



Perspectives

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Revolutionary rhetorics and situated sovereignties: a critical response to *The Conservation Revolution*

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Summary

This paper critically engages Büscher and Fletcher's *The Conservation Revolution*, an influential manifesto within contemporary critical conservation scholarship. While the book offers a powerful political-economic critique of fortress, neoliberal and neoprotectionist conservation paradigms and advances 'convivial conservation' as a transformative alternative, this paper evaluates both its intellectual contributions and limitations. The analysis examines the book's citational politics, theoretical framing and empirical scope, arguing that its reliance on metropolitan critical theory and limited engagement with place-based case studies constrain its claim to global applicability. Particular attention is given to the book's terrestrial bias and minimal engagement with marine socioecological systems, which restricts its capacity to address governance challenges in oceanic environments. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature, including Indigenous-led conservation in Papua New Guinea and community-based coexistence strategies in Botswana, the paper demonstrates that many practices aligned with convivial conservation already exist as grounded, relational and locally governed approaches. These cases suggest that conservation transformation often emerges through incremental, situated governance rather than universal political rupture. The paper concludes that while *The Conservation Revolution* re-politicizes conservation debates, future scholarship must integrate systemic critique with epistemic plurality, marine and terrestrial ecologies and empirically grounded understandings of conservation practice.

Introduction

The Conservation Revolution: Radical Ideas for Saving Nature beyond the Anthropocene (Bücher & Fletcher 2020; hereafter *The Conservation Revolution*) has become one of the most widely circulated contemporary interventions in critical conservation scholarship. The book advances a sweeping diagnosis of conservation's entanglement with capitalism, colonial legacies and technocratic governance, and it proposes 'convivial conservation' as a radical alternative capable of reorganizing human–non-human relations beyond market logics and fortress protection (Bücher & Fletcher 2020, pp. 1–6, 159–166). At the same time, it raises methodological and epistemological questions about how abstract political-economic critiques relate to situated conservation practices already unfolding in diverse socioecological worlds and how critique remains accountable to the lived practices through which people sustain land, sea, kinship and governance. This paper engages *The Conservation Revolution* as an exemplar of a broader genre of critical conservation writing that privileges planetary-scale political diagnosis over thick empirical grounding. The aim of this Perspective is fourfold: (1) to clarify what the book's argument is; (2) to examine its citational politics and epistemic positioning; (3) to assess the limits introduced by its sparse use of place-based cases and the absence of marine environments; and (4) to highlight conservation practices that were already enacting critical, on-the-ground alternatives long before *The Conservation Revolution* became a fixture in the citational atmosphere of critical conservation studies.

What the book argues

Bücher and Fletcher organize their book around a diagnosis of three dominant conservation paradigms: fortress conservation, neoliberal conservation and neoprotectionism (Bücher & Fletcher 2020, pp. 14–22). They argue that all three reproduce capitalist logics of enclosure, commodification and managerial control even when they appear ideologically opposed (pp. 18–31). Conservation, in their account, has increasingly become an accumulation frontier structured by tourism, biodiversity offsets, ecosystem services, carbon markets and financialized valuation (pp. 29–31, 80–98). Early chapters trace the genealogy of wilderness thinking, protected area expansion and rewilding, showing how nature–culture dualisms persist even within ostensibly progressive reforms (pp. 47–58). Subsequent chapters develop a political-economic

critique grounded in Marxian geography and critical political ecology, framing conservation as embedded within processes of uneven development, accumulation by dispossession and the production of fictitious value (pp. 80–88, 102–110, 124–129).

The constructive turn of the book proposes ‘convivial conservation’, drawing inspiration from Ivan Illich’s notion of conviviality, commons governance traditions, degrowth economics and decolonial critiques (pp. 159–166). Convivial conservation emphasizes embedded value rather than exchange value, democratic governance, reparative justice, participatory cocreation and the dismantling of conservation’s dependence on capitalist growth (pp. 171–176, 182–190). The authors explicitly present their proposal as provisional and open-ended rather than as a policy blueprint (pp. 147, 182–183). Overall, the book functions primarily as a conceptual intervention: a manifesto for re-politicizing conservation and reconnecting ecological futures to broader struggles over political economy, social justice and planetary limits (pp. 199–205). The book succeeds in demonstrating that conservation cannot be treated as a technical or managerial domain divorced from capitalism and geopolitics (pp. 78–110). Its synthesis of political economy and conservation history and critique of market environmentalism provide analytical clarity and intellectual ambition. It refuses the de-politicization of conservation, insisting that conflicts over land, labour, governance and value cannot be engineered away through better metrics or incentives (pp. 32–35, 173–176).

What follows evaluates the analytical and empirical limits that emerge when a planetary critique is mobilized without commensurate attention to epistemic plurality, place-based grounding and cross-domain ecological diversity.

Epistemic positioning

The citational architecture of *The Conservation Revolution* materially shapes what it can see, what it can credibly claim as universal and whose knowledge is authorized to define the future of conservation. The theoretical backbone is dominated by European and North American political economy, Marxian geography and critical theory (pp. 50–53, 80–88, 124–129). While women scholars are present and lightly engaged, the structural scaffolding of the argument remains anchored in a largely male, Euro-American canon that sets the terms of abstraction, causality and solution-making.

A review of the book’s bibliography makes this gendered asymmetry more concrete. Of the c. 180 unique authors cited in *The Conservation Revolution*, c. 125–135 are men (c. 70–75%) and 40–45 are women (c. 25–30%), with a small remainder unclassifiable based on publicly available self-identification. Male authors dominate the most frequently cited and structurally central theoretical touchstones, particularly in political economy, Marxian geography and critical theory (e.g., Harvey, Lefebvre, Moore, Malm, Hornborg, Brockington and Igoe; pp. 50–53, 80–88, 124–129). Women scholars, including feminist political ecologists and science studies scholars such as Haraway, Tsing and Sullivan, are substantively engaged but appear less often as sources of analytic generalization, more frequently serving to nuance or ethically inflect an already-established theoretical frame (pp. 95–100, 147, 159–163). Taken together, these patterns do not negate the importance of women’s scholarship in the book but indicate that its epistemic centre of gravity remains disproportionately male, reinforcing a citational hierarchy in which authority over abstraction and causal explanation is unevenly distributed.

Citations actively produce epistemic authority and delimit the horizon of legitimate explanation (pp. 44–46). By positioning metropolitan theory as the primary source of analytic generalization, the book implicitly reproduces a hierarchy in which knowledge generated in the Global South or Indigenous intellectual traditions is more often mobilized as illustration or ethical confirmation rather than as theory capable of reorganizing the conceptual architecture itself (pp. 147, 159–163). The result is that a project framed as globally transformative remains epistemically provincial in its foundations. This citational politics matters because it structures who is imagined as capable of diagnosing planetary crisis and who is positioned primarily as the object of reform.

The problem of place

The book’s most significant analytical weakness lies in its limited engagement with sustained, place-based empirical material. While the critique of neoliberal and fortress conservation is richly theorized and supported through secondary literature and emblematic references (pp. 47–63, 78–101), the proposed alternative – ‘convivial conservation’ – remains largely untested against the messiness of real governance, conflict, institutional inertia and ecological constraint (pp. 159–176, 182–189). Named sites function primarily as symbolic placeholders rather than as deeply situated social–ecological worlds followed over time. The book asks readers to accept a transformative political horizon without demonstrating how that horizon survives friction, compromise and unintended consequences (pp. 182–183). Without thicker empirical grounding, the proposal risks remaining rhetorically compelling but operationally indeterminate.

Equally consequential is the near-total absence of marine environments in the book. The empirical imagination is overwhelmingly terrestrial: protected areas, forests, rewilding landscapes, agricultural mosaics, urban ecologies and land-based carbon markets dominate the analysis (pp. 13–46, 47–77, 78–114). Oceans, fisheries, coastal systems, maritime labour regimes and marine protected areas are largely invisible. For interdisciplinary audiences working across oceanography, fisheries science, maritime law, political economy and coastal anthropology, this omission has concrete analytical consequences. Marine systems operate through radically different spatial ontologies (fluidity, mobility, depth and volume rather than surface area), governance regimes (international waters, overlapping jurisdictions, weak enforcement capacity) and political economies (industrial fleets, distant-water subsidies, transnational labour exploitation, port and logistics infrastructures, flags of convenience).

Core concepts mobilized in the book, such as enclosure, embedded value, participatory governance and spatial planning, are developed almost entirely through land-based political ecologies (pp. 47–63, 171–176). These do not translate cleanly from land to sea. Marine enclosure often occurs through quota systems, licensing regimes, surveillance technologies and data infrastructures rather than fences and territorial exclusion; displacement is frequently livelihood-based rather than village-based; and ecological dynamics are shaped by mobility, climate-driven regime shifts and transboundary flows that exceed place-bound governance models.

Because these dynamics are not engaged, the book cannot demonstrate whether convivial conservation can meaningfully address fisheries overcapacity, industrial fleet power, migrant labour precarity, ocean commons governance or the interaction

between climate change and marine biodiversity. The absence therefore functions not merely as a missing case domain but as a structural limitation on the scope of the theory itself. A framework that aspires to reimagine conservation writ large yet remains grounded almost entirely in terrestrial political ecologies leaves a substantial portion of the biosphere, and its distinctive governance challenges, analytically under-theorized.

The politics of voice

Across the book, an implicit collective subject emerges through appeals to what ‘we’ must recognize, confront or transform (pp. 3–5, 32–35, 199–203). This ‘we’ is never explicitly defined, yet it appears consistently as a politically capable, theoretically literate and normatively aligned actor able to diagnose capitalism, critique conservation orthodoxy and participate in the reimagining of governance futures. Conservation transformation is framed as a shared political obligation, as when the authors assert that ‘the question is how we understand the pressures and help direct imminent radical change towards something positive’ (p. 1), or when they suggest that the Anthropocene ‘forces humans’ to assume collective responsibility for planetary stewardship (p. 5).

In practice, this collective voice closely tracks the book’s primary epistemic community: critical conservation scholars, policy-orientated academics and reform-minded practitioners largely situated within European and North American institutional networks. Global environmentalism often depends on rhetorical dispossession: persuasive representations that render landscapes empty, endangered or outside history, thereby legitimizing external intervention (West 2016, pp. 5–7). The book, while opposing neoliberal conservation, reproduces this structure through a ‘revolutionary we’ that invites a generalized political subject into solidarity while eliding the colonial and racialized histories that differentially constitute that subject. Because this ‘we’ presumes a shared theoretical literacy, political sensibility and institutional location, other ways of knowing and governing conservation are positioned as external to conservation itself, appearing as broader postcapitalist movements rather than as co-equal sources of conservation thought (pp. 147, 159–163). By framing their intervention as translating these movements into conservation (p. 159), plural ontologies, customary governance, Indigenous sovereignties and non-academic conservation practices become empirical terrain to be incorporated rather than analytic frameworks capable of reorganizing conservation’s conceptual foundations. The collective ‘we’ thus operates as a gatekeeping device, stabilizing a shared critical horizon while narrowing who is authorized to define legitimate transformation.

Critical scholarship helps illuminate how such universal political subjects are historically produced rather than neutrally assembled. Scholars have shown that appeals to planetary responsibility often universalize Euro-modern epistemologies, obscure differentiated relations of power and vulnerability and erase the racialized and colonial histories that structure contemporary ecological crisis (Rocheleau et al. 1996, Quijano 2000, Wynter 2003). Anthropological and Indigenous scholarship further demonstrates that ecological responsibility frequently emerges through kinship, reciprocity and place-based accountability rather than abstract global stewardship (Rose 2004, Li 2007, De la Cadena 2015, TallBear 2017). Read through this lens, the book’s collective ‘we’ speaks confidently about what must change while leaving limited space for disagreement over what transformation should mean, who should lead it and according to which epistemic commitments.

Although the authors explicitly acknowledge uneven responsibility and critique universalized Anthropocene narratives (pp. 37–40, 124–126), the book’s rhetorical structure nonetheless operates at the scale of planetary transformation. Appeals to collective political agency risk reproduce a similar flattening by presuming a unified constituency capable of diagnosing and implementing systemic change. As a result, the book’s political vision remains ambitious but institutionally underdeveloped, offering limited engagement with how convivial governance would function amid transboundary regulation, capital mobility, geopolitical asymmetry and conflict among heterogeneous actors.

Situated alternatives

Across many regions, communities already sustain conservation through customary governance, relational accountability and locally embedded ethical economies. These practices do not await systemic rupture to operate responsibly; instead, they foreground slow transformation, place-based labour, negotiated authority and everyday stewardship. Long-term Indigenous-led conservation in Papua New Guinea offers a particularly clear illustration. Rather than treating conservation as a corrective intervention imposed upon social life, this scholarship documents it as an expression of Indigenous sovereignty, kinship and spiritual obligation (Aini et al. 2023, West & Aini 2026a, 2026b). In New Ireland, conservation is inseparable from the revitalization of traditional fishing practices, customary authority and intergenerational knowledge transmission, and it is enacted through long-standing Indigenous institutions rather than externally defined metrics of success or polemical calls for revolution. These efforts do not reject science or global environmental concerns but insist that ecological care must be grounded in relational sovereignty and locally governed ethical commitments. Conservation here is neither technocratic nor utopian; it is an ongoing practice of responsibility enacted within historically specific social worlds (West et al. 2025). While Büscher and Fletcher persuasively argue for moving beyond exclusionary and market-driven conservation, their emphasis on systemic transformation risks flattening the diversity of ways conservation is already practised outside dominant frameworks. Indigenous-led conservation in New Ireland demonstrates that alternatives are not only emergent futures but lived presents, sustained through kinship, ceremony and negotiated governance rather than revolutionary rupture.

Parallel insights emerge from applied research on human–elephant coexistence and community-based conservation in Botswana and the Okavango region. This literature shows that coexistence is achieved not through abstract commitments to harmony but through pragmatic, locally responsive strategies shaped by vulnerability, livelihood needs and institutional context (Buchholtz et al. 2022, Vogel et al. 2022). Farmers’ decisions about crop choice, planting strategies and mitigation uptake are shaped by food security, cultural preference, material access and risk perception rather than conservation objectives alone (Matsika et al. 2024). Research on land access, settlement policy and elephant connectivity further shows how conservation interventions can intensify vulnerability when they fail to account for local governance and social organization (Naidoo et al. 2022, Redmore et al. 2023). Policies designed to facilitate wildlife movement – such as fencing, corridor designation or resettlement – often produce uneven burdens borne by those with the least institutional power. At the same time, locally developed interventions, including community-designed transport systems and negotiated land-use arrangements, demonstrate how coexistence can be incrementally

improved through attention to everyday risk, care and mobility rather than sweeping structural reform (Songhurst et al. 2023).

Taken together, these literatures suggest that effective alternatives to dominant conservation paradigms do not converge on a single model of conviviality but instead reveal plural pathways shaped by historical relations, governance structures and ethical commitments. These insights resonate with the critique advanced by *The Conservation Revolution* while tempering its universalizing ambitions, demonstrating that ethical conservation is not achieved through systemic overhaul alone but through fragile, situated practices sustained by ongoing negotiation, accountability and care. Importantly, many initiatives in Papua New Guinea and Botswana predate the emergence of ‘convivial conservation’ as a formal concept, already advancing embedded value, local sovereignty, democratic governance, reparative justice and co-creation outside capitalist conservation logics.

Rather than asking how conservation might be revolutionized everywhere, this scholarship instead asks how existing place-based stewardship practices can be supported without being subsumed into new theoretical or policy hegemonies. From Indigenous sovereignty in Papua New Guinea to agrarian decision-making in elephant landscapes, conservation emerges as the practice of living with others – human and more-than-human – under conditions of constraint, uncertainty and uneven power. Conservation politics attentive to justice and sustainability must therefore remain open to multiplicity, resist singular solutions and recognize that transformation often unfolds through the cumulative work of sustaining relationships in place.

Conclusion and way forward

The Conservation Revolution makes a significant contribution to conservation scholarship through its synthesis of capitalism, inequality and political responsibility (pp. 78–110, 199–205). Yet its citational politics, limited place-based grounding, terrestrial bias and universal rhetorical horizon introduce structural constraints. The challenge is not to retreat from systemic critique but to ensure that transformative visions remain accountable to plural epistemologies, marine as well as terrestrial ecologies and the slow, uneven work of situated governance. This critique does not challenge the book’s insistence that conservation is irreducibly political or that capitalism, colonialism and inequality must be confronted directly. These claims have long anchored critical conservation scholarship (Leach 1994, Rocheleau et al. 1996, Checker 2005, West 2006, 2016, Duffy 2010, Corson 2011, Ogden 2011, Doane 2012, Sullivan 2017, 2018). Rather, it argues that manifesto-driven and weakly empirically grounded theorization represents only one pathway within critical conservation studies – and not necessarily the most generative or accountable one. A growing body of research demonstrates that intellectual ambition and political seriousness frequently emerge from methodologically plural, empirically embedded and relationally accountable scholarship (McGregor 2014, Simpson 2017, Whyte 2017, 2018, Mawyer & Jacka 2018, Winter et al. 2020, Fabre et al. 2021, Lamb et al. 2022, Townsend 2022, Aini et al. 2023, Cadman et al. 2024, Cannon et al. 2024, Maracle 2025, West & Aini 2025).

Syntheses of neoliberal conservation scholarship show that the field already contains diverse analytical tools capable of interrogating power, dispossession and commodification without collapsing difference into a singular political diagnosis. Apostolopoulou et al. (2021) demonstrated that critical conservation research is methodologically and geographically

heterogeneous, advancing through case-based, intersectional and governance-focused analysis. Scholarship examining conservation’s epistemic communities further challenges assumptions that sharper critique requires greater abstraction. Bunce et al. (2025) showed that neoliberal conservation scholarship operates through dispersed, polycentric networks in which collaboration patterns, gender and geographical location shape which ideas gain authority. Methodological scholarship complements these findings by demonstrating how conservation research can be reorganized through relational, co-productive and practice-orientated approaches. Work on knowledge co-production emphasizes transformation through sustained partnerships, negotiated research purposes and reflexive engagement with power (Petriello et al. 2024), while applied social science frameworks show how diverse social science approaches can be integrated iteratively and contextually to shape conservation outcomes, including in politically contested settings (Niemic et al. 2021). Taken together, this literature suggests that transforming conservation requires attention not only to political critique but also to how knowledge is produced, circulated and translated into durable, situated practice.

Viewed in this broader intellectual landscape, *The Conservation Revolution* is best understood not as the ‘overarching frame’ (p. 160) it is intended to provide for conservation’s future but as a powerful intervention within an already diverse and evolving field. Its strength lies in its synthesizing critique and its naming of structural injustice; its limitation lies in its privileging abstraction as the primary engine of change. The central task for conservation scholarship is therefore not to choose between critique and practice, or between political economy and empiricism, but to hold them in productive tension while remaining accountable to place, plurality and ecological difference. Conservation will not be transformed by universal manifestos alone. It will be reshaped through the cumulative, contested and deeply situated work of communities, institutions and movements translating critique into lived practice across uneven social and ecological worlds.

A productive way forward lies in strengthening conservation approaches that treat knowledge as co-produced, governance as relational and transformation as iterative rather than singular. This means investing in long-term, place-based partnerships that centre Indigenous sovereignty, local governance institutions and customary stewardship practices as sources of theory as well as implementation. It requires expanding conservation analysis beyond terrestrial systems to more fully engage marine and transboundary ecologies, where governance challenges expose the limits of land-based models. It also demands reflexive attention be given to how conservation knowledge is produced and circulated, including whose expertise shapes problem definition, policy design and evaluative metrics. Rather than seeking universal solutions, conservation efforts will probably prove most durable when they support plural pathways of stewardship, foster institutional humility and enable locally grounded experimentation capable of responding to ecological uncertainty and social change. Such an orientation does not abandon structural critique; it renders critique actionable by embedding it within the collaborative, adaptive and ethically situated practices through which conservation is already being reimaged in many parts of the world.

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