

Introduction

It must be considered that there is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit by the new order, this lukewarmness arising partly from fear of their adversaries, who have the laws in their favor; and partly from the incredulity of mankind, who do not truly believe in anything new until they have had actual experience of it.

Niccolò Machiavelli, 1903 [1515]: 22

This book was written to address a longstanding crisis that grows more urgent even as it becomes normal. The human destruction of life on Earth continues to gather momentum while being recorded by scientists and others. A recent summary of the state of biodiversity finds that in the last forty years global populations of vertebrates have collectively fallen by 52 percent (WWF 2014). The loss of animals we routinely notice is only part of what is happening. Among others: dead zones, the oceans becoming a plastic soup, incessant noise and pervasive light, forests and grasslands eaten by bipedal termites.

Human institutions have adopted national and international laws (treaties) to ostensibly slow or stop the carnage; in a few cases laws call for limited recovery (the US Endangered Species Act, Convention on Biological Diversity, Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, Marine Mammal Protection Act among others). But the trends belie the purpose of the laws. Governments and other institutions ignore such laws in the face of growing human populations and demand for consumption. Growth is the priority, the default, the ultimate arbiter of decisions (see, by comparison with the treaties and laws above, the World Trade Organization rules and subsidies for growth). Even among advocates of justice among humans there is comparatively little concern for other life; quite the contrary,

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some of these advocates would rather see a park undone than give back Manhattan. Yet humanity is stealing from other species as surely as colonial powers did from other humans. John Rodman (1977) eloquently explored the colonial analogy and it is a useful one. The invasion of a place, and its transformation into something that serves the invader at the expense of the existing biological community, is very much the heart of the colonial relationship. Conservation is essentially an anti-colonial struggle with one important difference – non-human species are ill-equipped to effectively resist and overcome the human onslaught, amplified as it is by technology and social organization. Humans may well fill the Petri dish and bring on their own demise, thus ending their reign of biocide. But much will be lost in the course of that, and it is not a good basis for conservation strategy. A good conservation strategy must rely on humans organized as an anti-colonial force seeking to dismantle the colonial relationship.

The language of conquest is less trumpeted today – though it is not long gone (LeGuin 1989 [1981]) – but the machinery of violent control still dominates the human enterprise. Official global rhetoric embraces protecting biodiversity and few openly damn it. After all, biodiversity is a nice thing to have, like bird feeders, and advocates of biodiversity and the wild are rarely a serious threat, so the rhetoric is not costly. Indeed, conservationists are mostly beggars, too politically weak to demand what is necessary to safeguard life on Earth. They are mostly confined to issuing calls to decision makers to do the right thing, but lack the resources or a strategy for creating a base of power that can make decision makers do the right thing in the face of strong pro-growth forces.

Many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and scientists accept existing trends of loss even though they result in a more and more impoverished world. At a recent Society for Ecological Restoration conference, paper after paper discussed how to adapt populations of other species to ongoing human encroachment and degradation of habitat. Not one paper discussed how to take on such trends, how to

stop or slow or frustrate or monkeywrench growth. Not one. Often such papers call for more study of the biology of other species. Rarely does one hear calls for the study of the one species that is the cause of almost every conservation problem, and how to halt such atrocious institutional and individual behavior. Still others, claiming the mantle of conservation, want to run up the white flag and compromise further on already anemic United Nations goals for protection (10 percent for the oceans and 17 percent for land); never mind goals set by the Wildlands Network or Half-Earth or Marine Conservation Institute, which aim for what is biologically necessary to ensure all life thrives and advocate for changing strategies in the face of obstacles rather than changing fundamental goals.

Indeed, much conservation is focused on addressing symptoms rather than causes – on playing catch-up and clean-up rather than prevention, on mitigating dams and carbon generation rather than removing dams and vastly lowering energy consumption, on so-called green consumption rather than lowering human population, on seeking to maintain minimal viable populations of species and outdoor zoos rather than reclaiming much of the Earth. While political regions add hundreds of thousands of humans, a few hundred wolves or cougars generate complaints of too many. How can 300 wolves in a region that contained thousands be considered meaningful recovery except in a blighted political landscape? Treating symptoms avoids the hard decisions and the risks that challenging the status quo inevitably carries.

Turning back extinction requires effective politics. A first step is putting political questions front and center. The primary challenge is creating and effectively utilizing a political force that can generate pro-conservation decisions from social institutions despite strong opposition; or enable taking control of decision-making institutions directly. While it is urgent to address countless emergencies in the here and now, much greater emphasis is needed on dismantling the drivers of biological destruction. Human societies must be pushed, if not forced, to adapt to the needs of the millions of other species on

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the planet, including creatures that are big, dangerous, and inconvenient to humans. The legislative removal of wolves in the US from protection – discussed in the first part of this book – is an example of conservation weakness.

Once conservationists recognize the necessity of focusing on politics the political questions must be framed correctly. Asking the wrong question guarantees the wrong answers or stumbling about interminably. Usually when the questions are the right ones the answers come pretty simply. The overarching question is, “how do” conservationists build and use a strong political force on behalf of life on Earth? The attributes of such a political force depend on what conservationists seek to accomplish. If their vision is mostly defensive it will operate within the status quo and that doesn’t call for much that is new; perhaps some tactical innovation. A strategy intending to change what is possible – dismantling the colonial relationship and changing human societies so they are compatible with thriving populations of other species, healthy ecosystems and vast wild places – requires a very different kind of political force, one that can successfully confront and overcome structural obstacles that are much more powerful than the conservation movement currently is. It calls for a clear vision, like those laid out by the Wildlands Network, Marine Conservation Institute and the Half-Earth Initiative.

Overcoming powerful obstacles also requires a reflexive and analytical understanding of power and how to gain it and use it against those who make war on wildlife and their homes. It calls for what might best be called guerilla strategies: strategies that enable the less conventionally powerful to overcome the more conventionally powerful by using unconventional means, such as those used fighting apartheid, dictatorships, electoral oligarchies, and colonial powers the world over. It calls for understanding the drivers of biodiversity destruction that inhere in the organization of society and the ways in which various groups in society benefit and are injured by these drivers of destruction.

The book's second part seeks to bring clarity to the strategic questions, to the obstacles and the opportunities facing the movement.

The third part examines how a successful political force is to be built and succeed. The attributes of successful movements are no secret and conservationists should become well acquainted with them so they can be creatively used. The successes and failures of conservation and other struggles offer important lessons. Unfortunately, the movement for conservation of species and habitat does

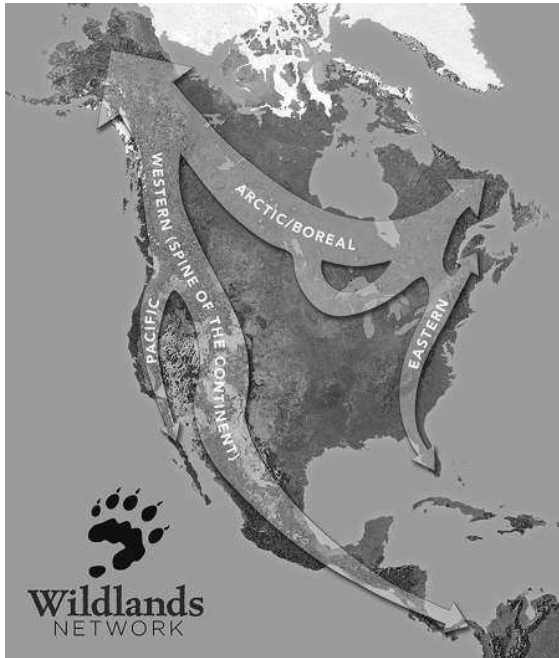


FIGURE 0.1 Wildlands Network North American Wildways. The wildways are planning regions, composed of strictly protected core areas, protected corridors or linkage zones, and buffer or multiple use zones, designated to ensure all native species, ecosystems, and disturbance regimes can thrive in perpetuity. Not shown is the Gulf Wildway, which runs from Florida to the Sierra Madre Oriental, and includes important systems such as Longleaf Pine Forests of the US South.

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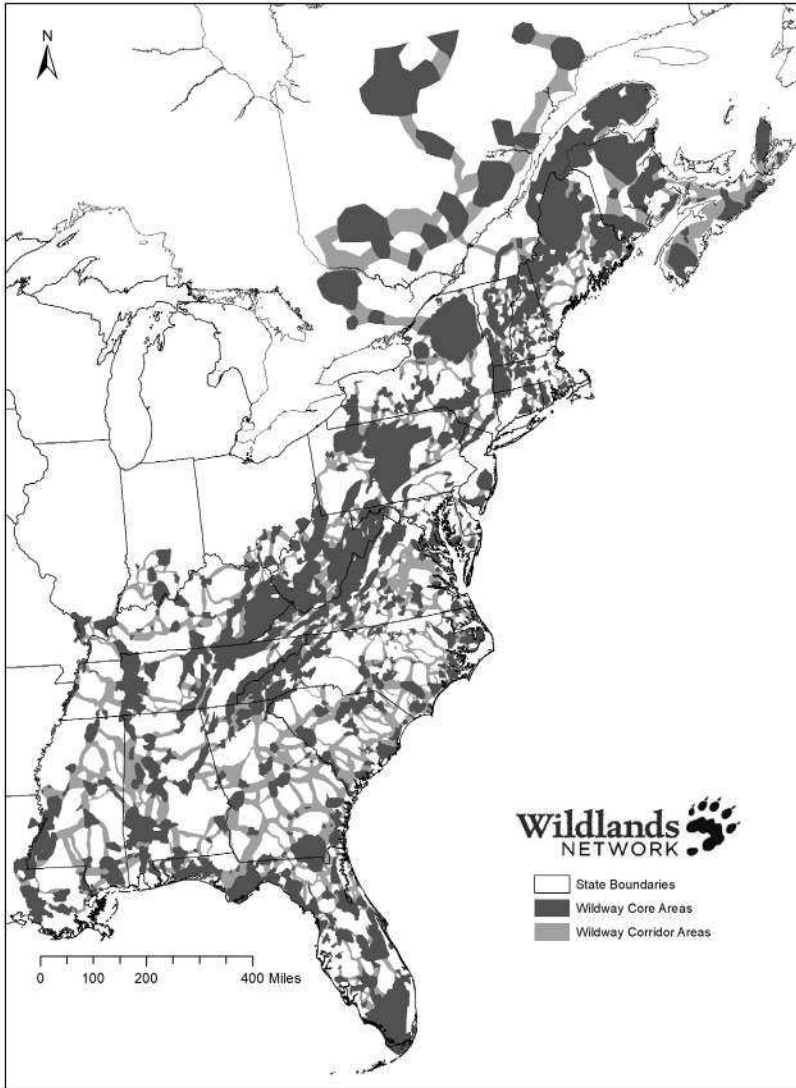


FIGURE 0.2 Wildlands Network Eastern Wildway. This map represents a potential network of connected core habitat areas for biodiversity in eastern North America. It is expected that safeguarding these areas and connections will take years of land protection and restoration efforts, including conservationists working with private landowners on a voluntary basis. Core area boundaries are drawn broadly to include restoration areas around existing concentrations of natural habitat. Corridors follow available habitat pathways and modeled habitat connectivity priorities, and in many cases would need restoration of habitat and mitigation of road barriers to achieve functionality.

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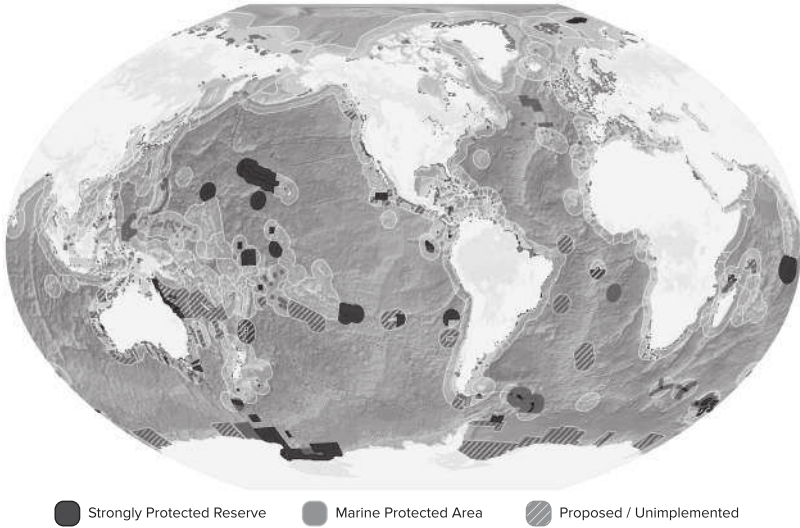


FIGURE 0.3 Global Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). The Marine Protection Atlas tracks areas designated by countries in waters under their control and on the high seas as designated by international agreement. The MPAtlas distinguishes between strongly protected MPAs (1.8 percent of the global ocean) and areas that have more limited protection (1.7 percent of the global ocean). The Global Ocean Refuge System evaluates the quality of MPAs based on extensive biological criteria.

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not interact with other movements to the degree protecting the “human environment” does, so the transmission of lessons is more limited. A deliberate effort is required to bridge movement networks. Mobilization – generating mass-based collective action – presents challenges that conservationists once mastered but have lost over the last few decades with the dominance of big NGOs that find activists inconvenient and prefer check-writers who will leave the decisions to them. The result has been compromised goals and loss of influence. Grassroots, mass organizing is the only thing that has ever overcome powerful entrenched interests or created new forms of social organization in the face of declining oligarchies.

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Marine conservation faces special challenges. For most people the oceans are out of sight, out of experience, out of urgent caring. Urgent and personal are essential elements of mobilization and organizing. The global ocean is probably damaged to a much greater degree than the terrestrial parts of the Earth, but difficult to see. If that decline reaches the point of irreversibility nothing we do on land will matter. Many still look to the oceans as a source of endless food and a limitless garbage dump. Much marine conservation action lacks a strategic focus, and means to safeguard the high seas are nascent at best.

The tools of conservation organizing remain undeveloped, though this was not always so. Organizing, not just recruiting members, was once a central focus of conservation. Documentary writing and film which does not give adequate attention to the language dominates efforts to communicate. The hedged language of science is too pervasive; it is not persuasive. Findings can inform but cannot tell people why to act nor do they usually persuade decision makers.

Politics ultimately is a material fight, as those engaged in it with their eyes open well know – especially those who fight from the grass-roots. Politics is also a cultural fight, and is so most of the time. Material conflict is very costly and creates lasting wounds. Better for rulers to convince people of the inevitability of the status quo or the lack of alternatives than to fill the jails and hospitals. People may rebel when conditions reach a certain point, but basic change requires a new vision and morality. It begins with cultural change among a few and spreads by way of a new mythology, new songs, new rituals, and the emergence of new institutions. All are important to mobilization, to organizing, to guiding action. They are central to building a broad-based conservation community – something essential to any successful movement.

The issues addressed in this book are not new. They are often quite thorny issues, long a matter of debate and strategizing. Every effort has been made to bring the discussion up to date, but the roots

are properly apparent in these chapters. Temporal context matters: many of these chapters have previously been published as essays or presented at meetings and circulated to address contemporaneous matters. They are presented for the first time together, most of them extensively revised and integrated into a whole. I am grateful to those who hold copyright on the original versions for granting permission to partially use language in the original version in the revised version without concern for copyright.

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