

Tear-Gassing the Panda: Capitalism & Conservation

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Biodiversity Loss and Mass Extinction

On Sunday, 22 May, 2022, the annual United Nations International Day for Biodiversity¹ was marked by the usual ritual of news articles appearing across the mainstream media warning us that living nature, biodiversity, is in deep trouble. This year, nearly one-third of the 142,000 species monitored by the world's leading conservation body, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), have been categorised as 'endangered' and therefore as 'very likely to become extinct in the near future.'² If those figures are representative of the bigger picture, then it is entirely possible that one in three of our planet's species are teetering on the brink of the extinction abyss.

Beneath this appalling overview, the proportion of species identified as 'endangered' by IUCN surveys ranges from 41 percent for amphibians to 14 percent for birds (with mammals at 25 percent and reef corals at the roughly average point of 33 percent).³ But the species that are being monitored by IUCN represent only fifteen percent of the 1.2 million species that have been recorded. The most-recent robust attempts to estimate the number of species on earth have produced a figure of 8.7 million, with a margin of error roughly equivalent to the identified number of species at 1.3 million.⁴ Each year roughly 18,000 new species are added to the tally, not only revealing that we are still learning—at the current rate it will take the best part of half a millennium to complete the task of recording them all—but also suggesting that many species are being lost before discovery.

Extinctions are not new to life on earth, nor are they new to human history. But there are only a handful of known events in the geological record where extinction rates are anywhere near as high as those unfolding before our eyes. It is a sign of the severity of our times that, from a geological perspective, today's biodiversity crisis is increasingly referred to as the sixth mass extinction.⁵

What is significant about current rates of actual and potential biodiversity degradation is not just the volume of loss but also its speed. Various metadata analyses compiled by conservation NGOs, including the World Wildlife Fund's (WWF) Living Planet Index (LPI) and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds' (RSPB) State of Nature reports, indicate a rapid and devastating surge in biodiversity depletion over the last half century.⁶ These studies confirm that the world's biological diversity is contracting at rates that are easily comparable to previous mass extinction events. The LPI reveals a decline of 68 percent in population numbers among its monitored species since 1970—a catastrophic reduction in species' genetic diversity and abundance. In just over half a century, human society has unleashed a life-destroying power that is on geological par with the asteroid that hit earth 65 million years ago at 30km per second,⁷ releasing energy equivalent to a billion Hiroshima and Nagasaki atom bombs.

That terrifying deep-time comparison is not lost on the mainstream. But there is a central weakness within many popular commentaries, interpretations and (very reasonable) fears. With subtle but relentless misanthropy, the biodiversity crisis is framed time and time again as a product of a generalised and uniform 'humanity.' In a mythology that gains its respectability through mass media consensus—from David Attenborough's emotive documentaries to George Monbiot's commentaries in the *Guardian*—'we' humans are presented as an inherently ecocidal species.⁸ For some commentators, that unifying theme serves their ideological purposes. It allows them to 'blame' all humans equally for this crisis and fan the flames of modern Malthusianism—whereby any human population growth simply increases our size as an ecocidal organism. Overall, at its worst, this angle of argument serves naked elitist ideology, and is disingenuous at best.

The reality, shrouded from view by ideology and abstract ecology, is that were 'we' to be operating as just an ordinary species or 'force of nature' along the

lines of others on earth, then ‘our’ impact would not be registered on that planetary scale. Humanity renders its uniquely global ecological expression through its social formations, not its naked biology, and if we could be armed with that truth by the mainstream, then we would better understand our historical interrelationship with living nature, for good or ill. That clarity would also enable us to pinpoint the only social force that has proved historically capable of exerting ecocidal barbarism of such geological significance: capitalism.⁹

Lest that conclusion be thrown out for political reasons, it is worth looking at the situation from another angle. Solutions to the biodiversity crisis have been long discussed and even costed within the United Nations system and beyond. From community-supported initiatives to effective legal protections for habitats and species under direct threat of destruction, urgent and effective biodiversity conservation is desperately needed. Successful deflection of the sixth extinction requires very serious, well-resourced, scientifically and sociologically rigorous and publicly supported intervention. Without this, today’s endangered species—with their beauty, cultural worth, ecological function, evolutionary ingenuity, uniqueness and grandeur—will simply disappear from the planet *forever*.

Those steps require an annual global expenditure of between \$400 billion and \$700 billion, according to the World Economic Forum and others.¹⁰ That price tag is roughly equivalent to the annual ‘defence’ budget of the US Pentagon (\$715 billion in 2020). Meanwhile, the top-ten wealthiest humans on earth hold enough net wealth between them (\$1,300 billion in 2022¹¹) to pump-prime the steps needed to avert mass extinction for two years—effectively slamming the breaks on the sixth extinction and giving us a little breathing space to reorientate our social system towards meaningful sustainability (instead of squandering their wealth on the egotistical quest to extend human consciousness onto neighbouring dead planets, as several of them do). Unless they are overtly in favour of capitalist inequality, it would take a shocking level of ignorance, or inexplicable consistency, for anyone to claim that such decisions over planetary resourcing and priorities are the actions of ‘humanity’ in the round. If, as humans, ‘we’ are all equally culpable in planetary ecocide, it would need to follow that ‘we’ want the solutions to be withheld by a tiny percentage of our species. Self-

defeating fatalism would be necessary in order to argue that biodiversity loss, the democratic deficit and massive wealth inequalities are our inherent and unavoidable species expressions, rather than the ideological and metabolic characteristics of capitalist accumulation and its violent neoliberal militarism.

Conservation and Capitalism

Since neoliberal capitalism has clearly become the powerful societal force driving the sixth extinction, it is reasonable to ask what biodiversity conservationists are doing to resist it. As an activity, conservation could be interpreted as objectively anticapitalist in many respects. Whether aware of it or not, conservationists are struggling to save biodiversity from a social system that prefers to value life—human or otherwise—through the narrow calculus of the profit motive. The nature reserves conservationists establish, and the species-saving efforts they invest in, are countering a logic that would see many habitats and species disappear simply because they slow down economic growth, resist land-use change or require subsidies and laws (‘red tape’) that counter the wholesale liquidation of nature for profit and market share.

In these and other endeavours to represent non-human life within capitalist systems, conservationists effectively act as the union reps for nature. That comparison might seem oversimplistic or even frivolous, but it is useful because it brings conservation immediately into the traditions of struggle that lie at the heart of capitalism and resistance. Just like trade union reps, conservationists find themselves torn between reformism—their faith in the United Nations system and its numerous conventions—and revolutionary change or rebellion; between narrow and local gains that may enhance conditions for individual species, and the wider necessity of meaningful ecological change that entails a global and radical overhaul of the capitalist system—often euphemistically referred to in conservation as ‘transformative change.’¹²

In particular, the analogy is useful because it contextualises conservationists’ experiences relative to the uneven political balance that we know operates for trade unionism when conditions for workers’ struggle are weak or difficult. Conservation is poorly resourced even though, as we have seen, its financial costs are not that high when compared to what is expended elsewhere. But that lack of resourcing

means that saving biodiversity is currently dependent on the political whims of elite international agencies, wealthy governments, philanthropic actors and greenwash-seeking corporations. Unsurprisingly, many of these supporters actively marginalise radicalism even as they shoehorn conservation into the prevailing logic and lexicons of economic growth and individual charitable activity. Increasingly, such funders have insisted on the corporatisation of conservation NGOs themselves (usually under the guise of funding transparency or ‘professionalism’). As a result, the income disparities of the corporate sector have spread across to most NGOs and conservation charities to the point where the treadmill of ‘core costs’ is outpacing membership subscriptions and other avenues of public support. Faced with rapidly rising management salaries and bureaucratic costs, and desiring to maintain their relevance and competitive edge over other NGOs, many conservation organisations have abandoned attempts to critique or counter capitalist valuation. Instead, they have recalibrated their operations to define their success on capitalist terms through accounting concepts such as ‘natural capital,’ ‘biodiversity offsetting,’ ‘net gain’ or ‘no net loss.’¹³ The adoption of that fiscal language and acceptance of the theory and practice of ‘nature financialisation’ is also being undertaken in the hope that private-sector investment will be released for biodiversity conservation—especially where it dovetails with carbon offsetting through tree planting and other so-called nature-based solutions (NbS) to the climate emergency.¹⁴

This rightward drift of biodiversity conservation appears naïve—appealing to capitalists to look after biodiversity is akin to asking vampires to look after the blood bank. But in many ways this cosying up of conservationism to elite interests reflects wider debates across today’s political landscape, and confirms David Harvey’s argument that ‘all critical examinations of the [human] relation to nature are simultaneously critical examinations of society.’¹⁵

Taming Conservation

Modern environmentalism has its roots in the 1960s and early 1970s. Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, WWF and other environmental groups started life around the anti-Vietnam War movements and the upsurge in popular resistance to racism and inequality that broke through everywhere from Paris to Washington, from Prague to Johannesburg. That

period’s growth in environmental concern was shaped by publications such as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* and the Club of Rome’s study on environmental crisis, *The Limits to Growth*. Radical activism produced significant wildlife conservation gains against commercial whaling and the use of pesticides, but the term and concept of ‘biodiversity’ wasn’t popularised until the late 1980s and early 1990s, in the second modern surge of environmental politics that came at the end of the Cold War.

In 1992, at the celebrated Rio Earth Summit, the concept of orchestrated and state-led biodiversity conservation was given political and financial substance through the development of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the multilateral Global Environment Facility (GEF). The post-Cold War optimism of Rio ’92 didn’t last long, however. The 1990s were dominated not by meaningful ‘sustainable development’ but by a process of neoliberal reconstitution of nation states’ economies. Through combinations of austerity, privatisation and reconfigured legal frameworks, the market economy was enshrined as the dominant social mechanism for everything from healthcare and farming to transport and education.

For the countries of the Global South and the former Eastern Bloc these pro-market ‘reforms’ (structural adjustment programmes—SAPs), were overseen by the IMF and the World Bank through debt relief conditionalities. In Western industrial countries, they were pushed through straightforward class confrontations between organised labour and the state, and the capitulation or defeat of Left forces.

The fine words, conventions and principles around biodiversity and climate change that appeared at Rio ’92 were all undone by the 1990s’ globalising neoliberalism. Unleashed, capitalism rolled back environmental protections, encouraged land inequality and land grabbing and drove corporate power and technologies deep into the world’s ecosystems in their search for profit and market advantage. Within eight years of Rio ’92, capitalist globalisation had gone from appearing as the world’s ecological saviour to being our biosphere’s nemesis. By the end of the millennium, the stage was set for conservationists and environmentalists to join with other activists in a broad anticapitalist alliance.

That anticapitalist coalition and its and pro-justice slogans were tested and found to be resilient against

riot police and state violence on the streets at the World Trade Organisation meetings in Seattle in 1999. By the time of the Genoa G7 summit of 2001, the alliance of protestors had grown to include formal delegations from Western NGOs such as Oxfam. Conservation organisations such as the WWF also attended the Genoa protests, but that bloody event proved to be the high point for conservation-NGO radicalism.¹⁶ Faced with state violence that tipped into indiscriminate and lethal force, the WWF's panda-slogan flags, which had waved through the tear gas of day one of the Genoa summit, were rolled up and withdrawn along with other official NGO delegations. Conservation organisations were driven out of anticapitalism by 24 hours of carabinieri brutality—a withdrawal that was made permanent by the op-eds and commentators of the mainstream media and a financial press that had already been conflating the anticapitalist movement with mainstream NGOs to water down the latter's critiques of globalisation and to accuse them of wielding too much political power.¹⁷

In many respects, that moment of capitulation laid the foundation for two decades of rightward drift within conservation organisations, as neoliberalism became increasingly embraced in their quest for political respectability and mainstream legitimacy. As with many NGOs from other sectors, this retreat came by way of the adoption of corporate-hierarchical organisational structures as much as through a new-found faith in neoliberal and market-based 'solutions' to societal crises. In the case of conservation, however, it also gave succour to the resurgent philosophy of misanthropy and to an elitist paternalism that have combined to frame current approaches to 'rewilding.'

Rewilding under Capitalism: Conservation Recolonised?

Conservation predates the struggles of the 1960s, mainly in the form of elitist and colonial demarcation of biodiversity or ecologically rich land. The large national parks that pepper the world today are examples of where the national or colonial state stepped in to prevent or limit land use. In some instances this kind of intervention may have carried benign intentions and been co-ordinated with local populations, but in others the establishment of such areas came about through the direct expulsion of indigenous populations. Large parks such as

Yellowstone National Park in the US were cleared of indigenous and new settler populations alike, and the case of Yellowstone, the park was held under military occupation for the first few decades of its life. The huge game reserves of Sub-Saharan Africa were created under European colonialism, sometimes in the twilight years of direct rule. The very titles of such preserves indicate their Western sociopolitical and ecological roots. 'Nation Park' suggests somewhere where nature is controlled to maintain an aesthetic, while 'Game Reserve' suggests a space where social elites may freely hunt for sport. Yet, despite their artificial and Western origins, these areas are held aloft today as prime examples of 'wild' nature where humanity never existed or had little impact.

As centuries of creeping or surging capitalist development have taken over the spaces that surround these preserves, they have become theorised within conservation as areas of 'fortress conservation' or 'land sparing.' In the case of their popular description across mainstream media (including David Attenborough's influential outputs), the African examples receive even higher accolades as remnants of Eden.

In a final act of cultural hijacking, traditional users of such spaces have been criminalised as 'poachers,' a concept deeply steeped in property fetishisation and land inequality. Today—even as they become squeezed by poverty, organised crime, illegal trade and the bizarre taste for animal parts of a far-away bourgeoisie—such 'poachers' are being met with lethal force in the form of armed guards and the militarisation of conservation.

Conservation has maintained its mythology of wilderness throughout its history, and retains it today despite the mounting archaeological evidence that, outside of Antarctica and a few oceanic islands, humanity could be found across the entire globe by the time that European powers went off on their 'discovery' expeditions from the fifteenth century on. In all continents, habitats and regions, humans were a part—a very significant part—of local, regional and global biodiversity patterns (whether they were hunter-gatherers, shifting pastoralists, settled farmers or urbanites). Conservationists' focus on 'the amount of land we use as an indicator of how much of the planet retains its naturalness or biodiversity integrity is basically misanthropic and ahistorical. With a sophistic tendency, many conservationists ignore the

fact that today's 'wildernesses' were mainly products of imperialist and colonial intervention. The illusion of wilderness is further entrenched by the hidden ecological consequences of historic settlement clearance and societal breakdown brought on by European land grabs and slavery—biodiversity effectively rushed in to fill spaces vacated by community collapse. This ahistorical and apolitical approach has actively encouraged the historical survival of racist concepts such as *terra nullius* (no man's land), and it is now influencing today's popular concept of rewilding.

This recent turn towards rewilding—the deliberate abandonment or reduced management of land to enable 'natural' processes to develop and take over—sits more comfortably alongside the historic focus on 'wilderness' conservation. Arguments for rewilding—such as E.O. Wilson's 'half earth' concept advocating that between 30 and 50 percent of the world be 'returned' to nature—sound attractive but actually reflect conservation's retreat from radicalism. The two decades that followed 9/11—which included the War on Terror and the 2008 Banking Crisis—unleashed intense neoliberal propaganda across the United Nations system and the NGO landscape. The consensus around 'sustainable development' that was achieved at Rio '92 was actively watered down and infused with thinly veiled, pro-market 'green economy' economics. As the complete neoliberal takeover of conservation advanced to the point that even conservation NGOs actively advocated for the financialisation of nature, rewilding was seen as a remedy that would reinvigorate the natural world. But rewilding has landed within our capitalist context, and this fact is denting its potential.

Underlying conservation trends—resurgent misanthropy, the neoliberal takeover of NGOs and the push towards nature commodification through concepts such as carbon and biodiversity offsetting—are converging to shape the political ecology of rewilding and to recolonise conservation. For example, across upland areas of the UK and Ireland, rewilding is rapidly developing into the preserve of established and new large, landed interests who are rewilding their estates in order to access potential markets in tree planting for carbon and biodiversity offsetting. These new and old 'Green Lairds' are being encouraged post-COP26 by environmental consultants, corporations, conservation NGOs and land agents. Wealthy individuals and corporations are actively buying up estate land in a new 'gold rush' for

carbon and biodiversity credits, and consultant land agents are cold-calling hill farmers to offer contracts to 'farm' trees as part of the emerging carbon market.¹⁸

In the predictable absence of democratic and eco-strategic assessments, this rise in elitist rewilding markets will result in another round of land monopolisation—the removal of small and tenant farmers from the system. It also threatens to take land out of agricultural production and increase food imports from the Global South, with all the negative social and biodiversity impacts such extractionism entails. If rewilding follows this market trend, then it could result in more biodiversity loss in the short term as the many species associated positively with marginal and small farming are wiped out by land abandonment and poorly construed afforestation schemes.

Renewing Radical Conservation

The losses in biodiversity that have unfolded over the last 50 years are ecologically and emotionally traumatic. But they are nothing compared to what may come if capitalism's project of nature liquidation and extinction runs its course unhindered. The ecosystems and habitats that have been ravaged have not yet completely collapsed, but the combination of biodiversity attrition rates and climate change means that the threat of catastrophic local and regional ecosystem failures is very real.

Even under the conditions of global pandemic, this barbaric system has continued to destroy biodiversity and degrade the world's biotic community through its profit-orientated and simplified ecology. Despite the anecdotal mass-media sound bites, nature was *not* given a break by our social lockdowns. In fact, quite the reverse: across Brazil, for example, the deliberate use of so-called 'wildfires' saw the rate of Amazon deforestation double between April 2021 and 2022, while 30 percent of the country's Pantanal wetlands were lost in 2020 through the use of similar infernos to pull more land into intensive arable and beef production.¹⁹

In the face of the mainstream's tilt towards neoliberalism and the convergence of NGOs at its 'extreme centre,' there is an urgent need to reinvigorate biodiversity conservation's radical potential and its underlying anticapitalist reflex. Thankfully, there are encouraging signs that

biodiversity is now receiving the attention it deserves, both theoretically and practically, from radical and ecosocialist environmentalists. The school of ‘convivial conservation’ that has emerged from Africa and Northern Europe is actively exploring the biodiversity benefits of closer integration and harmony between human development and ecology. Even the ‘half earth’ ethos, which had emboldened misanthropic rewilding, is finally coming under socialist scrutiny.²⁰ These and other radical positions are just the start of necessary debates and conversations on the left.

Despite capitalism’s ecocidal direction, there is still much to play for because of nature’s inherent ability to recover when our cultural and social formations are pushed to operate within sustainable means. There is also a very receptive audience for a new radical conservation, not least due to the various Extinction Rebellion platforms. Across wider society, the potential for anticapitalist and ecosocialist engagement with conservation is real because the left can tap into humanity’s broader valuations of nature through our ongoing and principled resistance to capitalist commodification.

¹ <https://www.cbd.int/biodiversity-day>

² <https://www.iucn.org/>

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/explainers-60823267> and https://www.iucn.org/resources/conservation-tools/iucn-red-list-threatened-species#RL_pub

⁴ <https://www.nature.com/articles/news.2011.498>

⁵ There have been five episodes of mass extinction in the geological record. The last one was probably triggered by a roughly 12km-wide asteroid (that would fill urban Dublin’s Mótarbhealach M50 boundary if its circularity was completed out in Dublin Bay) whose impact ended the Cretaceous Period and its dinosaurs 65 million years ago.

⁶ <https://livingplanet.panda.org/en-gb/> and <https://www.rspb.org.uk/our-work/state-of-nature-report/>

⁷ Roughly 87 times the speed of sound.

⁸ With David Attenborough’s usual voiceover, the BBC aired a TV series titled ‘A Perfect Planet’ in January 2021. After four episodes of informative and often inspiring natural history, its final episode shifted immediately and almost predictably to images of suffering animals as: ‘[victims] of a new force...one so powerful that it threatens the future of life on earth: Humans.’ See also George Monbiot’s piece in *The Guardian* from 2014: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/24/humans-diminutive-monster-destruction>

⁹ See <http://isj.org.uk/the-habitable-earth/>

¹⁰ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/the-biodiversity-crisis-cant-be-solved-by-the-market/> and https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_New_Nature_Economy_Report_2020.pdf

¹¹ <https://www.nationalworld.com/news/people/who-is-the-richest-person-in-the-world-2022-net-worth-elon-musk-jeff-bezos-3669375>

¹² The Intergovernmental Panel on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) advocates ‘transformative change,’ but stops short of calling for an end to capitalism even though that is where the logic of their evidence and conclusions lead. See <https://ipbes.net/>

¹³ See Sian Sullivan’s excellent website for articles that critique these approaches and the financialisation of nature that accompanies them <https://the-natural-capital-myth.net/>

¹⁴ See John Bellamy Foster’s essays on nature financialisation in *Monthly Review*: <https://monthlyreview.org/2022/03/01/nature-as-a-mode-of-accumulation-capitalism-and-the-financialization-of-the-earth/> and <https://monthlyreview.org/2022/04/01/the-defense-of-nature-resisting-the-financialization-of-the-earth/>; For critiques of NbS see <https://redd-monitor.org/2021/09/29/no-to-nature-based-dispossessions-sign-on-to-the-statement-opposing-nature-based-solutions/>

¹⁵ David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Blackwell, 1996), p.174.

¹⁶ In 2000, WWF produced work that explored the ‘root’ causes of biodiversity loss. This radical assessment of the relationship between deep socioeconomic factors such as poverty, inequality and trade was a significant divergence from the more shallow approaches that blamed ‘humanity’ before and since its publication.

¹⁷ See ‘The Case for Globalisation’ *The Economist*, 23 September, 2000, www.economist.com/printedition/2000-09-23-0

¹⁸ See <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/scotland-environment-green-lairds/>; and in the case of Ireland, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/aug/07/people-think-youre-an-idiot-death-metal-irish-baron-rewilds-his-estate>

¹⁹ See <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2319326-amazon-deforestation-in-april-was-the-worst-in-modern-records/> and <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-59670396>

²⁰ For a summary of the convivial conservation approach see <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/conservation-at-the-crossroads> and <https://progressive.international/blueprint/e6e09a90-dc09-410d-af87-5d3339ad4ed3-fletcher-et-al-a-new-future-for-conservation/en>; *Half Earth Socialism*, by Troy Vettese and Drew Pendergrass, had just been published by Verso Books at the time of writing.