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Title
The Urgent Need for a Unified Vision of Conservation

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9db4c53h

Journal
Parks Stewardship Forum, 41(1)

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Publication Date
2025-01-15

DOI
10.5070/P5.41997

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BRANCHING OUT

The Urgent Need for a Unified Vision of Conservation

Jonathan B. Jarvis and Gary Machlis

Ed. note: With this editorial, we are launching "Branching Out," a new occasional column in *Parks Stewardship Forum* that is open to those who want to answer the call made below by Jarvis and Machlis for "writers, practitioners, and new voices" to share collaborative strategies that expand the traditional conservation community with new ideas and perspectives. If you'd like to propose an editorial for "Branching Out," contact the *PSF* editors at psf@georgewright.org.

In the aftermath of the 2016 national election, we began work on a small book in anticipation of the incoming Trump administration's expected assault on a generation of conservation accomplishments. The Future of Conservation in America: A Chart for Rough Water (*University of Chicago Press, 2018*) *both sounded the alarm and proposed what we thought might be effective responses by the conservation movement. Our most essential recommendation was that conservation would be more successful, sustainable, and equitable if the work were more collaborative, embracing and partnering with organizations that focus on, for example, environmental justice, science, history, and human health. Now that America is facing another anti-environmental administration, more prepared (and vengeful) than the last, that call for collective action may again be urgent. In the following editorial, we revisit and expand upon the need for a new and unified vision of conservation in America.*

Conservation in America currently resembles a deep-rooted tree at a mature stage of growth, with its older, large branches bent far apart. Nature conservation organizations and historic preservation groups share little in the way of strategies, tactics, or resources, and often (as in lawsuits by wilderness advocates to remove historic structures) actively oppose each other. The American healthcare community is minimally involved in the protection of clean air and clean water, though continued protection of air and water is absolutely vital for American's health. Outdoor recreation and resource management agencies are only just now beginning to realize their potential as healthcare providers capable of contributing to mental and physical well-being, aiding recovery from post-traumatic stress disorder, and reducing obesity. Environmental justice activists struggling to clean up urban neighborhoods are often dissociated from wildlife protection activists struggling to maintain biodiversity, missing opportunities to form rural–urban alliances as well as the potential of local communities to collectively serve as monitors and protectors of urban and regional environmental quality. The people of rural communities and regions often take their access to public lands for granted—and some support political agendas that would divest, develop, and degrade these resources even though there is little local economic benefit and their own access would be curtailed.

We argue that a more unified vision of what constitutes conservation is vital for the future of the conservation movement. This unified vision of conservation would include and integrate several major branches, each representing an "assemblage" (to use a term from ecosystem ecology) of citizens; activists; philanthropists;

organizations; Tribes; local, state and federal agencies; private-sector industries; and individual firms, scientists, and public leaders. We present these branches not in any priority order, as all are essential to the growth and progress of conservation.

The first branch is the traditional nature conservation community, dedicated to the preservation of biological diversity in general, and individual species (often iconic ones like whales or wolves) in particular. These interests are often linked to conservation in specific and often highly contested locations—including sport hunting and fishing areas, Tribal lands, wilderness, urban open space, marine reserves, and rare ecological systems such as the bioluminescent bays of Puerto Rico or the high alpine meadows of the Northern Rockies. Federal agencies such as the National Park Service and US Fish and Wildlife Service play a central role, as do advocacy organizations such as the Sierra Club, the National Parks Conservation Association, and the League of Conservation Voters. Land trusts such as the Trust for Public Land and The Nature Conservancy, which buy, hold, and manage lands for conservation values, are important contributors. Equally important stakeholders are Tribal governments, especially of federally recognized Tribes with established treaty rights. Nature conservation is often linked to the outdoor recreation, hunting, and fishing sectors dependent on these landscapes.

The second branch is the historic preservation community, which in the United States is largely focused on the preservation of structures such as the homes of famous Americans or buildings that bear witness to major events in American history, historic objects, and landscapes such as battlefields or urban historic districts. Often, the historic preservation community is dominated by local or state interests, with national organizations such as the National Trust for Historic Preservation operating as facilitators, grant-makers, and lobbyists with Congress. Both preservation science and contemporary scholarship (from history to cultural anthropology) can provide guidance to new interpretations of historic events. Historic preservation is often linked to the tourism industry by creating and managing "attractions" for local rural communities and metropolitan areas, and for critically important historic resources, often supported by private philanthropy.

The third branch of a unified conservation includes local, state, regional, and national interests that advance the protection and provision of ecosystem services—the valued benefits society receives from functioning, healthy ecosystems. Examples include clean drinking water, medicinal resources, pest and flood control, carbon sequestration, healthy food production and regenerative agriculture, and more. The community of interest often includes city, state, and federal officials working to maintain or improve all types of ecosystem services and regulators focused on prevention of harm, as well as scientists, Tribal leaders, organic farmers, engineers, landscape architects, and powerful administrative organizations. An institutional example is the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago, an independent agency of state government with an elected board of commissioners and the responsibility of managing the water supply and wastewater treatment of the greater Chicago area. A direct-action example was the long-running protest against the Dakota Access Pipeline, led by Native Americans calling themselves Water Protectors, who had encampments near the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation and were bearing witness to the potential to harm the reservation's water supply.

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The fourth branch is the environmental justice and civil rights communities. Environmental justice directly links access to a healthy living environment at the neighborhood or regional level to civil rights and protections. While often focused on identity

politics and advancing the rights of individual groups (such as Black Lives Matter, Tribal rights groups, or LGBTQI+ organizations), these interests also include organizations such as the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) that work toward broader restorative justice, education, and resistance to hate groups (in 2023 numbering over 1,400, according to the SPLC) operating in the United States.

The fifth branch of a futures-oriented conservation is the sustainability community, focused on developing sustainable infrastructure and technology, reducing unnecessary consumption, and creating sustainable livelihoods. Government and non-profit organizations actively participate in this effort, often creating "green" development goals, plans, and small-scale enterprises, such as community gardens or recycling programs. The private sector (from the renewable energy industry to retail manufacturing and building construction) plays a major role in developing and marketing sustainable options for the general American economy.

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The sixth branch of conservation is the healthcare community, which includes physicians, insurance companies, healthcare providers, hospitals, and regulators charged with ensuring levels of quality and safety. The healthcare community ranges from small town clinics with one general practice doctor to large corporations (such as Humana and UnitedHealth), to federal agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, to scientists and clinicians. Powerful professional associations such as the American Medical Association set standards, monitor misconduct, and recommend policies. The focus is on human health, often at the level of the individual patient and sometimes at the level of households or occupational groups. There is a smaller yet committed community of interest surrounding animal health—wildlife, domestic production animals, and the large US pet population—and an emerging interest in One Health, a collaborative effort to "obtain optimal health for people, animals, and the environment."

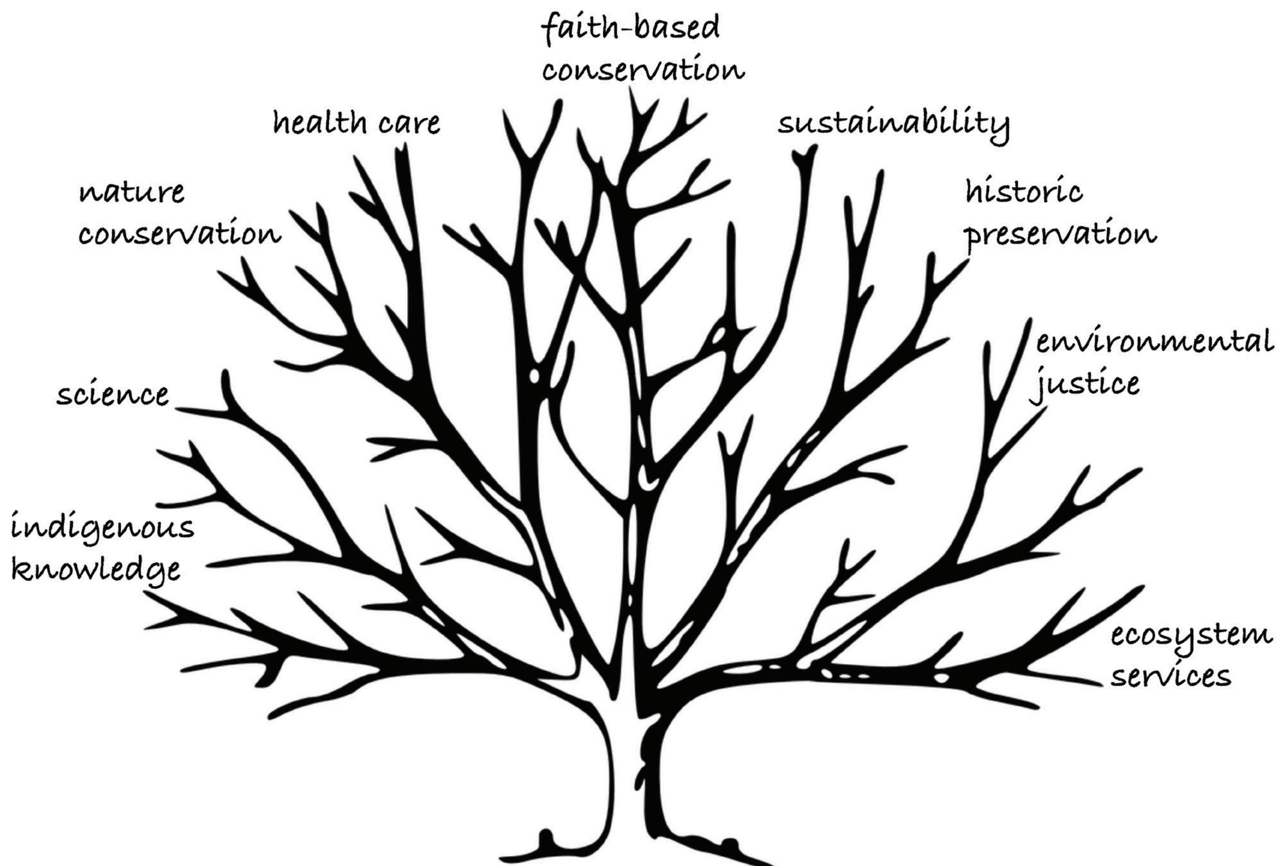
The seventh branch of conservation is the scientific community. Science provides both information and insight essential to effective conservation. The scientific community is broad and varied in America and includes research universities, institutes for advanced studies, federal research programs, professional societies, and corporate laboratories. An example is the American Association for the Advancement of Science—the world's largest general scientific society, with over 120,000 members and active in promoting the sciences across and among 91 partner organizations. Often these institutions are linked by agreements and shared activities. Another example is the Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Network, which includes 17 federal agencies and over 500 additional partners. Non-profit organizations like The Nature Conservancy or NatureServe maintain their own research staffs, and individual scientists are engaged in thousands of scientific projects that support conservation, from inventorying and monitoring small-site environmental conditions to large-scale ecosystem assessments.

The eighth branch of conservation is what can be called "the communities of faiths." Many religious faiths and their institutions—from the Catholic Church to Islam, Bahá'í, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhist traditions, and more—have theological convictions that embody care for God's Creation. They operate at scales from a local church's community clean-up project to Pope Francis's encyclical letter of guidance *Laudato Si'* (*On Care for Our Common Home*). The core principles of liberation theology directly support strategies for sustainability and environmental justice. There is a troubling history of the secular, elite elements of conservation rebuffing the genuine potential of faith-based conservation. Earth Day, for

example, was first established in 1968 by Pentecostal minister John McConnell Jr. and celebrated by evangelical Christians on the spring equinox—until Senator Gaylord Nelson claimed the name "Earth Day," secularized it into a mix of public festival and political action, and moved the event off the equinox (with its spiritual connotations) to 22 April each year. As part of a unified vision of conservation, communities of faith can be effective voices for and stewards of the earth.

The ninth branch of conservation is what is often referred to as "Indigenous knowledge." Indigenous Native Americans have lived on the lands now known as the United States for thousands of years and have accumulated a deep understanding and appreciation of nature and natural processes. Conservation practices by Indigenous people, such as the use of fire, were (and still are) linked to their survival, sustenance, religion, and culture. Indigenous knowledge was passed from generation to generation through oral traditions and storytelling and is carried on by contemporary Tribal members. Western scientists are beginning to value a "thousand years of observations" in addressing complex issues such as climate change. Public land managers are engaging in co-stewardship agreements with traditionally associated Native people for more successful resource management actions. For example, the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe brought their Indigenous knowledge of salmon to a partnership with the National Park Service to successfully remove two dams and restore the Elwha River within Olympic National Park. Indigenous people have survived catastrophic events in their history, yet they persist and in some cases thrive, and are willing share their knowledge to navigate a challenging future.

The Branches of Conservation



All of these branches—nature conservation, historic preservation, protection of ecosystem services, environmental justice and civil rights, sustainability, healthcare, science, communities of faith, and Indigenous knowledge—are essential. Acting individually, each branch will be unlikely to achieve significant progress in the face of the deliberate, determined, and direct attacks on conservation that lie ahead. United and working collaboratively, they are more capable of confronting the assault on conservation by the second Trump administration, learning the strategic lessons of the current populist revival, and authentically and intentionally responding to the deep resentment, frustration, and fear among many Americans that the populist rising has exposed.

The challenges of conservation in the years ahead are too complex, wide-ranging, and consequential for one branch to take responsibility or "ownership." Division within the conservation community—to maintain outmoded traditions, argue about arcane terminology, protect "turf" or membership, further a single organization's goal or strategy, or to prioritize independence over collective action—is not a viable option. What is necessary is an all-branches approach with intentional strategies for action, new alliances, and new forms of transformative change.

Several steps can be taken to advance this unified vision of conservation. Communication and sharing of agendas across the branches can be increased: meetings and conferences hosted by non-profit organizations, government agencies, universities, and professional societies should strive to broaden participation beyond their traditional participants to include representatives from the other branches, as well as local interested citizens, and to foster new forms of collaboration. The national leaders of these branches of conservation should meet regularly, beginning with a national conservation summit (independent of the federal government), and work to establish shared strategies and coordinated action. Elsewhere we have argued for an intergenerational transfer of power; young voices must be heard at these events.

The organizations that operate within each branch of conservation can expand their missions—beginning with examining and revising their formal mission statements and strategic plans. Key themes that can bind these organizations together include (but are not limited to) green urban renewal, environmental justice, public access, responsiveness to community concerns, and reduction of inequality. By broadening their organizational directions to legitimate and enable engagement across the branches of conservation, these groups can more easily support conservation's unified advance. A principle of mutual aid should be established and relied upon—when one branch is threatened the others must join in its defense.

Collaborative conservation actions should be encouraged, particularly where distinctive advantages from working across branches are obvious. One example is climate change: all branches of conservation have a considerable stake in monitoring, mitigating, and adapting to the accelerated pace of climate change. Another is a broad and ambitious effort to treat conservation as a health issue, which can range from programs that link patients to parks to those protecting forests, oceans, and clear air and water as a public health response that benefits all Americans, not just the wealthy or privileged.

Collaborative conservation actions should be encouraged, particularly where distinctive advantages from working across branches are obvious. One example is climate change: all branches of conservation have a considerable stake in monitoring, mitigating, and adapting to the accelerated pace of climate change.

The unified vision of conservation we call for reflects the challenging conditions of contemporary American society. It encourages a convergence of interests at once necessary and powerful. It can create deep and meaningful common cause and calls out to the

next generation of citizens. We believe that working toward this unified vision of conservation is perhaps the most important strategy of all to navigate the rough water ahead. We face a weakening and/or dismantling of a generation of federal laws, policies, and practices for our air, water, wildlife, and public lands. The traditional conservation community will not, alone, save these essentials for all people; there is a new and urgent need for a unified vision. We call upon writers, practitioners, and new voices to offer their strategies of collaboration across these branches in future issues of the *Parks Stewardship Forum*. Our hope is that from these committed citizens we can all learn, be inspired, and grow the unified movement for the future of conservation in America.

This editorial is adapted from G. Machlis and J. Jarvis, *The Future of Conservation in America: A Chart for Rough Water,* University of Chicago Press, 2018.

The views expressed in Parks Stewardship Forum *editorial columns are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official positions of the University of California, Berkeley, Institute for Parks, People, and Biodiversity, or the George Wright Society.*