

Conservation Politics

The Last Anti-Colonial Battle

Whilst the science of conservation biology is thriving as a discipline, ultimately global conservation is failing. Why, when the majority of people say they value nature and its protection? David Johns argues that the loss of species and healthy ecosystems is best understood as human imposition of a colonial relationship on the non-human world – one of exploitation and domination. Global institutions benefit from transforming nature into commodities, and conservation is a low priority. This book places political issues at the forefront, and tackles critical questions of conservation efficacy. It considers the role of effective influence on decision making, key policy changes to reduce the human footprint, and the centrality of culture in mobilising support. It draws on political lessons from successful social movements, including human anti-colonial struggles, to provide conservation biologists and practitioners in scientific and social science disciplines and NGOs with the tools and wider context to accelerate their work's impact.

DAVID JOHNS is both a conservation practitioner and Adjunct Professor of Political Science in the Hatfield School of Government at Portland State University, where he teaches courses on politics and the environment, US constitutional law, and politics. He has published extensively on science, politics, and conservation issues. He is a cofounder of the Wildlands Network, Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative, and Conservation Biology Institute, and is currently Chair of the Marine Conservation Institute board which created the Global Ocean Refuge System Initiative. He has worked with NGOs on conservation projects in the Russian Far East, Australia, Europe, southern Africa and throughout the Americas. He is recipient of the Denver Zoological Foundation's Conservation Award, 2007.

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David Johns
Frontmatter
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Bruce Babbitt, when he was Secretary of the Interior, was fond of saying to conservationists, “Don’t expect me to do the right thing, make me do it.” Conservationists made impressive strides after Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, by relying on passion and persuasion, but little progress has been made since the 1970s, as corporate opposition has coalesced into a powerful counter-movement. Meanwhile, with shrinking opportunities for habitat protection and the looming specter of climate change, the need for further progress is greater than ever. David Johns, a political scientist with a deep interest in popular movements, makes the case that conservation will only return to the forefront of the nation’s agenda when citizens mobilize into a vigorous movement with the energy to elect advocates to positions of political power. His new book offers deep insights into how to achieve this goal.

John Terborgh, Ph.D.

The scientific case has been made. Poets have spoken with deep feeling. Now comes the hard part. In this well-written and very timely book, David Johns lays out the practical, political steps required to save the rest of life on Earth, and ultimately ourselves.

Edward O. Wilson, Harvard University

We the people must accept that any conservation activity of worth must be a political act. This is a simple but not a small idea. The insults foisted upon Mother Earth are so pervasive, that nothing less than the world’s greatest collective action will suffice as redress. Politics is the only scheme that can organize and advance such action. David Johns writes clearly to this end from the hard ground of history and science. His book is a call to arms to use politics to promote peace, prosperity, and justice for all life. Let’s hope that we the people heed the call. Every future depends on it.

Mike Phillips, Turner Endangered Species Fund,
Montana State Senator

David Johns has done it again! The author of *A New Conservation Politics* brings his wide knowledge of the conservation movement and other social movements to provide practical insights on how to make conservation more effective. This book fills a critical gap in conservation literature by explaining how to overcome the political obstacles to conservation. For those who care about the extinction crisis, he offers a path to action beyond business-as-usual. In the end conservation is too complex to leave it to scientists, and much too important to leave it to politicians. He combines both worlds into a powerful mix.

Ignacio Jiménez Pérez, The Conservation Land Trust Argentina

In the 30 years I’ve worked with David Johns for things wild and free, I’ve seen him become a leading activist on the visionary cutting edge of rewilding and also as our deepest thinker on effective activism. Witness his latest book.

Dave Foreman, author of *Rewilding North America* and
The Great Conservation Divide

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DAVID JOHNS
Portland State University



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For Gunter e) Chocomo. Always close to the Earth; they know what's what. And to all those on the front lines – unafraid to lead and to embrace without hesitation the fight on behalf of Earth and its life, who follow their love where it takes them regardless of the obstacles. And for Signe.

Science without politics has no impact, politics without science
can be dangerous . . .

Peter Piot, MD, co-discover of Ebola,
World Health Organization administrator, and United Nations
Under Secretary-General, *No Time to Lose*, 2012

[A]ll attempts to rationalize a subjugated biosphere with man in
charge are as doomed to failure as the similar concept of
benevolent colonialism.

James Lovelock,
Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth, 1979

Contents

Foreword <i>by Kristine Tompkins</i>	page ix
Acknowledgements	xiii
Introduction	1
I. THE PROBLEM	11
1. The Tragedy of Political Failure	13
2. Like It or Not, Politics is the Solution	29
II. GETTING THE QUESTIONS RIGHT	47
3. Ten Questions for Conservation Politics	49
4. Adapting Society to the Wild	54
5. Striking at the Roots: The Burgeoning Human Footprint	64
6. Domination and the Intractability of Energy Problems	141
III. TAKING THE OFFENSIVE	155
7. Turning the Tide: Lessons from Other Movements and Conservation History	159
8. Lessons from Large-Scale Conservation	204

viii TABLE OF CONTENTS

9. Doing Large-Scale Restoration	236
10. The Other Connectivity: Reaching Beyond the Choir	265
11. The Special Challenge of Marine Conservation	276
12. The Biological Sciences and Conservation	286
IV. CULTURE CHANGE	311
13. Conservation, George Orwell, and Language	317
14. Restoring Story and Myth	325
15. Conservation's Moral Imperative: The Human Obligation to the Wild	352
Conclusion	367
Index	376

Foreword

Kristine Tompkins, *Conservación Patagónica*

There is a conscious decision being made today at every level of modern industrial society to convert this beautiful, living Earth into commodities for personal gain, regardless of the consequences. It seems that despite our scientific knowledge, technological sophistication, and innate survival instincts, people are racing down a path that ends with the collapse of modern society and the destruction of millions of species of our fellow travelers on Earth. Immeasurable suffering, human and non-human, is resulting. These decisions are being made by relatively few people, those my late husband, Douglas Tompkins, always called “The Faceless Ones,” inspired by the poem of that name by Jack Whyte. Looking to past examples of societal collapse, Dr. Jared Diamond has said this great tragedy is because “culture always trumps common sense” – and this is surely true with our present techno-industrial culture, which ignores the wondrous beauty and diversity of life to focus on maximizing economic growth. Human and non-human suffering has been relativized by the Faceless Ones as the price of progress.

I have for many years informally studied the history of societies large and small whose collapse was so abrupt, harsh, and, for the most part, so complete that they left little trace. I fear that contemporary society is at that point. This time, given the reach of the global economy and size of the human footprint, the impacts of unraveling will be far greater. Millions of species, many never described by science, will be lost and the Earth’s potential for sustaining and generating biodiversity will be greatly diminished.

This trajectory of human population growth and overdevelopment precipitating a global extinction crisis is not

X FOREWORD

immutable, however. Engaged citizens around the world are working to create a better and more durable future for people and the rest of life. The organized conservation movement has for 150 years now resisted the forces that would industrialize and commodify every square meter of the Earth. That movement has already succeeded in protecting approximately 14 percent of the land and 3 percent of the oceans. No, that is not nearly enough but the ideas, institutions, and laws are in place for us to dramatically increase the amount and interconnectivity of protected areas globally.

National parks are one of those vital institutions, globally recognized and culturally valued, for protecting wild places and things. For the past quarter-century my husband and I have worked to expand national parks and other protected areas. Through our family foundations we have acquired approximately 2 million acres of conservation land and have been incrementally donating it to the national park systems of Chile and Argentina, typically using our donations to leverage additional government land into the newly designated parks. Working with many partners including four presidents of varying political parties, we have helped create eleven new national parks, in total conserving millions of acres of forest and grasslands. Our Tompkins Conservation team has complemented that parklands creation work with ecological restoration and species reintroduction work, returning natives like giant anteaters, pampas deer, and collared peccaries back to their rightful landscapes (i.e. their homes).

This work has been successful and personally gratifying. I do not recount it to tout our team's accomplishments but to stress that there are still myriad opportunities to put the brakes on human impact and to help nature heal. Our team is relatively small, our finances relatively modest compared to many philanthropists, and certainly tiny compared to the financial resources of governments – and yet working with vision and dedication much positive for wildlife and local economic vitality has been accomplished. So much more can be done if individuals will *act*.

My conservation experience has left me repeatedly astounded and heartbroken at the unwillingness of those who understand what is happening to become activists – to step forward and join in protest or try to address the disintegration of the living world. Neutrality is not an option. Too much is at stake. Ed Abby reminds us that “sentiment without action is the ruin of the soul.” It is also the ruin of the world.

This is not a time of simple political or ideological disagreement. Conserving biodiversity and wild places is not just another issue. This is about life itself. No future generation of apologists will be able to put the wheels back on the bus. Nor will they be able to assuage the ethical pain of those who failed to act. Every single person has to decide what they value. All life? Or just their life?

We need a new story about the Earth that doesn’t begin with staggering statistics about crashing wildlife populations, the breakdown of human societies due to unstable climate conditions, unfit water systems, and the loss of beauty as a basic value. That new story can be a positive one, using real-life examples like our work in South America, which shows how local economic vitality can be a consequence of conservation. The idea of our species living well among our wild neighbors, of helping wildlife populations recover their former abundance, of solving the climate crisis because we decided to live in a different way – and that way turns out to be more rich and rewarding – is an appealing story to tell.

In a world with unstable human communities and experiencing increasing climate chaos, leadership matters. Great leaders display the talent, vision, and capacity to make bold decisions not solely focused on human needs but on caring for all the Earth’s life by protecting natural areas and taking responsibility for defending the masterpieces of their respective territories. To do otherwise is immoral.

Great leaders have the courage to do what is right, to undertake bold and spectacular and beautiful action that will withstand the test of time even in the face of great opposition. But great leaders in the

xii FOREWORD

political arena are rare, hence the need for organized social movements that push their political representatives toward policies that address true prosperity, which does not merely equate to humanity's economic well-being. Long-term prosperity, regardless of where you are in the world, insists that we live, if not in perfect balance with the rest of nature, at least in a truce.

There is a central truth to humanity's relationship with the natural world: we were born into it fully dependent upon it from our first breath. Our lives are not formed solely by our work to sustain our material existence, but also by the beauty of the bend of the river; we are made whole by the cry of a newborn, and the millions of small celebrations of life taking place in the cathedral of nature such as seeing a mother polar bear and her cubs. Two hundred years from now let the elephants trumpet, the giant sequoias sway in stiff winds, and our human descendants enjoy healthy lives aware of their place in this wild thing we call nature. Let them look back with satisfaction on ancestors that took on the most important of all tasks – the act of loving life on Earth. We must all be courageous leaders.

This book offers us insights into what courage means and how to use it strategically. For decades David Johns has been a leading thinker in this fight for nature's beauty and diversity, his insights on political organizing gleaned both from academic and real-world experience. In this book he forthrightly analyzes the mainstream environmental movement's weaknesses and recounts examples from positive social change movements that were successful. Grassroots organizing and movement building in the long run can build the future we seek. But to achieve it, all of us who love the Earth need to work harder and better, need to be more effective, and that means being more politically powerful. *Conservation Politics* can help teach us.

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First and foremost I am grateful to all those colleagues whose day-in-day-out work on behalf of all of the Earth's life and wild places pits them against enormous odds. Despite the challenges, sometimes from those who fancy themselves conservationists, they fight on with fierceness, passion, intelligence, sometimes at great risk, and without regard for fads and trends in political correctness. I cannot begin to name them all, and even naming their organizations is a difficult task. Among those from whom I have learned much are the staff, boards, and others associated with: The Wildlands Network; Marine Conservation Institute; Oregon Natural Desert Association; Greater Hells Canyon Council; Marine Section of the Society for Conservation Biology; Tompkins Conservation and the Foundation for Deep Ecology; Paseo Pantera; *Wild Earth* magazine; Naturalia; Predator Defense; Project Coyote; Sea Shepherd Conservation Society; Rewilding Institute; Wild Country; African Wildlife Foundation; Gorongosa National Park; the Wild Foundation; Trees for Life; Wild Europe Initiative; Turner Endangered Species Fund; E. O. Wilson Biodiversity Foundation; Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative; Larch Company; Oregon Wild; Wild Earth Guardians; Sanctuary Asia; Wildlife Trust of India; and all those throughout the years I have worked with and met. Needless to say none bear responsibility for the lessons I have taken from their work.

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If one could not take delight in the gallows humor of brilliant editorial cartoonists, it would be a much bleaker world. If a picture is worth a thousand words a good editorial cartoon is worth an entire book. I am very grateful to those cartoonists who have allowed me to reprint their good work: Tom Toles, Joel Pett, Sidney Harris, Seppo Leinonen, and Dan Piraro (aka Bizarro). Like great music, their work transcends mere words.