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Whose vision? Conspiracy theory and land-use planning in Nevada County, California

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Abstract. In this paper we examine the role of claims of global conspiracy in undermining a local environmental planning process known as Natural Heritage 2020 (NH 2020) in Nevada County, California. County officials intended NH 2020 to mitigate the environmental impacts of rapid growth in this gentrifying rural community. This program illustrates the increasing use by land-use planners of landscape-scale approaches derived from conservation biology to protect biodiversity on private land. In Nevada County, this new planning vision met intense resistance. The ensuing struggle demonstrates the conflicts that can arise between social groups with competing visions for the future of the local environment in response to efforts to realize particular visions through land-use planning and policymaking. Opponents perceived a significant threat to their property rights from the use of a landscape-scale vision from conservation biology in county planning, which some depicted as part of a global environmental conspiracy. We explore the links between broader conservation science, ideology, and activism in the case of NH 2020, and suggest that quite real conceptual connections to global conservation politics potentially make local conservation planning efforts susceptible to claims of 'outside' interference. Although NH 2020 had no *direct* link (despite claims by some opponents) to global conservation efforts, the successful use of claims of global conspiracy in efforts to halt the program underscores social realities that planners and scholars need to consider when promoting what they often view as simply 'good planning.'

Opening their newspapers on 27 February 2002, readers of *The Union* in Nevada County, California, found a full-page advertisement featuring a map of California and Nevada awash in red, orange, and yellow (for a black-and-white version, see figure 1, over). Captions in the adjoining text, produced by an ideologically conservative national foundation, the Paragon Foundation, claimed that the map showed the extent of future UN-mandated biodiversity reserves. Other captions described the alleged loss of freedom that would result from the implementation of this reserve system and the network of corridors promoted by the Wildlands Project, a continent-wide effort to 'rewild' North America and protect its biodiversity (see Noss and Cooperrider, 1994). The purpose of the advertisement was to link the UN and the Wildlands Project to a county-sponsored 'collaborative' land-use planning program known as "Natural Heritage 2020: A Vision for Nevada County" (NH 2020 Program, 2000). Allegations of a UN-sponsored environmental conspiracy in Nevada County became a central part of a bitter political conflict over efforts by the county's board of supervisors to address the loss of habitat, open space, and working landscapes related to ongoing development authorized by county policy.

Less than a year later, in July 2002, NH 2020 was ended prematurely, and the ensuing elections of November 2002 wrested control from a 'slow-growth' board of supervisors and returned it to progrowth interests. Drew Bedwell, one of the chief proponents of the idea of a UN conspiracy in Nevada County, and another conservative candidate, who each ran campaigns based almost solely on opposition to

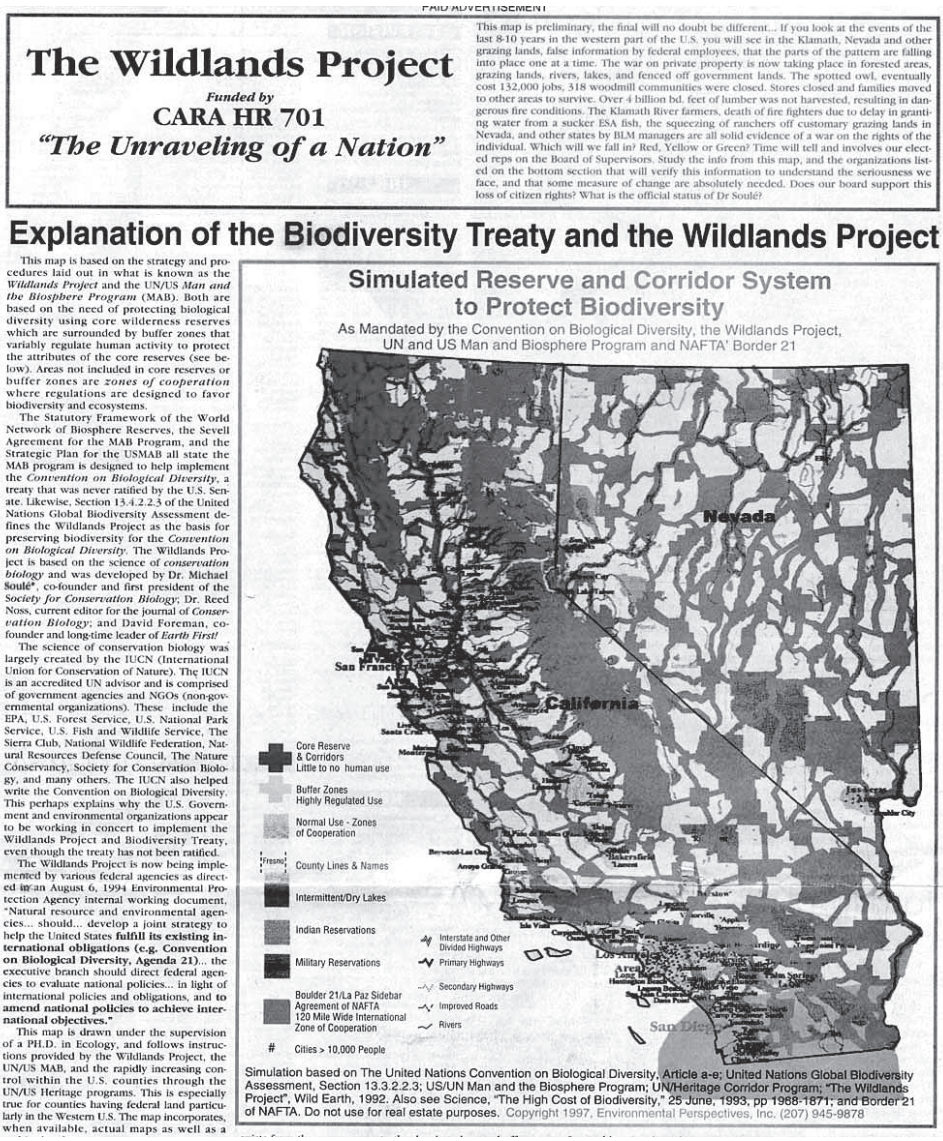
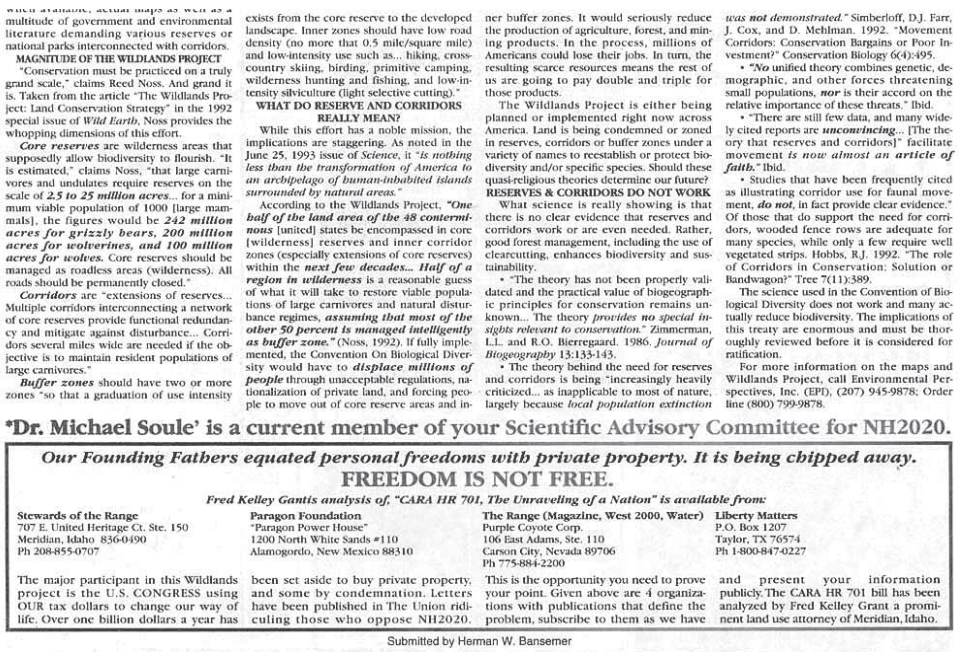


Figure 1. The 27 February 2002 advertisement that appeared in *The Union* newspaper of western Nevada County, CA.

NH 2020, unseated two pro-NH 2020 county supervisors. We argue that the successful campaign against NH 2020, and the associated shift in the political composition of the board of supervisors, should challenge the tendency by planners and scientists to dismiss claims of conspiracy as merely frivolous. This paper examines the role that claims of global environmental conspiracy played in halting the NH 2020 planning process, the ensuing loss of control over county government suffered by slow-growth advocates, and opponents' ability to chart a new direction for land-use policy. We examine the rhetoric of conspiracy as a political phenomenon and ask *why* it appeared effective in contributing to the collapse of NH 2020 in Nevada County.

More broadly, we suggest that this case illustrates why conservation science and planning may be susceptible to such claims. Although described as a 'collaborative'



which dramatic, actual maps as well as a multitude of government and environmental literature demanding various reserves or national parks interconnected with corridors.

MAGNITUDE OF THE WILDLANDS PROJECT

"Conservation must be practiced on a truly grand scale," claims Reed Noss. And grand it is. Taken from the article "The Wildlands Project: Land Conservation Strategy" in the 1992 special issue of *Wild Earth*, Noss provides the whopping dimensions of this effort.

Core reserves are wilderness areas that supposedly allow biodiversity to flourish. "It is estimated," claims Noss, "that large carnivores and undulates require reserves on the scale of ***2.5 to 25 million acres***... for a minimum viable population of 1000 [large mammals], the figures would be ***242 million acres for grizzly bears, 200 million acres for wolverines, and 100 million acres for wolves.*** Core reserves should be managed as roadless areas (wilderness). All roads should be permanently closed."

Corridors are "extensions of reserves... Multiple corridors interconnecting a network of core reserves provide functional redundancy and mitigate against disturbance... Corridors several miles wide are needed if the objective is to maintain resident populations of large carnivores."

Buffer zones should have two or more zones "so that a graduation of use intensity exists from the core reserve to the developed landscape. Inner zones should have low road density (no more that 0.5 mile/square mile) and low-intensity use such as... hiking, cross-country skiing, birding, primitive camping, wilderness hunting and fishing, and low-intensity silviculture (light selective cutting)."

WHAT DO RESERVE AND CORRIDORS REALLY MEAN?

While this effort has a noble mission, the implications are staggering. As noted in the June 25, 1993 issue of *Science*, it "*is nothing less than the transformation of America to an archipelago of human-inhabited islands surrounded by natural areas.*"

According to the Wildlands Project, "***One half of the land area of the 48 conterminous*** [united] states be encompassed in core [wilderness] reserves and inner corridor zones (especially extensions of core reserves) within the ***next few decades... Half of a region in wilderness*** is a reasonable guess of what it will take to restore viable populations of large carnivores and natural disturbance regimes, ***assuming that most of the other 50 percent is managed intelligently as buffer zone.***" (Noss, 1992). If fully implemented, the Convention On Biological Diversity would have to ***displace millions of people*** through unacceptable regulations, nationalization of private land, and forcing people to move out of core reserve areas and inner buffer zones. It would seriously reduce the production of agriculture, forest, and mining products. In the process, millions of Americans could lose their jobs. In turn, the resulting scarce resources means the rest of us are going to pay double and triple for those products.

The Wildlands Project is either being planned or implemented right now across America. Land is being condemned or zoned in reserves, corridors or buffer zones under a variety of names to reestablish or protect biodiversity and/or specific species. Should these quasi-religious theories determine our future?

RESERVES & CORRIDORS DO NOT WORK

What science is really showing is that there is no clear evidence that reserves and corridors work or are even needed. Rather, good forest management, including the use of clearcutting, enhances biodiversity and sustainability.

- "The theory has not been properly validated and the practical value of biogeographic principles for conservation remains unknown... The theory *provides no special insights relevant to conservation.*" Zimmerman, L.L. and R.O. Bierregaard. 1986. *Journal of Biogeography* 13:133-143.
- The theory behind the need for reserves and corridors is being "increasingly heavily criticized... as inapplicable to most of nature, largely because *local population extinction was not demonstrated.*" Simberloff, D.J. Farr, J. Cox, and D. Mehlman. 1992. "Movement Corridors: Conservation Bargains or Poor Investment?" Conservation Biology 6(4):495.
- "***No*** unified theory combines genetic, demographic, and other forces threatening small populations, ***nor*** is their accord on the relative importance of these threats." Ibid.
- "There are still few data, and many widely cited reports are ***unconvincing***... [The theory that reserves and corridors]" facilitate movement *is now almost an article of faith.*" Ibid.
- Studies that have been frequently cited as illustrating corridor use for faunal movement, ***do not,*** in fact provide clear evidence." Of those that do support the need for corridors, wooded fence rows are adequate for many species, while only a few require well vegetated strips. Hobbs, R.J. 1992. "The role of Corridors in Conservation: Solution or Bandwagon?" Tree 7(11):389.

The science used in the Convention of Biological Diversity does not work and many actually reduce biodiversity. The implications of this treaty are enormous and must be thoroughly reviewed before it is considered for ratification.

For more information on the maps and Wildlands Project, call Environmental Perspectives, Inc. (EPI), (207) 945-9878; Order line (800) 799-9878.

***Dr. Michael Soule' is a current member of your Scientific Advisory Committee for NH2020.**

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The major participant in this Wildlands project is the U.S. CONGRESS using OUR tax dollars to change our way of life. Over one billion dollars a year has been set aside to buy private property, and some by condemnation. Letters have been published in The Union ridiculing those who oppose NH2020. This is the opportunity you need to prove your point. Given above are 4 organizations with publications that define the problem, subscribe to them as we have and present your information publicly. The CARA HR 701 bill has been analyzed by Fred Kelley Grant a prominent land use attorney of Meridian, Idaho.

Submitted by Herman W. Bansemer

Figure 1 (continued).

process, we argue that the conservation science employed in NH 2020 contained certain preconceived scientific visions of the landscape and of how environmental mitigation should be pursued. The experience of NH 2020 shows that such scientific visions (when viewed as espousing 'universal truths') can provide the conspiratorial 'hook' for opponents of conservation planning by undermining the perceived legitimacy or 'localness' of scientific practice. We also suggest, however, that the power of conspiratorial rhetoric to affect real changes is context specific. Thus, in our examination of the debates over land-use planning in Nevada County, we examine the social context and meanings that gave resonance and power to claims of conspiracy to help understand why county residents might accept them.

We argue that the effectiveness of conspiratorial rhetoric can be adequately understood only in the context of the political and economic drivers and the diverse interests that propel such ideas to the surface of political debates. Our case study shows that the conflict over NH 2020 was most fundamentally about differing ideological interpretations of the landscape tied to competing forms of rural capitalism (Walker and Fortmann, 2003). Specifically, the interjection of global conspiracy theory into the conflict over NH 2020 came from progrowth and development interests in the community (local developers and other building interests, as well as investors from outside the community) that were, at the time, engaged in a political strategy to regain control of county government, and conspiratorial rhetoric appears to have helped to achieve that goal. We argue, however, that the effectiveness of the rhetoric of global conspiracy reflected more than just crude political deception by progrowth segments of the community.[(1)]

Specifically, we explore the idea that the rhetoric of global conspiracy in the fight over NH 2020 although clearly inflated and at times cynical, nevertheless tapped into real ideological, conceptual, and methodological connections between global conservation

[(1)] See Walker and Hurley (2004) for discussion of the efforts to derail the collaborative planning process.

science and local conservation planning. These connections are indirect and do not rise to most definitions of conspiracy. Nevertheless, the NH 2020 case did in fact mirror broader—indeed, global—discourses of conservation science. Thus, claims of conspiracy, such as that in the advertisement in *The Union*, aimed to paint the use of principles of conservation biology and conservation planning as representing an 'outside' political agenda and a form of social control, the use of which was able to instill fear among landowners. That is, it was not only the policies associated with NH 2020 but also the particular type of *science* behind the program that came under direct political attack. Thus, we suggest that, if not recognized, the genuine conceptual links between global conservation science and local land-use planning—with their shared scientific language and ideologies—can make conservation planning vulnerable to political attacks such as those that contributed to the demise of NH 2020.

In the following sections we discuss the theoretical framework used for examining our case study before sketching the background of NH 2020 and its relationship to the politics of land-use planning in Nevada County. We then examine the science employed in NH 2020 in relation to the claims by opponents that it was a conspiracy, and we assess whether a conspiracy existed.

This research is the product of multiple qualitative and quantitative methods and data sources used by the authors (separately and together) in Nevada County between 1999 and 2003. These include 67 in-depth interviews with key informants (county officials and activists), 104 semistructured interviews with Nevada County landowners, a mail-in survey of 358 households, attendance at NH 2020 and other planning meetings, and review of public documents and records.

Toward a political ecology of land-use planning

We begin by observing that land-use planning is a key site of political power in which differing groups vie for control in part through competition over the landscape visions, or 'environmental imaginaries', that guide the planning process. We emphasize the role of science in lending legitimacy and power to particular visions. We stress, however, that, at least in the case of Nevada County, scientific discourses are far from hegemonic or uncontested. Indeed, as we will explore later, we suggest that in Nevada County the counternarratives of global environmental conspiracy can significantly undermine the hegemony, and even the perceived legitimacy, of a particular science and associated practices of land-use planning.

Land-use planning is an important institutional arena where struggles to define the meaning of the natural environment and how communities structure their relations with nature take place (Herrington, 1989; Hillier, 1998; McCann, 1997; Whatmore and Boucher, 1993) but one that has been largely neglected by political ecologists. Political ecologists have long been concerned with struggles among local peoples, and between local peoples and outsiders, over control and access to resources (for example, Neumann, 1998; Peluso, 1992; Schroeder, 1999). Political ecology examines "the political dynamics surrounding material and discursive struggles over the environment" (Bryant, 1998, page 79), paying specific attention to the "rules, norms, and systems of authority and power" in particular places that control the use of natural environments (Robbins, 1998, page 410). However, these struggles and the ways they take place within or through formal institutional politics have received too little attention in the political ecology literature (Robbins, 2002), particularly in studies of the so-called First World (McCarthy, 2002; Robbins, 2002; Walker, 2003a). Competing visions in land-use planning reflect the constellation of social and economic interests that have power to shape land-use governance (Halseth, 1998; Hulse and Ribe, 2000). Indeed, we argue that land-use planners actively work to create an arena (increasingly through

collaborative or participatory approaches) in which those with differing visions of the future of the landscape compete (Hillier, 1999a; 1999b; McCann, 2001; Shipley, 2002).

We draw from Peet and Watts's (1996) idea of an 'environmental imaginary' as a means for understanding how different visions of nature are woven into and emerge through local politics. This concept focuses specifically on the links between power, knowledge, and practice and their role in creating new systems of meaning for nature and how it should be used. Peet and Watts's concept pays particular attention to the struggle over symbolic meanings of nature among different actors who have the power to *institutionalize* those interpretations through norms and customs that determine access to, and control over, nature.

In this way we integrate political ecology into broader studies of the regulation and meanings of space and landscape. Interpretations of nature form the basis for how society regulates community practices toward spaces, or, in other words, the way in which communities regulate land use (Harvey, 1996). Beatley (1994, page 4) suggests that "moral judgments about land use are ultimately made by individuals, but they can occur at different social, governmental, or institutional level." Landowners make claims to certain rights, but not all moral rights are legally guaranteed. Rather, these claims are expressions of what certain actors and social groups think are their rightful entitlements. As such, struggles over land-use rights can be seen as struggles over the symbolic meanings of nature and the right to (or prohibition of) particular material practices that flow from those interpretations (Bourdieu, 1977; Moore, 1993; Peters, 1984). McCann (1997, page 641) shows how institutional sites, such as planning commissions, serve as "vitally important spaces" in processes of landscape production. Through these procedural means, powerful actors can legitimate certain discourses, and associated land-use practices, over others. In his analysis of planning decisions in Kentucky, McCann (2001) demonstrates how a collaborative planning process was controlled to create outcomes that conform to the economic models of hired consultants.

Whatmore and Boucher (1993, page 169) directly address the narratives that govern the treatment of nature in planning, stating that "land-use planning formalizes the separation between nature and abstract space through the written codes of legal statute and professional conduct which impose a site-based, rather than system-based, narrative structure on its treatment of the environment". Their research on 'environmental planning gain' in the United Kingdom points to three narratives that permeate planning: narratives of conservation, commodities, and ecology.

We emphasize that struggles to define appropriate societal practices toward nature increasingly are influenced by the role of scientific expertise in describing nature as well as corresponding practices. For example, literature on the conservation of private land in the USA calls for the integration of principles from conservation science—including conservation biology and landscape ecology—into more traditional land-use planning efforts (see Beatley, 2000; Dale et al, 2000; Theobald et al, 2000). This type of integration falls neatly within the parameters of the ecology narrative described by Whatmore and Boucher. As Whatmore and Boucher note, the ecology narrative gains a great deal of legitimacy from its 'scientific credentials' (1993, page 170). Efforts to apply conservation science in the USA emphasize the protection of important ecological functions (including habitats), and proponents stress the scientific underpinnings for implementing these new approaches (see Dale et al, 2000; Peck, 1998).

As political ecologists, we stress that these scientific definitions of nature are inherently political. As Whatmore and Boucher argue, competing narratives of nature in planning have important (re)distributive effects for land-using interests. In particular,

the focus of the commodity narrative as opposed to the ecology narrative envisions human actions and their impact on the environment in very different ways, with implications for how different places can be treated by the development process. The ecology narrative values nature in ways that have important social and economic implications and relies heavily on a regulatory planning ethos (Whatmore and Boucher, 1993, page 170).

The emergence of a new, more ecologically focused, development ethos is becoming evident across the USA as many land-use planners, conservation scientists, and residents pay greater attention to the consequences of development on the ecology of local areas (see Duerksen et al, 1997). Customary land-use practices and development trends are being reexamined and evaluated for their impacts on species and ecosystems. However, the way in which conservation science represents environmental 'problems' reflects particular ideologies of nature that, put into practice through land-use planning and land-use government, have material consequences.

This valorization of the ecology narrative in the USA stems in part from broader international scientific and environmental discourse and social practices. Escobar (1998: 55) has observed that biodiversity protection through elite scientific management is a social concept that "goes well beyond the scientific domain". In the debate over biodiversity, as with other environmental issues of international concern such as the debate regarding global climate change, scientific discoveries often lead to principles that are proposed to guide the *social* responses to natural problems. As Wynne (1994) notes, the ways in which these principles are translated into practice are often taken for granted. Bryant (1991) concurs, noting that the technomanagerial perspective prevalent in global change science formulates and implements strategies without much consideration of the social, political, or cultural impacts. For example, Cronon (2000) questions whether efforts to develop a set of ecologically based land-use management principles should remain the province of ecologists alone.

Although we strongly concur with the view that scientific management, with its particular environmental imaginaries, plays a central role in shaping land-use management and politics, we suggest that the narratives of global or elite science are not necessarily hegemonic; indeed, at the scale of local environmental politics they may be specifically and actively contested or rejected. Science, as numerous scholars have pointed out, is often seen as a superordinate discourse that exerts social control because it has the authority to describe our 'natural' problems (Wynne, 1994). In much of the political ecology literature, science is portrayed as a dominating and unassailable force that generates policies that are then resisted by local peoples defending their livelihoods. For example, in Java, as Peluso (1992) notes, scientists were unopposed in their analyses of forest conditions, creating policies that became the source of bitter bush warfare.

In further interrogating the notion that ecologists and conservation biologists are the experts most appropriately positioned to guide land-management practice, we are also reminded that science does not necessarily start out as universal. Latour (1987) has argued that science is at all points a *local* enterprise (for example, in the use of local laboratories) but that through the extension of these networks [more recently referred to by Latour (1999) as a *series of transformations* across space and time], science achieves the appearance of 'universality'. This process of becoming universal provides ecological science with the appearance of, or creates the right to speak of, ecological 'truth'. Through the practice of creating local biotic inventories, for example (what Latour might call a particular type of 'black box'), conservation biology research has generated universal notions of material reality whose assumptions are rarely questioned and are often implied to transcend time and space in their applicability to the conservation of biodiversity.

In our case study from Nevada County, we find in the struggle over the NH 2020 land-use planning program that the very perception of the dominance of a particular global scientific discourse, along with real conceptual links (though not a 'conspiracy'), became a tool for resistance against the environmental imaginaries embedded within conservation science. In Nevada County, resistance was focused not against policies but directly against the methods and ideologies of a particular branch of science whose practices could not be legitimately viewed as universal—allowing its nonlocalness to be challenged when applied to the specifically local activity of land-use planning. Environmental science—in particular the concept of biodiversity and the field of conservation biology—was contested from the outset in the NH 2020 conflict as opponents resisted its inclusion in the political processes that shape land use. Drawing strength from real conceptual links and shared language between local land-use planning and conservation science, claims of global conspiracy became central in the conflict over visioning the landscape and what moral rights and whose material interests would be recognized as legitimate by land-use planners.

The experience of NH 2020 has broad implications.[2] Like many conservation planning efforts, the program was intended to focus on protecting important areas of ecological value for humans and other species through incentive-based measures controlled by centralized management. Undeveloped open spaces (many of which are owned by the county's largest landowners) might become valued for their recreational, habitat, or other ecological values, instead of their development potential. In this sense, the approach reflects efforts to protect a public good through "the negotiated transfer of value from private capital (developers, landowners, builders, etc) to a public authority" (Whatmore and Boucher, 1993, page 170) or other nonprofit entities. The NH 2020 case study illustrates, however, that significant resistance may be posed against the assumption of scientific legitimacy behind these approaches. The case highlights competing visions of nature and their claims about appropriate forms of knowledge and their integration into the planning process. By paying attention to the ways that particular visions are contested and legitimated through local land-use planning, we argue that political ecologists and others may gain a clearer understanding of *whose* visions are institutionalized within planning and other policymaking processes.

Origins of NH 2020: institutions of landscape visioning

NH 2020 did not emerge spontaneously; it was rooted in local interpretations of State of California planning laws that institutionalize processes of visioning the landscape. In California, state laws are the primary mechanisms that guide the planning process and translate policy from words on paper (themselves reflecting the values of stakeholders and economic interests) to patterns on the landscape. The state's General Plan Act requires all counties and municipalities to develop a comprehensive plan that addresses a series of common elements, such as land use, conservation, and conservation of open space. Individual jurisdictions, however, decide how to address each of the required components, relying on two different sets of implementing regulations: the zoning ordinance and subdivision regulations (Fulton, 1999). The state's Subdivision Map Act gives local governments authority to decide what is required to gain approval of land division and empowers locally elected officials to shape the nature of development (Fulton, 1999). Together with

[2] Several opponents with whom we spoke made it clear that this was not merely an issue in Nevada County but indicative of wider efforts in California and across the American West. Moreover, the involvement of the Paragon Foundation (which many proponents of NH 2020 referred to as a 'Wise Use' organization) in producing *The Union* advertisement suggests that opposition in Nevada County is representative of resistance to such planning efforts by a wider network.

zoning regulations, the Subdivision Map Act translates policy into specific provisions for individual parcels and thus applies broader social or community visions to individual private owners. In this way, county-level general plans are supposed to represent the intersection of state land-use laws with the particular visions of political and economic actors in local jurisdictions.

Together, these state laws require planners and politicians to consider the potential environmental impacts of local land-use decisions and policies (Fulton, 1999). The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) focuses largely on enumerating the process for doing so, and does not define specific outcomes or goals (Fulton, 1999). CEQA specifies whether policies or specific development proposals need to be reviewed, based on whether they pose a significant impact. However, under the law, *local* jurisdictions are supposed to determine what constitutes significant impact—and thus what vision constitutes environmental quality. In Nevada County, previous conservative-majority boards of supervisors met state requirements by inserting the appropriate language into general plans but appear to have done little else actually to put these goals into practice. Nevertheless, to comply with CEQA, the county's most recent general plan, adopted in 1995, included visioning language (drafted by environmentalist minority members of the board of supervisors)[3] that provided a legal launching pad for what would become NH 2020. Under California law, this vision is clearly to be determined *locally*—lending nonlocal scientific or environmental visions little institutional legitimacy, and creating opportunities for claims of outside interference, or even 'conspiracy'.

Shifting land-use politics and the demise of NH 2020

Nevada County is located in the heart of California's historic 'Gold Country' in the Sierra Nevada Mountains (figure 2). Since the Gold Rush of 1849, the region has experienced dramatic transformations of its society and landscape (Farquhar, 1965; SNEP, 1996). Following the Gold Rush, open-range cattle grazing, orchards, timber, and hard rock mining became the economic mainstays. By the mid-1950s, however, the last large commercial mines closed, and the traditional resource-based economy has been in decline ever since. By 1998, employment in agriculture, forestry, and mining (together) in Nevada County dwindled to 2% of local jobs (SEDD, 2001, pages 11 – 13). Located an hour drive from Sacramento, and a 2.5 hour drive from the San Francisco Bay Area, Nevada County had become home to a 'second Gold Rush' by the 1960s (Duane, 1996, page 245) in the form of land speculation and development for waves of urban migrants moving to the county in search of investments in cheap land and a better quality of life (Walker, 2003b). Walker and Fortmann (2003) report that the acreage of private land in the county under primarily residential use increased from 30% in 1957 to 70% in 2001, with an almost equal decrease in agricultural land. Between 1965 and 2001, the county's population nearly quadrupled, from 25 100 to 94 361, almost exclusively through in-migration (Berliner, 1970, page 3; USBC, 2003). The growth in population and associated landscape fragmentation have been promoted by development companies such as the Boise Cascade Corporation that created large residential subdivisions on the county's former ranch and timberland in the 1960s (Berliner, 1970).

With exurban in-migration, new land-use pressures have been accompanied by new ideas about land-use planning. As a long-time planner noted:

> "it wasn't until about the early 1980s that anybody cared what was going on from a land-use standpoint in Nevada County; it wasn't until our population had grown to have a lot of people who escaped the metropolitan areas."[4]

[3] Interview L, 5 July 2001, Nevada City, CA.

[4] Interview A, 29 March 2002, Grass Valley, CA.

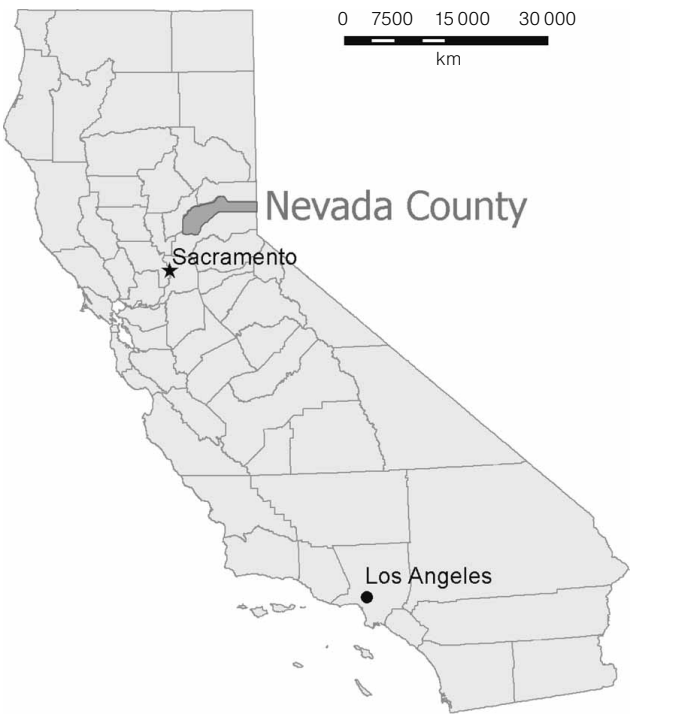

Figure 2. Location of Nevada County within the State of California (map by E Strandhagen).

Concern over increased development was especially apparent in the mid-1990s in public responses to the formulation of a new comprehensive land-use policy in the 1995 General Plan (Duane, 1999). An effort that started out as a community-visioning process ended in disappointment for many participants. The final plan decided upon by the ideologically conservative board of supervisors at the time largely ignored extensive input from community members who had participated in working groups. The resulting frustration led to the political mobilization of citizens concerned about the dramatic growth allowed under the new plan (Duane, 1999).

By the next election, the necessary forces had been mobilized to win control of county government and control over its planning processes. The 1998 election was widely seen as a referendum on the future of planning and development in Nevada County because two of the four candidates running for office ran on slow-growth or planned-growth agendas (Duane, 1999). After the election, a new 4:1 slow-growth majority meant progrowth 'old-timers' had, for the first time in 150 years, lost control of the county's political machinery and its vision of how development would be guided (Walker and Fortmann, 2003). The 2000 elections reaffirmed this new majority.

Responding in large part to the county's tremendous growth, the new environmentally oriented board of supervisors initiated NH 2020 in May 2000. Arguing that the 1995 general plan failed sufficiently to detail how environmental impacts would be mitigated (as required by CEQA), proponents of NH 2020 pushed for implementing mechanisms that were more than just vague language. They wanted explicit policies that would address the growth authorized by the general plan. In an effort to mitigate environmental impacts, the process was supposed to create a new landscape-scale plan for development in the county that would supplement the site-by-site mitigation approach (and an ad hoc system of awarding exceptions to the county's 'old guard' of large landowners).

Comprised of a Community Advisory Committee (CAC), a Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC), and a number of working groups, NH 2020 was touted as a collaborative effort between political leaders, the county's planning staff, technical experts, and the general public. The project was funded in part through the Sierra Business Council (a group derided as 'the Sierra Club in suits' by opponents)[5] and aimed to create a comprehensive strategy for "identifying, managing, and protecting the natural habitats, the diversity of plant and animal species, as well as the open space resources found in the County".[6] Notably, these goals were predetermined (a fact upon which opponents seized to question the 'collaborative' intent of the program). To achieve these goals, the program was expected to result in four different planning products: (1) a countywide biotic inventory; (2) a habitat management plan; (3) an open-space district; and (4) a vegetation ordinance.

This new vision for Nevada County was not shared by all of its residents. Billboards declaring "No on NH 2020" quickly became ubiquitous in the county. At least two new property-rights groups were formed in opposition. Representatives of large landowners and conservative business interests became prominent sights at meetings of the board of supervisors, whereas 'environmental' groups remained strangely silent. A recall effort was launched against Supervisor 'Izzy' Martin, a leading proponent of NH 2020 who was described as the 'leader of the gang' (the epithet 'gang of four' was used against the four slow-growth supervisors). On a daily basis, letters to the editor appeared in the county's largest newspaper, with headlines such as "NH 2020 is socialism", "Enviros after your property", "Pagan Greens control county", and "U.N. threat to our freedom" (*The Union* 2000a; 2000b; 2000c; 2002). Opponents, often employing what were described by proponents as "tactics right out of the Wise Use movement's handbook", shouted down NH 2020 leaders in public meetings, and some NH 2020 leaders reported threats of physical violence and even death.[7]

This climate of intimidation and fear included claims that NH 2020 was a direct product of a global environmentalist conspiracy directed by the UN. Speaking to the Republican Women's Club of Nevada County, CA in 2001, Drew Bedwell, a candidate for county supervisor, presented a flowchart that directly traced the flow of authority from the UN Agenda 21, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, and UNESCO to the Nevada County Planning Department. Bedwell bluntly claimed that, under guidance from the UN,

> "you've got regulations and activists and lawsuits working in collusion to take away—they've taken away—our public lands. Now they've gone to work on private property rights. That's where Natural Heritage 2020 comes in. They'll use this as just another tool to identify properties and to take properties".[8]

Bedwell's comments were extreme but hardly unique in the fight over NH 2020. Many of the claims made in the advertisement that appeared in *The Union* (figure 1) linking NH 2020 to the UN and the Wildlands Project were echoed in public meetings, letters to the editor, and other forums. Proponents failed to see the symbolic significance of the membership of Michael Soulé (one of the founders of the science of conservation biology, who is well known in property rights circles for advocating the 'rewilding' of private land) on the NH 2020 SAC. Yet supporters of NH 2020 often reacted to claims of 'outside' collusion with derision tinged by condescension.

[5] Interview B, 20 March 2003, Grass Valley, CA.

[6] This quotation was taken from the website of NH 2020 (accessed 28 May 2001). The website is no longer active.

[7] Interview J, 20 March 2003, Penn Valley, CA; Interview K, 6 July 2001, Penn Valley, CA.

[8] Speech to Republican Women's Club of Nevada County, Penn Valley, CA, 2001; broadcast on Foothills Community Access Television, Channel 11, January 2001.

As absurd as it seemed to supporters (most dismissed it as unimportant and irrelevant), the conspiracy rhetoric lingered as part of the campaign against NH 2020 and its proponents. Following the narrow defeat of an effort to recall pro-NH 2020 Supervisor 'Izzy' Martin in July 2001, anti-NH 2020 activists turned to the 2002 elections, in which Martin and Supervisor Bruce Conklin, also a supporter of the NH 2020 program, were running for reelection. Property rights activist Drew Bedwell declared his candidacy for Conklin's position, and political newcomer Robin Sutherland challenged Martin. Both ran campaigns built almost solely in opposition to NH 2020. The acrimony escalated and, on 30 April 2002, Supervisor Martin, declaring a wish to "no longer split the community in half", requested the program be ended quickly, without achieving an open-space or habitat management plan (Karpa, 2002b). (The biological inventory, however, was eventually completed and published as the retitled Natural Resources Report.)

In November 2002, Drew Bedwell, the chief proponent of the idea that NH 2020 was linked to a global environmental conspiracy, was elected to the board of supervisors over incumbent Conklin (albeit by a razor-thin nineteen-vote margin). Together with Sutherland's convincing twelve-point defeat of Supervisor Martin (NCEO, 2002), control of the board of supervisors was returned to the progrowth interests, and the prospect of integrating principles of conservation biology into the county's long-range planning declined to virtually nil. In a watershed election decided by only nineteen votes, it is impossible to know whether conspiracy rhetoric made the winning difference for Bedwell and Sutherland, but this rhetoric clearly galvanized conservative activists and provided an avenue to challenge the legitimacy of the scientific vision behind the NH 2020 program.

NH 2020: whose vision?

> "Well, all of a sudden this grassroots movement came out of nowhere. People who hadn't been standing in line during the last general plan update, or hadn't been the usual suspects and following the [development] process, just appeared on the scene, and came unglued [by] this *global* approach ... so this sort of conspiracy theory paranoia swept over the public" (our emphasis).[9]

Proponents of NH 2020 say they were dismayed by the acrimony engendered by the program because, in their view, they were simply carrying out the mandate of the county's 1995 general plan, which was created by a previous conservative board of supervisors. As one county planner explained, "In the general plan there are a number of policies that say the county will prepare a county-wide biotic inventory, shall prepare a county-wide habitat management plan, shall consider forming an open-space district."[10] Thus, proponents maintained that the goal of NH 2020 was not to create regulations but to implement existing policies in the 1995 general plan.

We suggest, however, that the effort to implement the goals of the 1995 general plan reflected a new kind of vision for planning in Nevada County, and this vision was the crux of the conflict, as much or more than any specific policies that might have resulted. The fundamental source of contention in the NH 2020 conflict was over what mitigation measures were needed. The most heated disputes were over the efforts to implement the call in the general plan for a biotic inventory and a habitat-management plan to mitigate the environmental impacts of ongoing development. The choice of the slow-growth board of supervisors actually to implement the language of the general plan represented a new vision and a major departure from the days when the county's board

[9] Interview M, 24 September 2003, Nevada City, CA.
[10] Interview C, 28 March 2002, Nevada City, CA.

of supervisors simply inserted the appropriate language to meet state requirements, with little or no effort to implement these goals on the ground.

NH 2020 signaled not only a shift toward active implementation of state environmental planning guidelines but also a shift of scale in planning, from parcel-by-parcel planning to a county-wide *landscape*-scale approach based on principles of conservation biology. Such efforts are designed to identify important habitats for conservation and then codify protection measures through long-range, comprehensive planning (see Beatley, 2000; Dale et al, 2000; Knight, 1999; Miller and Hobbs, 2002). This approach relies on evaluating the known distribution of biological diversity and an assessment of conservation opportunities, taking into account areas of intact habitat, suites of habitat for rare or sensitive species, or habitat corridors among existing natural areas (Duerksen et al, 1997)—a vision alien to Nevada County in the past.

In explaining how the biotic inventory might be used to plan for habitat and open space, one county planner offered a clear picture of the shift in focus implied by the landscape-scale approach,

> "So the same thing with oak woodlands, endangered species' habitat, that type of thing. [Under current approaches we'll] protect that immediate tree, or that immediate small area that that endangered species might use. Some would call that mitigation .... As a conservation biologist, I say, if you can't maintain those physical processes [that maintain biodiversity] that we talked about—fires, floods, natural environmental flux—[if] you can't maintain some sense of the natural hydrology and climate, it's questionable whether you've protected anything."[(11)]

Efforts by proponents of NH 2020 to downplay the changes associated with the program, and to claim that there was really very little that was new in it, rang hollow to those familiar with the vision of planning under the county's 'old guard'. Proponents of NH 2020 insisted on describing it as an 'empty box', suggesting a politically and ideologically neutral tabula rasa to be inscribed through community input. Yet, landscape-scale visioning, based on principles of conservation biology—with its normative prescriptions for landscape conservation—were explicit guidelines in the science of the NH 2020 process. Visitors to the NH 2020 website could read about the principles of conservation planning through a link to supplementary material (NH 2020 Program, 2000). In Nevada County in the past, the interpretation of environmental impacts required under CEQA had long been characterized by a narrow, parcel-by-parcel, vision. Anti-NH 2020 activists understood the significance of this shift and argued that the implied neutrality of the 'empty box' masked a hidden agenda—a new *vision*.

Whether or not NH 2020 contained any intentionally hidden agenda, it clearly entailed new priorities for land-use policy. Opponents challenged the need for new mitigation measures, especially the biotic inventory and the use of principles from conservation biology. In short, the conflict over the shift to landscape-scale planning represented a struggle over whose vision of environmental quality would guide the material development of the landscape through planning.

Specifically, by incorporating principles of conservation biology, NH 2020 reflected normative ideas about how to manage lands for the survival of species and their habitats. The conservation biology literature in particular, and biodiversity conservation efforts in general, focus on specific visions of nature and advocate for species and their ecosystems (see Odenbaugh, 2003). Specifically, conservation biology envisions a 'right' kind of nature that verges toward a reverence for wilderness. Much has been made of the problematic implications of the wilderness ideal in conservation, most notably in Cronon's essay, "The trouble with wilderness" (1995; see also Neumann, 1998).

[(11)] Interview C, 28 March 2002, Nevada City, CA.

Cronon (1995, page 81) argues, "although at first blush an apparently more 'scientific' concept than wilderness, biological diversity in fact invokes many of the same sacred values". To opponents, this normative shift of vision implicit in NH 2020 signaled a broader political agenda; they viewed this ideological and political shift in terms of the changes in the conceptualization of—and, ultimately, policies regarding—property rights that were implied by the NH 2020 vision.

As Whatmore and Boucher (1993) suggest, the application of the landscape visions of conservation biology may have important (re)distributive effects through policies that determine what types of land use are considered appropriate on private land. For example, areas of habitat that are produced through human action may be 'reappropriated' solely for wildlife. In a very material sense, conservation-based planning redefines where development should or should not be allowed. Such policies reflect a redefinition of property rights in terms of the contribution of individual parcels to the health of the broader ecosystem.

Not surprisingly, conservative opponents vigorously resisted this 'revisioning' of the landscape in terms of how private property can promote ecological functions across entire landscapes. Opponents recognized that this 'revisioning' was not specific to NH 2020 alone; the program reflected ideologies and priorities embedded within conservation biology. Therefore, opponents set out to attack not only NH 2020 but the *science* behind it. One advocate for a major business group that opposed NH 2020 underscored the issue

> "When you're talking about conservation biology, I'll just take a leap here [sarcastic tone] and say that means we're going to preserve large blocks of some sort of ecosystem ... show me the data that that's going to be more successful ... [and] if we're going to have large intact ecosystems, that means something else [development] is not going to happen."[(12)]

Proponents generally responded to this kind of critique of the science behind NH 2020 with derision. As a member of the NH 2020 CAC put it,

> "[they] attack the whole idea of science … they're not throwing science back at us, they're just generally attacking the idea of science."[(13)]

These comments imply that science should be unassailable and its universality unquestioned—and that any criticism of the ideologies and priorities of science that is not itself framed in explicitly scientific terms should not be dignified with a response.

When specifically pressed to respond to the question of whether the program and the science behind it implied a changed vision of environmental quality, NH 2020 leaders were only slightly more forthcoming. One key leader of NH 2020 stated, "that's truly what it's doing."[(14)] However, this leader did not see the shift as problematic, insisting instead that, "the vast majority of the work that's being done in the [NH 2020] science program is *simply* the collection of this data from all the available sources" (our emphasis). This theme—that NH 2020 was 'simply' about an unproblematic scientific approach (rather than a changed vision)—was recurrent among proponents, who consistently maintained the program was about science and good planning, not about ideology or politics.

This interpretation ignored the political history of Nevada County and the redistributive effects of conservation-based planning. For example, the habitat management plan (which was cancelled) was supposed to "take [an] impact and reduce

[(12)] Interview D, 28 May 2002, Truckee, CA.
[(13)] Interview E, 28 March 2002, Penn Valley, CA.
[(14)] Interview F, 29 March 2002, CA.

it to a level of less than significant"[15]—a vision with enormous political and economic implications. Despite this, some proponents resolutely downplayed any political implications. The county planner in charge of NH 2020 stated, "I don't care a damn about politics, all I care about is the science"[16]—an attitude that infuriated opponents and fueled charges of misrepresentation by NH 2020 leaders.

Despite the refusal of some proponents to acknowledge the political implications of the NH 2020 vision, opponents feared the shift in planning approach was a step toward increased regulation of land use on private property. When viewed within the political–historical context of Nevada County, there are legitimate reasons for this concern. Elected officials in Nevada County did not have a history of strong enforcement of environmental regulations. Historically, the county's elected leaders focused "on getting entitlements—prior development potential entitlements for certain property owners ... they really did not focus on the effects of the policies [on the environment]."[17] As one county planner acknowledged, prior to NH 2020, "the county never mitigated development impacts from a biological and habitats perspective."[18] Another proponent agreed:

> "right now ... [we] just do piecemeal onsite habitat management and mitigation ... . That's how we're doing it now. We could have written a comprehensive management plan for the county. This [NH 2020] would have been a way to do that [landscape-scale management] for the county."[19]

A landscape-scale vision for planning would have represented a very new way of developing land-use policy and potential regulations in Nevada County.

In a very material sense, the use of a landscape-scale planning approach held the potential to redefine where development should or should not take place. NH 2020 was supposed to identify "highly desirable areas for conservation because of the value of their habitat, whether for plants or animals."[20] Nevada County's initial proposal for a biotic inventory, and, ultimately, its Natural Resources Report, would have facilitated this process by providing explicit recognition of places in the landscape with particular environmental value.[21] As a county planner with the program explained, by

> "having a GIS database, ... [t]he advantage is that it gives planners and people who are concerned about the environment an even playing field, because … everyone will know what the existing resources are … so hopefully the county will be able to mitigate the impacts."[22]

Thus, although it was true, as NH 2020 supporters stated, that the program did not propose any new regulations, the biotic inventory was designed to identify places that merit special attention by policymakers. Opponents were aware of this, and their fear was that NH 2020 would serve as the basis for policies of habitat protection that would alter customary land-use practices under the guise of 'simply' implementing the county's 1995 general plan. Above all, opponents of NH 2020 feared that the application of a landscape-scale conservation approach in land-use planning would lead not only to new regulations but also to public 'takings' through property condemnations. This fear appears to have gained traction with some landowners in

[15] Interview G, 24 May 2002, Nevada City, CA.
[16] Interview H, 25 July 2002, Nevada City, CA.
[17] Interview A, 29 March 2002, Grass Valley, CA.
[18] Interview G, 24 May 2002, CA.
[19] Interview I, 24 May 2002, Penn Valley, CA.
[20] Interview G, 24 May 2002, Nevada City, CA.
[21] See Robbins (2001) for a critique of environmental inventorying.
[22] Interview G, 24 May 2002, Nevada City, CA.

the county, given the wide distribution of signs stating "No on NH 2020: protect your property rights." As one of the scientists involved with NH 2020 stated, alluding to the reserve strategies of conservation planning,

> "there is a backlash against conservation biology because people [think we] are going to draw big circles around large areas of public and private land and try to acquire private land forcefully; I think that's part of why people are afraid of it."[23]

Despite their considerable use of vitriolic rhetoric and hyperbole, opponents were generally correct in their assessment that NH 2020 would have represented a fundamental shift of vision in development had it been fully implemented. Proponents of NH 2020 generally failed to acknowledge that this fundamental shift was anything more than just 'good planning' and 'objective' science. The more questionable claim by anti-activists was the assertion that it was a product of a global *conspiracy*.

Was NH 2020 a conspiracy?

Although we found no evidence to support the claim that NH 2020 resulted from any direct influence of global institutions such as the UN, we suggest that the broader conceptual and ideological shifts described above make the idea of linkages between NH 2020 and broader conservation efforts less preposterous than proponents of NH 2020 maintained. Although NH 2020 was not the child of UN Agenda 21, or any other global conservation program, a plausible argument can be made that it was a cousin of such programs—descended from a shared intellectual lineage and vision rooted in principles of conservation biology. To conservatives and long-time residents who were familiar with Nevada County's traditional laissez-faire approach to development and land-use planning, the use of a biotic inventory and the landscape-scale approach in planning clearly indicated 'outside' influences.

The most rhetorically flamboyant leaders of the NH 2020 opposition (such as county supervisor candidate Drew Bedwell) claimed that these influences proved a conspiracy, but other opponents were more subtle and chose to distance themselves from these inflated claims. A leading member of a prominent opposition group summarized this more moderate view succinctly, "There *is* a UN connection; a UN *policy* connection"[24] and went on to suggest that the idea of an active conspiracy theory was a separate issue.[25]

Opponents provided no evidence of direct causation between global conservation programs and NH 2020, but the idea of a 'policy connection' is at least remotely plausible. Agenda 21, for example, is a very real effort by the UN to create a "comprehensive plan of action to be taken globally, nationally and locally by organizations of the United Nations System ... in every area in which humans impact on the environment" (UN, 2003). Through this program, the UN encourages all levels of government to address the biodiversity 'crisis', often through policy changes, such as those based on a landscape-scale vision of habitat protection. The similarities to NH 2020 are striking. One local journalist put it this way: "read United Nations 'Agenda 21: Promoting Sustainable Human Settlement Development', and Nevada County's Natural Heritage 2020 documents side-by-side and much of the language is similar" (Karpa, 2002a). One anti-NH 2020 activist put it more baldly. Referring to the inclusion of Dr Michael Soulé (an internationally known conservation biologist associated with the Wildlands Project) on the NH 2020 SAC, the activist stated, "[NH 2020] scientists ... had their

[23] Interview H, 25 July 2002, Nevada City, CA.
[24] Interview B, 20 March 2003, Grass Valley, CA.
[25] Interview B, 20 March 2003, Grass Valley, CA.

own political agendas; for example, Michael Soulé was involved, and he's the advocate for, 're-wilding' the Sierra. Hello? What more do you want?"[26]

In this sense, claims by Drew Bedwell and others of a global environmental conspiracy, although apparently groundless in and of themselves, nevertheless served as effective tools that conjured fear among property owners about the threat of 'outside' control. These claims were made more credible by the quite real conceptual and ideological similarities between NH 2020 and various international conservation programs—similarities that derived from their shared origins in the principles of conservation biology. It is these conceptual ties, we argue, that made NH 2020 susceptible to claims of conspiracy.

Conclusions

Ultimately, the story of the NH 2020 program in Nevada County is about the competition between differing visions for the future of the landscape more than about any specific policies that might or might not have emerged. It is a story of a struggle between differing social groups regarding whose vision should guide planning in the years to come. In the case of Nevada County, this competition emerged as certain exurban migrants brought new ways of imagining the county's future that strongly diverged from the county's past practices and that held dramatic redistributional potential. Opponents recognized the shift from a parcel-by-parcel approach in planning to one in which private property would be assessed in terms of its contribution to broader ecosystem health as a significant departure from, and threat to, historic planning approaches that had long served traditional development interests in the county well. The rhetoric of conspiracy, although not founded in literal truth, revealed important social realities: opponents perceived a significant threat from the shift to landscape-scale planning, and the congruencies between broader conservation science and NH 2020 provided them with an opportunity to attack the program as 'outside' interference in county land-use policy

Resistance to the conservation science at the heart of the program further suggests that claims of the 'nonlocalness' of science may find traction from the act of making science 'universal'—a situation that Latour's (1987) concept of science networks appears not to have anticipated. This suggests that scientists need to pay greater attention to the tensions between local visions and knowledge and the visions of nature that circulate among scientists and planners.

Indeed, the experience with NH 2020 demonstrates the danger of simply dismissing claims of environmental conspiracy that arise in the local application of conservation science. No matter how groundless, these claims can be effective in the political realm. Clearly, many conspiracy claims wrongly asserted causality with regard to NH 2020: the UN is not directly involved in Nevada County (nor, as some anti-NH 2020 activists claimed, did Aldolf Hitler found the Nature Conservancy).[27] Yet the fact that these claims were wrong does not obviate the need to understand why they display real social power. The effectiveness of such claims signals social realities that planners and scholars disregard at their peril. The experience with NH 2020 shows that planning is more than just 'good policy'; it is an arena for competing visions of nature that guide social and environmental change. It also indicates that conservation science quietly contains important normative principles that are visible to opponents of such approaches, if not to planners themselves. Planners should recognize that science is not necessarily a

[26] Interview B, 20 March 2003, Grass Valley, CA.

[27] One informant repeated this assertion by a prominent opponent of the NH 2020 process. Interview E, Penn Valley, CA.

self-evident good, and that when opponents perceive that the ideologies of conservation science conflict with their own values they may attack science itself. Claims of conspiracy may become an effective tool to challenge conservation science when this science derives (even indirectly) from 'outside' visions.

Given the push to integrate principles of conservation biology into land-use planning, planners may find that explicitly recognizing and acknowledging the important shifts in vision associated with conservation-based planning is ultimately more effective than downplaying these shifts or dismissing their real connections to 'outside' scientific values. Planners may benefit by working to understand the social meanings that give the seemingly irrational rhetoric of conspiracy real social and political power, and by openly examining and defending the need for new visions.

In this sense, for conservation practice to be viewed as legitimate in communities experiencing social and political turmoil, planners and conservation biologists might be better served in finding solutions that are built from the ground up, in ways that do not rely upon the imposition of a preconceived vision of how to protect or conserve the natural heritage of a particular place. This type of approach may necessarily involve wider definitions of what constitutes natural heritage, a proposition that may be somewhat startling to conservation biologists. At the same time, conservation practice might also be better served by developing more transparent solutions to the types of redistributive effects that likely would have been createed by the NH 2020 vision. Instead of leaving this issue as an afterthought or simply relying on 'universal' policies or planning tools, tackling this problem head-on may have reduced the amount of fear among many landowners.

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