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Pushing back against paper-park pushers – Reply to Craigie et al.

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Letter to the Editor

**Pushing back against paper-park pushers –
Reply to Craigie et al.**


While we share a different opinion than Craigie et al. (2014) on the relative value of nature in remote areas, we agree with many of the well-reasoned observations that they contribute. These authors make two points that, in particular, are worthy of re-emphasis: (1) many leaders have let political expediency trump scientific wisdom and have aggressively dumped reserves in remote areas that have questionable value to global biodiversity and (2) setting up ineffectual parks in remote areas permits nations to inappropriately sidestep international commitments to biodiversity protection. There is no excuse for either of these abuses. The presence of these injurious practices emphasizes that a radical rethinking of our sincerity for doing conservation in remote areas is overdue.

We are no longer ignorant of patterns of biodiversity in our frontier zones. We can make biologically strategic decisions about how and where to effectively protect biodiversity in remote areas, just as we can in better studied contexts closer to home. Conservation practitioners must be vigilant and critical of reserves set up in disregard to this scientific counsel. The Craigie et al. advisory that quantity does not equal quality in reserve design is sound. Because reserve management is a resource-limited endeavor, parks, even large ones, that are set up to meet political and not ecological goals can do more harm than good. The presence of ineffectual parks on the ledgers of conservation dilutes the effectiveness of international commitments to environmental protection and confuses our global accounting of conservation.

We disagree with the conclusion from Craigie et al. that it is easy to properly execute conservation in remote areas. We discuss in our perspective (McCauley et al., 2013) many of the opportunities that can and should be leveraged by conservationists genuinely aiming to protect biodiversity in remote places. Yet even with these advantages, remote place conservation is extremely difficult. It is worth being upfront about this. One of the more conspicuous of such roadblocks to doing effective conservation in remote settings is the extreme expense of managing these reserves. The bill, for example, for a several hour resource protection visit to some of the United States' more remote national monuments can easily cost tens of thousands of dollars. Few developing nations can hope to shoulder such expenses and yet the majority of remote places rich in biodiversity are situated in the developing world. Without a revival of enthusiasm and support for remote place conservation, genuinely valuable and globally unique reserves in such places will perish. It is irresponsible to misrepresent these difficulties to policy makers. Perpetuating the myth that it is easy to do meaningful conservation in extremely remote places only lends support the abusive practice of remote paper-park pushing. Drawing lines on a map in a remote place is easy – managing the biodiversity within these lines is difficult and expensive.

In many contexts, however, the potential payoff in terms of global biodiversity security for making these investments is high.

It is desirable to encourage a diversity of opinions for priority setting in the conservation community and to foster the development of more effective conservation strategies wherever they are to be implemented. As to the relative merits of allocating limited effort and resources to conservation in urban versus remote and less-disturbed wildlands we submit the following allegory: Imagine a fire bearing down on a village with few firefighting resources. There are twin temples in the village. One temple has been badly vandalized – it has a cracked roof, broken statues, and missing treasures. The second temple is in near-pristine condition. Without intervention the fire will consume both temples. Where is the best place for firefighters to make their stand?

Such analogies however are simplistic and needlessly binary. Taking their logic too far promotes a kind of divisiveness that is both artificially polarizing and largely unnecessary in a community that shares in common the goal of protecting biodiversity.

Debating the value of doing conservation in developed areas and remote settings promotes a healthy reevaluation of present trajectories in conservation – but we can all agree that biodiversity suffers from pseudo-conservation carried out by disingenuous politicians in remote areas. The kinds of abuses usefully highlighted by Craigie et al. should be universally opposed. Doing conservation in remote places has great value and, we maintain, underappreciated potential to benefit global biodiversity – but only if it is done properly.

References

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