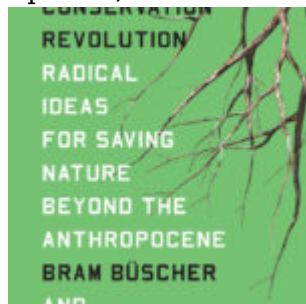
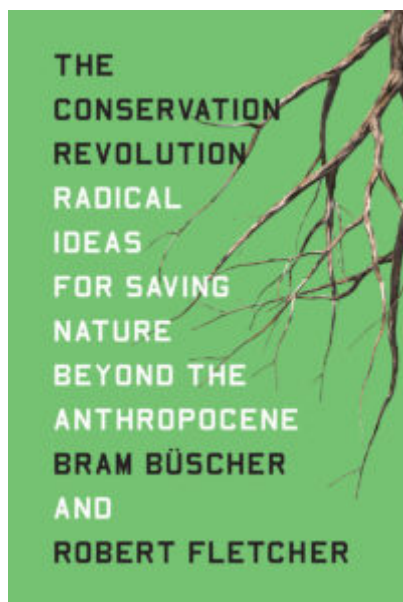


Protecting Nature in a Conservation Revolution

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Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher, *The Conservation Revolution: Radical Ideas for Saving Nature Beyond the Anthropocene*. London: Verso, 2020.



In a welcome contribution to discussions of radical green vision, Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher propose an intriguing concept called “convivial conservation.” Influenced by scholarship of the degrowth and eco-Marxist movements, the two Wageningen University sociology professors suggest shrinking and redistributing global economic resources and building sustainable landscapes of human-nonhuman cohabitation. Because convivial conservation is such a worthy idea, it’s a shame that Büscher and Fletcher try to attach it to several aspects of the deeply anthropocentric and anti-wilderness “new conservation” movement. In particular, they make an unconvincing case against a popular proposal to protect at least half of the planet’s surface from intensive impact.

The titular “*Conservation Revolution*” could not be more crucial, and not only because of the intersecting ecological and climate breakdowns and nuclear threat that conservationists have so far failed to halt. A need to overhaul conservation is equally evident in last year’s disturbing reports that the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) employs guards who have tortured and killed people at wilderness parks around Africa and Asia. Far from an anomaly, the news pointed to a violent side of the conservation movement that has historically displaced millions of indigenous and rural residents to establish and maintain protected areas. Today, the WWF, Nature Conservancy, and Conservation International have extensive and compromising ties to fossil fuels and other destructive industries,

and rely on ineffective market-based instruments, such as carbon offsets, that Böscher and Fletcher aptly call “fictitious conservation” (23).

This context makes Böscher and Fletcher’s use of Ivan Illich’s radically anti-industrialist philosophy so pertinent. “The road to hell is paved with good intentions,” Illich famously scolded 1968’s American volunteers for “pretentiously imposing” their lifestyle on rural Mexican villages, and the same advice applies to many well-meaning supporters of today’s frankly colonialist large conservation groups. Böscher and Fletcher cautiously endorse Illich’s call in *Tools for Conviviality* (Harper & Row, 1973) for society to frugally limit itself to “convivial” (non-compulsory, user-friendly, sustainable) technologies and institutions. Illich praised buses but warned that cars disrupted the mobility of pedestrians and bikers. He praised stationary telephones but would likely detest today’s smartphones that distract and de-skill users. Böscher and Fletcher’s emphasis on conviviality marks a welcome departure from their publisher Verso’s recent books—by Alex Williams, Nick Srnicek, Aaron Bastani, and Peter Frase—offering ecologically dubious visions of a fully automated society.

To make conservation convivial, Böscher and Fletcher propose a democratized structure that gives decision-making power to local residents while compiling resources to target top-level industrial threats to biodiversity (186). They turn to conviviality’s etymological roots of *con* (with) and *vivire* (living) to advocate that humans live peaceably with nonhuman surroundings. This vision focuses on five elements: “promoted areas” that “promote nature for, to and by humans”; “celebrating nature” rather than charitably “saving” it; accessible slow-paced travel as opposed to elite, voyeuristic ecotourism; “everyday environmentalism” grounded mainly in immediate surroundings rather than distant landscapes; and “common democratic engagement” instead of “privatized expert technocracy” (163-174).

To these ends, they helpfully propose specific policies including historic reparations and a “conservation basic income” that enables communities to forgo destructive forms of revenue. They call for expanding and strengthening the existing strategies of community-based-conservation and Indigenous and community conserved areas. Such a bottom-up approach could be effective from a decolonial standpoint. Scientists report that indigenous peoples’ territories, only a quarter of the world’s terrestrial surface, contain 40% of “ecologically intact land” and 80% of “the planet’s biodiversity.”

Humbly, the authors position their proposal among “many confluent streams contributing to a much larger river” that includes *buen vivir* (living well), the right to the city, bioregionalism, ecosocialism and other “transition discourses” (147). An excellent introduction to this “larger river” is the anthology *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary* (Tulika Books, 2019), whose foreword describes Illich as a *spiritus mentor*.

Since I hope it is clear at this point that I recommend *The Conservation Revolution*, and especially its overview of “convivial conservation” (in chapter five), I devote the rest of this review to a critique. Böscher and Fletcher borrow potentially destructive ideas from the neoliberal “new conservationist” movement and make unconvincing claims against the “half earth” solution.

Gardening and Developing the Earth?

Troubling ambiguities emerge when Böscher and Fletcher reject the concepts of “protected areas” and “wilderness.” The authors suggest that their preferred “*promoted areas*” would allow “extractive and destructive types of enterprise” as long as these activities were not communally deemed “unnecessary or excessive” (164). Although industrial and agricultural impacts are unavoidable in densely populated regions, more stringent protection would be necessary in many places to preserve large carnivores and rare species. Moreover, the book’s theoretical focus leaves

somewhat vague how Büscher and Fletcher’s proposed “alternative” development would differ in practice from the capitalist development they condemn as unsustainable (144). My concerns heighten when the authors sympathetically discuss a group of Franken-world promoters, known as “new conservationists,” who want humans to manage the whole planet like a domestic garden. Given the deep anthropocentrism and questionable science of the new protectionists, it is alarming to read Büscher and Fletcher conclude, “we have a lot of sympathy for the new conservation project to break through nature-culture dichotomies” (117).

	Nature/culture dichotomies	Beyond N/C dichotomies
Capitalist	Mainstream conservation	New conservation
Beyond-capitalist	Neoprotectionism	Convivial conservation

Four main positions in conservation, according to The Conservation Revolution (7)

The new conservationists’ opening salvo, “Conservation in the Anthropocene,” was published in 2012 by the staunchly pro-market, pro-fracking, pro-nuclear, and pro-biotechnology Breakthrough Institute. Co-written by scientist Peter Kareiva, the manifesto insisted that “conservationists should partner with corporations” rather than “scolding capitalism.” Dismissing the idea of “pursuing biodiversity for biodiversity’s sake,” it proposed an explicitly anthropocentric aim “to benefit the widest number of people.” Kareiva and co-authors continued, “Nature could be a garden [...] used for food production, mineral extraction, and urban life.” Most dangerously, they claimed, “Nature is so resilient that it can recover rapidly from even the most powerful human disturbances.”

New conservationists’ scientific claims were immediately rejected by mainstream conservationists and, more forcefully, by wilderness-loving researchers whom Büscher and Fletcher call “neoprotectionists.” Writing in biology journals, Michael Soulé and Brian Miller warned that new conservation “rests more on delusion and faith than on evidence” and “if implemented, would hasten ecological collapse globally.” E.O. Wilson charged the new conservationists with holding “the most dangerous worldview” (30). Kieran Suckling, director of the Center for Biological Diversity, argued that Kareiva and co-authors “misrepresent, ignore, or obfuscate the science.” For example, while Kareiva optimistically pointed to a resurgence of coyotes in downtown Chicago, Suckling noted that the coyotes’ presence is a symptom of habitat loss and removal of larger predators such as wolves, with “cascading negative changes in the food web.”

To be sure, Büscher and Fletcher raise important critiques of the neoprotectionists, some of whom vastly overemphasize so-called “overpopulation” and pay insufficient attention to poverty and injustice (164, 202). In fact, I would go further and condemn the prominent neoprotectionist group Nature Needs Half’s partnership with the xenophobic Weeden Foundation.

Still, checking *The New Conservation’s* footnotes led me to reject the premise that neoprotectionists as a whole oppose community-based and socially-just approaches to conservation. I frequently found neoprotectionists declaring that conservation and rewilding “should be done with the consent and active engagement of the people who live on and benefit the land” (Monbiot) while “respecting rights, improving livelihoods, and sharing decisionmaking” (Dinerstein et al.). I also found them expressing support for non-wilderness issues such as “urban pollution concerns” and “organic and urban agriculture” (Meine). Even Büscher and Fletcher acknowledge that it’s common for neoprotectionists to view wilderness “as a *relative* rather than absolute concept” and accept “that humans are part of nature” (57, 64).

Amidst an even-handed critique of both new conservationists and neoprotectionists (39-40), *The Conservation Revolution* obscures the fact that neoprotectionists have a firmer grounding in

scientific evidence. According to a 2019 report by the IPBES (the UN's biodiversity equivalent of the IPCC), it is "*well established*" that expanding protected areas "is important for safeguarding biodiversity."

Had Büscher and Fletcher ventured outside of conservation biology discussions and engaged more deeply with grassroots histories, they would have found numerous ways to integrate human and nonhuman nature, and to integrate ecological and social justice struggles, without embracing the new conservationists' Franken-world. Various indigenous nations, on their own initiative, protect large areas of their lands as explicit "wilderness," as detailed in *Protecting Wild Nature on Native Lands* (Fulcrum Publishing, 2008). The ecofeminist Val Plumwood, acknowledging human presence in wild areas, sought to define wilderness not by an *absence* of people but by the presence of a free and self-willed ecosystem. Earth First! has advocated that rewilding jobs be given to laid-off timber workers and in the 1990s formed a coalition with timber workers to protect northern California's wild redwood forests. Environmental Justice founder Robert Bullard and social ecologist Murray Bookchin each made clear that their focus on social issues was complementary to, not opposed to, the protection of wild areas. Given these nuanced approaches that assign humanity a sustainable place in wilderness and non-wilderness areas, it is not necessary for Büscher and Fletcher to turn to new conservationists to transcend human-nature dichotomies.

At Least Half the Earth for Wild Nature

During its often reasonable critique of neoprotectionism, *The Conservation Revolution* most strongly opposes a popular vision, among neoprotectionists and the public, of protecting at least half of the world's lands and oceans as wild areas. Although E. O. Wilson popularized this plan in his book *Half Earth: Our Planet's Fight for Life* (Liveright, 2016), earlier precedents include the journal *Wild Earth's* 1991 proposal to protect half of North America and the Decheo First Nations' proposal since 2006 to protect half of their territory in northwestern Canada. Büscher and Fletcher charge that the half-earth solution "ignores what humans are supposed to do in 'their' side of earth" and would require massive dispossessions of human beings (94-96). While the authors are likely correct about the pitfalls of implementing the plan through capitalist institutions, the half-earth solution remains an important science-based goal and could be part of the ecosocialist transition that Büscher and Fletcher endorse.

Acknowledging the half-earth goal's basis in scientific literature, Büscher and Fletcher quote a landmark 2012 *Conservation Biology* editorial: "[S]cientific studies and reviews suggest that some 25-75% of a typical region must be managed with conservation of nature as a primary objective to meet goals for conserving biodiversity [...] 50 per cent—slightly above the mid point of recent evidence-based estimates—is scientifically defensible as a global target." They also quote Wilson's estimation, "[O]nly by setting aside half the planet in reserve, or more, can we save the living part of the environment and achieve the stabilization required for our own survival." Rather than directly refuting these claims, *The Conservation Revolution* oddly refers readers to an allegedly "excellent response" that, in naive terms, rejects the "conflation of values and science" and urges scientists to offer only "objective" and "policy-neutral" analyses(33-34). But human survival is hardly a controversial value, and Büscher and Fletcher themselves acknowledge that science is "already political" (48). In fact, they endorse the neoprotectionists' main normative commitment, to nature's intrinsic value (41,144-5, 195).

Perhaps the reason Büscher and Fletcher accuse half-earth supporters of neglecting social issues (202) is precisely because, in their focus on scientific literature, they neglect more grassroots venues where there's no pressure to be "objective" or "policy-neutral." "Missing Pathways to 1.5°C," commissioned by the Climate Land Ambition and Rights Alliance and written by Kate Dooley and Doreen Stabinsky, advocates half-earthing as part of a larger strategy for protecting the climate,

biodiversity, and “indigenous and community land rights.” Troy Vettese’s 2018 *New Left Review* article “To Freeze the Thames” promotes half-earthing as part of a broader eco-Marxist plan modeled on some of Cuba’s policies after the USSR’s collapse. Eileen Crist’s *Abundant Earth* (University of Chicago Press, 2019) calls for half-earthing as part of a bioregionalist “ecological civilization” close to eco-Anarchism. All three proposals belong to the above-mentioned “river” of transition discourses and could have been usefully discussed by *The Conservation Revolution*.

Most unfairly, Büscher and Fletcher malign the half-earth solution as tantamount to “herding half the world’s human population onto half of the earth’s surface” (206). Human beings are not nearly as evenly dispersed as the authors imply. In fact, some 95% of humans live on just 10% of the world’s land. Moreover, in the less-densely populated areas, local residents can contribute to protecting wild nature by staying where they are. The IUCN’s widely-used definition of protected areas, for example, allows on-site and nearby habitation in several of its categories. Even implementing park refugees’ right of return, a moral necessity, would be compatible with protecting these areas. Mark Dowie wrote in *Conservation Refugees* (MIT Press, 2009) that most displaced people he interviewed would be willing to return to the parks as protectors of wildlife and to restrict harvesting to non-commercial subsistence needs, as long as they didn’t have to live in poverty. Büscher and Fletcher’s proposal for a conservation basic income would be relevant here.

For a just half-earth solution, the only necessary eviction would be of livestock. It is unfortunate that *The Conservation Revolution* wholly ignores animal agriculture, since it’s a bit like a book on climate policy ignoring fossil fuels. Highly inefficient with land and other resources compared to vegetable farming, animal agriculture is the leading cause of wild habitat loss, by far the largest contributor to tropical deforestation and, according to a 2015 journal article, “likely the leading cause of modern species extinctions.” Shifts toward a more plant-based diet could be made by securing a just transition for hyper-exploited slaughterhouse workers, starting community gardens and vegetable farms in urban and rural food deserts, and eliminating obscene government subsidies to the meat and dairy industries. A hypothetical vegan world would require 76% less farmland, liberating some 37% of Earth’s ice-free land.

Adding the 28% of ice-free land that only exhibits minimal human impact, there would already be enough space to surpass the half-earth solution. Other methods could bring the total available land even above 75%. These include halving food waste (5%), eliminating biofuels (2%), reducing wood harvest and improving forestry practices (3%), and agroecological methods that a UN study says would double agricultural yields in regions of the Global South. In the context of a degrowth-based and ecosocialist transition, a majority of the Earth could therefore be protected without dispossessing people.

In addition to reversing the biodiversity crisis, a half-earth plan would help reverse climate breakdown. In 2018, Troy Vettese convincingly demonstrated that reforesting parts of current pasture lands, in a largely vegan and 100%-renewable-energy world, could bring down atmospheric carbon dioxide to nearly pre-industrial levels. Since then, the claim has found further substantiation in the scientific literature, with high estimates of potential carbon-sequestration from restoring wild forests, grasslands, and oceans.

In summary, a more effective vision for convivial conservation would shed new conservation’s anthropocentric and anti-wilderness leanings. Without dispossessing any human beings, it would rewild half the Earth or more, and garden the rest. While guaranteeing comfortable living standards, it would trade in the Global North’s consumerism for increased leisure time, local and organic plant-based food, and a healthy planet to live in and enjoy. Despite certain problems, *The Conservation Revolution* offers many promising ideas for how to re-green the world.