

# What is conservation?

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In a recent Editorial in *Conservation Biology*, Michael Soulé, a founding father of the discipline of Conservation Biology, took issue with a group of scholars and practitioners who have developed the so-called new conservation. He argued that ‘because [new conservation’s] goal is to supplant the biological diversity-based model of traditional conservation with something entirely different, namely an economic growth-based or humanitarian movement, it does not deserve to be labelled conservation’ (Soulé, 2013). What is remarkable about this statement is Soulé’s presumption that there is a clear definition of what conservation is. As his article makes clear, he believes that conservation should be about protecting nature for its own sake, and that a movement that focuses on delivering benefits to people is therefore not conservation at all.

Some might see the debate about new conservation to which Soulé’s article seeks to contribute as a sideshow alongside the daily business of getting conservation work done. Certainly the debate has been at times ill-tempered, but it does serve to reveal an uncomfortable truth that lies at the heart of the conservation movement—namely, that there are profound disagreements about what conservation is. This is more than just an academic question, because so many of the choices that conservation entails about what to conserve, where and how, grow out from how it is defined, whether implicitly or explicitly. There is much disagreement about all of these things within conservation, as demonstrated by the debate about new conservation and earlier disagreements about the proper relationship between conservation and development (Oates, 1999). These differences are confirmed by empirical research into the values held by conservationists (Sandbrook et al., 2010). Given this level of disagreement it seems reasonable to ask whether there are any shared characteristics that cut across all different forms of conservation and, if so, what might the answer to this question tell us about the future of the conservation movement?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines conservation as ‘the action of conserving something’. To unpack the word ‘conserving’ in this sentence, the dictionary provides two relevant definitions of the verb to conserve: ‘to protect from harm or destruction’ and ‘to prevent the wasteful over-use of a resource’. These points describe two important

themes in conservation thinking, and for some people the implicit acceptance of sustainable use in the second of these definitions is a defining feature of conservation that distinguishes it from preservation, where the latter is focused on protecting areas of wilderness entirely free from people (Sarkar, 1999; see Cronon, 1996, for a critique of the idea of wilderness). However, others see wilderness preservation as an important part of conservation, so this distinction is not universally recognized.

Most definitions of conservation provided by conservationists reflect their authors’ particular view of what conservation ought to be. For example, Leader-Williams et al. (2011) define conservation as ‘actions that directly enhance the chances of habitats and species persisting in the wild’. This emphasizes habitats and species, and persistence in the wild, which in turn suggest a particular set of actions intended to achieve these goals. There is nothing wrong with this definition, and many people who call themselves conservationists would agree with it. Others would not, however. For example, some are particularly concerned with conserving the genetic diversity within single species of agricultural crops, and others may not wish to limit their concern to ‘the wild’. So the Leader-Williams et al. definition of conservation, like Soulé’s and most others, describes a branch of the conservation tree rather than the tree itself. It is possible to engage in lengthy debates about the merits or demerits of each definition (the new conservation literature is just such an example) but this does not help with the broader task of identifying shared ground.

Given the diversity of perspectives on what conservation is, it is necessary to take several steps back from the specifics of conservation objectives and practice to find a definition that might be acceptable to everybody. The broad definition of conservation that I propose is: ‘actions that are intended to establish, improve or maintain good relations with nature’. This definition highlights the idea of conservation as something that is active rather than passive (actions). It recognizes that some conservation actions create new relationships with nature (establish) whereas others build on existing relationships (improve or maintain). At the same time it recognizes that despite good intentions, not all conservation actions are successful (intended to). It captures the positive intentions of conservation towards nature (good relations), whilst leaving room for different perspectives on what these relations might entail. Finally, it allows for diverse understandings of the entity with which these relations are held (nature), which for some may include people and even non-living geodiversity.

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I feel this definition is broad enough to capture all things that might be thought of as conservation (ranging from the strict protection of national parks and the eradication of invasive species right through to forms of farming and gardening), and yet narrow enough to exclude things that are done deliberately to harm nature. In this sense, it does its job. However, it is certainly too broad to be used as the basis for determining conservation priorities or actions. This conclusion demands careful thought. If the conservation movement is so diverse that a definition of conservation that suits everybody is this vague, is it useful to think of conservation as a single movement at all? Perhaps instead the process of developing this definition demonstrates that contemporary conservation is not one thing but many, and that there can be more that separates different conservations from each other than binds them together.

Recognition of the diversity of conservation has two important implications for the future of the conservation movement. Firstly, it challenges the view of those who have argued for an end to internal debates over the meaning of conservation in favour of 'a unified and diverse conservation ethic; one that recognizes and accepts all values of nature, from intrinsic to instrumental, and welcomes all philosophies justifying nature protection and restoration, from ethical to economic, and from aesthetic to utilitarian' (Tallis & Lubchenco, 2014). This sounds good and might be pragmatic when speaking to diverse audiences, but if conservation is not one thing but many then attempts to fold them into a single movement under the banner of inclusivity seem unrealistic in practice, and potentially stifling of debate over what are real and meaningful differences of opinion.

Secondly, it raises the question of which version(s) of conservation thinking different conservation organizations and individuals actually subscribe to. It is remarkable that so much energy has been invested in efforts to characterize and champion particular forms of conservation without asking conservationists themselves whether they recognize these positions and/or agree with them. This is an area ripe for further empirical research.

The new conservation debate has been a source of frustration for many conservationists who see it as divisive and dichotomizing. However, it highlights the fact that conservation in the 21st century is such a broad movement that it resists straightforward definition and is riddled with contradictory values and viewpoints. Given this situation, it is tempting to argue that the word conservation (with its backward looking and conservative connotations) should be jettisoned altogether. But it is a deeply embedded and widely recognized label for those who care about nature, and

here to stay. Rather, it might make sense for those with closely aligned values and preferred means of action to come up with titles and definitions for their own form of conservation. The resulting conservations would then fit (sometimes uncomfortably) within the broader singular category of conservation. In this vision conservation becomes a forest rather than a single tree—a parliament not a corporation.

This might appear an admission of failure, as the orthodox view has been that conservation is strengthened by presenting a united front to the outside world because a 'patchwork approach to conservation synergizes its ineffectiveness' (Child, 2009). However, it could instead be seen as a sign of maturity as conservation grows in scale and influence. In this vision, different (and sometimes contradictory) perspectives could be promoted unashamedly by those who support them rather than swept under the carpet. This would make it easier for conservationists to identify who they would, or would not, like to work with, and enable niche forms of conservation to get on with their work without worrying about undermining the integrity of the conservation movement as a whole. There are many conservations, and it is time to stop pretending otherwise.

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