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Response to Panelists

Contribution to GTI Forum Conservation at the Crossroads

Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher

We very much appreciate all the responses to our [opening essay](#) for this GTI Forum. We are heartened by the general agreement on the need for a different and, indeed, post-capitalist path forward for conservation, even if there are clearly different ideas about what this means. It is only through open debate across difference that we can hope to find common directions going forward. Indeed, this is why neoliberalism has been so strong: it is driven by common overarching ideas (growth, accumulation, entrepreneurialism, etc.) despite differences in operationalization. By contrast, alternative paradigms have often failed to achieve a shared direction across difference, thus undermining efforts to effect structural change.

First, we want to emphasize that we fully agree with several commenters that the land and ecosystem practices, knowledge systems, and critiques of neoliberal development generated by indigenous communities and Global South movements are central to effective conservation. While we emphasized this in our opening essay and in much of our other work, we gladly heed the important call to go much further in this regard.¹ We have had the good fortune to work with many indigenous and local community members in the Global South, and these collaborations have shaped the formulation of convivial conservation. We are deeply indebted to them as well as to the many scholars and activists who have worked to bring indigenous wisdom and practices to wider attention.

Yet our proposal is not merely “old wisdom” under a new name. First, because we do not want to appropriate others’ wisdom or voices when they can express this much more effectively. Second, because while we believe our proposal can speak to many conservation actors around the world, it is above all aimed at international policy discussions. In particular, we aim to challenge and

change “mainstream,” Northern-based/funded conservation ideas and organizations, not indigenous and grassroots land and ecosystem stewardship in the Global South. Hence, we agree with [Diana Pound](#) when she notes “when it comes to convivial conservation, I think some of us have been doing work that could be described this way for a while.” Our aim is precisely to build on and join many existing examples of convivial conservation in practice, highlighting their commonalities to advance a broader conservation paradigm shift. In [Guy Dauncey](#)’s terms, this is a “practical utopian politics” for conservation.

In so doing, the question posed by [Alejandro Argumedo](#)—whether we need retain the label “conservation” at all—is important. After all, our proposal also broadens the narrow focus of mainstream biodiversity conservation to include decolonization and socio-ecological justice. This addresses what [Ashley Dawson](#) incisively emphasizes: mainstream conservation’s extremely violent history. Our and others’ work on “green violence,” “green wars,” and colonial conservation has highlighted this violent historical legacy and how it continues to be fueled by capitalist developments.²

Another reason for doubting the term is our emphasis on political economy. After all, if capitalism were truly sustainable, there would be no need to advocate for conservation, which would simply be endogenous to the economic system. This extends to issues such as the food system ([Eileen Crist](#)), which is problematic precisely because of its embeddedness in a global political economy oriented towards capitalist accumulation. All this means—coming back to Argumedo—the need to challenge neoliberalism and the neoliberal state. As he stresses, nurturing more autonomous spaces for communities that care for themselves and environments outside of global markets is vital.

Consequently, we agree with [Troy Vettese and Drew Pendergrass](#), among others, that the critique of capital is central. Our “practical utopian political” instinct counsels working with actors with varying perspectives in the process of transformation. At the same time, we must hold fast to the conviction that many institutions (Big Oil, Big Tech, Big Advertising, Big Agriculture, Big State, Big Military, etc.) are incompatible with a sustainable planet and need to be abolished. Still, transformation will arise within the capitalist system while at the same time going beyond it, which is why we frame our proposal as “post-capitalist,” not “the end of capitalism,” as [Lisi Krall](#) calls it. Like the rise of capitalism itself, moving beyond it will be highly uneven—*but move beyond it, we must*.

Troy Vettese and Drew Pendergrass’s proposal for “Half-Earth Socialism” makes this explicit. However, we don’t agree that the “nature-culture dichotomy” is merely an academic hobbyhorse. To the contrary, the dichotomy has concrete implications wherever conservation planners create and enforce strict protected areas. Additionally, we strongly disagree with their claim that a “park with livestock is not a well-functioning park,” given that this completely ignores how the history of park creation required (violent) expulsion of local residents and livelihoods. In fact, many parks that allow some livestock grazing function well.

In the end, a *political* proposal like convivial conservation needs to balance nuance and flexibility with strong principles and a clear direction. Hence, responding to [Shiba Desor](#), [Lisi Krall](#), and [Eileen Crist](#), we don’t simply dismiss “neoprotectionists” (or, for that matter, “new conservationists”), but earnestly engage with them. In our judgment, neoprotectionists have not been the strongest environmental justice advocates, but we appreciate how neoprotectionism and new conservation are often not opposites but “in reality may tend to often coincide and co-exist on the same landscape and be implemented by the same body” (Desor). Indeed, many actors from these divergent camps have recently come together to promote a conjoined “Nature Positive” proposal.³ We view convivial conservation in the same way: in theory, policy, and practice, all will need to balance flexibility and strong principles.

Responding to [Annie James](#), theory in this proposal must both reflect on the world and inspire actions to change it. In the process, certain goals are central, such as social justice and equity (as reflected our proposal for a Conservation Basic Income) and the preservation of biodiversity (with due attention to the need of large animals have for abundant space, as Eileen Crist emphasizes). To our pleasant surprise, forthcoming Dutch environmental planning bureau scenarios for convivial conservation, which included simulating a degrowing economy, found that it left *more space for biodiversity* more swiftly over the short term, and almost as much over the medium term, as “Half Earth” scenarios that have major negative social justice implications. Hence, we believe convivial conservation and its focus on promoted areas is *better* overall for big animals, too. In this way, it can promote global “ecohealth” as suggested by [Neva Goodwin](#), [James Aronson](#), [Adam Cross](#), and [Laura Orlando](#).

As we stressed in our opening essay, true conservation will require quenching economic growth, a goal that can be advanced through blending convivial conservation and degrowth political-economic paradigms. This is not easy in practice, but with colleagues and community partners in South Africa, we are currently experimenting with this in our “Living Landscapes in Action” project.⁴ One of our cases in Cape Town resonates with [Orion Kriegman](#)’s important point that cities and urban ecologies are also vital spaces for convivial human-nonhuman relations.

To be sure, convivial conservation cannot be all things to all actors: it is unabashedly political and politicizing, targeting dominant actors to make space for voices, practices, and forms of wisdom too often excluded from mainstream decision-making processes. At the same time, it seeks to find commonality across difference to present a *structural* alternative to capitalist conservation and other dominant paradigms. We take to heart the important elements brought by this discussion and hope to continue the conversation going forward.

Endnotes

1. Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher, *The Conservation Revolution: Radical Ideas for Saving Nature Beyond the Anthropocene* (London: Verso, 2020); Robert Fletcher, Kate Massarella, Ashish Kothari, Pallav Das, Anwesha Dutta, and Bram Büscher, “A New Future for Conservation: Setting out the Principles of Post-Growth Conservation,” *Progressive International*, August 10, 2020, <https://progressive.international/blueprint/e6e09a90-dc09-410d-af87-5d3339ad4ed3-fletcher-et-al-a-new-future-for-conservation/en>.
2. Bram Büscher and Maano Ramutsindela, “Green Violence: Rhino Poaching and the War to Save Southern Africa’s Peace Parks,” *African Affairs* 115, no. 458 (2016): 1–22; Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher, “Under Pressure: Conceptualising Political Ecologies of Green Wars,” *Conservation and Society* 16, no. 2 (2018): 105–113; Rosaleen Duffy et al., “Why We Must Question the Militarisation of Conservation,” *Biological Conservation* 232 (2019): 66–73.
3. Harvey Locke et al., “A Nature-Positive World: The Global Goal for Nature, 2020,” https://www.nature.org/content/dam/tnc/nature/en/documents/NaturePositive_GlobalGoalCEO.pdf.
4. For more, see <https://www.plaas.org.za/living-landscapes-south-africa/>.

About the Authors



Bram Büscher is Professor and Chair of the Sociology of Development and Change group at Wageningen University. He is the author of *The Truth About Nature: Environmentalism in the Era of Post-Truth Politics* and *Platform Capitalism* and co-author, with Robert Fletcher, of *The Conservation Revolution: Radical Ideas for Saving Nature Beyond the Anthropocene*.



Robert Fletcher is Associate Professor in the Sociology of Development and Change group at Wageningen University. He is the author of *Romancing the Wild: Cultural Dimensions of Ecotourism* and the co-author, with Bram Büscher, of *The Conservation Revolution: Radical Ideas for Saving Nature beyond the Anthropocene*.

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