



May 2022

A Practical Utopian Agenda Contribution to GTI Forum [Conservation at the Crossroads](#)

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The debate about convivial vs. neo-protectionist conservation is fascinating, since we each bring a different perspective. Mine is practical utopian politics. Practical, because it needs to work; utopian, because we all dream of an Earth in which nature is restored; political, because that is how things get done.

First, the sickening reality: since 1970, we have lost 60% of the world's mammals, birds, fish, and reptiles.¹ Insect populations are crashing, including the bees on which we depend for pollination. Rivers and lakes are being polluted, and if we do not get a handle on our plastic wastes, by 2050 the world's oceans will have more plastic in them than fish.²

Every day, nature loses 80,000 acres of tropical rainforest, along with 135 plant, animal, and insect species.³ Why? Because the indigenous forest dwellers have no recognized land rights, because the small forest-hackers and the big corporate clear-cutters follow the same impulse to maximize personal and corporate gain, and because they meet little regulatory resistance.

In my own backyard on Vancouver Island, the temperate rainforests are being clear-cut and stripped of their biodiversity; their soils are washed into the ocean with each big winter storm, turning the sea brown. Why? Because the big forest corporations work to maximize financial yields, biodiversity laws are almost nonexistent, and captured regulators do their bidding.

On farmlands around the world, industrial farming is destroying soils and biodiversity, decreasing productivity, wiping out insects and birds, draining aquifers, and polluting creeks, rivers, and oceans.⁴ Why? Because most of the world's fields, ranches, and orchards are owned by big

agri-food corporations or investment funds, which operate to maximize yields to investors, and because, as above, biodiversity laws are almost nonexistent and captured regulators do their bidding.⁵

In the oceans, more than a third of the marine mammals are threatened with extinction.⁶ Why? Because the big Japanese, Thai, Norwegian, American, Chinese, French, and Spanish corporate fishing fleets venture ever further and deeper out to sea. Their bottom trawling is the single greatest threat to ocean biodiversity, even though the economic value of high seas fisheries is only 0.5% of the \$75 billion value of marine fish caught globally. Offshore fishing accounts for just 5% of the global catch, but it is here that the most ecological harm takes place. Just five nations—China, Spain, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea—take 85% of the catch.⁷ If crews were paid fair wages, instead of working as forced or slave labor, and if the \$4 billion a year of high seas fishing subsidies were removed, most offshore fishing would no longer be profitable.⁸ The solution proposed by Enric Sala, who leads National Geographic’s Pristine Seas project, is to turn the entire high seas into a marine protected area, free from fishing of every kind, and off-limit to all destructive industries, including ocean mining.⁹ Currently, only 2.2% of the ocean is protected, a far cry from the 30% scientists say we need to ensure a healthy ocean by 2030.

Sala’s proposal would protect 66% of the ocean. Experience in Marine Protected Areas shows that the ocean would regenerate within ten years, filling the barren waters with an abundance of sea life, and the spillover into coastal waters would increase the catch for convivially organized community fishers.¹⁰ It would be a win-win for everyone. A very limited version of an Ocean Treaty is currently being negotiated at the UN, but it faces relentless foot-dragging and resistance from the nations which host the predatory corporations.¹¹

What do these examples tell us for the Great Transition? Seven things:

- (1) That convivial conservation bringing lasting land stewardship is needed in local areas, as Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher [propose](#);
- (2) That a thousand regulatory battles must be fought and won, from banning bee-killing neonicotinoid pesticides to ending deep-ocean trawling;

- (3) That national and global legislation must be advanced to recognize ecocide as a crime and give legal rights to Nature, as is beginning to happen;
- (4) That corporate powers must be challenged and fought, biodiversity-destructive subsidies must be ended, and trade agreements which defend investors while ignoring nature and the climate must be resisted;
- (5) That global biodiversity treaties must be signed that have teeth and intention;
- (6) That most of these tasks are specific and hands-on, and need our individual effort and attention;
- (7) That we must learn how to tell a story to the world in which our collective work enables the full restoration of nature by 2050, inspiring people to get involved.

Most of this brings us back to politics, and the need for activists and politicians who will understand the issues, write the bills, and push for their enactment against selfish resistance from those who care only about their money and power.

There is so much to do, and it is easy to feel overwhelmed. We should not underestimate the power of the world's civic organizations, however. For every challenge, people are working hard to win victories. Most are unsung heroes. In the Philippines, Colombia, India, Brazil, Guatemala, Mexico, and other countries, people are being assassinated for their efforts.¹²

There are so many examples of successful restoration. There is the restoration of the vast arid wasteland in the Loess Plateau in north-central China that is lifting millions out of poverty. There is the restoration of Morgan Freeman's Mississippi ranch, which has become a bee sanctuary; of Pamela and Anil Malhotra's dry, deserted farmland in Southern India, which has become an oasis with an abundance of trees and elephants; of John and Molly Chester's almost dead farm outside Los Angeles, which has become an ecologically diverse feast of species and food, shown in the Netflix movie *Biggest Little Farm*; of Isabella Tree and Charlie Burrell's farm in Knepp, Sussex, England, which has become an ecological paradise with free-roaming cattle, ponies, pigs, deer,

and extraordinary increases in wildlife diversity.¹³ Judith Schwartz's *The Reindeer Chronicles and Other Inspiring Stories of Working with Nature* to Heal the Earth is full of inspiring stories.

The struggle between selfish dominators and caring cooperators is as old as time. The stakes have never been higher, however, because our technologies are so much more powerful, from feller buncher machines that can fell an acre of forest in less than a day to industrial trawlers that can sweep an entire marine ecosystem off the ocean floor.

The challenge we face is not just to suppress the dominators. It is to end the belief that the forests and fish are “things” that we can harvest to satisfy our greed, and to embrace instead the understanding, deep within our hearts, that all Nature is alive, and in need of our help.

Endnotes

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Cite as Guy Dauncey, "A Practical Utopian Agenda," contribution to GTI Forum "Conservation at the Crossroads," *Great Transition Initiative* (May 2022), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/conservation-dauncey>.

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