

Fletcher, R. *Failing Forward: The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Conservation*, University of California Press, California, USA, 2023, 318pp. Paperback £25. ISBN 978-0-52039-069-0.

Failing Forward: The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Conservation

Neoliberal conservation programmes have been subject to considerable criticism since they became *de rigueur* in the 1990s. However, “Failing Forward” goes beyond restating what’s wrong with these programmes. Its original contribution is to explain how neoliberal conservation has continued to be promoted worldwide despite failing to live up to its own goals. It fails, yet somehow, it’s endured, with its advocates doubling down on their convictions in order to ‘get it right next time’. Failed experiments beget yet more failed experiments.

In Rob Fletcher’s view, this seeming paradox is not adequately explained by the two major bodies of academic criticism that have dissected neoliberal conservation in recent years. Supplementing Marxist and post-structuralist approaches. Fletcher turns to the influential ideas of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. In a sometimes-dense discussion, Fletcher argues that insatiable desire impedes a ‘rational’ analysis of failure, leading neoliberal conservationists to believe that further attempts will yield profit-making ventures to protect everything from gorilla habitats to wetlands. They almost never do yield profit, however, as Fletcher shows in a chapter based on previous fieldwork in Costa Rica—a famously ‘green’ country in both a literal and political sense. Instead, attempted conservation markets lose money and often require the state to step in. So it is that the ‘selling nature to save it’ concept morphs into the very government-led arrangements neoliberals have sought to dismantle, at least rhetorically. Yet the affective allure of neoliberal conversation keeps people invested in its ideals, argues Fletcher.

“Failing Forward” is a highly stimulating read. Full disclosure: I’m one of the endorsers whose positive words appear on the back cover, this after reading the pre-publication manuscript. The book paints on a very big canvas, both in a diagnostic and historical-geographical sense. After a scene-setting introductory chapter sketching the rise of neoliberal conservation since around 1990, Fletcher details his theoretical framework, which is a combination of Marxian, Foucauldian and Lacanian ideas combined in a novel treatment of ‘biopower’. At times I found the discussion hard going, and others may do too—Lacan’s ideas, in particular, are elusive to this reader, while Fletcher’s use of Michael Taussig’s and Slavoj Žižek’s ideas had me baffled here and there. Chapter 3 offers an excellent global history of where neoliberal conservation came from while detailing its key concepts and promoters. Chapter 4 then explores conservation efforts

in modern Costa Rica that have failed to conform to the neoliberal script. This focussed chapter illustrates wider arguments, exploring internationally well-known experiments to marketise biodiversity in this Central American country. Chapter 5 steps back and sets these national-scale failures in the wider context of capitalism’s ongoing attempts to square the circle of profitability and protection of its ‘conditions of production’. Chapter 6 offers the big picture and tries to explain the rationalisation of failure among the various promoters and patrons of the ‘green neoliberal’ agenda, such as the IUCN and World Conservation Society. Chapter 7 then outlines some responses to failure in economically poor but resource-rich countries (e.g., Latin America). These include returning to things like mining and deforestation to make nature pay given that conservation seemingly won’t do the job. The final substantive chapter explains why there’s no alternative to post-capitalism and economic de-growth if the world’s biodiversity is to survive.

Fletcher writes well and has authored a book to get the neurones firing. Researchers in the field will appreciate his original, cross-disciplinary synthesis and interpretation. Conservation professionals will be provoked to consider where their work fits into a bigger story and how it might best be progressed. There are plenty of things to argue within the book, which I regard as a strength. For instance, I think Fletcher is right that, to all intents and purposes, ‘green capitalism’ is a virtual contradiction in terms. And yet, given today’s stupendous concentrations of economic power and the footloose nature of contemporary capital, post-capitalism is a total pipe dream. So, realistically, how does one grope towards some version of the growth-equity-sustainability trinity sought after since the Brundtland Commission report of 1987? What mix of hard-headed realism and aspiration will move the political dial in the conservation world? It seems to me that nature conservation now has to reckon with two simply enormous forces: 1) neoliberal capitalism (Fletcher’s concern), which is remaking the world’s economic and political geography as never before; and, 2) related to this, a changing Earth System that eludes control and will impose massive adaptation costs destined to limit various conservation ideals. Where the likes of Emma Marris want to make a virtue of these existential realities, another view is that they will erode most attempts to preserve what’s being lost. Seen thus, and to riff-off Fletcher, most nature conservation is now destined to ‘fail’ as the entire operating environment is being upended. The shocking bleaching events that will blight coral reefs more and more are a testament to this.

The book is handsomely produced by the University of California Press. There are extensive endnotes and an extraordinarily rich bibliography, though far too few visual aids. “Failing Forward” adds to a substantial body of work by its author. His previous sole and co-authored books (e.g., with Bram Büscher) are, like the present one, intended to set the agenda. I anticipate this monograph will be widely read in the academic and (to a lesser extent) practitioner communities trying to understand how to conserve the world’s microbes, insects, soils, plants, trees, birds, animals and marine species.

Noel Castree

University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

E-mail: noel.castree@uts.edu.au

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