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Towards Half-Earth Socialism

Contribution to GTI Forum Conservation at the Crossroads

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Half-Earth Socialism (HES) is a project on which we have worked over the last few years that has taken the form of several essays, a book, and a video game.¹ We believe that socialists need to take conservation seriously, while conservationists need to embrace socialism. We see our framework as a fourth branch in the environmentalist debate [outlined](#) by Bram Büscher and Rob Fletcher, on top of the proposed tripartite division of ecomodernism, neoprotectionism, and their concept of “convivial conservation.” The dividing line between our framework and “convivial conservation” is both material and philosophical: we are skeptical that “convivial” forms of conservation would protect biodiversity, and we doubt that the “nature-culture” dichotomy actually matters much in causing the environmental crisis. We are more interested in studying why capitalism engenders constant ecological disasters, surveying useful technologies and policies, and thinking practically about building ecosocialism.

The name of our project makes E. O. Wilson’s influence obvious, yet we are well aware of conservation’s colonial history.² Wilson was no angel, but he appears almost benign compared to fellow conservationists, such as David Foreman or Ian Player, who respectively collaborated with US fascists and the Apartheid government in South Africa. Despite Wilson’s odious “sociobiology,” his work on biogeography has withstood five decades of scrutiny and provides the foundation for understanding the ongoing sixth mass extinction.³ Due to the close relationship between habitat loss and biodiversity, there is no plausible way to slow extinction rates some 1,000 times higher than natural background rates without protecting ecosystems. We fear that Büscher and Fletcher’s framework avoids the basic need for intact habitat in its pursuit of conservation without social cost. It is not exactly clear to us what convivial conservation would look like in

practice, but a park packed with livestock cannot be a well-functioning ecosystem. Cattle, sheep, goats, and other domesticated creatures are hardly convivial company for countless endangered species.

We believe environmental scholars need more precise concepts to critically examine how humans interact with nature, rather than merely praising Latourian “hybridity” of nature and culture. Even on their own terms, however, Büscher and Fletcher’s dismissal of Half-Earth for its supposed Cartesianism makes little sense because rewilding has little to do with fetishizing pristine nature—the field began after all on the artificial island of Oostvaardersplassen in the Netherlands. It takes a great deal of labor to remove invasives, restore streams, remove dams, reintroduce extirpated species, or find close substitutes. Humanity must mix its labor with the natural world to provide the basis for a wilder Earth. We agree with Büscher and Fletcher that conservationists today should have no quarrel with indigenous sovereignty and instead ally with the Land Back movement. This is not only because it is the ethical thing to do, but also because ecosystems managed by indigenous nations tend to have higher levels of biodiversity than conventional preserves and sequester twice as much carbon.⁴

Büscher and Fletcher portray neoprotectionists as hostile to capitalism, yet they seem to be exaggerating the influence of a tiny minority. Leading neoprotectionists, such as Wilson, believe not only that Half-Earth is compatible with capitalism, but that it implicitly requires it because only oligarchs can acquire vast swathes of land for new preserves. In turn, these preserves are often money-making ventures that seek to reap carbon credits or purvey exotic beef from their bison and Tauros herds.⁵ Wilson’s allies included the oil and gas trader MC Davis and Ted Turner (who founded CNN), both of whom became barons of vast wild estates.⁶ Yet, philanthropists cannot purchase half the world (our society would be even more dystopian if they could). If neoprotectionists hope to achieve their goals of protecting biodiversity, they need to abjure their Malthusian beliefs that malign the downtrodden, spurn their wealthy backers, and join a broad progressive bloc.

We believe that a true solution to the biodiversity crisis can only be achieved in a post-capitalist society. As socialism lacks the coercive and decentralized structure of the capitalist market, a global parliament and central planners could create Half-Earth by restricting economic growth

within planetary boundaries. Conscious control over this process (rather than relying on the market) would facilitate finding the fairest way to conserve land by promoting or constricting certain industries. Some of these decisions would be impossible under capitalism because they would be woefully unprofitable. We are aware a socialist society might decide against creating Half-Earth. The grievous environmental degradation suffered in socialist eastern Europe (or more recently in China) demonstrates that socialists would not necessarily care about conservation, the welfare of the peasantry, or animal rights. Such choices must be made consciously and depend upon powerful social movements to support such goals.

In our book *Half-Earth Socialism*, we delve into how the economy can be democratically planned and restrained without recourse to market mechanisms. The book includes a simple model where one can decide between different energy and agricultural systems, as well as goals for carbon emissions and conservation, and then see if the resulting mix is feasible given land constraints. We imagine socialist democracy to be the choice between different total plans that are decided collectively at the global level. These rough-hewn plans are then translated into regional and local plans, constructed with wide autonomy yet constrained by globally determined ecological and developmental goals. Old and new planning techniques, such as linear programming and data assimilation, make it possible for humanity to collectively decide how many fields are tilled, how much carbon emitted, and how much land is rewilded.

Once we look at everything from food to energy production at the same time, it becomes possible to see some solutions. For example, if we want to achieve Half-Earth, renewable energy systems, and organic food production, then land must be wrested from animal husbandry. This conclusion becomes even more obvious if massive biofuel plantations assumed in IPCC climate models are implemented to achieve negative emissions.⁷ The hard realities of the environmental crisis stand in the way of any “convivial” answer to the land problem. Two-fifths of the world’s inhabitable surface is taken up by pasture and fodder crops to produce food we do not need, with consequences that are unethical, carbon-intensive, and prone to creating new zoonotic diseases like SARS-CoV-2.⁸ Without the meat industry, suddenly we have enough land to achieve all of our environmental goals while ensuring the good life for all. Of course, a HES society can and should differentiate the likes of Cargill and JBS, and the extraordinarily meat-intensive diets

of the global upper-class they support, from the peasants who did little to get humanity into this mess.

Unlike Büscher and Fletcher, we stress the necessarily difficult and conflictual nature of conservation. There are no easy solutions, and it is time that conservationists and ecosocialists acknowledge that. There will be much to disagree about in a socialist society, perhaps even more than our present circumstances because socialism makes visible the tradeoffs between goals more obvious than what we can discern in the opaque market. Yet it is in the creation of new, numerous, and conflicting visions of the future that socialist democracy is practiced. This is not to say that we are certain that a socialist society will choose to create Half-Earth, yet its mere possibility is something to be cherished in contrast to our current society where solutions to the environmental crisis will forever elude the blind grasp of capital.

Endnotes

1. The book is *Half-Earth Socialism: A Plan to Save the Future from Extinction, Climate Change, and Pandemics* (London: Verso, 2020). For an exemplary essay, see Drew Pendergrass and Troy Vettese, "The Climate Crisis and Covid-19 are Inseparable," *Jacobin*, May 31, 2020, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/05/climate-change-crisis-covid-coronavirus-environment>. The video game version of Half-Earth Socialism will be available in early May at the website half.earth.

2. E. O. Wilson, *Half-Earth: Our Planet's Fight for Life* (New York: Liveright, 2016).

3 E. O. Wilson and Robert H. MacArthur, *The Theory of Island Biogeography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967)

4. For biodiversity, see Richard Schuster et al., "Vertebrate Biodiversity on Indigenous-Managed Lands in Australia, Brazil, and Canada Equals that in Protected Areas," *Environmental Science & Policy* 101 (2019): 1–6. For carbon sequestration, see World Resources Institute and Climate Focus, *Sink or Swim: How Indigenous and Community Lands Can Make or Break Nationally Determined Contributions* (Bonn: Forest Declaration Assessment, 2019).

5. Paul Jepson and Cain Blythe, *Rewilding: The Radical New Science of Ecological Recovery* (London: Icon Press, 2020).

6. Tony Hiss, "Can the World Really Set Aside Half of the Planet for Wildlife?," *Smithsonian*, May 2014, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/can-world-really-set-aside-half-planet-wildlife-180952379/>; E. O. Wilson Biodiversity Foundation, "Turner Endangered Species Fund and E. O. Wilson Biodiversity Foundation Join Forces to Combat Extinction Crisis," press release, January 21, 2014, <https://eowilsonfoundation.org/turner-endangered-species-fund-and-e-o-wilson-biodiversity-foundation-join-forces-to-combat-extinction-crisis/>.

7. Figure 2.11 in the following IPCC report suggests that a 1.5 C compatible world under a slow decarbonization scenario (S5) would require around three India's of land to be allocated to bioenergy with carbon capture and storage by 2100: Joeri Rogelj et al., "Mitigation Pathways Compatible with 1.5°C in the Context of Sustainable Development," *Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report* (Geneva: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2018).

8. 40 million km² of land are dedicated to animal husbandry (including feed) of the 104 km² of global habitable land. Hannah Ritchie and Max Roser, "Land Use," *Our World in Data*, September 2019, <https://ourworldindata.org/land-use>.

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