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CONVERSATIONS 2: Forest Conservation

Reconciling Rights of Individuals with Rights of Wild Species

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Some animal rights advocates argue that each individual animal of any species, domestic or wild, must enjoy the same rights as an individual human being. Beckoff (2013) presents a bouquet of arguments for such 'compassionate conservation'. This extreme position is unlikely to be useful in practice; so, I sidestep it in this brief article.

Science-based conservation must address its primary goal of recovering endangered wild species. However, conservationists are also occasionally compelled to eradicate harmful species and even kill individuals of rare species (such as man-eating tigers). They must also deal with the harvest and use of some wild species. Within such a scientific framework, species conservation can be defined as promotion of the 'rights' of wild species, thus embracing the issue of compassion at some level.

Unlike human individuals, however, all wild species cannot enjoy equal rights. Scientific attributes, such as rarity and degree of endangerment, fuse with social values, like utility and cultural appeal, to determine the conservation priority for each species. However, modern science shows that, now, wild nature needs urgent recovery assistance for our own good. Such utilitarian arguments, based on the economic value of nature, are now accepted globally, and this acceptance is at the core of the consensus around the need for 'sustainable development', which includes 'conservation'.

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Population of the resource-hungry *Homo sapiens* is expected to plateau at 10 billion by 2050. For achieving this transient evolutionary success, humans have outcompeted and extirpated many other wildlife species, and even other *Hominins* (Harari 2011). During the Anthropocene, extending over the last 10,000 years, we humans have enforced our rights *as individuals* quite ruthlessly over all other species. The scientific evidence for humandriven extirpations, range collapses, and species recovery in nature reserves is abundant and compelling (Barnosky et al. 2011; Dirzo et al. 2014; Karanth et al. 2010) —contrary to the repetitive assertions of Kabra (2018) and the supportive citations therein.

The Indian subcontinent has a 60,000-year history of successive waves of human colonization, each of which possessed greater technological mastery over wild nature. Invasive application of fire, agriculture, animal husbandry, and—more recently—industry have shrunk areas that still harbour somewhat intact natural animal-plant assemblages (not 'pristine') to less than 10 per cent of the land. These 'natural landscapes' now cover less than half of even the public reserved forest estate. The rest has been lost, to primarily agricultural expansion and secondarily industrial-urban expansion (Shyam Sunder and Parmeshwarappa 2014).

This wholesale landscape modification by humans using fire, axe, and plough and by the over-hunting of wild animals has led to species extirpations and massive range collapses (Barnosky et al. 2011; Dirzo et al. 2014; Karanth et al. 2010). Conspicuous examples of such extirpation of 'species rights' by humans in India include the Cheetah, Javan and Sumatran rhinos, Banteng, and the Pink-headed duck. Other threatened species such as the lion, Indian rhino, tiger, elephant, and the great Indian Bustard have been evicted from over 90 per cent of their former ranges, belying claims of a prior harmonious coexistence (Kabra 2018). Undoubtedly, many less charismatic species of mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians have suffered a similar fate.

The rights of individuals of a single species, *Homo sapiens*, have massively 'trumped'—I cannot think of a better word—the rights of entire wild species. If preservation of endangered species is accepted as a 'moral' imperative (Kabra 2018), it is hard to justify the further expansion of destructive human domination into the remaining 3–4 per cent of land now set aside as a refuge for extinction-prone species. Some animal species can coexist with specific human land uses and cultural practices, but that fact does not negate the need to reduce negative human impacts on many other endangered species.

Evolving a societal response to redress this imbalance between human rights and 'rights' of threatened species requires serious thought, whether from a 'utilitarian' perspective or 'moral' one.

Many of the assumptions that underlie emancipatory laws, such as the Forest Rights Act, do not even recognize—let alone address—real problems involved in protecting 'species rights'. Their human rights-based frame enables them to escape this responsibility using unsupported assumptions.

Such faith-based assumptions include the idea that wild species are not impacted by the increase in human population density, which is accompanied by the doubling of life expectancy; reduction in poverty; and the consequent, rising demand for more animal protein, water, sanitation, and healthcare. Such assumptions ignore also the impacts of changing technology and culture, such as the demand for motorized draft power and transport and for access to modern healthcare, education, electricity, and mass communication. The promotion of putative, 'traditionally harmonious' coexistence of threatened (and, sometimes, dangerous) animal species with societies under such market-linked demographic transitions, inside 4 per cent of land designated for wildlife protection, is unlikely to enhance the welfare of either.

Another formula employed to avoid the contradictions between achieving human emancipation and nature conservation has been the mantra of 'sustainable development', which no one can criticize prima facie. Conservation thinker John Robinson (1993) has robustly critiqued its underlying conflation of 'conservation' (saving other species) with 'development' (making life better for our own species) and its ignoring inherent contradictions. I think his alternative proposal (Robinson 1993) for 'sustainable landscapes' offers a better framework to address these all-too-real contradictions. The scheme is formulated for terrestrial habitats and argues for setting aside and spatially separating landscapes for (1) strict nature protection, (2) non-intensive uses at low human densities, and (3) intensive agriculture and industry.

Undoubtedly, application of the 'sustainable landscapes' model to specific countries and regions will present many scientific challenges, and depend on evolving social and political consensuses at the right spatial scales. Nevertheless, I believe such an approach is more likely to work than the options of a Luddite escape into an imagined past or an uncritical conflation of 'conservation' and 'development'.

The concept of sustainable landscapes stands firmly on defensible science. It does not wish away social aspirations for economic and technological

progress. Hopefully, it can mediate better than other proposed alternatives, between the conflicting rights of wild species and individual humans.

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