Conservation Biology

Editorial

The Thoreau Ideal as a Unifying Thread in the Conservation Movement

Californian almond farmers do not need native bees. The logic of the bee market decrees it. Opportunity costs of setting aside land to promote the diversity of wild bees are higher than importing pollinators from a bee factory in some far-flung, distant metropolis (Ghazoul 2007). Conservationists cannot complain about such a perverse situation because they established the economic framework in which to install the ecosystem service strategy and will have to eat the almonds with all the wryness but with none of the bitterness. Wouldn't it feel wonderful, though, to not have to keep quiet about the twisted dialectics of economics? Imagine being able to state, without shame or sheepishness, that the economy is but a subset of the biosphere and thus bee markets are just a Platonic abstraction, whereas native bees are a reality worth protecting. Collar (2003:265) laments our "desperate and sometimes excruciating inability to articulate the most basic truth about conservation's motivation." The ontology of conservation has but one basic truth: "existence value" is an oxymoron.

By conceding that nature can be valued, conservationists put themselves in an untenable position. Research is beginning to reveal that many species are not actually needed to maintain valued services (Ridder 2008), which ruins the economic justification of preserving biodiversity. Conservation was never meant to become another latch in the ratchet of progress; its primary purpose has always been to transcend the notion of economic progress. Leopold (1933: 634) said "economic criteria did not suffice to adjust men to society; they do not now suffice to adjust society to its environment." Not only do conservationists play into the hands of industry when they use an economic framework but its use bleaches the once-interesting conservation lexicon bone white. Too often I see my friends' eyes glaze over when I start barking out my barrage of mournful statistics and hackneyed environmental harangues. Most citizens are not creatively engaged enough to care about conservation because conservation philosophy is brimming with woebegone litanies and soulless financial rhetoric: that wetland provides $75 worth of services a day, do not touch it; that species is worth a net value of x units for y reasons, preserve it; your SUV emits 300 g CO_2/km, feel bad about it. Conservation is a sexy subject, but it comes across as frumpish and bad tempered.

By returning to a Thoreau-based ideology of conservation, the movement could become both reenchanted and enchanting. Henry David Thoreau recognized conservation as an existential reaction to the rapid industrialization that was tearing through frontier America. He maintained that humans are far richer when free from superfluous external inputs and, instead, embedded within the beauty of nature. It is certain that he would have balked at the tragic incongruence of conservationists using an economic framework to justify the existence of the movement. He was an unapologetic and nonviolent freedom fighter for nature who decried the societal dictum that "fruits are not ripe until they are turned to dollars," thus discerning true wealth from the cult of wealth that capitalism has recklessly promulgated. Yet many conservationists cannot hold a candle to Thoreau. The steady edification of conservation biology as an academic discipline has resulted in a strange mismatch between motivation and justification, which is analogous to a scale mismatch between solution and problem: the development of the conservation ethos preceded industrial optimization but now attempts to use economic tools to solve what is essentially a cultural problem. The movement has been sold short.

Conservation biology is, and should probably be, a scientific pursuit. But it is mostly a belief. And by defining the Thoreau ideal as an explicit and all-encompassing motivation cum justification, conservationists will create the culture of conservation in situ. In a recent discussion with my colleagues, however, I was blasted for wanting to integrate conservation morals into a coherent ethic. They declared, "Conservation decisions and outcomes are invariably complex processes, with a swirling mix of morals interacting with livelihood standards and geography." Yes, given. But why should one not strive for the ideal? Always aiming for the inevitable middle ground leads to a shifting-baseline syndrome, allowing one to accept worse and worse trade-offs as the norm.

My colleagues also contended "people are extremely varied in their attitudes toward the preservation of nature, and conservationists need to communicate with

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them all." True, people do have varied attitudes, but this does not mean the attitudes of conservationists themselves have to be varied. On the contrary, the majority of these varied attitudes only exist because they are allowed to through the equivocation of the conservation ethic. Conservationists need one overarching ideal or the movement risks becoming atomized by self-interest. For this my colleagues labeled me naive. But, as Ehrenfeld (2008) remarks, naiveté is investing in a bankrupt economic concept. Settling for trade-offs and weak, diluted moral variety is exactly the attitude that has shunted conservation to the sidelines.

Obviously there are complex socioeconomic considerations: most citizens of the developing world care more for finding their next meal than discussing the philosophies of Thoreau and Emerson. Breakfast comes before philosophy, as the popular quip goes. But, in conservation's case, this is only because Western breakfasts have become so enormous. When people speak of conservation-development trade-offs in developing areas, most often the situation is greatly exacerbated by developing nations striving for unsustainable, consumption-driven Western lifestyles. There is nothing wrong with wanting a better, more comfortable life. But that everyone's idea of a better life is endless material acquisition and wasteful, linear chains of consumption to maintain unstable identities, reflects the movement's failure at the grandest scale. Conservation is a culture-first, science-second endeavor. Perhaps when conservationists start aiming for the ultimate, the middle ground will get a lot higher.

The motivation–justification mismatch can be redressed by instituting a unifying ethical code. The code does not have to be complicated. If the Thoreau ideal of preservation for intrinsic worth and "human excellence" is used as the movement's framework, all other justifications (read: utilitarian strategies) can fit as a nested hierarchy of "utility" within the framework. The eventual methods used in each specific conservation scenario are contingent; the Thoreau ideal should not be. Furthermore, all semantic arguments about the different moralisms of philosophy are unnecessary. When Emerson began boasting to Thoreau about Harvard possessing all the "branches of learning," Thoreau remarked dryly, "Yes, all the branches but none of the roots" (Krutch 1976). What matters is that conservationists stick to one clear message: nature should be preserved because it makes the world a better place. This still provides room for the inevitably complex sociopolitical compromises that comprise biodiversity conservation but will provide the movement with an immutable core.

Some may argue that the current patchwork ideology of conservation is beneficial because it imbues "resilience" to the movement under the duress of societal change. Nevertheless, it can be argued equally that the conservation movement is in the consolidation phase of its adaptive cycle, not the back loop. If this is the case, conservationists should be uniting instead of diversifying. I believe the patchwork approach to conservation synergizes its ineffectiveness. Continually shifting from one justification to the next makes the movement appear disunited, disorganized, and slightly desperate. Conservationists undermine each other's efforts by not possessing a resounding philosophy.

Consider the current push to promote private conservation. The perceived question is whether private landowners should have a "duty of care" or whether they are providing a service for which society should pay. In an economic framework, the latter argument is undeniable and will probably only succeed in pushing away landowners with needless bureaucracy and legislation. Similarly, at a broader scale, it is dubious whether the economic strategy of curtailing carbon emissions through trading will ever work or work fast enough to mitigate the impacts of climate change. Yet if conservationists succeed in creating a "culture of care" this will be enough to encourage further private conservation endeavors, with both local and global effects, by taking advantage of latent philanthropic and moral tendencies. The point is not who should pay and what services conservation areas provide. The point is that people want to conserve and want to see other people conserving. If conservationists are to truly inspire (rather than alienate) the public, they must set the example by being conservationists body and soul, not pseudoeconomists.

Such cultural revolutions do not arise from uninteresting arguments. The contemporary conservationist has to be less the researcher and more the entrepreneur of an ecologically designed and mindful society. New graduates are well positioned to become the champions of such an era by being the written and spoken word of the media, the chief engineers and architects of cities, the political leaders, the lobbyists encouraging people to truly know landscapes and integrate with, instead of obliterating, them. Thoreau promoted this ideal implicitly by rejecting the temptation to retreat to faraway, exotic tropical paradises in search of wildness. Instead, he operated in the backyard of Concord, observing and rhapsodizing, creating an awareness of local aesthetics. And with that awareness will come the community-mindedness to live within, not against, natural aesthetics, rejecting urban sprawl and the endless deluge of plastic products that have become little but emotional crutches.

Technical phrases such as *systematic conservation planning* are lifeless and convey a false sense of conservationists winning the war. If conservationists were honest about it, they would call it *fighting-for-scraps conservation planning*. Human emotions do not respond to sentences containing the words *systematic* and *planning*; they are bureaucrats' phrases, politicians' contrivances. Conservation documents need a more emotive lexicon to reflect the emotive issues underlying the movement. For

example, conservationists are not simply cut-and-dried conservationists, they are warrior-poets patrolling the frontlines of the science–society interface. The bureaucratic capture and corporate outlook that has come to characterize modern conservation organizations must be avoided (Jepson & Canney 2003). Each new conservation graduate should take a Thoreuavian oath, one that binds them to the ethical foundation of conservation biology and codifies the mission principles of the discipline. By simply churning out scientists hell-bent on publishing papers that few people read, conservation will never be anything other than a sideshow. But through ceremony and a sense of camaraderie, fresh graduates will define conservation culture from the bottom-up.

Culture can also be influenced through popular media, providing conservationists actually bother to use popular media. Currently, there is a credit crisis rocking the capitalist ideology but seemingly no unified conservation voice to proclaim the alternative of ecological design! In my experience, the media are hungry for contributions from conservationists: most articles I have sent to a magazine or newspaper have been printed, and they keep asking for more. No, one cannot increase one's h-index by writing popular articles, giving talks to lay audiences, or acting in environmentally centered plays. But then the h-index is an unsuitable metric for conservationists. Plans are in progress to create and experiment with a cultural-transformation index that will assess and give credit for the quantity and quality of public engagement each conservationist undertakes. By developing such a metric, it will lessen the trade-off one inevitably faces between becoming a "good" scientist and becoming an effective conservationist.

There has been a lot written about the merits of a Thoreau ethic in the modern conservation paradigm but very little embodiment. Thoreau's revolution is a "revolution which each person can make for themselves" (Krutch 1976:10); thus, the potential exists for a culture of conservation to be created. So why isn't there a culture of conservation? Because there is no ideological precedent to establish the culture, not even within the conservation movement. The Thoreau ideal needs to ring through the chaos of globalization as a rallying call to all those who believe in ecology over economics and a better, more excellent human condition. "On the most important issues of the time, we have sounded an uncertain trumpet or no trumpet at all" (Orr 2002:80). I believe it is time to sound the trumpet of the true ideal.

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