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In Defense of Protection

Contribution to GTI Forum Conservation at the Crossroads

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Limits of space compel me to focus on two issues of divergence between convivial conservation and what Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher [call](#) neoprotectionism. (I count myself in the latter camp.) The first divergence involves the causation of (and thus solution to) the eco-social crisis. The second relates to the scale of nature protection needed to avert the sixth extinction and to enable Earth's biodiversity to resurge.

The authors identify capitalism and "its unquenchable thirst for economic growth" as the driver of environmental destruction. I agree that capitalism must be superseded. Yet capitalism is not a monolithic enterprise, but rather a multifaceted composition. Beyond private ownership of the means of production and surplus-value extraction, capitalism involves global trade and the infrastructural sprawl that supports it, the institutional allegiance of nation-states, mass production concomitant with supplying a burgeoning global middle-class population, a reigning worldview of nature qua "resources," and consumer culture along with its widespread allure. The hybrid character of the capitalist enterprise has certainly played into its resistance to abolition.

The composite nature of this system forces a diagnosis of a broader array of culprits in the current crisis than the gloss of "capitalism." There is of course broad agreement that nonstop expansionism is the root biophysical cause of biodiversity's unraveling. Expansionism includes that of the economic system (extraction, production, and consumption), the human population, the livestock population, and the technosphere (especially infrastructural development).

The human system that is most detrimental to the rest of life is the food system. The human population, taking on board its predilection for carnivory, has exceeded Earth's capacity to

support it with organic, diversified, and local/regional food production, while simultaneously allowing for the maintenance of biodiversity at all its levels.¹ Food production “in the Anthropocene” occupies entire terrestrial biomes (for example, grasslands and wetlands), while marine life has been devastated by industrial/commercial fishing. The scale of modern-day processing, packaging, trade, and waste of food has further amplified its ecological costs. Indeed, environmental analysts are now identifying the food system as the overarching driver of biological meltdown in terms of land-use takeover and degradation, freshwater withdrawal, marine life depletion, decimation of large wild animals, and excessive consumption of materials and energy, not to say output of greenhouse gases, nitrogen pollution, and pesticide contamination.²

The food system reveals the impossibility of disentangling industrial production regimens, consumption patterns and preferences, sheer numbers of (increasingly) globally connected humans, and techno-infrastructure innovation and expansionism. As prosaic as it may appear by now, the PAT formula remains insightful shorthand. Population x Affluence x Technology, we might quip for our age, equals a food system that “radiates disaster triumphant.”³ Thus, in order to end the extinction crisis, tame climate change, reduce global toxification, and nourish all humans with wholesome food, the variables of industrial productivity, global human population, trade intensity, dietary choices, and technospheric reach all need to be confronted and transformed.

The second aspect of divergence between convivial conservation and neoprotectionism relates to the level of nature protection required (1) to end the extinction crisis and (2) to make reparations for the injustices perpetrated against nonhumans and their homes. To achieve these goals, we must restore, connect, and protect Earth’s ecosystems on a large scale. While protected areas have increased in recent years, the increase has not been sufficient—in quantitative, ecosystem representation, connectivity, and effective management terms—to conserve Earth’s species, population abundances (including migratory phenomena), ecological complexity, and evolutionary potential.⁴ To be sure, size of terrestrial and marine reserves is only one variable for safeguarding biodiversity. Yet large-scale protection is requisite to prevent biodiversity depletion from spiraling into a mass extinction event.⁵ Before touching on how we might still achieve such a vision of nature protection (extensive, interconnected, free of infrastructures, and representative

of all ecosystems), I turn to some highlights of why this zeitgeist of nature protection is superior to alternatives.

Large terrestrial carnivores and herbivores, as well as big marine predators and whale nations, require substantial habitat ranges, unfragmented by infrastructures, free of extractionist operations, and minimally disturbed by modern humans. These requirements are indispensable if big wild animals are to persist in numbers that are viable for their ecological functions and their evolutionary resilience. More generally, bigger reserves contain more species, larger populations, more variety of habitats, and richer gradients of microclimates and other variables (like soil types) than smaller comparable reserves. In continuance with this point, substantially sized protected areas harbor remote regions where sensitive species—highly vulnerable to human pressures, edge effects, and introduced species—can find refuge. Larger protected areas are also more likely to moderate the destructive effects of natural or anthropogenic disturbances (e.g., disease or fire) than smaller ones of the same ecosystem type. As a last point here, the large-scale restoration and protection of Earth's biological wealth is also one of the critical guarantors of Earth system (and thus human) resilience in the face of major anthropogenic perturbations, especially climate change.⁶

If we take as our starting point that Earth's remaining biodiversity (at all levels) is a treasure that warrants preservation, deserves our awe, and can (if we allow it) largely shape the biological and physical parameters of our home planet, then we must figure out how to transform ourselves in order to achieve the large-scale nature protection needed. Elsewhere, I have abridged the mandate for a Great Transition as a two-tiered strategy of humanity *scaling down* and *pulling back*.⁷ Scaling down means reducing commodity production and trade, eschewing wasteful consumer culture, embracing a mostly plant-based diet, investing ambitiously in female education and empowerment, making family planning services universally available, placing strong limits on infrastructural development (especially roads in natural areas), and reconfiguring political and civic life at local/regional levels to include both humans and nonhumans as members and neighbors. Pulling back is all about the conservation factor—generously freeing into self-governance large areas of land, freshwater, and marine habitats so that biodiversity may not only survive but flourish.⁸

In agreement with Büscher and Fletcher, social and ecological transformations should not be undertaken at the expense of human well-being and security.⁹ The question of how strictly to protect nature from people is always looming. The answer is not simple. Protected nature may include or exclude humans, depending on the context of their presence and activities. Human beings can remain integral with the more-than-human world as long as they sustain respectful relations with wild nature in ways that retain the regenerative qualities of its biodiversity. This has been and often remains the case with indigenous peoples. Thus protected areas may include humans with cultural traditions (material and ideational) that foster belonging with, and participating in, the orchestra of life that surrounds them. However, protected areas should exclude or strictly regulate humans with traditions bent upon the appropriation, exploitation, and aggressive management of nature. Clearly, modern people equipped with the mindset of nature-as-resources, and with technologies bent on extracting and profiting from those so-called resources, are inimical to the rest of life. Strong boundaries must be set and enforced to obviate their encroachments.

I also agree with the authors that “human nature” far from being the cause of our dire predicament predisposes us (as they put it) to connect with all of life and to give it space to thrive. Since this inclination is part of the human core, we must endeavor to awaken humanity to what is at stake; tragically, the biodiversity crisis and an imminent mass extinction continue to be shrouded in silence and ignorance. We must educate people about the chance we still have to sustain a living planet, rather than a biologically simplified and colonized one. Therefore, all conservationists might unite in advocating for the recognition that human and nonhuman worlds are both due justice and the right to a good life. Underlying these educational and ethical directives, I would argue, is the spirit of protection: Protection is a beautiful idea, conjoining action from love that yields a sense of safety in others.

Endnotes

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