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Human Confusion: Why There Must Be Justice for Non-Humans

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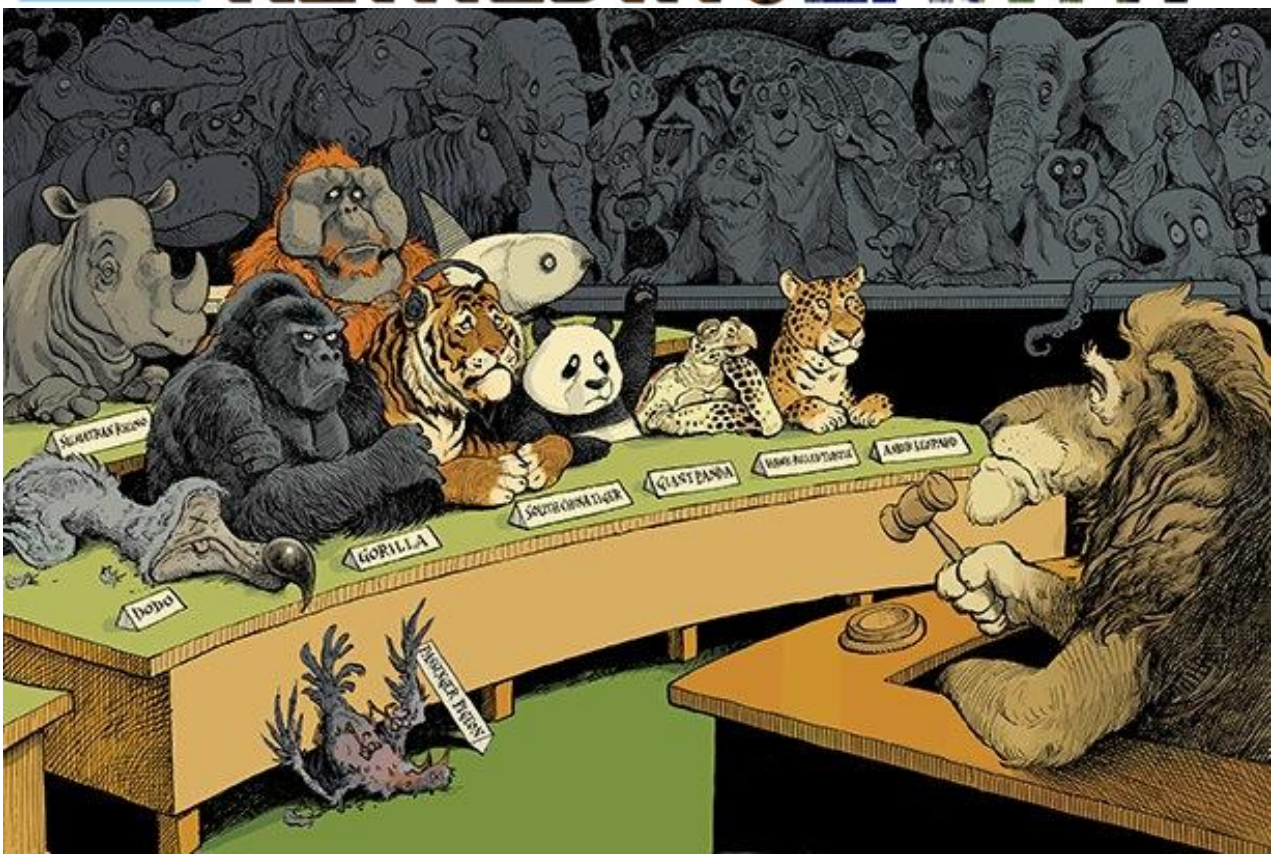

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Human Confusion: Why There Must Be Justice for Non-Humans

By David Johns

"The animals of the world exist for their own reasons. They were not made for humans any more than black people were made for whites or women for men. This is the gist of Ms. Spiegel's cogent, humane and astute argument, and it is sound." —Alice Walker, Introduction in Spiegel (1988: 10).

*"*What do they know—all those scholars, all those philosophers, all the leaders of the world—about such as you? They have convinced themselves that man, the worst transgressor of all the species, is the crown of creation. All other creatures were created merely to provide him with food, pelts, to be tormented, exterminated. In relation to them, all people are Nazis; for animals it is an eternal Treblinka. And yet man demands compassion from heaven…." —Isaac Bashevis Singer (1948: 270).

Over the last twelve millennia—since agriculture first emerged—humans have increased their exploitation and efforts to control other species and to colonize the Earth. Human on human hierarchy and colonization of other humans follows on the colonization of the natural world. The task of conservation is to undo that colonial relationship. We have been causing the extinction of other life-forms, including hominid species, since we left Africa at least 60,000 years ago. In the last 50 years, or just about two human generations, nearly 68% of all vertebrate animals have disappeared due to human activity (WWF 2020). Humans go into an existing biological community and reorganize it for the benefit of the invaders. We simply take what we want—the homes and lives of others—like the British did in India, the Spanish in much of the Americas, Japan in East Asia; like Mesopotamian cities did to agricultural hinterlands, and like the Aztec did to many of their neighbors.

Because we are cultural animals we have a need to justify our violent efforts to colonize and control—efforts which Walker and Singer eloquently and steadfastly reject. Whether we seek to displace other species or other humans, it's almost invariably about resources, but we imagine a moral cause—a civilizing mission, historical progress, democracy. In *Gulliver's Travels*, Jonathan Swift's Lilliputians and Blefuscuans fought and rested their superiority over the other on which end of an egg it was proper to open. We chuckle knowingly but have learned nothing. With such weighty matters as egg-opening to focus on, it's easy to see how we humans can be so self-absorbed and ignore our myopic destructiveness toward the larger world. Even Swift wasn't concerned that the eggs in question might not belong to humans in the first place. Perhaps he knew better than to go too far; they still burned people in those days.

Conservation is at its core an anti-colonial struggle. Its job is to dismantle these structures of exploitation and control and to do justice in our relationships with other species. As we close in on 8 billion people—up from 10 *million* at the beginning of the Neolithic, adding well over 4 billion in the 20th Century with the help of fossil energy—we are consuming more and more per person. Extracting more and more from the Earth entails creating greater machinery of control and extraction. Human societies pursue ever greater wealth and domination, whether Manifest Destiny of old or the Belt and Road of today, or just stumbling on; but "…all attempts to rationalize a subjugated biosphere with man in charge are as doomed to failure as the similar concept of benevolent colonialism. They all assume that man is possessor of this planet, if not the owner, then the tenant." (Lovelock, 1979)

Colonialism does not end well, as Franz Fanon warned us so eloquently more than half a century ago (1963). It is violent—both to impose and to throw off. It requires those who impose it to morally alienate themselves from the world they depend on. Colonialism over nature

requires that the doctrine of discovery and conquest be internalized psychologically, crippling people emotionally, and keeping us confined by the instruments of control. It feeds on death—not the death that attends the ebb and flow of self-regulating ecological systems, but the death that attends the clearcut forest and industrial farm where daylight never reaches.

The primary enemies of life on Earth are those who lead and cooperate with the human domination and do not resist. Timid conservationists—maybe they should not even be called 'conservationists'—and apologists of humanity are also problematic. To rid Earth of inequality, rid Earth of human domination of the natural world and the hierarchical systems produced by large-scale societies. This includes racism, Nazified agriculture, and much else.

Many criticisms of conservation are distractions, stuck in a human-centered universe with a god made in the image of humanity and an ever growing economy. They have no solutions and will haplessly go along with the status quo. They will not help safeguard the Earth. Mostly they focus on straw dogs. Those they criticize for "only addressing human population" also address consumption, but they ignore this; and of course the needy reasonably want more. Many historical conservationists are criticized for words or behavior, but sadly the criticism is usually not very original or thoughtful.

—Teddy Roosevelt did like to kill things, human and not human. There was clearly something fearful in him; and many a modern dentist has sought to emulate him, shooting at things that can't shoot back. Many conservationists consider trophy hunting a disease. Creating National Monuments and National Wildlife Refuges is a good thing, however. TR, like Pinchot and unlike Muir, was a utilitarian. Most conservationists are motivated more by appreciation of the intrinsic value and beauty of wild things than by their utilitarian value.

—There has been much criticism lately of some things John Muir said a hundred years ago, probably to reassure middle class white voters to visit and support protection for mountains and forests. Recovering from their civilized anemia was probably not an adequate motivation in his view. He's dead now and can't explain himself or apologize; as with Jefferson and the Declaration, one must acknowledge his owning slaves as an evil but be glad for the latter, which underpinned the abolitionist movement and much else. There's much fuzzy and muddy thinking in these criticisms of historic leaders. I do not hear Michael Brune, Sierra Club executive director, or other Muir critics say much about human domination of the biosphere and the suffering caused by that, let alone the failure of social justice leaders to criticize abuse of other species.

The great abolitionist Frederick Douglass is one of my personal heroes; one cannot imagine the Second American Revolution without him. He fought not just for American Blacks before and after the Civil War, including for Haitians and others, but was also an inspiration for many freedom struggles. Yet even he had lapses, saying that Blacks had achieved "the character of a civilized man," and Native Americans had not. The Indian, said Douglass, is "too stiff to bend" and "looks upon your cities…with aversion." The Indian retreats before modernity while the black man rejoices in modernity, Douglass believed (David W Blight, 2018: 486.). These days we might well debate who had the better judgment on urban centers, but I will not be so foolish as to stop seeking inspiration in Douglass, especially given how wimpy many activists are today.

Nor should conservationists abandon Muir‘s vision or those of other historic conservation leaders who argued on behalf of other species or wilderness. Life is not just about people—we are only one species among many millions.

—Wilderness has long been criticized as a North American or white invention and therefore problematic. (See Guha 1989 and Johns response 1990.) The term ‘wilderness’ comes from ancient Gothonic “self-willed” land or beast (Vest 1985), recognition from millennia ago that not everything has always been under human domination, despite “humanist” hubris. The modern notion of wilderness recognizes that areas must be off limits to human habitation if other species and places are to thrive. There’s no question that some human groups are more destructive than others; but the human record as a whole is not good. As noted above, humans have been causing extinctions since we left Africa, even as hunters and gathers. Wide ranging, slow moving and slowly reproducing animals can be especially vulnerable. Science is now telling us that the biological health of the planet and of all its species require at least half the planet be free of human exploitation (Noss 1992; Wilson 2016).

—Decades ago Jane Goodall was criticized by stuffy scientists fearful of emotional connection with what they studied. Now she is recognized for reconnecting many with the wild, if not first-hand, then at a distance. One might wish her more politically effective, but she has made a huge difference for the better in terms of humans recognizing wild Earth as their common home, not a rearranged, controlled landscape.

Being an asteroid is not the great purpose of our species. If we avert our wrecking of the Earth, and perhaps even save our pathetic selves, it won’t be because of philosopher-kings, technology, or reasonable people; it will be because the poets help us hear and feel the life around us again. It will be because we grow up a bit. Even scientists can at best only tell us how the world works—and all cultures have science. We would do well to heed Robinson Jeffers (1948):

“…, hour after hour, the happy hunters

Roasted their living meat slowly to death.

These are the people.

This is the human dawn. As for me, I would rather

Be a worm in a wild apple than a son of man.”

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Marc Bekoff Ph.D./Animal Emotions

Conservation Science Shouldn't Be All About Us

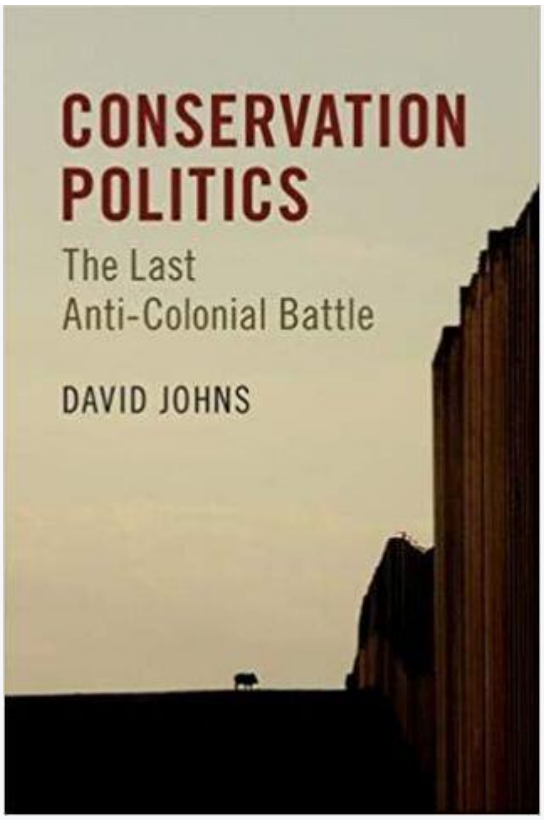
David Johns writes about freeing Earth and other species from human domination.

"We live in a time that may in the future be called The Great Dying." —David Johns

It's my pleasure to offer this interview with conservation activist, political scientist, lawyer, and strategist Dr. David Johns about the invaluable and forward-looking essays in his book *Conservation Politics: The Last Anti-Colonial Battle*.[1] His words are an excellent sequel to two previous pieces about the perils of human-centered conservation, Do Individual Wolves Care If Their Species Is on the Brink? and The Personal Side of Extinction: The Case of Orca Scarlet.

Why did you write *Conservation Politics*?

We live in a time that may in the future be called The Great Dying. Many of the world's forests are gone, replaced by tree farms. Some creatures are gone forever, extinguished by an explosion of human population and consumption, roads and dams and toxic chemicals. Almost 70 percent of the world's vertebrate populations have been snuffed out in the last two human generations, as we have stolen their homes, taken their lives, paved over their food or converted it to our food, eaten them, caused disease, and spread plastic everywhere. With a mixture of intention, thoughtlessness, self-absorption, and clumsiness, human societies have brought about this great loss. There are some people, of course, who are awake, who feel the outrage and sadness, and have acted to save our covoyagers and their livelihoods.



Source: David Johns, with permission

This book is mostly addressed to them and how they can be more effective at what they do. Conservation is at heart an anti-colonial struggle. It's an effort to free the Earth and other species from human domination and control.
In *Conservation Politics,* I try to summarize the lessons of other such efforts and make them available to those engaged in helping life. We don't have to invent the wheel—we have dismantled oppressive regimes before.

The real challenge, which this book can only encourage but not bring about, is to generate caring and reconnection. But I hope to generate a greater focus on underlying causes and encourage decisive action. We need to be unafraid of where dismantling colonialism takes us.

How does your book relate to your background and general areas of interest?

In another time, I was engaged with civil rights in the US, and halting aggressive wars aimed at peasants in Vietnam, Nicaragua, and elsewhere. For whatever reason, I experienced injustice against others personally and felt the need to act. Even then, I felt those struggles against injustice were incomplete. One did not have to dig too deep to find limits to justice; human

progress was built on the exploitation and domination of the non-human world. Endless growth—the ideology of the cancer cell as Edward Abbey called it—was considered a foundational good, as if no one had to pay the price. I recognized that to seek justice for humans and balance the books on the back of Nature was not a solution to the problem, but I was still struggling to articulate it.

What are some of your major messages?

The challenge conservation presents to the status quo is social, economic, cultural, but primarily political. As with slavery, labor, and women's rights, ending apartheid and toppling oppressive regimes there must be a clear and bold vision. In the case of conservation, settling aside at least half the Earth for other species is critical. Humans are one species among millions; we take too much. Since the early 1990s, it has been argued that setting aside half—the right half—should ensure other species and ecosystems can thrive. E.O. Wilson lent his support to that early on and more recently announced his Half-Earth effort.

One reason having a vision is so important is that goals and strategy flow from it. Vision is the foundation of any effort, the place from which one starts. Without it, one becomes bogged down in the near term and never gets beyond it. Movement toward the vision involves starting with it and backing up to the present, step by step. It's the art of changing what's possible, not the art of the possible. Abolitionists were constantly told that slavery ran too deep and was too essential to be ended. But they kept at it. Perseverance is essential.

Politics is a primitive business: fundamental change involves creating sustained political action and pressure—an organization or organizations that can reward decision-makers for doing the right thing, punish those that do not, or replace them. Organizations of activists—check writers can't generate the needed energy and commitment—must overcome the pressure brought by opponents. As one official put it: Don't expect me to do the right thing; make me.

Our own movement over the decades, and other social movements, remind us that we must not only mobilize and organize people but make a change on a variety of fronts simultaneously. Institutions, some very large and deeply rooted such as militaries, banks, energy, transport, and chemical must be

transformed or dismantled. Wildlife-friendly institutions must be created. People, especially children, must become re-embedded in the natural world as part of socialization and enculturation. Literature, film, theater, song, ritual, and other cultural practices must come to reflect an intimate, compassionate, and caring relationship with the natural world, even though the world is not always friendly. We need new mythology; rather than one based on human suffering, we need one that embraces all life, not just humans, and focuses on this world and not the millennium.

Hierarchy is a result of large-scale society. With fewer of us, hierarchy becomes superfluous and we can afford to be generous rather than selfish about the Earth.

Mobilizing and organizing can only be based on a combination of emotion—caring, a strong feeling for justice—need states such as belonging, and the cognitive: values, morality, stories about the sacred. Too often NGOs focus on only one, and academics tend to study only the last. Political practitioners tend to focus on emotion, but only for the short term. The key to conservation is the long term—pressure must be sustained over the long haul as those forces which corrode life are dismantled.

We have an obligation to the Wild—self-willed lands, creatures, waters. Historically, it is our home whether we can feel it or not. We cannot be at home on the Earth if we base it on stealing the homes of others.[2]

There will be many paths to protecting half of the Earth. We are still a distance away. Less than 3% of the ocean is strictly protected. About 12% of the terrestrial Earth is highly protected, but unlike the oceans, there is no independent verification. Governments make claims and no international body will challenge them. One path to protection is political campaigns—national and global-- that demand protection. These may succeed depending on how well organized conservationists are, their leverage, and what is at stake: good soil, minerals, oil, water, hydropower. Much also depends on what is being demanded and by who. Big NGOs are inclined to compromise to protect “access” to the powerful and appear reasonable Grassroots campaigns are usually less willing to compromise but often trigger repression. A fundamental problem, as we know, is that lions, gorillas, and grizzly bears do not get to vote, have lunch with prime ministers, or to suggest to prime ministers that if they don’t behave they will be lunch.

There are a variety of other paths to protection. Scientists have often led campaigns that can be quite effective if they have leverage for their goals such as foreign exchange earnings from tourism. Moral pressure may work, as with whaling by some countries—it also may not. But, conservation is mostly a moral fight. Marine conservation presents special issues. Marine mammals enjoy popular sympathy, but overall the ocean is alien to us. We don't tend to see the damage done unless fish disappear. When we look at the ocean, we see our reflection, and there is a bias that the ocean is too big to damage. We use water to ritually purify—but the ocean can be polluted.

Much conservation involves restoration of damaged areas, but little restoration is ecological in nature. Mostly restoration is meliorative—partial and involving only the recovery of those aspects favorable to humans.

Conservation will always be a fight because of societal inertia—millennia of hierarchy and efforts to control the world; because humans are myopic and selfish, because often conservationists don't understand power and the need to fight in the way Frederick Douglass did. "Power concedes nothing without a demand," he wrote. "It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress."

References

Notes

1) David Johns is a conservation activist, political scientist, lawyer, and conservation strategist. He was a co-founder of Wildlands Network and Conservation Biology Institute, among other NGOs, and he has worked on large-scale projects around the globe. His books include *Conservation Politics: The Last Anti-Colonial Struggle* and *A New Conservation Politics: Power, Organization Building and Effectiveness*.

2) Also see Dave Foreman's *Take Back Conservation*. Raven's Eye Press, Durango, Colorado, 2012.

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