Seeds of change

Provocations for a new research agenda

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From elite wildlife-ism and ecosystem service jugglery to an inclusive environmentalism

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What and why: from wildlife to biodiversity

The term 'biodiversity conservation' is of recent vintage. 'Wildlife conservation' is what inspired most modern-day conservationists, including my college friends and I. Inspired by documentaries like "Serengeti Shall Not Die", we went on field trips to wildlife hotspots. If you had asked us *why* we loved megafauna or birds, our answer would have been "because they are beautiful." It is this aesthetic and spiritual value that arguably drives most conservation action worldwide, a value derived from a subset of nature, viz., megafauna, not bacteria.

Another prominent strand in conservation is 'animal rights'. But this makes a case not only for wildlife, but also stray dogs in cities, whereas several 'wildlifers' would recommend culling strays to prevent them spreading infectious diseases. Similarly, the animal rights perspective differs that of the 'Deep Ecologists' who talk of the 'intrinsic value of nature' and therefore focus on 'wilderness'. They are unlikely to endorse saving stray dogs in cities either. And possibly none of these groups will uphold the rights of mosquitoes, cockroaches or cholera germs.

Conservationists also value natural forests, but for mixed reasons: their intrinsic beauty, their role in harbouring wildlife, and because they bring rain. Aesthetic/spiritual and instrumental values converge. With individual trees – typically in an urban context – the instrumental argument becomes stronger – trees as shade-givers and air cleansers – even though many urban trees are exotics introduced for their beautiful flowers.

Thus, the answer to 'why conserve (biotic[1]) nature?' is a mixture of aesthetic, intrinsic value, rights-based, and instrumental arguments, each leading to a somewhat different 'what to conserve' goal (megafauna, all animals, or only useful biota). They may overlap operationally in some cases – natural forests may deliver megafauna, pristineness, animal rights and rainfall – but not in others.

Building common ground can be achieved by using terms that encompass multiple values, such as 'nature' instead of 'wildlife'. Or by demonstrating operational convergence, such as the argument that biodiversity ensures resilience of agriculture against future shocks. Both are legitimate and necessary coalition-building strategies. Where the conservation movement has failed, however, is in indulging in scientific jugglery to claim operational convergence of all conservation with instrumental values, whilst ignoring a wider set of values towards nature and society that exist globally.

The jugglery of ecosystem services[1]

Having championed various versions of conservation that appealed to non-material values for decades, some conservationists felt the need to get greater 'traction' with policymakers who seemed obsessed with economic growth and the conservationists came up with the 'ecosystem services' argument: biodiversity = ecosystem services = human wellbeing.

This edifice of ecosystem services turned out to be a house of cards for several reasons. Firstly, pristineness (a cultural service) and sustainable use (a provisioning service) have significant non-overlap. Some diversity is relevant for sustainable use, but use values can be maximised and sustained under 'far from pristine' conditions. Similarly, wild nature may yield pollination, pest control, or hydrological regulation services, but much of treasured wild nature – elephants, tigers and lions – does not provide material benefits[2].

Secondly, wild nature can also be harmful, i.e. produce 'dis-services' such as pathogens, or damage and death from pests and wildlife. Thirdly, human development indices (HDIs) are increasing as biodiversity is declining – the "environmentalists' paradox[3]." Resolving this requires acknowledging that human development is increasingly reliant upon 'abiotic' resources – petroleum, iron ore, bauxite, etc. – and the biotic contribution is now largely from agriculture, not forests or prairies.

Ironically, modern-day interest in wildlife or wilderness is also premised upon solving the material challenge of living comfortably, i.e. unnaturally. "For most Americans [read urban wildlife lovers] it is perfectly consistent to drive a thousand miles to spend a holiday in a national park[4]," or to fly to Tanzania, stay in five-star hotels, and travel in air-conditioned safaris to watch lions hunting wildebeest in the Serengeti.

Thus, although the ecosystem services literature generated useful pieces of research on indirect services, it involves too much conceptual jugglery and produces bad science – where the answer to the questions are already known. It is better to re-engage with traditional, 'honest' conservation and its critiques.

The elitism of conservation

At a panel discussion in a recent conference, the anchor asked "What is your vision for a desirable future for this planet?" Eric Dinerstein from Global Deal for Nature replied: "A future in which half the planet is set aside for nature." Tania Lee, a renowned anthropologist, replied: "A future in which all human beings live a dignified life." This captures the essence of the problem. Conservationists' vision of a 'good society' is one-dimensional: a world in which landscapes are kept pristine. Completely missing are other values or concerns that societies legitimately hold and which, in fact, underpin the lives and work of conservationists themselves.

First, is the concern for material wellbeing – how many professional conservationists live a $1/day lifestyle or live without laptops, refrigerators and cars? Modern-day conservation is full-stomach environmentalism. This does not make it illegitimate, but it demands that basic wellbeing and dignity for all has to be placed on a higher footing than conservation. 'Deep Ecologists' on a moral high horse touting biocentrism as

superior to anthropocentrism are worse than a distraction; they demean the idea of humanity: the capacity to talk about value.

Second, is the concern for equity, justice and fairness. Essentially, if I want a $100/day lifestyle I must allow it for others. Moreover, if sustainability or conservation require 'cutting back' on the use of nature, who should make this sacrifice? Socially marginalised and colonised forest-dwellers who have lived a subsistence lifestyle for millennia? Or we, the urban elite whose environmental footprint is the cause of climate change, climate-induced biodiversity loss, and the mining, dams and highways that are destroying the wilderness that remains?

Third, is the concern for sustainability. Many conflate this with conservation. But sustaining human wellbeing into the future requires sustainable management of renewable resources, limiting use of non-renewables, and averting the future impacts of current pollutants, foremost among which is CO_2. While conserving biota may mitigate climate change marginally, limiting fossil fuel use is the only way to substantively address the climate challenge. But sustaining wellbeing whilst limiting fossil fuel use will involve more intensive use of biological resources. A climate-sustainable economy may be 'greener' than today's economy, but will be far from pristine.

Finally, if multiple values cannot be simultaneously maximised, we need a 'procedural ethic' as to how trade-offs or tensions may be best resolved. Democracy in its deepest sense seems to be the only reasonable procedural ethic for this and most modern-day conservationists live in and benefit from it. Functioning democracies ensures that our houses in Bengaluru, New York or Cambridge are not flattened overnight, without due process, in the name of a 'greater good' such as a public park. But conservationists forget this when they hob-nob with dictators elsewhere to pursue conservation[5], or compromise on due diligence process when lobbying to create National Parks in lands historically occupied by forest-dwellers.

Re-engaging with an open-ended inclusive environmentalism

The criticism about elitism is simply a reminder of all the values that conservationists tend to take for granted in their own lives but ignore when they pursue conservation outside their homes, particularly in the Global South. The criticism about the *Half Earth* proposal is that it is narrowly focused on only one value (conservation), and so does not ask 'which half?', 'who decides?', and, importantly, 'what is the vision for humanity in both halves?'. It instead hides behind fake scientism, claiming that setting aside half the earth is the "only defensible target" from a "strictly scientific [sic] point of view[6,7]." Rejecting this scientism and asking those awkward questions means moving from narrow conservationism to a broad-based environmentalism[8]. It means acknowledging multiple legitimate societal goals including the right to a dignified life for all, acknowledging that trade-offs and synergies between these goals cannot be fully understood beforehand and are essentially value-loaded, and therefore requiring a commitment to a democratic process. We cannot say we 'scientifically know' how much biodiversity – whether wildlife, wilderness or pristineness – has to be saved and should stop pretending that we do.

Rather, it is time to engage with the larger environmental challenge of achieving reasonable material and non-material wellbeing for all nine billion people in a just and sustainable manner, through democratic decision-making. If this means in practice that most elite urban, Western conservationists should focus on reducing their own environmental footprints and of their fellow citizens before they demand conservation from others, then so be it – it may lead to lesser conservation in the short run, but will yield greater overall personal satisfaction and social acceptability in the long run. In other words, conservationists need to not just "think like a mountain" as Aldo Leopold suggested, or strategically co-opt community organisations to achieve narrow conservation goals in half the world but work towards a broader eco-social vision for the whole world.

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