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The COVID-19 pandemic: A learnable moment for conservation

1 | INTRODUCTION

The global COVID-19 pandemic is a massive humanitarian and economic disaster on a scale not seen for more than a generation. Although society has appropriately focused on the human costs, the pandemic has provided an opportunity for conservation scientists to highlight lessons for society (Wittemyer, 2020), and assess impacts on biodiversity (e.g., Corlett et al., 2020). At the same time, society's response to the global pandemic provides learning opportunities for the science and practice of conservation.

With respect to conservation, we find three key issues from which conservation may seek new directions in research and practice. First, the need to shelter in place has focused a bright light on the deep-seeded need for people to connect to nature. Second, the pandemic illustrates how crises create opportunities to undercut programs to protect people and nature. Finally, observing the willingness of people to make deep sacrifices for society to stem the pandemic shows the power of collective action to make governance succeed. Each of these observations of human behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic provide important lessons for conservation.

2 | NATURE CONNECTION

As research in the conservation social sciences gains momentum, the pandemic reveals further ways to study how human interest in nature can better foster social support for conservation (Schwartz, 2020). The expressed interest of people in nature displayed during this pandemic shutdown has been nothing less than astounding. Sales of fishing licenses have increased in some places nearly 50% compared to this time last year¹; beaches are packed²; public natural areas are experiencing enormous demand.³ Sheltering in place during the pandemic has emphasized people's fundamental need to connect to nature. More programs to keep people connected to

nature are needed. More research on the capacity of a social movement for conservation to impact environmental governance is needed.

3 | CRISIS-DRIVEN RULE RELAXATION

Crises foster the resetting of policy, often toward positions that are favorable to business yet socially unpopular (Klein, 2007). Industries that exploit resources are well-primed to use crises to get what they want.⁴ During the current pandemic, the U.S. government has relaxed rules constraining pollution⁵ and protecting endangered species.⁶ Lack of enforcement in Brazil has accelerated deforestation of the Amazonian.⁷ Klein (2007) describes "disaster capitalism" as the deliberate engineering of crises to create opportunities to forward less popular agenda. Natural disasters that create social upheaval, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, create similar opportunities.

The practice of conservation must be better prepared for crisis governance, recognizing and seizing policy windows of opportunity (Rose et al., 2017) and respond to disasters (Birkmann et al., 2010). Conservation practitioners need to be prepared with action scenarios for when governments quickly and quietly revoke conservation protections. Conservation science has a role here. Strategic foresight tools (e.g., scenario planning, horizon scanning; Cook, Inayatullah, Burgman, Sutherland, & Wintle, 2014) can be used to better prepare for "disaster capitalism" (sensu Klein, 2007).

4 | CULTURES OF (NON) COMPLIANCE

Numerous countries (e.g., South Korea, New Zealand, most of the European Union) have seen its citizens embrace significant sacrifice for the common good, and

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managed to reduce new infections. In contrast, a few countries (e.g., United States) have failed to contain the pandemic through a combination of mixed messages from leadership fostering lower rates of compliance to safety guidelines. This pandemic has taught us that collective action can have huge positive impacts on societal outcomes. These patterns reinforce our understanding of the role of the governed in the success of government. Rules, in a free, open, civil society, only work when the majority of citizens abide by them.

Most conservation action is a consequence of legislation, policies and enforcement (Folke, Hahn, Olsson, & Norberg, 2005). The lesson for conservation is that gaining government protections for species and ecosystems is necessary but not sufficient. A large host of conservation issues (e.g., Illegal take of endangered and exploited species, introduction of nonnative species) represent management issues that most governments require widespread compliance to address.


Public support is critical if we expect successful social compliance with environmental laws. Many have highlighted the role of society in ecological management (e.g., Dietz, Ostrom, & Stern, 2003). As a community, we might better consider the role of advocates and constituencies for public benefit (e.g., conservation) in the willingness of people to comply and support enforcement measures. We might work to better understand how values translate into actions and what features of governance motivate people to comply with rules they find inconvenient. Conservation research can be more integrated with practice in the science of behavior change to harness an understanding of the psychology of compliance (e.g., Rose et al., 2017).

5 | CONCLUSIONS

Conservation needs to be prepared for global crises that threaten biodiversity. Much recent research has focused on extreme physical events (e.g., drought floods, Maxwell et al., 2019). Perhaps it is time to dedicate more attention to study, understand, and be prepared for, the consequences of extreme social events.

The COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented with respect to our lifetimes. We should not, however, think that global crises with similarly huge social impacts are unlikely to happen in the future. Conservation, to be successful, must be able to advance even in times of social crisis. COVID-19 provides lessons to help us understand the stress points that threaten conservation gains. While it is good to understand lessons for the world about conservation that emerge from this pandemic, it is equally important to take a hard look at what conservation

science and practice can learn from this crisis, and how we can better focus research to increase our preparedness for a future that is likely to include further tests of the fabric of civil society.

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ENDNOTES

¹ <https://www.duluthnewtribune.com/sports/outdoors/6478252-Minnesota-fishing-license-sales-explode-during-COVID-19-pandemic>

² <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-memorial-day-weekend-beach/>

³ <https://www.nwpb.org/2020/04/04/washington-public-lands-are-still-closed-so-please-stop-going-around-closure-signs-officials-ask/>
<https://www.nrpa.org/globalassets/engagement-survey-report-2018.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-29/logging-bushfire-affected-areas-australia-increases-fire-risk/11903662>; <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-29/logging-industry-and-nationals-call-for-burnt-timber-salvage/11903574>

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/26/climate/epa-coronavirus-pollution-rules.html>

⁶ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-rule-could-kill-billions-birds-former-wildlife-chief-don-ashe-migratory-bird-treaty-act/>

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/06/world/americas/amazon-deforestation-brazil.html>

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