



May 2022

Building Radical Consensus

Contribution to GTI Forum Conservation at the Crossroads

Diana Pound

There is so much with which I agree in Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher's [essay](#), but with limited time, I will provide a few thoughts and then explain my approach to what might be described as a form of “convivial conservation.”

Both their critique of capitalism and description of various conservation paradigms rooted in colonialism are about Western approaches. It is important to recognize other places and peoples working to care for nature see, value, and do things differently.

Capitalism is not the only political/economic system that damages nature. Accrual of wealth by exploitation of people and nature is at the heart of an array of state-based political/economic systems, including capitalism, communism, and imperialism. Who holds the wealth may differ (rich and famous, corporates, the state, a dictator, or royalty), but the impact on nature and people ends up the same. Working to change these systems to something better is an exceedingly long-term proposition. If convivial conservation asserts that “success in the conservation arena requires transforming the overarching global political economy,” we are out of time, and there won't be success. When “the house is on fire,” the focus is on how best to put the fire out as quickly as possible—not the governance of the fire service. Those with the skill and clout to work at influencing the global political economy and global conservation paradigms must do so, but the focus has to be on how we can get on better trajectories and to better outcomes for nature and people now—last week, yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

In the UK, there seems little awareness amongst environmental professionals that the roots of conservation practice here are in fortress conservation and colonialism. I mentioned it in a recent

blog for the UK Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM) and was asked to explain what I meant.¹ Whether self-aware or not, these attitudes are still quite evident, particularly in the rewilding endeavor (a more male-dominated strand of UK conservation, which I suspect is no coincidence). But the problems extend beyond this paradigm. Back in 2003 at a gathering of the European part of the IUCN Commission for Education and Communication (CEC), a challenging conclusion was that one of the greatest threats to biodiversity conservation is the attitudes and behavior of conservationists. This includes linear and silo thinking; an “experts know best, so experts decide” mentality; scientism with the natural sciences seen as the only way of knowing; top-down approaches telling others what to do; black box methods; and a belief that the answer is to educate “them” and then make them rationally analyze (our) options. All these need to change—and fast.

I too share grave concerns about the “nature at our service” paradigm of ecosystem services, but in certain limited settings and contexts, it has its uses.² For example, in England, if farmers are to stop operating on the production model that causes terrible damage to life support for humans and nature, they need income from creating and nurturing healthy landscape-scale habitats, regenerated soils, clean rivers, flood mitigation, clean air, and recreation access. With subsidies coming from the taxpayer, there has to be some fair way of calculating this. Likewise for making the cost/benefit case for natural coastal fringes or river management as part of better flood protection compared to large concrete structures.

When it comes to convivial conservation, some of us have been doing work that could be described this way for a while. Our team at Dialogue Matters design and facilitate multi-stakeholder consensus-building and negotiation related to the natural environment. By “consensus-building,” I don’t mean weak compromise; I mean stakeholders working hard to seek out win/wins for nature and all the different stakeholders and interests: looking for “both and” solutions and innovations. We have completed over 130 multistakeholder projects at local, national, and international levels. Some are collaborative research; others, better management of land, sea, rivers, species conservation, landscapes, fisheries, farming, water management, and climate change.

We help people come together across sectors, parts of society, and interests to combine their understanding of their part of the system and work out the optimum way forward for nature and people. Solutions can be a mix of technical, spatial, behavioral, market, operational, managerial, and governance. Outcomes are across the range for nature: areas left alone to nature, areas where local people and traditional practices are a fundamental part of how the ecosystem works, areas for active restoration or self-willed wilding, to greening highly altered urban areas. All are needed, but should not be imposed.

When I said above that I want to focus on what can be done now—last week, yesterday, today and tomorrow—I meant it for real, not in an aspirational way:

Last week, we ran the first workshop to help the UK fishing sector consider the most feasible and impactful solutions to transition to net zero and deliver other benefits.

Yesterday, it was all about bat conservation commissioned by Natural England (England's government agency for nature and landscape). In the second workshop in the dialogue, participants discussed if and how the implementation of regulation should be changed. The shift would be to refocus from conservation of local bats and roosts toward measures for bat populations, their habits and prey, and a developer's levy used to deliver landscape-scale conservation measures, strategies, research, and support for volunteer roles. Participants included scientists, regulators, conservation charities, local authority ecologists, custodians of historic buildings from the church and National Trust, local bat conservation volunteers, developers, and ecological consultants. Together, they shared knowledge and ideas and then explored the pros and cons and action steps for their shared priorities. Previously resisted by some, there was a consensus that significant change was necessary—of course with caution about what exactly those changes end up looking like and an ask that the changes are developed collaboratively.

Today, we are completing a Tree Strategy for Jersey (UK Crown Dependency). In that dialogue, we had farmers, nature conservationists, arboriculturists, people responsible for roads and infrastructure, developers, tree nurseries, heritage, local community voices, young people, and many others. They co-created the contents of the strategy which we have written, using their

words as much as possible. The resulting strategy is by the people of Jersey for Jersey's people, trees, woodland, hedgerows, and wildlife. This is no top-down imposition by a few experts telling everyone else what to do and overlooking intricate system connections and effects.

Tomorrow, we are continuing a project called "Quantocks Futures" a protected landscape that will lose iconic beech trees and other features to climate change. Multiple stakeholders, supported by wider community input, are exploring how best to adapt to these and other changes and make the most of their treasured landscape for well-being, livelihoods, and nature.

Delivering these deliberative consensus-building processes involves a great deal of design: who is in the core deliberations; any wider engagement to feed into that; mapping out questions, techniques, flows of knowledge, decision points, and then facilitating to enable points to be taken on merit not the status, power, or behavior of who said what. This encourages greater systems thinking, builds trust and understanding across differences, and—crucially—momentum for change.

Great outcomes can come even when people have very different values and politics if they work together in a principled and collaborative way—not one side trying to educate or change the other but co-designing what change looks like and how they will each play their part to deliver it. Our best commissions are when we can help people co-design the change and co-produce it too.

For me, that is what a great transition approach to biodiversity conservation looks like... today!

Endnotes

1. Diana Pound, "What does Transformative Change Mean?," Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM), December 22, 2021, <https://cieem.net/what-does-transformative-change-mean-diana-pound-cenv-fcieem/>.

2. Diana Pound, "The Eco...What Approach?," <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.1241484> ch?," International Association of Landscape Ecologists Conference Proceedings, 2011, <https://ecosystemsknowledge.net/sites/default/files/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Pound-RGS-2013.pdf>.

About the Author



Diana Pound is the founder and managing director of Dialogue Matters, which conducts stakeholder engagement for environmental projects. She works on integrated management of land, sea, and rivers; species conservation; climate research prioritization; water and energy futures; food security; and sea governance. Working in 28 countries, she has trained 2,500 people and advised national and international organizations. She was awarded the IUCN Commission on Education and Communication (CEC) Award for Excellence in West Europe in 2019. She holds an MSc in landscape ecology, design, and maintenance from the University of London.

About the Publication

Published by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



Cite as Diana Pound, “Building Radical Consensus,” contribution to GTI Forum “Conservation at the Crossroads,” *Great Transition Initiative* (May 2022), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/conservation-pound>.

About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As a forum for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.