

Protecting the Wild: Parks and Wilderness, the Foundation for Conservation

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Protecting the Wild: Parks and Wilderness, the Foundation for Conservation

Edited by George Wuerthner, Eileen Crist, and Tom Butler. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2015. xxvii + 362 pp. US\$ 24.95. ISBN 978-1-61091-548-9.

Protecting the Wild chronicles the evolution of the rewilding movement. Comprising a collection of 28 forward-looking chapters that explore the fundamental values of global conservation discourse, it considers the foundations needed to protect the wild in any meaningful way. In doing so, this book provides a strong indictment of the weak, cautious approaches to date and presents a compelling case for bolder vision and commitment in conservation discourse and practice. While it opens with acknowledgement, in John Terborgh's foreword, of how many more species would be extinct without conservation efforts to date, its central tenet—the need to expand the number, size, and interconnectedness of protected areas, and as such to rewild them—is quickly apparent.

Central to the framing of rewilding in this book is the idea of conservation based on nature's intrinsic value, as opposed to conservation based on what nature can provide or do for people. Drawing on a number of fascinating case studies from around the world, this book critically evaluates the difference between anthropocentric and ecocentric conservation discourses and cautions against confusing biodiversity conservation with the ecosystem services paradigm. To this end, it tracks the critical debates between new conservation science (NCS) and the emerging field of compassionate conservation, and it demonstrates the importance of distinguishing between

the two to ensure the coherence of future conservation discourse and practice.

The central premise of NCS is made clear: traditional conservation approaches arguably (1) have failed to protect biodiversity, (2) rest upon the myth of pristine nature, (3) regularly harm disadvantaged people, and (4) have only been supported by an affluent, white minority. The remedies offered by NCS involve allying conservation with significant economic actors and focusing on the landscapes that are most useful to people.

Whereas NCS calls for conservation in the name of people and for the sake of people, the emerging field of compassionate conservation presents a strong case for shifting from commodity-focused management and narrow anthropocentrism, toward valuing the intrinsic values of the wild instead. In advocating a wilderness approach instead of a fundamentally humancentric conservation ethic, a critical question at the core of this book is whether rewilding is naive when compared to the NCS or social conservation, which focuses on protecting the environment for its benefits to humans.

As Reed Noss et al illustrate in their chapter, balancing biocentric and ecocentric values is not new to conservationists. But whether conservationists should be less ambitious for conservation policy to be more socially acceptable is a challenging, yet fundamental, question. In general, this book provides a damning indictment of social conservationist arguments, with Daniel Doak et al suggesting that “rather than adding to the conservation toolbox, NCS seeks to shrink the range of conservation activities, and especially motivations, which are considered legitimate” (p 34). Douglas McCauley's fool's gold analogy of the ecosystem services paradigm encapsulates the idea that market-based mechanisms for conservation are not the panacea that they have been portrayed as. In

many instances, making money and protecting nature are mutually exclusive, as demonstrated by McCauley's Lake Victoria example, where the introduction of invasive Nile perch has contributed to decimating local biodiversity but caused a boom in the economic value of the lake. There are cases in which it is lucrative to protect nature or in which people will derive benefit from such conservation efforts, but it is dangerous to overstate the role of ecosystem services in conservation and this paradigm should not be the foundation of conservation. Instead, McCauley writes, “we must redirect much of the effort now being devoted to the commodification of nature back toward instilling in more people a love for nature” (p 36); fundamentally, this necessitates being explicit that the mission statement needs to be to protect nature, not to make it turn a profit.

Critically, this book plays an important role in demonstrating, and reminding us, that not all conservationists think the wilderness idea quixotic, misanthropic, or shortsighted. There is still value in a conservation ethic built upon the intrinsic value of wild places beyond their utility to people. As George Wuerthner reminds us, while the Yellowstone model is criticized as a form of imperialism or colonialism that denies the influence of indigenous people, the reality is that the signature of human influence and manipulation to some extent or another is irrefutable globally. As Emily Wakild warns, therefore, we cannot ignore conceptions of conservation and wilderness that do not translate into US-centered narratives, which are so purist that no real wilderness can exist. Unsurprisingly, the idea that conservationists are guilty of oversimplifying false dichotomies and stark contrasts, as opposed to subtle gradations, forms the mainstay of this book. One of the most enlightening arguments is Marc Bekoff's view that rewilding can only

deliver if it is allowed to be a flexible-enough concept that it can be adapted to a range of contexts and needs and can allow people with different interests and objectives to work collectively.

Once again, in a book focused on the conservation of nature, human relationships are at its core. From Christof Schenck's overview of human relationships with the wild to Jane Goodall's insights into community empowerment, it is apparent that society's willingness to accept bold conservation discourse that puts nature first remains at the

epicenter of this debate. As Spencer Phillips articulates, personal experiences in wilderness are intrinsically linked with humility, yet spiritual renewal tends to get short shrift when considering the value of wilderness to people. But if the importance of "rewilding our hearts" (p 144) and re-enchanting people with nature was ever in question, Bekoff is quick to convince otherwise. Rewilding is an attitude, a mindset, a personal journey in which people and nature come together. There is no doubt that this requires a bold diversion from

current conservation discourse and blind faith that the consequences of rewilding will be good. Still, as Bekoff urges, action is required, so "leap and the net will appear" (p 152).

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