What Conservation Is: A Contemporary Inquiry

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Review Essay

What Conservation Is: A Contemporary Inquiry

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Abstract

Recent debates regarding conservation's proper objectives have been underlain by the more fundamental question of what conservation is and what it is not. In this essay, I elaborate and justify the following definition: the promotion (or the intended promotion) of the continued existence of valuable things in the living world in extended human time. I then use this definition to ask whether two recent proposals, so-called new conservation and compassionate conservation, are truly conservation. In asking these questions, I explore how conservation relates to ecological change and to the welfare of nonhuman animals. I end by situating conservation within the broader array of societal relations with the living world.

Keywords: Ethics, Diversity, Values, Animal Welfare, Ecological Change.

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS CONSERVATION?

In a perspective piece published in 2015, Chris Sandbrook proposed to define conservation as "actions that are intended to establish, improve or maintain good relations with nature". This is a helpful definition in several ways. Perhaps most commendably, the author recognises that conservation is a diverse movement. Conservationists worldwide have varied and sometimes conflicting goals, ranging from the preservation of biological diversity to the advancement of human wellbeing (Holmes et al. 2017; Sandbrook et al. 2019). More broadly, there exists a multitude of groups who have not traditionally been considered conservationists but some of whose practices can be understood as conservation. Excessively narrow definitions work to exclude these. As etymology reveals, to define (*finitum*) is to establish the boundaries of something, a root meaning shared with to determine (*terminus*) and to delimit (*limes*). Since the early days of the modern conservation movement in the British Empire to the more recently dominant biological paradigms, narrow articulations of what conservation is have placed beyond their bounds those groups whose activities and motivations do not conform to said articulations, be they indigenous hunters, settler agriculturalists or those working in international development (Cronon 1995; Adams 2004; Dowie 2009). Sandbrook intentionally defines conservation in a way that is sufficiently open to accommodate this plurality of motivations, identifying shared ground between all the different kinds of self-labelled 'conservations' that exist today.

At the same time, Sandbrook worries that his urge to respect and encompass the diversity and disparity of conservationists' goals renders his definition excessively vague. His concern is justified. Under Sandbrook's definition, any individual or collective who acts in well-intentioned ways toward nature is a conservationist. This would necessarily include animal rights activists and even doctors, if we considered the human body a thing of nature. But, as I will show, there are good reasons why movements including animal rights activism are not conservation. It is important not to allow the urge to account for diversity within conservation to tempt us into casting the net so widely that it captures what is best left outside it. Delineating conservation from these other attempts to establish or maintain good relations with the living world can bring clarity to situations in which these relations come into conflict. This is another way in which definitions matter.

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In this paper, I shall attempt to articulate a definition of conservation that is neither narrowly exclusive nor excessively broad. My argument is grounded in Western, English-speaking epistemologies, in both its sources and its logics. This is inevitable, given my personal and intellectual upbringing in Western Europe, and it is better to be honest about this than to coat one's writing with a veneer of neutrality or universality. The concepts I will employ have intellectual lineages that can be tracked back to specific scholarly traditions. Moreover, and more perniciously, language itself carries, everywhere and at all times, a contraband of cultural and ideological baggage. As Spanish philosopher and sociologist José Ortega y Gasset put it nearly one hundred years ago: "Language, which always fails us when we wish to fully express ourselves as individuals, paradoxically lays bare, without us wanting it to, the deepest secrets of the society that speaks it" (Ortega y Gasset 1937: 30–31, my translation).

In spite of these intellectual and linguistic roots, I will not trace the contours of conservation in so strict a manner as to systematically exclude cultures and practices that do not originate in or identify with the histories and institutions of Western conservation (Adams 2004; Lorimer 2015). With regard to epistemologies distinct from my own, my aim is neither inclusivity nor exclusion, but rather openness. In other words: I will neither attempt to subsume all cultures under a supposedly universal understanding of what conservation is nor claim that it is impossible to be a conservationist if one does not adhere to the Western traditions which this essay takes as its primary object of analysis. Instead, my aim is for it to be possible for certain non-Western ideas and practices to be understood as conservation, as long as due attention is paid to the questions of who wields the power to deploy definitions and who speaks on behalf of whom. My argument draws on philosophical, geographical, historical and biological scholarship, reflecting its author's training in the humanities and social sciences (present) as well as the natural sciences (past).

I will tend to refer to the constellation of things that conservationists are usually interested in conserving as the living world or the more-than-human world. I do not mobilise these terms in the hope of referring to some neatly demarcated metaphysical category or ontological collective. As David Hume wrote about the word "Nature", "there is none more ambiguous and equivocal" (Hume 1739: 474). This is not the place for me to attempt to settle, once and for all, what nature is, what it includes and what is excluded from it. My chief reason for refraining from this attempt is not, in fact, the fear that whatever I proposed could be proven wrong and a better universal category devised; rather, what is problematic is the very intention to come up with such supposedly universal categories. In an essay of scope as broad as the present one, it is preferable to deploy these terms as placeholders and allow readers to bring their own notions to bear on the thorny question of how best to conceptualise the relevant realms. I, for one, have favoured 'the living world' because conservationists have, so far at least, overwhelmingly been concerned with preserving lifeforms, although it is true that some people are devoted to conserving mineral formations. (I would simply invite those people to take from this essay whatever they find useful and to consider what revisions might be required to make it speak more fittingly to their concerns.) Whenever I use the term 'more-than-human' (Abram 1997; Whatmore 2002), what I wish to convey is a disposition to look and think beyond the human realm while refraining from silencing or erasing any elements of humanity in the search for pristine or untouched nature.

With these disclosures in mind, let us ask again: what is conservation? In the next section, I will propose three necessary and sufficient elements to an understanding of what conservation is: the recognition of value, the promotion of continued existence, and the unfolding of thought and practice in what I have chosen to call extended human time. Taken together, these allow us to grasp the essence of conservation and to differentiate it from the things it is not. I will then use my definition to ask whether two recent proposals, so-called new conservation and compassionate conservation, are truly conservation. Each of these initiatives has attempted to bring the wellbeing of human and nonhuman animals, respectively, into the fold of conservation concerns, and each has been criticised—typically by writers who espouse strictly biological definitions of conservation—for not truly being conservation or even running counter to real conservation objectives (e.g. Miller et al. 2014; Driscoll and Watson 2019). Rather than confining my argument to each of these initiatives, I will use them as recent case studies through which to explore the longer-standing questions of how conservation relates (or how it ought to relate) to ecological change and to the wellbeing of nonhuman animals. I will end by considering conservation's place within the broader array of relations between the human and the more-than-human, and make some closing reflections on the importance—and perils—of defining conservation in the way I do.

WHAT CONSERVATION IS

Before it is anything else, conservation is the recognition that there exist things of value in the living world. Put differently: any attempt to describe ecological realities without evaluation, explicit or implicit, of what is good and desirable (or of what is bad and undesirable) can never, by itself, be conservation. As well as endeavouring to understand ecological entities and processes, conservationists recognise that something of value exists in them. In a foundational article entitled 'What is Conservation Biology?', Michael Soulé (1985) put forth a set of normative postulates which, he believed, are integral to the field and are shared by most conservationists. These include 'diversity of organisms is good' and 'ecological complexity is good'. Curiously, Soulé thought that these claims about value cannot be shown to be true by reason or argumentation, let alone by scientific investigation. Regarding the first of the postulates quoted here, he wrote: "Such a statement cannot be tested or proven. The mechanisms by which such value

judgments arise in consciousness are unknown. The conceptual mind may accept or reject the idea as somehow valid or appropriate." Later on, Soulé reiterates:

"When pressed, however, ecologists cannot prove that their preference for natural diversity should be the standard for managing habitats. For example, even if it could be shown that a decrease in species diversity led to desertification, eutrophication, or the piling up of organic material, it is still not a logical conclusion that such consequences are bad."

Whether Soulé was right to think that values may only be accepted or rejected on the basis of intuition raises questions in moral epistemology that need not concern us here. The key point is that without these judgements of value and disvalue, conservation is groundless. Since the publication of Soulé's essay, conservation scientists have repeatedly broken with the value-free ideal (the belief that scientists can and should limit their work to understanding reality, and leave questions of value and ethics to realms outside of science (Douglas 2009)) and described their field as mission-oriented and value-laden (Noss 2007; Wilhere et al. 2012; Mace 2014).

Soulé proposed only four normative postulates of conservation biology (the other two being 'evolution is good' and 'biotic diversity has intrinsic value'), but he was wise not to be driven by the search for ideological purity (in his words). As recent empirical research has shown, different conservationists have differing conceptions of what things are valuable and why (Holmes et al. 2017, Sandbrook et al. 2019; Bruskotter et al. 2019). For some, genetic diversity is the primary concern (Curry 2022). Others are preoccupied with species, and yet others with habitats and landscapes (Leader-Williams et al. 2011). Some conservationists are not so much concerned with particular entities but rather with ecological and evolutionary processes (Norton 2000). Many conservationists believe the value of these entities and processes exists primarily in relation to human beings: they believe that such things as species and landscapes are valuable in the measure that they contribute to human interests (Matulis and Moyer 2017). In direct opposition to this view, other conservationists think ecological entities are intrinsically valuable, independently of whether they advance or detract from human-centred goals (Batavia and Nelson 2017). Despite these differences regarding which things have value, why they are valuable and whether such evaluations have any basis in conscious reasoning or science, all conservationists share the recognition that valuable things exist beyond the human world (even if some conservationists consider that the value of these things exists solely in relation to humankind).

Next, conservation entails the promotion, or at least the intended promotion, of the continued existence of these valuable things. In Western traditions, conservationists have typically conceived of their endeavour as one of *protecting* these valuable things from *threats* to their existence. One of the most visible reflections of this fact is conservation's historical fixation on protected areas, set up with the intention to shield wild species from the human activities that threaten them (Adams 2004: 67–124). This fixation looks set to continue into the future as plans to set aside thirty and even fifty percent of the planet for nature reserves gather momentum (Wilson 2016; Waldron et al. 2020) regardless of significant concerns raised from both the human and biological sciences (Agrawal et al. 2021; Wauchope et al. 2022). Western, scientific efforts to conserve domesticated species, too, have frequently been built on the twin premises of threat and protection, as Helen Curry's (2022) history of maize conservation demonstrates. Importantly, the articulation of conservation around the notions of threat and protection is far from politically innocent. While in the context of wild species it has led to the aforementioned emphasis on protected areas, in the case of crops it has served to justify state-led initiatives seeking to preserve genetic resources in seedbanks—places spatially and culturally removed from the human cultivators who, in truth, played fundamental roles in the production of the valued strains (Curry 2022).

But the articulation, in both theory and practice, of conservation as protection from threats is not itself part of the defining essence of what it is to conserve. As I am theorising it here, conservation entails the promotion of the continued existence of valuable things, and there are other ways of going about this than by defending these things from the threats they face. To pick just one problem with the protectionist approach, it has a certain air of resignation to the continued existence of the threats themselves—hence the necessity to continuously protect the living world from them. So just as the conceptualisation of conservation on protectionist terms recommends specific courses of action (protected areas, seed banks), it also directs our gazes to particular kinds of threats and brews assumptions about their permanence. As Rosaleen Duffy has shown, protectionist varieties of conservation have focused on the people and activities that directly harm wildlife, such as poaching and agricultural expansion (Duffy 2010). Political ecologists and critical social scientists, by contrast, have repeatedly argued that globally dominant political structures, particularly those associated with capitalism, lie closer to the roots of conservation problems (Büscher and Fletcher 2020). On this view of things, what conservation should ultimately strive toward is not the protection of the living world from those political structures and economic systems, but rather the ideation and materialisation of alternative structures and systems. A similar reasoning underlies accounts that characterise root environmental problems as cultural or religious (White 1967): proposed solutions do not consist of protecting the living world from destructive worldviews but rather cultivating more ecologically sound ones.

While my argument here has been that the conception of harms to the living world as threats and of conservation as protection from those threats is not inherent to conservation itself, I propose that whether something can be meaningfully considered conservation does hinge on the temporal nature of the harms with which it is concerned. Conservationists, as I view them, are not overly concerned with temporary and reversible harm. Rather, their focus lies with damage that is difficult or impossible to repair. Therefore, what is inherent to conservation is the recognition that permanent loss, and not

just transient harm, is a real possibility; hence conservation's central mission to prevent extinction (Adams 2004). The fact that conservationists' overarching worry is irrecoverable loss, rather than temporary harm, is reflected in recent controversies about the resilience of ecological systems. In their recent manifesto for new conservation (more of which later), Peter Kareiva and Michelle Marvier (2012) proposed that, in the short term, it can be acceptable to damage ecosystems, because these often recover from even severe perturbations. Those who have objected to this proposition have not done so motivated by the belief that any kind of harm, however short-lived, is unacceptable, but rather by the conviction that the ability of ecosystems to bounce back has been exaggerated (Miller et al. 2014). This reveals that for them also, permanent loss is the principal harm to be prevented. It is because of conservationists' central concern with the avoidance of ecological loss, as well as their relatively tolerant attitude toward temporary harm (so long as it truly is temporary), that I have proposed that conservation is fundamentally about promoting the *continued existence* of valuable things, rather than merely improving their temporary states.

This raises the question of the timescale at which the possibility of loss can be appropriately considered, which in turn requires conservationists to identify what kinds of things it is realistic to conserve. From the point of view of the human observer, individual organisms are created and destroyed on an ongoing basis. This makes the attempt to ensure the continued existence of individual animals and plants finally futile (Greenland sharks and California redwoods are notable exceptions, on account of their extraordinary longevities). It is for this reason that conservation has principally concerned itself with promoting the continued existence of ecological wholes, such as populations, species and ecosystems. From the human point of view, individuals continually come and go, but wholes can remain. As Ishmael, the narrator of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851: 1286) concludes his assessment of the sustainability of nineteenth century whaling practices: "we account the whale immortal in his species, however perishable in his individuality."

And yet, on geological timescales, ecological wholes are also transient. The overwhelming majority of species that have ever existed are now extinct (Raup 1991). This makes the attempt to ensure their continued existence across these vast spans of time also futile, a problem which has not escaped environmental philosophers. Its consideration has led J. Baird Callicott (1984) to argue that conservationists owe their moral duties to *existing* ecological entities. Callicott recognises that presently extant species will one day disappear, either suddenly or via their slow evolution into other lifeforms. He even concedes that the evolution of these future forms will be contingent on the disappearance of currently existing taxa. But Callicott believes it is the latter that have moral claims on us. A similar point was made by Holland and Rawles (1993) in arguing that:

"Conservation is about negotiating the transition from past to future in such a way as to secure the transfer of maximum significance. However dimly, we all hold a picture of life in all its rich and varied forms continuing into the future – including of course human life – and this conception is part of what gives our own lives meaning. Bereft of such hope for the future, our lives would be blighted. We may indeed know for a theoretical certainty that it all must come to an end some day, and we may even believe that, in the context of eternity, life itself is a matter of indifference. But only in very rare cases could this be a lived belief. For most of us, such a realisation serves only to make life itself more precious."

These facts and reflections make clear that while the lives of most individual organisms unfold in timespans too brief to attract the concern of conservationists, geological time is too long for the conservation of even ecological wholes to be possible. Therefore, we may regard the appropriate timescale for the promotion of the continued existence of valuable things as *extended human time*: stretches of time longer than a single human generation, but short enough that humans with whom we can identify still exist. It is from the human point of view that the attempt to conserve (most) individual organisms is vain; but it is also from this point of view that it can be meaningful to conserve such things as genes, species and ecosystems, even in the knowledge that they too will ultimately vanish or morph. Mark how the Holland and Rawles quote above is unmovably situated in the human perspective: the authors write that *we* all hold a picture of life continuing into the future, which gives *our own* lives meaning; that bereft of such hope for the future, *our* lives would be blighted; and that for most of *us*, the realisation that life is finite only makes it more precious. Conservation is only intelligible from the human standpoint. As a consequence, conservation cannot be entirely stripped of anthropocentrism: even when conservationists are motivated by the belief that ecological entities have value beyond their contributions to human interests, the project of ensuring their continued existence can only be conceived over timespans in which humans are able to find meaning.

To cover in one leap, then, the total sum of successive steps my argument has taken in this section, I propose to define conservation as the promotion (or the intended promotion) of the continued existence of valuable things in the living world in extended human time.

IS 'NEW CONSERVATION' CONSERVATION?

"Solomon saith, *There is no new thing upon the earth.* So that as Plato had an imagination, *that all knowledge was but remembrance*, so Solomon giveth his sentence, *that all novelty is but oblivion*."

- Francis Bacon, 'Of Vicissitude of Things' (*The Essays*)

My proposed understanding of conservation as the promotion, or at least the intended promotion, of the continued existence of valuable things in the living world raises the old question regarding the desirability of change and its relationship with loss. As an abundance of scholarship has

demonstrated, dominant strands of ecology and conservation have tended to portray nature as balanced, pristine and timeless (Cronon 1995; Kricher 2009; Lorimer 2015). These varieties of conservation have usually recommended that ecological change is arrested, particularly when it is caused by humans. Breaking with these traditions, recent manifestos for self-styled new conservation have eschewed what they consider to be the myth of untouched wilderness and embraced novelty and change. They have advised that we learn to love exotic species (Marris 2011: 97–110; Pearce 2015), that we welcome the ecological potential of novel ecosystems (Marris 2011: 111–132) and that we expand conservation's geographical range beyond protected areas to include landscapes dominated by humans (Marris 2011: 133–152; Kareiva and Marvier 2012).

A significant number of new conservationists have also encouraged the inclusion of human interests in conservation agendas, with special emphasis on the alleviation of poverty (Kareiva and Marvier 2012). These writers have argued that conservation must partner with development and capitalist enterprises and, more generally, that conservationists must highlight the value of the living world for human beings (*ibid.*). This shift in favour of instrumental valuation has been justified both as an ethical imperative to assist humans living in substandard conditions (Kirby 2014) and as a pragmatic move (in an ideal world, all humans would be motivated to conserve the living world by an appreciation of its intrinsic value; but given this is not the case, appeals to instrumental value are proposed as a more effective alternative (Kareiva 2014)). In turn, critics have objected that, with its emphasis on promoting human development, new conservation is not conservation at all, but rather a form of humanitarianism (Soulé 2013). Soulé and others have taken this point further and claimed that if new conservation were implemented, it would not only fail to deliver conservation goals but it would even act against them (Johns 2014; Miller et al. 2014). In the manoeuvres and counter-manoeuvres of new conservation and its critics, particular articulations of what conservation is are deployed to promote—or to attack—specific agendas, as received definitions of conservation are stretched beyond their traditional scope and later retightened, at times by the same biologists who proposed them in the first place (Soulé 1985).

Contrary to what its name suggests, there is little that is genuinely new in the constellation of arguments that make up new conservation. A wide range of cultures have long recognised that change is in the very nature of the world (including, of course, ecological systems) and that it can be preferable to learn to live with change than attempting to resist it (e.g. Keeler 2021). For their part, questions to do with the relationship between conservation, development and the instrumental value of the more-than-human world are as old as conservation itself (Leopold 1949; Adams 2019; Clayton 2019). Writing in 1999, David Hulme and Marshall Murphree described the emergence of a new paradigm of African conservation, focused on promoting human interests and partnering with capitalist development. They also called it new conservation, but their work is distinctly absent in the bibliographies of the more recent books and articles on the topic. As Solomon could have anticipated (Ecclesiastes 1: 9–11)[1], the fact that this latter iteration of new conservation has presented itself as innovative has less to do with the novelty of its proposals and more with the collective forgetting of the history of their ideas.

In light of this, one is inclined to predict that the spate of articles and debates on new conservation which emerged in the last decade will soon blend back into the longer-standing matrix of ideas on the geographies and ethics of conservation. In other words, the issues at the heart of the debate (how to respond to ecological change, the tension between the intrinsic and instrumental values of the living world, the relationship between conservation and capitalism) did not just precede new conservation, but are bound to outlive it. They are, in fact, perennial components of the dual questions of what conservation is and what it is for. For this reason, my analysis of new conservation is not intended to apply specifically and exclusively to last decade's debates. Rather, I use these as a lens with which to focus my inquiry. I will concentrate on the issue of ecological novelty; I invite those interested in the relationships between conservation, development and capitalism to consult the rich literatures that already exist on these topics, and to consider the extent to which my proposed definition helps or hinders the clarification of such relationships (on development, see Elliott et al. 2013; Svampa 2016; Adams 2019; on capitalism, see Gray 1993; Brockington and Duffy 2011; Büscher et al. 2012; Cleary 2018).

There are at least two ways of reconciling new conservationists' embrace of ecological novelty with my proposed understanding of what conservation is. Both hinge on the distinction between change and loss. First, it is important to recognise that new conservationists' openness to, and at times fondness of, ecological change is actually motivated by the urge to prevent loss. Throughout Emma Marris' writings, extinction is viewed negatively, as something preferably to be avoided. Her widely read book *Rambunctious Garden* opens with a powerful account of the various ways in which nature has been lost, both materially and in our imaginations (Marris 2011: 1–2). As its subtitle, *Saving nature in a post-wild world,* makes clear, the novelty-embracing, future-oriented approaches she endorses are ultimately aimed at ensuring the continued existence of valuable things, such as species and ecological communities (see also Marris 2014). In fact, this is the normative thread that binds Marris' book. In her account of conservation, the aim of artificially relocating species is precisely to enhance their chances of surviving global climatic changes (*ibid*.: 73–96). Exotic species are seen positively when they save native species from probable extinction, as in the case of timber plantations, songbirds and fruit bats on Rodrigues Island (*ibid*.: 97–98). The view of alien species as potential allies in the fight against ecological loss is further defended in Fred Pearce's book *The New Wild*, which also has a telling subtitle: *Why invasive species will be nature's salvation*. All these strategies have the avoidance of loss as their most fundamental objective; their creative, change-embracing

approaches are deployed to serve familiar conservation goals. As Pearce puts it (*ibid.*: 2): "I am not questioning the motives – to strengthen nature – but the means."

A second way to interpret the strategies proposed by new conservationists as real conservation is to consider that what they seek to save are not supposedly fixed entities, such as biological taxa, but ecological processes. Seen this way, the difference between approaches that embrace change and those that seek to preserve ecological entities in their current states pertains to the first step of my proposed definition. In other words, disagreement between these approaches could be seen as stemming from differences in considerations of what is most valuable in the living world. If this were current ecological states, then change of any significant sort could pose a threat to their continued existence. But it is just as possible to construct a vision of conservation in which ecological processes —such as evolutionary diversification, nutrient cycling and carbon fixation—rather than entities are the chief values of the living world. Environmental ethicist Bryan Norton (2000) has argued in favour of process-oriented value; on this view, the natural world is principally valuable not on account of the entities it contains but because of the creative processes that ongoingly generate (and destroy) those entities. Under this conception of value, openness to change could be seen as a strategy to promote the continued existence of valuable processes, such as ecosystem function and evolutionary diversification.

In the two ways I have described, new conservationists' openness to ecological change can be considered conservation. Importantly, the traditional varieties of conservation to which new conservation constitutes a reaction have no theoretical grounds on which to object to the arguments above. Of course, these arguments can be challenged on empirical grounds: it might be that in some or even most cases embracing anthropogenic change is not a good strategy to save the kinds of things that both new and traditional conservationists are interested in conserving. Regardless of their plausibility, these change-embracing approaches are simply alternative strategies through which to promote the continued existence of the kinds of things conservationists have typically valued, such as species and ecological processes. It is possible, though, to consider the value of the more-than-human world in terms not of species and processes but rather in terms of the interests of the individual beings—animals, plants and other organisms—that make up those ecological wholes. To understand how the value of these beings relates to more traditional conservation goals, I now turn to debates about compassionate conservation.

IS 'COMPASSIONATE CONSERVATION' CONSERVATION?

In an essay entitled 'Summoning compassion to address the challenges of conservation', Arian Wallach and colleagues (2018) build on their previous work (Wallach et al. 2010; Bekoff 2013; Ramp and Bekoff 2015) to develop a critique of widespread conservation practices that (according to the authors) cause unnecessary, and sometimes intentional, harm to wild animals. Examples of these practices include the poisoning of rodents on oceanic islands where their presence threatens the survival of seabird species and the culling of non-native herbivores in habitats where natural predation is insufficient to prevent overgrazing. As a corrective to these harmful practices, the authors propose four fundamental tenets of compassionate conservation, which include the belief that individual lives matter in their own right, beyond their value as parts of broader wholes; and a principle of peaceful coexistence, which counsels that in situations where the behaviours of humans and wildlife enter into conflict it can be preferable to modify human practices than to harm nonhuman beings. There is now a Centre for Compassionate Conservation (based in Sydney and co-managed by Wallach and Daniel Ramp) and compassionate conservation has gained currency beyond academia, attracting significant media coverage (Marris 2021).

Even though the parallels with Buddhist philosophy are obvious enough, there is little or no mention of Buddhism in compassionate conservation. As Wallach et al. (2018) note, the etymology of the word 'compassion' is rooted in the Latin words *com,* meaning 'with', and *pati,* meaning 'to suffer'. Buddhist ethics are centrally preoccupied with suffering and the alleviation thereof (Harvey 1990). In Buddhism, the metaphysical rejection of any strict separation between the self and others, coupled with practices that encourage empathy toward other beings, form the bases of the virtue of compassion (*ibid.*: 197). Viewing compassionate conservation in light of Buddhist ethics can help account for its concern with the welfare of wildlife individuals. Abstract collectives, such as populations and species, are incapable of suffering; therefore, they are not proper objects of compassion (James 2006). By contrast, it is incontrovertible that many nonhuman animals can suffer (James 2015); animal individuals, unlike the wholes to which they belong, are appropriate objects of compassion. (This also explains why, on the whole, Buddhist ethics appear to contribute little moral support to the conservation of species, instead concerning themselves with reducing the suffering of individual animals. As Peter Harvey (2000: 183) remarks, somewhat inverting Ishmael's priorities: "Buddhist principles might not strongly support saving 'the' whale, but they support saving whales!"[2])

Not all the attention received by compassionate conservation has been favourable. Compassionate conservation's focus on the lives of individual beings has been seen as anathema to the endeavour of promoting the continued existence of ecological wholes, which, for reasons explained in the second section of this essay, constitutes the heart of conservation's ethical mission. Critics have argued that compassionate conservationists are animal rights activists in disguise, and that their focus on the welfare of individual animals is a serious distraction from—and even a barrier to—the attainment of true conservation goals (Hayward et al. 2019, Callen et al. 2020). Others have contended that compassionate conservation, if it

were implemented at scale, would result in unjust outcomes for many humans (Oommen et al. 2019) and that compassionate conservationists' claim that the preservation of biological diversity can be achieved without harming individual animals is a piece of fiction (Driscoll and Watson 2019). These last authors conclude, uncompromisingly, that "compassionate conservation is not conservation."

So is compassionate conservation, truly, conservation? In and of itself, concern about the welfare of wild animals cannot be meaningfully considered conservation. The reason for this has to do with the fact that for conservation to make sense it has to operate in what I have termed extended human time. The lives of individual animals unfold in spans of time that are too brief (from the human standpoint) for their conservation to be a feasible or meaningful project. Meanwhile, the kinds of valuable things with which critics of compassionate conservation have preoccupied themselves, including biological diversity and ecosystem function, are sufficiently durable for their conservation to be possible, at least in principle.

But the claim that their concern with the welfare of individual beings necessarily shatters compassionate conservationists' credentials as conservationists is misguided. As articulated in the foundational publications, compassionate conservation does not aim to overthrow or even question the central goal of conserving ecological wholes. On the contrary: its proponents have clearly and repeatedly stated that these wholes are inherently valuable and that it is morally good to attempt to preserve them (Wallach et al. 2018; Batavia et al. 2021). Unlike some of the recommendations made in other accounts of wild animal ethics (e.g. Palmer 2010), the kinds of interventions endorsed by compassionate conservationists are not based on the single pursuit of enhancing the welfare of animals. When, for instance, Wallach et al. (2018) recommend that the breeding colony of Little Penguins (*Eudyptula minor*) on Middle Island (Australia) be protected from fox predation by deploying guardian dogs rather than by poisoning foxes, the motivation to protect the wellbeing of foxes (wildlife individuals) is coupled with the motivation to protect the continued existence of the penguin colony (an ecological whole). That compassionate conservationists believe in the moral importance of protecting wholes is also evidenced by disputes internal to the initiative around the extent to which it is permissible to harm and kill individual animals when doing so advances the goal of conserving species (Batavia et al. 2021).

It is possible to distinguish at least two practical strategies of compassionate conservation, and both are immune to the criticism that they are not true conservation. The first stems from the realisation that many of the human activities that are damaging to ecological wholes are also harmful to the individuals that compose them (Nussbaum 2007). The unsustainable harvest of wild beings and the destruction of their habitats are examples of such activities. Indeed, many of these behaviours threaten ecological wholes precisely because they are damaging to individuals. Contrary to Ishmael's calculations, whaling did eventually pose a critical threat to the continued existence of whale species. (To be fair to Ishmael, it must be said that in his time whales were hunted with hand-held harpoons cast from oar-propelled boats.) Thus, protecting individual whales promotes the conservation of whale species, and initiatives that aim to conserve whale species benefit individual whales. More generally, wherever the interests of individual animals align with the conservation of the wholes to which they belong, summoning compassion toward sentient beings has the potential to advance conservation goals (James 2006).

A second approach to compassionate conservation is based on the proposition that whenever conservationists intervene in wild populations, they should do so with compassion for the individuals that form those populations. Again, and contrary to what many of its critics have suggested, compassionate conservation's main normative thrust is neither the recommendation that humans intervene in wild habitats to assist suffering animals nor the proscription of any kind of intervention that results in suffering. Rather, and more simply, the core contention of compassionate conservation is that individuals matter. Like Buddhists before them, compassionate conservationists have acknowledged that suffering inheres in the world, and they recognise that some amount of it is inevitable (Batavia et al. 2021). That is why, also like Buddhists, compassionate conservationists have recommended that conservationists refrain from inflicting *unnecessary* harm (Wallach et al. 2018). None of this challenges the central mission of promoting the continued existence of ecological entities and processes. Instead, compassionate conservationists have argued that this very mission ought to be pursued with due regard for the lives of individual beings.

To be sure, one can dispute the claim that wildlife populations can be managed for conservation without actively inflicting harm to individual beings. Critics of Wallach and her colleagues have questioned the effectiveness of using guardian dogs to conserve penguin colonies, of protecting dingoes as a strategy for conserving small endemic mammals, and of refraining from culling feral horses when these threaten the native vegetation of Australia (Driscoll and Watson 2019). But just like doubts about the effectiveness of embracing ecological change as a strategy for conserving species and ecological processes, these are empirical questions rather than philosophical ones about the nature and goals of conservation. Compassionate conservationists have admitted that there exist inescapable trade-offs and tragic choices between the goals of conserving ecological wholes and protecting the wellbeing of individual animals (Rohwer and Marris 2019; Batavia et al. 2021). Again, the belief that the lives of wildlife individuals matter and that one ought, where possible, to behave compassionately toward them are not in themselves challenges to conservation goals, even when these goals conflict with the welfare of individuals. One may recognise that in some cases harming animals is a necessary evil and inflict that harm with a heavy heart and a commitment to trying to minimise unnecessary damage.

So far, I have argued that compassionate conservation can rightly be considered conservation when fostering compassion for individual beings promotes conservation goals (as in the

protection of whales) and when compassionate conservation simply recommends that conservation goals are pursued with a commitment to minimising the unnecessary harm inflicted on wild individuals. Before concluding this essay, it is important to note that some members of the compassionate conservation initiative have expressed more extreme views than these. Wallach, for one, thinks individuals are more important than species. When faced with situations in which one must either inflict large amounts of suffering on individual animals or let species go extinct, Wallach believes the latter option must be chosen (Marris 2021: 217–220). (One example of such a choice is that between poisoning mice on Gough Island or letting Tristan albatrosses—on whose chicks the mice predate—be gradually eaten to extinction.) According to Wallach, individual lives matter not just enough to recommend that conservation goals be striven toward with compassion, but indeed to demand that those goals be dropped whenever they come into conflict with the principle that it is impermissible to inflict large amounts of suffering on individual beings. Unlike the two approaches to compassionate conservation reviewed above, these views are not conservation and indeed they run counter to conservation goals. But note that it does not follow from this that Wallach's views are wrong: it is a further question whether the right course of action is to forego conservation goals when these require that the welfare of individual animals is seriously compromised.

CONCLUSION: CONSERVATION IN CONTEXT

The last decade saw the repackaging of the most fundamental questions in conservation—why and how the living world is valuable, and how best to conserve those values—in the form of debates about new and compassionate conservation. Given the wide and deep diversity of available answers to those questions, the further problem has arisen of deciding whether conservationists across the globe should unite behind a shared mission (Tallis and Lubchenco 2014) or coexist in a climate of plurality and dissent (Sandbrook 2015; Matulis and Moyer 2017). Reflecting on these debates, I have argued that there is a single, basic mission that is shared by all conservationists: to promote the continued existence of valuable things in the living world. I have also proposed that conservation necessarily unfolds in what I have called extended human time. In timespans briefer or longer than this, conservation is not just unfeasible: it is unintelligible.

Several additional caveats with my definition are in order now that my argument has been made and my propositions defended. I have spoken freely about time and humanity as though my treatment of these concepts were universally intuitive—but of course this is not the case. The idea that time flows steadily and irrevocably from the past into the future has underlain not just this essay but also the principal varieties of conservation I have considered; yet many cultures do not understand or inhabit time in such linear ways (Rifkin 2017; Hunfeld 2022). For all its talk of hybridity and entanglement, the notion of the more-than-human has at its core—if only semantically—a conception of 'the human' as a valid category; but in a range of Indigenous American cultures, personhood is neither fixed nor confined to *Homo sapiens* (Fausto 2007; Descola 2013). Moreover, my articulation of what conservation is has at its centre the understanding that valuable, living things can be lost and that efforts must be made to save them; yet it would be hard to deny that, in European languages at least, talk of death and salvation is steeped—however covertly—in Christian values (MacCulloch 2010). Had my analysis of conservation not been so fixed on the avoidance of loss, more space would have been available to discuss the importance of other qualities of the living world, such as abundance and place-based values (Norton and Hannon 1997; Collard et al. 2015). I offer these qualifications not as a way of invalidating my conclusions, but rather to substantiate the claims I made in the Introduction regarding my epistemic positionality.

Crucially, the proposition that there is one core spirit animating conservation does not entail that it is possible or desirable for all conservationists to set aside their differences and work together in the pursuit of shared goals. The reasons for this are multiple. First, while all conservationists agree that there is value in the living world, they are often at odds about where that value lies (genes, species, ecological processes, etc.). Second, conservationists often disagree about *why* those things are valuable (because they are important to humans, or because they are important in and of themselves). Third, even if conservationists agreed on what things are valuable and why, they may legitimately disagree about how those values ought to be traded off when they come into conflict. And fourth, conservationists disagree about how conservation ought to relate to other human projects. One of the benefits of avoiding excessively vague definitions is being able to distinguish conservation from other good ways of relating to the living world (such as the promotion of the welfare of individual animals). Conservationists may, and should, continue to disagree about how the goals of conservation are to be balanced with other worthwhile ways of relating to the more-than-human world, as well as how best to negotiate—as conservationists—with more and less powerful human actors. With regard to each of these questions, the global conservation movement is, and will continue to be, both diverse and divided.

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NOTES

1 Note, however, that although the superscription of Ecclesiastes attributes its authorship to the "son of David, king of Jerusalem", the form and content of the book belong to a time much later than Solomon's.

2 To clarify: Buddhist principles might not support saving the abstract category of 'the' whale (e.g. as a species), but they support saving individual whales.

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