

## **Compassionate Conservation**

### **Abstract**

Compassionate conservation arose as a scientific response to the lack of consideration of the welfare and relational lives of animals in mainstream conservation practices. With growing awareness of the depth and complexity of non-human existence, new ethical and practical approaches were required to overcome widespread and problematic dependency on consequentialist ethics. By employing virtue ethics, compassionate conservation prioritizes moral inclusion of all life while providing guidance on our moral obligations towards other beings. In doing so, compassionate conservation represents a paradigmatic and ontological repositioning of who conservation is for and what it seeks to achieve. It incentivizes new policies and laws that promote equity and justice, while creating new visions of safe cohabitation for all of Earth's inhabitants.

### **Keywords**

Compassion; Human Exceptionalism; Intrinsic Value; Virtue Ethics; Justice; Guiding Principles

# Compassionate Conservation

## I. Introduction

As the planet plunged into a climate and biodiversity crisis in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century, conservation arose as the discipline primed to respond (Soulé [1985]), striving to promote the protection and persistence of the natural world. Seeking to conserve nature enshrines the goals of conservation as indelibly and explicitly entwined with depictions of what nature is and how it might be threatened. What nature is varies with perspective, whether shaped by Western traditions, those of the global south, or by first nations peoples, among others. Whichever derivation takes precedence, its construction lies in the normative depictions of nature and the natural world that are shaped by culture and experience (Yanco, Nelson and Ramp [2019]). As a result, although traditional conservation in the western world recognizes the intrinsic value of most beings (Batavia and Nelson [2017]), it struggles to consistently advocate for all life equally. Largely driven by human superiority (Kopnina and Washington [2020]), reconciling the ethical and philosophical concerns that arise when conservation views people as unnatural has long been recognized (Mill [1904]). Terms like 'wild' and 'wilderness', 'nature' and 'natural', emphasize nature/culture dichotomies that have been substantively critiqued (Plumwood [1998]), but remain instrumental and foundational to the crisis-informed demarcation of the 'Anthropocene'. It is certainly not contested that through industrialization, colonialism, and rampant consumption, people have singularly altered the planet unlike any other species (Steffen, Crutzen and McNeill [2007]). Yet as the transformation and destabilization of land and climate systems drives species decline and ecosystem collapse (Estes *et al* [2011]), traditional conservation has resisted decoupling human exceptionalism from objectives aimed at arresting the crisis. While the concept of the Anthropocene is contentious because it encourages negative framings of human/nature interactions, it is nevertheless within the complexity of anthropogenic landscapes that conservation must find traction and transcendence toward a post-Anthropocene planet.

## II. Evolution of Conservation's Purpose

Conservation has previously undergone reconfigurations aimed at evolving its purpose, in part seeking to address tensions exposed by its relationship to human exceptionalism (Mace [2014]). Much has been made of the failure of nature/culture dichotomies and neoliberal framings to stimulate the fundamental actions necessary to prevent further biodiversity and climatic collapse (Fletcher [2023]), signifying what is essentially a Kuhnian paradigmatic crisis in reconciling the juxtaposition of people and nature. While it is beyond this essay to interrogate the complexity of why these failings appear systemic and insurmountable, it is worth noting that whether it is framed through protectionism or capitalism, inherent in these constructions are apparently uncontested notions of what nature is and who should be protected. The central tenet of each of these frames lies in the assertion that nature's value is fully captured by quantitative definitions of biodiversity, whose units of concern are populations, species, ecosystems, and the diversity and history they weave together. Construed in this way, the anthropocentric

assertion of a nature that is ordinally categorizable into who matters most, explicitly dictates the kinds of conservation interventions that should be actioned. It is this cartesian delineation of nature, positioning people at the precipice of a foundational order, that stymies conservation from truly stemming global eco-climatological collapse because it fundamentally alienates and disincentivizes moral attentiveness to individual lives and lived experiences.

The complicity of conservation promoting human exceptionalism has led current conservation frameworks to at least three systemic and interrelated problems: instrumentalism, collectivism, and nativism (Wallach *et al* [2018]). The ‘othering’ of the more-than-human, which ‘obscur[es] human-generated problems by shifting welfare burdens towards regulated entities’ (Riley [2019]), perpetuates violence actioned through these three lenses. In short, by pragmatically prioritizing the instrumental value of nature, like the financial commodification of ecological function or services, instrumentalism leans into Kantian philosophy where non-human animals are not considered ‘rational beings’, thus downplaying their intrinsic and existential rights (Birch [2020]). The instrumental values that eventuate are then easily transferred to a collectivist framing, where the needs of collectives (population, species, ecosystem) outweigh those of individuals. Collectivism incentivizes conservation goals that seek to ensure non-human collectives remain protected, regardless of the impact on the ethical claims individuals have over their lives (Riley [2019]). This is not to say that collectivism is invariably harmful; it does provide the case for extinction as an important mechanism for stimulating conservation action. However, the overemphasis of collectivism can subjugate the rights of individuals and promote assertions that collective transformation represents ecological harm, even when transformations represent adaptive responses to novel anthropogenic conditions. It is this last point that drives the most insidious concept within conservation, the assertion that nature has a set form, a moral position whereby anthropogenic complicity in the modification of nature is viewed as aberrant and harmful, rather than a result of nature/culture entanglement. Expressed in this way, ‘nativism’ has increasingly become embedded as the primary locus in global conservation efforts, dominating policy development and forming the backbone of emerging conservation interventions like the control of introduced species (Lundgren *et al* [2024]). Not only have these three interrelated framings shaped how current conservation conceives of who matters, they also dictate where nature belongs and what it should look like, limiting future ecological possibilities that may be evolutionarily fit for coexistence alongside people in the post Anthropocene.

### **III. Compassionate Conservation**

Compassionate conservation is a direct response to the challenge of reimagining a more inclusive and relational form of nature protection, seeking to overcome the cultural residue of human exceptionalism in traditional conservation. It paradigmatically reframes who conservation is for, and in doing so, incentivizes a morally inclusive, just, and future-ready world. In this way it augments other recent reframing, like multispecies studies (Celermajer *et al* [2020]) and convivial conservation (Büscher and Fletcher [2019]), yet its unique ontological repositioning offers an essential adjustment necessary for a post

Anthropocene world (Steinhardt, Pratt and Ramp [2022]). It achieves this by reorienting conservation and nature protection towards individual beings and their relationality to the world, rather than just as building blocks of biodiversity (Ramp and Bekoff [2015]). Informed by overwhelming evidence of the sentience, sapience, agency, culture, and relationality of other beings, grounding conservation in individuals establishes due concern for their welfare and needs alongside other metrics of biodiversity. By including wild animal welfare, rights, and equity in conservation practice, compassionate conservation establishes a firm response to the weak ethical claims, explicit sanctioning of harm, and failure to address underlying causes of biodiversity decline inherent in traditional conservation practice (Baker [2017], Ben-Ami [2018]).

The utility of compassion, as applied to conservation, is two-fold. As an emotional response to suffering, being rooted in the Latin *com*, meaning 'with', and *pati* meaning to 'suffer', compassion provides ethical guidance on the obligations moral agents have towards deserving entities. The embodiment of compassion is, therefore, an appropriate and virtuous response that provides inspiration to those seeking a morally just world. But compassion also deconstructs the overwhelming entanglement of the gendered socio-cultural lens (primarily white, heterosexual, and male) through which the fundamental narrative of conservation has evolved. Although not intended as an explicit critique of this narrative, 'challeng[ing] the hierarchical and oppressive ideals of individualism and control in conservation' (Batavia *et al* [2021]) would be almost impossible without addressing its foregrounding in human exceptionalism. By acknowledging the well-established consensus between emotion, reason, and rationality in scientific deliberation, compassion facilitates the reorientation towards accommodating non-humans as morally relevant beings (*ibid*). Here, compassion invokes a virtue ethic rather than the consequentialist underpinnings of normative conservation framings (Environmental Ethics Entry). Embedding attentiveness to the moral dilemmas faced in meeting obligations to others as moral agents, compassion provides practical guidance on accounting for the residue that takes root when morally just actions are unable to be universally met (Batavia, Nelson and Wallach [2020]). While compassion is but one of several relevant virtues, compassion provides the necessary inspiration for reimagining structural foundations within traditional conservation.

Although compassionate conservation arose in the 2010s, several guiding principles were agreed upon by early practitioners. Not intended to be fixed, prescriptive, or necessarily comprehensive, these principles include (i) 'first, do no harm', (ii) 'individuals matter', (iii) 'promoting equity', and (iv) 'peaceful coexistence'. Indeed, those who have begun exploration of compassionate conservation come from many persuasions, disciplines, and perspectives, providing a rich and inclusive diversity through which our ability to work through the complexity of expressing compassion in conservation may be realized. Perhaps rightly, conservation scientists recognized the challenge these seemingly straightforward principles present to the anthropocentric framing of modern conservation (Soulé [1985]), even if expressed concerns are often logically and ethically infirm (Castelló and Santiago-Ávila [2023]). In fact, the increasing focus on individuals clearly highlighted how moral attentiveness to individuals radically alters why and how we might act as moral conservation agents. If the 'golden rule' were to apply, treating others

as one would expect to be treated, acts that transgress normative ethical responsibilities towards moral patients can only be justified when the rights of those patients are considered beneath human rights. Compassionate conservation asks us to act as enlightened beings, with the capacity to be virtuous, just, and compassionate, so that we may reconsider our responsibilities and relationality to the more-than-human world. What may emerge, we argue, is a conservation movement that reconfigures people within nature, motivating them to locate themselves in their surroundings, to express moral concern for all life, and to actively engage the flourishing of multispecies societies through safe cohabitation (Srinivasan [2019]).

#### **IV. Possibilities and Challenges with Compassion**

Engaging in a paradigmatic repositioning of people alongside other life presents considerable challenges. For conservation, both the scientific endeavors that gather knowledge of the more-than-human world and the activities and interventions championed by policy and local actors require careful reexamination. It would be easy to misconstrue the implications of what being attentive to individuals means for the way people dominate the planet, and the conservation actions that seek to protect it. To those for whom it may seem heretical and naïve to provide recognition to non-humans, their agency and cultures, absurdist arguments are easily indulged to prevent positive discourse and necessary paradigm shifts. However, there can be no doubt that our obligations as moral actors require serious deliberation, encouraging us to not bury our heads in the sand while the bodies of non-humans are buried in the name of conservation, all while the precarity of eco-climatological systems and global biodiversity continue to decline at pace. Rather than a cessation of conservation activities, compassionate conservation encourages contemplation of our reticence and discomfort to overcome resistance to new opportunities for discovery and actions that promote flourishing. Important areas of research include learning to listen to non-humans while overcoming the inherent anthropocentrism of behaviorism (Soryl *et al* [2021]), being responsive to the cultures that arise in intra- and inter-species communities of individuals (Brakes *et al* [2019]), contemplating how we meet our obligations to more-than-human rights in nature restoration policies, laws, and activities, and promoting emerging political foundations and spaces that advocate for multispecies flourishing. Through the guiding voice of compassion, much of this work is already happening (Compassionate Conservation: A Legal Perspective in the EU entry) but continuing to explore how compassion can improve our actions, policies, and laws is critical for finding a path towards addressing the planetary crises we all now face.

#### **Bibliography**

Baker, Liv, 'Translocation biology and the clear case for compassionate conservation' (2017) 63 *Isr J Ecol Evol* 52

Batavia, Chelsea, Nelson, Michael P., and Wallach, Arian D., 'The moral residue of conservation' (2020) 34 *Conserv Biol* 1114

Batavia, Chelsea and Nelson, Michael P., 'For goodness sake! What is intrinsic value and why should we care?' (2017) 209 *Biol Conserv* 366

Batavia, Chelsea *et al*, 'Emotion as a source of moral understanding in conservation' (2021) 35 *Conservation Biology* 1380

Ben-Ami, Dror, 'Compassionate conservation, where to from here?' (2018) 63 *Isr J Ecol Evol* 1

Birch, Jonathan, 'The place of animals in Kantian ethics' (2020) 35 *Biol Philos* 8

Brakes, Philippa *et al*, 'Animal cultures matter for conservation' (2019) 363 *Science* 1032

Büscher, Bram and Fletcher, Robert, 'Towards Convivial Conservation' (2019) 17 *Conserv Soc* 283

Castelló, Pablo P. and Santiago-Ávila, Francisco J., 'Conservation after biodiversity: An analysis of Michael E. Soulé's "What is Conservation Biology?"' (2023) 287 *Biol Conserv* 110313

Celermajer, Danielle *et al*, 'Multispecies justice: theories, challenges, and a research agenda for environmental politics' (2020) 30 *Environ Polit* 119

Estes, James A. *et al*, 'Trophic downgrading of planet Earth' (2011) 333 *Science* 301

Fletcher, Robert, *Failing Forward: The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Conservation* (U Cal Press 2023)

Kopnina, Helen and Washington, Haydn 'Conservation and Justice the Anthropocene: Definitions and Debates' in Kopnina, Helen and Washington, Haydn (eds), *Conservation* (Springer International Publishing 2020)

Lundgren, Erick *et al*, 'Preventing extinction in an age of species migration and planetary change' (2024) e14270 *Conserv Biol*  
<<https://conbio.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/cobi.14270>> accessed 18 June 2024

Mace, Georgina M., 'Whose conservation?' (2014) 345 *Science* 1558

Mill, John S., *Nature, The Utility of Religion and Theism* (Rationalist Press 1904)

Plumwood, Val 'Wilderness skepticism and wilderness dualism' in Callicott, J. Baird and Nelson, Micheal P. (eds), *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, vol 655 (UGA Press 1998)

Ramp, Daniel and Bekoff, Marc, 'Compassion as a practical and evolved ethic for conservation' (2015) 65 *BioScience* 323

Riley, Sophie, 'Wildlife law and animal welfare: competing interests and ethics', *Animal Welfare and International Environmental Law* (Edward Elgar Publishing 2019)

Soryl, Asher A. *et al*, 'The case for welfare biology' (2021) 34 *JAGE* 7

Soulé, Michael E., 'What is Conservation Biology?' (1985) 35 *Bioscience* 727

Srinivasan, Krithika, 'Remaking more-than-human society: Thought experiments on street dogs as "nature"' (2019) 44 *Trans Inst Br Geogr* 376

Steffen, Will, Crutzen, Paul J. and McNeill, John R., 'The Anthropocene: are humans now overwhelming the great forces of nature' (2007) 36 *Ambio* 614

Steinhardt, Margarita, Pratt, Susanne, and Ramp, Daniel, 'Re-thinking felid-human entanglements through the lenses of Compassionate Conservation and Multispecies Studies' (2022) 12 *Animals* 2996

Wallach, Arian D. *et al*, 'Summoning compassion to address the challenges of conservation' (2018) 32 *Conserv Biol* 1255

Yanco, Esty, Nelson, Michael P. and Ramp, Daniel 'Cautioning against overemphasis of normative constructs in conservation decision making' (2019) 33 *Conserv Biol* 1002

### **Authors**

Daniel Ramp, Associate Professor, Centre for Compassionate Conservation, Transdisciplinary School, University of Technology Sydney, Australia

Madden E. Solomon, Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, Tufts University, USA