already living closer to biotic nature. Lesser conventional top-down conservation action in the short run could help build a broader collaborative movement towards a dignified, just, sustainable and democratic society across the globe, including but not exclusively for non-humans.

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