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Radical Conservation: Misdirections, New Directions

Opening Essay for GTI Forum Conservation at the Crossroads

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Lost in the Current of the Mainstream

The world is losing biodiversity at a frightening pace. Record numbers of species are going extinct, indelibly altering the character of ecosystems and impoverishing Earth's community of life. The scale of the impact, along with other major crises like climate change, has prompted many scientists to announce a new geological era, the Anthropocene. This hotly contested term may not be the most accurate way of describing our current moment, but the urgent need for transformational change grows clearer with each species lost.¹

Prodded by this dire reality, the global conservation community is sounding the alarm ever louder. The World Wildlife Fund has recently stated bluntly that "our relationship with nature is broken." Some academics speak of "biological annihilation" in describing the current crisis.² Mainstream organizations are recognizing that the crisis isn't coming—it's already here.

We find ourselves in this morass not for lack of a large, well-funded global conservation effort. In fact, many people may still feel a sense of relief that for the biodiversity crisis, at least, there are major institutions and policy frameworks in place that seek to solve it. And yet, there is an unsettling contradiction here: in recent decades, the extinction crisis has accelerated despite the success of the major prong of conventional strategies: expanding protected areas. Doubling down on conventional conservation approaches will thus be insufficient to shift our dangerous trajectory towards a sustainable future. In failing to address the underlying forces driving the biodiversity crisis, mainstream conservation has proven incapable of producing politics, policies, and practices matched to the challenge.

In fact, conventional approaches are arguably part of the problem. To understand why, we need to be clear about the meaning of “mainstream conservation.” The dominant paradigm has roots in the “fortress” model that arose in North America in the late 1800s and early 1900s and sought to protect natural areas from the impacts of rapid industrialization, while allowing such industrialization to continue elsewhere. Thus, from the start, mainstream conservation has been intertwined with the fundamental social and philosophical causes of the contemporary global crises: the impacts of capitalism’s unquenchable thirst for economic growth and a response that understands nature and culture as dichotomous. Rather than challenging the expanding capitalist order, the conservation movement cordoned off spaces for (elite) recreation while expanding the uses of biodiversity for economic growth through its conversion to “natural capital.”

The relationship between mainstream conservation and capitalism deepened in the early 1990s with the ascendance of “sustainable development” discourse. Bowing to the hegemonic worship of profits and the market, conservationists began to argue that the most effective way to protect nature was to give it monetary value. By revealing its economic value, nature would be protected, it was hoped, through market-based instruments that include ecotourism, payments for ecosystem services, and more. Global NGOs and intergovernmental organizations established partnerships with multinational corporations to advance the alleged shared goal of conservation; all the while, those same corporations continued to extract, emit, and encroach.

Now, one could argue that without all these efforts to set aside protected areas and build capitalist awareness of the value of nature, the biodiversity crises could have been even worse. But this offers little consolation as the extinction crisis accelerates. Indeed, by masking the deeper causes of the crisis, the accommodationist mainstream has delayed the emergence of the political and economic awareness critical for curbing the underlying drivers of biodiversity loss. The time for removing the mask and radically rethinking the philosophy and practice of conservation is long past due.

Radical Alternatives or Flawed Paradigms?

In response to the urgency of the extinction crisis and the insufficiencies of status quo responses, a number of conservation groups have advocated for major new initiatives to transform mainstream conservation. Many of the prominent voices fall into one of two camps of reformers: “new

conservationists” or “neoprotectionists.” New conservationists call for abandoning the idea of “pristine” nature and, instead, learning how to live constructively with nature and use it for human development. Neoprotectionists advance proposals to massively expand global protected areas, most prominently through the 30x30 initiative that seeks to protect 30% of the earth by 2030.³ While offering important insights and purporting to address the root causes of our extinction crisis, both approaches suffer from fundamental flaws that negate their potential to provide a foundation for transformative action.

The new conservationists (or “eco-modernists”), to their credit, reject the nature-culture dichotomy that treats the natural world as a place “over there” to be protected rather than the living basis of all life, including human life. Ecosystems always change, they argue, and in the Anthropocene, humans must figure out how to live in and manage the earth as a “rambunctious garden.” This camp embraces the critique from social scientists that conservation projects must do no harm to the people around them, such as those displaced by the creation of protected areas. Instead, such efforts should be designed to benefit local communities and address the underlying social and economic causes of biodiversity loss—or risk failure. But the new conservation undermines this kernel of wisdom by reinforcing, rather than resisting, the dominant political economy and championing market-based “solutions” like environmental services and natural capital valuation that ultimately accommodate conservation to capitalism. If the despoilment of nature is traced in good measure to the predations of capitalism, how can more capitalism be the path to a sustainable future, optimistic claims about technological innovations notwithstanding?⁴

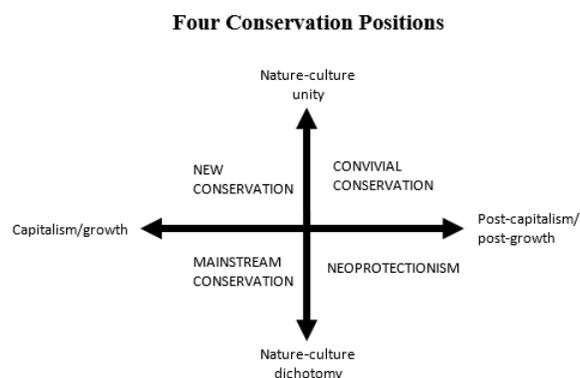
The neoprotectionist approach is the inverse of new conservation. Where new conservation rejects the nature-culture dichotomy, neoprotectionist advocates affirm the split and side with nature. They believe that the only way to stave off collapse of the Earth’s life-supporting ecosystems is to protect nature from people. They often reject market-based conservation schemes as harmful or inadequate, instead putting forth ambitious proposals to return as much as half the earth to “nature.” Notably, they also call for sharp limits on human populations, on consumption, and on economic growth.⁵ Thus, in contrast to new conservation, many neoprotectionists are critical of contemporary capitalism, either implicitly or explicitly.

The flaw in neoprotectionism, however, is the unrealistic faith in the possibility of separating our way out of the problem. Capitalism’s long history of transgressing the very borders it creates suggests that any such separation would at best be temporary. But even if capitalist expansion could be contained, the neoprotectionist vision of cordoning off immense swaths of the earth would entail unprecedented human displacement and militarized enforcement. Historically, the implementation of protected areas often required forced relocation of indigenous communities, thus removing the very people whose land management made the areas attractive to conservationists in the first place.

The policy uptake of major elements of these new frameworks signals a brewing “conservation revolution.” Yet neither perspective adequately addresses the socio-ecological roots of the biodiversity crisis, nor do their politics offer a progressive alternative to conventional politics or the very real threat of reactionary, imperial politics around the world. Hence, we need another model of conservation that rejects both the capitalist imperative for growth *and* the rigid dualism that separates humans from the rest of nature.

Towards Convivial Conservation

Realizing the need for a third way inspired our concept of “convivial conservation,” which can serve as a transformational framework for conservation in a Great Transition.⁶ The crucial difference between convivial conservation, mainstream conservation, and the other two radical alternatives is that convivial conservation explicitly starts from a political ecology perspective, steeped in a robust critique of capitalist political economy.⁷ Its rejection of both the nature-culture dichotomy *and* growth-centric capitalism makes convivial conservation more radical than the other alternatives, but at the same time, given the scale and urgency of the crisis and its root causes, more realistic.



The underlying premise of convivial conservation asserts that our dire conservation challenges cannot be met without directly confronting capitalism *and* its ingrained dichotomies and contradictions. The framework is rooted in a politics of equity, structural change, and environmental justice. It directly targets the economic interests of global elites and transcends the technocratic faith of many contemporary pragmatists. Most importantly, it enthusiastically joins the current upswell for systemic structural change via a Great Transition. It stands in solidarity with local, indigenous movements seeking to restore and reinvent convivial forms of sustainability that connect humans with the rest of nature.⁸ Convivial conservation embraces this broader vision, asserting that success in the conservation arena requires confronting and transforming the overarching global political economy in which it is embedded.

The paradigm of convivial conservation calls for changing how we engage with conservation as both discourse and practice. First, we must change how we *conceptualize* nature and re-embed “protected areas” into their social, political and ecological surroundings. We must stop protecting nonhuman nature *from* humans but actively promote ways of living together with all the complexities this entails, that is, no longer regarding nature as distant “protected areas” but engaging with them as “promoted areas.” We should no longer see ourselves as “saving” nature but instead insist on nurturing ways human and nonhuman nature can thrive together. We must challenge the view of human nature pressed on us by mainstream economics: one that considers us separate from the rest of nature and egoistically focuses on profit maximization. We must frame human nature as predisposing us to connect positively with and create space for nonhuman life by viewing material needs and wants within the broader context of qualitative aspects of fulfillment.

Second, we must overhaul how we *experience* nature. The COVID-19 crisis shows that relying on unsustainable and unreliable tourism and other market-based mechanisms to finance life-sustaining ecosystems and biodiversity is illusory. This understanding also means we must move from a “spectacular” to an everyday environmentalism. Yes, spectacular natures—whether the majesty of an Amazonian waterfall or the sorrow of the climate-threatened polar bear—sell. But they are a minute part of all the varied, more mundane ‘everyday’ natures on which our long-term survival depends.

Finally, out of such new thinking about and interacting with nature must come a new way of *governing* our relationship with nature, one that moves from privatized expert technocracy to

popular democratic engagement. Conservation must work to make biodiversity a global commons rooted in direct democratic decision-making centered on people living with (endangered) biodiversity, not the purview of a handful of mostly white, well-off experts.

In essence, convivial conservation calls for a transformation of the model of development. Recoiling from global capitalism's ravaging of the natural world, like some neoprotectionists, convivial conservationists reject the demand for heroic land set-asides and the large-scale displacement this would entail (compounding and extending historic harms). Rather, the time has come to decolonize conservation by providing reparations to those who already have been displaced and marginalized by protected areas. This could take the form of returning land to local communities or at least adopting co-ownership or co-management responsibilities in ways that respect biodiversity as well as indigenous and other marginalized peoples and their rights to nature.

In this sense, convivial conservation shares new conservation's concern that biodiversity goals cannot be met through efforts that lead to impoverishment and displacement of local communities. But it eschews new conservation's adherence to the dominant capitalist paradigm and its flawed policy tools grounded in market mechanisms. Instead, we should embrace emerging alternative approaches, such as the redistribution of wealth by instituting some form of a conservation basic income (CBI). Such a policy would ensure a decent life to people living in or near promoted areas, and thereby facilitate local care for biodiversity.

With an ethic of decolonization and redistribution at its core, a conservation strategy fit for a Great Transition would abandon cozy relationships with corporations and extractive industries of mainstream and new conservation organizations. These relationships, pursued in the name of fallacious pragmatism, result in greenwashing and legitimization of unsustainable business models. Instead, conservation actors need to join together in an independent global movement—a Convivial Conservation Coalition—committed to challenging vested interests through coordinated campaigns, while advocating for and experimenting with alternative practices.

Dire conditions on the ground combined with ineffectual mainstream strategies underscore a grim reality: a fundamental shift in the conservation paradigm must be made. The ambitious approaches outlined here—new conservation and neoprotectionism—are responses to this challenge that

have engaged many conservationists attuned to the urgent need for radical action in the face of the accelerating sixth extinction. Ultimately, though, these alternatives are hamstrung by their failure to go to the root of the crisis.

Skeptics and naysayers may dismiss strategies rooted in fundamental social change as inherently unrealistic. However, to face the scale of the crisis with eyes wide open and to locate drivers deep within institutional power structures is to recognize that transformative politics, not incrementalism, creates the pragmatic path. Moreover, imagining conservation outside the capitalist box is a liberating exercise, countering eco-anxieties and catastrophic nightmares, while releasing positive collective energy. A movement united around a convivial conservation vision would be a powerful change agent in the Great Transition.

Endnotes

1. See, for example, Jason Moore's discussion of the "Capitalocene" in *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2015) as well as "Interrogating the Anthropocene: Truth and Fallacy," GTI Forum, *Great Transition Initiative* (February 2021), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/interrogating-the-anthropocene>.
2. World Wildlife Fund, *Living Planet Report 2020* (Gland, Switzerland: WWF, 2020); Gerardo Ceballos, Paul Ehrlich, and Rodolfo Dirzo, "Biological Annihilation via the Ongoing Sixth Mass Extinction Signaled by Vertebrate Population Losses and Declines," *PNAS* 114, no. 30 (2017): E6089–E6096.
3. See <https://www.campaignfornature.org/Background>. Even more recently, efforts have been made to bring these different approaches together in a synthetic "nature-positive" agenda.
4. Emma Marris, *Rambunctious Garden. Saving Nature in a Post-Wild World* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011); Peter Kareiva, Michelle Marvier, and Robert Lalasz, "Conservation in the Anthropocene. Beyond Solitude and Fragility," *Breakthrough Journal* 2 (Fall 2011).
5. George Wuerthner, Eileen Crist, and Tom Butler, eds., *Protecting the Wild. Parks and Wilderness: The Foundation for Conservation* (London: Island Press, 2015); Edward O. Wilson, *Half-Earth: Our Planet's Fight for Life* (London: Liveright Publishing, 2016).
6. We expand on the arguments in this essay in *The Conservation Revolution: Radical Ideas for Saving Nature Beyond the Anthropocene* (New York: Verso, 2020). The term "convivial conservation" comes from the Latin "convivere" ("to live with") and alludes to Ivan Illich's classic *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).
7. Raymond Bryant, *The International Handbook of Political Ecology* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2015).
8. Noah Theriault, et al., "Living Protocols: Remaking Worlds in the Face of Extinction," *Social & Cultural Geography* 21, no. 7 (2020): 893–908; see also the important work by the Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCA) consortium: <https://www.iccaconsortium.org/>.

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