

The global conservation movement is divided but not diverse: reflections on 2020

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My title is a riff on that of the excellent article by Chris Sandbrook and colleagues from 2019, ‘The global conservation movement is diverse but not divided’ (Sandbrook et al., 2019). In a survey of 9,264 conservationists from 149 countries they showed that, although there were substantial differences in opinion regarding how conservation should be done, all shades of opinion were represented in their survey sample, rather than people clustering in one camp or another. Their study also highlighted two matters that came into stark focus in 2020. Firstly, there were major differences in viewpoint that broke along geographical and demographic lines (e.g. women and Africans were more likely to endorse people-centred conservation, whereas biologically-trained people and those from Oceania and North America were more likely to endorse science-led ecocentrism). Secondly, their sample was heavily biased towards the Global North, with Europeans (38%) and North Americans (25%) outnumbering Africans (5%) and Asians (8%).

Twenty-twenty was a year like no other, for everyone, and has brought some of the core fissures within conservation into stark focus. It was supposed to be the biodiversity super-year in which the Global Biodiversity Framework would be ratified by the signatories to the Convention on Biological Diversity, setting us on a course over the next several decades towards the restoration of nature. This did not happen. Instead, a global pandemic slammed into us, forcing societies around the world to re-evaluate their priorities. In addition, although so-called natural disasters in many countries have brought the dangers of climate change into sharp relief, some opportunistic administrations and resource-grabbers took the opportunity to step up the pilaging of nature and weaken or ignore environmental regulations (e.g. in Brazil: Silva Junior et al., 2021; in the USA: Frumkin & Myers, 2020).


One element of division relates to the sampling issue in the research of Sandbrook et al. (2019). Global conservation is still overwhelmingly dominated by the same privileged, white, wealthy, Northern hemisphere voices. This is problematic because it means the diversity of views that is needed for better conservation is not present, as eloquently stated by Ashish Kothari in the recent March editorial in

Oryx (Kothari, 2021). Worse, the entrenched injustices of colonialism and power imbalances continue to fester (Chaudhury & Colla, 2020). These came into sharp focus within conservation with the revelations in 2020 about human rights abuses perpetrated in the name of conservation (WWF, 2020). These should give everyone who calls themselves a conservationist pause for thought. The Black Lives Matter movement in the USA has catalysed debate about the composition of our profession. I write from the UK, where there is a woeful lack of ethnic diversity within conservation. We are, however, also unrepresentative of wider society with respect to many other dimensions of privilege (e.g. disability, care-giving responsibilities, neurodiversity, socio-economic background). This has to change.

Another element of division relates to views on how conservation should best be done. The unprecedented opportunity for a seismic shift in global biodiversity conservation represented by the Global Biodiversity Framework and the post-COVID ‘build back better’ agenda has brought to the fore bitter divisions in the conservation movement and led us to fight among ourselves rather than focusing on the big picture. For example, the first COVID wave in April–May 2020 led to a major campaign to ban all wild meat from commercial sale for consumption (e.g. ExtinctionEndsHere, 2021), and subsequent pushback from those who were concerned about the impacts on livelihoods, particularly in Africa (e.g. Roe et al., 2020). The two sides actually have large areas of agreement, but these tend to be lost in the rhetoric. Following on from this, arguments about banning trophy hunting raged on social media (Morss, 2021), often over-simplifying complex arguments about a type of land use that is relatively limited in extent compared to, for example, industrialized agriculture (Cooney et al., 2017).

The intertwining of both of these fault lines—the lack of diversity in conservation and passionate differences in views about how to do conservation—can be seen in the open letter of Agrawal et al. (2020) in response to the working paper ‘Protecting 30% of the planet for nature: costs, benefits and implications’ (Waldron et al., 2020). This letter highlights the dangers of focusing on the biodiversity and economic implications of a massive expansion of protected areas but also points out the disproportionate representation in the research team of people from institutions in wealthy countries compared to the disproportionate impacts of such a policy on people within poorer countries.

How can we take lessons from 2020, and move forward in 2021 so that conservation scientists and practitioners can

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influence the global agenda more effectively? As a privileged, senior conservationist from a wealthy country, there are a few things that I can do more of, and better, this year:

- 1) However tempting it is to answer requests to give an interview or offer a view to the media, or take up an appointment, senior Northern conservationists need to try harder to redirect requests to others whose voices are less heard. A concern may be that the journalists asking for contributions may not take these recommendations but simply move on to another privileged person. Rather than saying 'better me, as I'm enlightened, than the other, who may not be', we need to stand strong and insist that others have access to the platforms they deserve.
- 2) I will continue to try to redirect my research towards tackling my country's own culpability for environmental damage overseas (e.g. through its supply chains), and making contributions closer to home, to help improve the environmental sustainability of my own institution and country. As I have spent my professional life working on issues about resource use in rural areas of poor countries, this will be a step into the unknown, but if everyone in the Global North redirected more of their energies towards challenging their own institutions and governments, systemic change might be more likely. There is still of course value in international collaborations to support colleagues who are working around the world to tackle problems in their own countries, but these need to be both initiated and led locally.
- 3) All of us need to be more generous and accepting of the contributions and viewpoints of others, and recognize that a rainbow of approaches is needed, dependent on scale, location and circumstances. Although we have a long way to go in improving the diversity of conservation (both in terms of who is involved and in terms of the approaches we use), it is important to start to make progress in the right direction, recognizing that we cannot solve our deep-rooted problems instantly (Ngwenya et al., 2020).

It is a challenge to balance pushing for the ambitious and radical action the planet needs with working within the current system to shift it (e.g. working with financial institutions to redirect their investments while also promoting Indigenous and local voices in the face of land conversion). We need to argue passionately for biodiversity for its own sake, as well as recognizing its fundamental role in sustaining human existence. Not everyone can, or even should, cover the whole range of philosophical positions or

conservation approaches in their own work. But if we respect each other's perspectives and intentions more, and recognize that conservation is, and should be, a broad church, maybe we will make more progress in 2021. Conservation needs, more than ever, to be both united and diverse.

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