

“The future of nonhuman life is not a technoscientific matter; it is a political and ethical one.”

Nature without Conservation

KRITHIKA SRINIVASAN AND ROSEMARY COLLARD

On June 5, 2023, the forest department in the state of Tamil Nadu in southern India caught a male elephant called Arikomban and transported him to a region around 300 kilometers from his home, causing him injury and severe stress in the process. This was the second time Arikomban had been subjected to capture and relocation; the first instance had come around a month earlier, after which he tried to make his way back to his home in Idukki district. This area has always been home to elephants, and it is now designated as an elephant corridor under India's wildlife conservation regime. It has also seen significant landscape change due to human settlement, dam construction, plantations, roads, and tourism.

Arikomban's repeated capture and relocation have been justified as necessary because he would seek out and eat rice from fields, kitchens, and shops in the area, interacting with people in ways considered conflictual. The elephant's most recent relocation was followed by protests by the people living in and around the area to which he had been moved—they did not want him nearby either. At the same time, some Indigenous communities held protests in his home region, asking for his return—since he had always lived there, they believed that he belonged there.

In the months preceding Arikomban's travails, 20 African cheetahs were transported from Namibia and South Africa to Kuno National Park in central India under the aegis of Project Cheetah, another conservation initiative of the Indian government. Asiatic cheetahs were declared extinct in India in 1952, victims of hunting and habitat loss. Project Cheetah seeks to reintroduce these animals to the country both to promote ecosystem

health and because they are seen as “natural heritage.” Less than a year after their arrival, five adults that were released from captive enclosures and three cubs are dead, mainly from relocation-related stress and trauma.

In yet another conservation program, in Western Canada, provincial governments are killing thousands of wolves by means of strychnine poisoning and aerial shooting. These wolves' ancestors survived hunting programs begun in the colonial era that aimed to eliminate them in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the interest of protecting “game” and farmed animals. Today's wolf culls are carried out to protect caribou who have been endangered by rapid and ongoing industrial extraction, including clearcut logging, coal and mineral mining, oil and gas exploration and production, and large dams, as well as the supporting transportation infrastructure: pipelines, roads, rail lines, and transmission lines.

Meanwhile, free-living dogs in India have been the subject of sporadic controversy and litigation seeking their elimination in the interest of health and safety, and, more recently, wildlife conservation. These liminal animals have always been a part of the subcontinent's socio-ecological landscape. Like their distant cousins, wolves, these dogs survived culling programs that were introduced in the colonial period. In independent India, these programs continued until 2001.

These examples of wildlife conservation in action capture the contradictions that characterize how humankind relates to the rest of planetary life. How is it that something meant to protect nonhuman life-forms (conservation of wildlife, biodiversity, or nature) ends up causing harm to them—sometimes to the very same animals or plants that are the subject of protection? What do these contradictions say about more fundamental questions as to how humankind ought to share Earth with other life-forms?

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Broadly speaking, biodiversity conservation seeks to protect nonhuman life-forms on Earth from the impacts of human activity. It encompasses a range of practices on various scales that aim to enable plants, animals, and their habitats to survive independent of human management. But since the beginning of human history, people have lived alongside other life-forms, including those considered “wildlife” or “nature” or “biodiversity” today. What, then, drives the need for conservation?

DEVELOPMENT AND DESTRUCTION

The answer partly lies in the pursuit of what has come to be referred to as “development,” and the visions of human well-being that underpin it. In today’s world, a good human life is seen as one insulated from risks, vulnerabilities, and uncertainties that are intrinsic to life on Earth, including hunger, predation, exposure to the elements, ill health, and death itself. This vision in turn justifies societal activities, whether agriculture, mining, manufacturing, construction, or modern medicine, that exploit, displace, and eliminate other life-forms and their habitats. These activities are also undertaken by businesses and governments in pursuit of surplus accumulation of material goods, economic growth, public revenue, and private profit.

Any organism that is the target of contemporary conservationist protection has a history of exploitation or displacement in the pursuit of such human and political economic interests. For instance, wolves were once present in the United Kingdom. But they were deemed a threat to livestock and human life, so they were exterminated through bounty hunting as well as habitat loss due to deforestation. Elephants in South Asia, red squirrels and wildcats in the UK, gray wolves and North Atlantic right whales in and around North America, and gorillas, rhinos, and ostriches on the African continent all have similar histories.

The history of buffalo on the North American plains is emblematic of the suite of logics behind the annihilation of such animals. As historian Nick Estes, a member of the Oceti Sakowin Oyate nation, recounts in his book *Our History Is the Future*, first settlers and commercial hunters decimated buffalo and other animals for fur markets; then the US military deliberately exterminated the remaining buffalo—10 to 15 million of them—in

an attempt to deprive Native Americans of a vital source of material and cultural sustenance. This was an act of genocide not only against Native Americans, but also, as Cree filmmaker Tasha Hubbard argues, against buffalo themselves.

The link between development and the endangerment of nonhuman life is seen in the near-complete destruction of biodiversity in what are referred to as developed countries. As a 2018 article in the journal *Biodiversity Conservation* argues, what is left of wildlife and habitats considered worthy of protection tend to be located mainly in parts of the world that have not yet been fully subject to development. To a lesser extent, valued wildlife and habitats are also found in parts of the Americas and Australia that have been continuously inhabited by Indigenous people despite European nations’ attempts to eliminate or assimilate them during the colonial era. Globally, studies show that the majority of lands managed by Indigenous people are ecologically healthy and hold a high proportion of the world’s remaining biodiversity.

Conservation is the outcome of development and colonialism.

What’s left of such biodiverse spaces around the world faces continual threats posed by global markets and development, and by related demands for resources and land. Most metal and mineral deposits—coal, iron ore, diamonds, coltan—are located within delicate terrestrial and marine ecosystems. Developmental activity affects nonhuman life not only through the direct destruction of particular landscapes, but also through habitat fragmentation. Many animals, such as elephants and large carnivores, have extensive ranges and need to travel large distances. Even if some spaces are set aside for them in protected areas, they often encounter human habitations and artifacts, like railway lines and energy infrastructure, with fatal consequences.

Although the impacts of these activities might be most visible locally, the causes and drivers of destruction are global and structural. For example, the devastation of rainforests and their inhabitants in Indonesia is directly tied to the international market for palm oil, which has become commoditized for use in everything from shampoo to chocolate to dairy calf feed. Domestic and international economic drivers tilt societies worldwide toward this type of destructive development.

Governments seek legitimacy from their citizenry by providing jobs and services, like electricity, which often depend on those governments maintaining growth trajectories through extractive development. Global financial structural dynamics like uneven terms of trade, indebtedness, increasing corporate power, the primacy of profit maximization, and the pursuit of high-value currencies lead governments not only to authorize activities that cause habitat destruction, but also to promote and subsidize them, invest in them, provide the infrastructure for them, and protect them through law and policing.

Conservation initiatives seek to protect organisms that are threatened by such historical and current development processes. In essence, biodiversity conservation is made necessary by the pursuit of development and its endeavor to protect human societies from the vagaries of planetary living, and to generate public revenue and private profit as part of the process.

Conservation is the outcome of development and its predecessor, colonialism. At the same time, conservationist protection remains fundamentally circumscribed and shaped by developmental norms. This has been noted extensively in relation to social justice impacts. Wildlife conservation through protected areas—or “fortress conservation”—has dispossessed local and Indigenous human communities while failing to disturb or slow the wider development processes that cause endangerment, often also advancing colonial and developmentalist agendas. As political ecologists Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher put it in their 2020 book, *The Conservation Revolution*, conservation remains “crucial to, and always part of, a broader political economy that is ultimately unsustainable.”

This embeddedness of conservation within developmental norms and processes has far-reaching consequences beyond social justice impacts. It gives rise to rather paradoxical situations—like those described at the beginning of this essay—in which nonhuman life-forms are subject to harm in the name of conservation. These situations take at least three forms.

RENEWED PERSECUTION

First, conservation often engenders human–wildlife conflict, which then results in fresh persecution of nonhuman life. When conservation efforts are successful in protecting and improving the lives and numbers of threatened or extirpated

animals, more often than not this leads to efforts to remove and eliminate those very same animals in the name of preventing human–wildlife conflict. The stories of Arikomban and other elephants in South Asia exemplify this trend.

Conservationist protection and the revival of vulnerable wildlife often take place in periods and societies that lack the memory, knowledge, or social norms that enable people–wildlife cohabitation. At the same time, due to significant landscape change that involves the spread of development and associated human activity, these animals have no choice but to inhabit regions where they must interact with people and developmental artifacts such as fields, houses, hotels, and infrastructures.

In Arikomban’s case, this elderly elephant born around 1984 has been associated with human–elephant conflict only recently, with the increased diffusion of tourism and habitat fragmentation in the area. In this changed socio-ecological context, Arikomban, despite being the subject of conservationist protection, has been framed by some local people, businesses, and government officials as a problem animal who needs to be translocated, or, like other elephants in the area, to be taken into captivity—or be killed in the process.

Similar stories involve wolves, bears, and raptors in parts of North America and Europe. First they were subject to extermination as pests and predators, then they were protected and reintroduced as endangered wildlife and “ecologically valuable” keystone species, and then they again became the subject of controversy and culls. Even animals such as beavers, first exterminated by hunting in the UK, and now the subject of conservation protection after unintentional rewilding, come into conflict with human interests such as farming and fishing; the commonplace outcome is relocation or captivity. This can also be seen in cases where certain animals (such as African elephants) whose life opportunities are improved thanks to conservationist protection face population culls when they transgress the spatial and material limits imposed on them.

Such renewed persecution emerges from the rootedness of conservationist action in developmental norms requiring that human–wildlife interactions—which are inevitable on a planet where no area remains untouched by human activity—do not negatively affect human interests and the pursuit of development. If they do, the animals in question must be removed, relocated, killed, or captured.

KILLING TO PROTECT

Second, nonhuman animals are often harmed or killed to protect their own or other species. Conservation efforts within a developmental context are founded on win-win narratives of enabling the flourishing of wildlife while not compromising the ever-expanding human interests that are mediated by development. Within developmental imaginaries, there are no limits to human needs and desires, which are not restricted to immediate survival but entail ongoing progress. This creates the conditions wherein conservation interventions harm nonhuman life-forms in the name of protecting them or other organisms.

Animals of one species can be targeted as requiring elimination because they have the potential to impede the flourishing of another species that is already endangered by developmental activity. A case in point is that of organisms classified as invasive aliens and subject to conservationist programs of eradication. Such plants and animals are easy scapegoats that can be eliminated in a political-economic context where more serious threats such as habitat loss and development activity cannot be curbed.

For instance, gray squirrels in the UK are required to be killed as invasive alien organisms that obstruct the lives of red squirrels via competition and shared diseases. This imperative overlooks the underlying causes of endangerment. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, red squirrels were nearly eliminated from Scotland because of habitat loss and culling as pests, and then were reintroduced from Scandinavia—only to be subject to further extermination because of the damage they allegedly caused to woodlands.

Red squirrels now live in regions where the habitats that enable their flourishing are scarce because of human activity; gray squirrels, originally from North America, are far better adapted to such human-dominated landscapes. But measures to stop activities that destroy red squirrel habitat would be in conflict with developmental norms and interests. Gray squirrel eradication, by contrast, allows (in theory) for seemingly win-win conservation that aims to protect red squirrels without affecting human interests.

Killing one species to ostensibly protect another is a prominent if controversial conservation strategy around the world. Another example takes us

back to caribou in western Canada. Forestry, dams, transmission lines, mines, oil and gas wells, pipelines, and seismic lines have reduced historically abundant woodland caribou to fragile, fragmented herds. Caribou were designated a species at risk in 2002, but this designation did not slow government authorization of extractive industrial development in caribou habitat. On the contrary, such development has increased across sectors, and seven herds have been extirpated in British Columbia since 2002.

Rather than curb habitat loss by not approving more extraction, the government's primary caribou recovery strategy has been to kill wolves. Extractive development puts caribou at higher risk of wolf predation: roads and other linear access features like pipelines, seismic lines, and transmission lines create travel and sight lines for wolves, allowing them to move faster and more easily spot caribou, who are also more vulnerable to predation because they are clustered together in fragmented habitat. At best, though, wolf culls buy caribou time; the culls would need to be con-

ducted indefinitely to keep at least some caribou alive if the development trajectory does not change.

Individual animals are also sacrificed in service of their species or populations, as seen in trophy hunting and “sustainable” ranching for conservation fundraising, and in captive reproduction and reintroduction programs. These are all interventions that permit the pursuit of wildlife protection without necessitating any change in human activities that harm nonhuman life. But these interventions harm the very organisms that they seek to protect.

Take for instance, the cheetahs trapped or born into captivity, transported across continents by air and road, and eventually released to die of stress and trauma in a strange land as part of India's Project Cheetah. They are framed as unfortunate but anticipated casualties serving the larger cause of cheetah conservation. Many other animals, including fish, are caught up in other captive reproduction and similar *ex situ* conservation programs.

ABUNDANCE AND SUPPRESSION

A third way in which conservation's intertwinement with developmental norms manifests in harm to nonhuman life-forms is found in conservation's

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ambiguous relationship with nonhuman abundance. Conservation has as its aim the independent flourishing of nonhuman life, but in reality, nonhuman abundance that is not engineered by human society invites responses of suppression. Ambivalence toward autonomous nonhuman flourishing can be seen in dominant conservationist responses to those animals that do manage to thrive in the human-dominated landscapes that characterize today's Earth. Such organisms are more often than not reviled and suppressed as pests, invasive species, vectors of disease, or simply not "valuable."

Street dogs in India are a very good example of this. These animals are not out of place "strays" or homeless former pets. Rather, they are free-living animals that have always lived alongside human communities, in the ecological niches created by human activity. Like gray squirrels, crows, pigeons, and rats, they are creatures that have the resilience and adaptability to live and even flourish in landscapes that have been radically shaped by humans. But rather than celebrating and supporting their resilience, the predominant conservationist impulse is to control and eradicate them, much as now-endangered animals like wolves were treated several decades ago.

These animals, like all animals that have not been adapted for human purposes, do not always act in ways that fit human norms and align with human interests, which prompts suppressive responses. In the case of free-living dogs, the risks of rabies and mauling they pose to people, and more recently their impacts on valued wildlife through predation and disease transmission, are among the justifications for their eradication or removal to human-controlled institutions.

It is true that dogs pose threats to people and other animals. But so do animals that are now the subject of conservationist protection. In fact, elephants, tigers, and wolves pose far greater material risks to people than do dogs and other such liminal animals. It is also unclear why predation and disease transmission between dogs and other animals is more problematic than the same interactions between animals that are classified as wildlife.

What's more, research conducted in different parts of India shows that free-living dogs interact with people in many positive ways, and that people who live and work in close proximity to these animals are quite knowledgeable about how to share landscapes safely with them. A similar ethos

of tolerance, and the everyday knowledge that accompanies it, has also been documented among Indigenous and other communities living alongside elephants and leopards in different parts of South Asia. Yet such instances of nonhuman resilience and human–nonhuman cohabitation are rarely promoted as models for nature in the Anthropocene.

These contradictions and paradoxes in how we decide which animals we consider worthy of protection, and under what conditions, raise the question of to what extent mainstream human societies are really open to sharing the planet with all the other creatures that it hosts. Although our essay has focused on conservation, the problems discussed here are emblematic of a much broader societal ethos toward the rest of planetary life.

PROTECTION AFTER DISPLACEMENT

In the age of the Anthropocene, the extensive harm to nonhuman life caused by (some) human ways of life tends to be addressed through logics of protection and restoration—*after* displacement and endangerment. By contrast, nonhuman abundance invites suppression and eradication. The focus on protection of endangered organisms is usually justified in relation to their role in maintaining or restoring particular attributes of a landscape. As conservation biologist Nitin Sekar argues, however, by the time animals become endangered, their habitats have also changed so much due to continued developmental activities that protection oriented to single or keystone species rarely has the intended landscape-level outcome.

On the whole, these approaches have been able to keep some organisms alive, to a limited extent. But they have not been successful in stopping the accelerating erosion of nonhuman abundance and life experiences, or of intensified habitat loss. This is because they do not interrupt the root causes of ecological destruction and the diminishment of nonhuman lives.

Biodiversity conservation and the ethos of protection after displacement do not offer a promising future (or present) for nonhuman life on the planet. They put forward ecological solutions to what are actually political, economic, and social problems. These are problems that are inextricably intertwined with developmental norms and associated processes of material and monetary accumulation. The future of nonhuman life is not a technoscientific matter; it is a political and ethical one.

The fundamental question at stake is this: What sort of societies and Earth do we want? Do we want a planet composed of only humankind and those entities, whether living or nonliving, that are of material, aesthetic, or other kinds of known utility to people? If we want Earth to be more than humans and life-forms that are made or managed by humans, we cannot do it through conservation.

The valuations, trade-offs, sacrifices, and calculations that the protection of nonhuman life after displacement entails have paradoxical outcomes. They also rest on the assumption that humankind has (or can have) adequate knowledge—a God-like overview and wisdom about what the rest of the planet ought to be like, and how it can be curated. If humankind is a part of Earth, it is implausible that our knowledge can exceed the bounds of our imaginations and cognition to encompass the larger whole of the planet. To rely on our limited and partial knowledge to make planetary-scale decisions on the appropriate contours of life on Earth is deeply problematic.

A MORE-THAN-HUMAN EARTH

A planet that is to remain truly more-than-human requires a fundamental shift in approach. It needs a move away from the impetus to protect, engineer, or overproduce (as with farmed animals) certain valued organisms—either after endangering them, or in ways that seriously compromise their life experiences. Instead, it needs an ethos that emphasizes learning to live alongside and share space and sustenance with the diversity of organisms for which Earth is home, regardless of whether they are abundant or endangered, whether or not they please us, whether or not they harm us, or whether or not they are of use to us.

Cohabitation entails both coexistence and conflict—whether with other humans or with nonhuman organisms. If we are to share the planet with others, we need to be prepared to accept the inevitable risks and uncertainties. These include risks posed by those we cohabit with, as well as the uncertainties that are inherent in being part of life on Earth. It is such risks and uncertainties that developmental norms and associated processes seek to eliminate, at the cost of reconfiguring, diminishing, and destroying the rest of life, as well as non-mainstream human lifeways. A crucial step toward a world beyond conservation is therefore dismantling development as we know it and the globalized drive to insulate, accumulate, and expand.

These are not easy tasks—they involve unsettling deeply entrenched and dominant ways of thinking about the place, role, and entitlements of humankind on earth. But they are not impossible tasks. Inspiration and lessons can be found in Indigenous societies and economies that have withstood the erosion caused by globalized development and are founded on reciprocity (such as the tribal communities in Arikomban's home region, or West Moberly and Saulteau First Nations, who sustain and are sustained by caribou and many other wild animals), in the fledgling degrowth movement, and in the everyday habits and knowledge of people who share lives and spaces with risky, pestilent, or dangerous nonhuman others—street dogs, elephants, or pigeons—without resorting to displacement or eradication. Any possibilities for life beyond the human, and indeed for human life itself, lie in reconfiguring society to enable nature beyond and without conservation. ■