Conservation Biology

Essay

Emotion as a source of moral understanding in conservation

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Abstract: Recent debates around the meaning and implications of compassionate conservation suggest that some conservationists consider emotion a false and misleading basis for moral judgment and decision making. We trace these beliefs to a long-standing, gendered sociocultural convention and argue that the disparagement of emotion as a source of moral understanding is both empirically and morally problematic. According to the current scientific and philosophical understanding, reason and emotion are better understood as partners, rather than opposites. Nonetheless, the two have historically been seen as separate, with reason elevated in association with masculinity and emotion (especially nurturing emotion) dismissed or delegitimated in association with femininity. These associations can be situated in a broader, dualistic, and hierarchical logic used to maintain power for a dominant male (White, able-bodied, upper class, heterosexual) human class. We argue that emotion should be affirmed by conservationists for the novel and essential insights it contributes to conservation ethics. We consider the specific example of compassion and characterize it as an emotional experience of interdependence and shared vulnerability. This experience highlights conservationists' responsibilities to individual beings, enhancing established and widely accepted beliefs that conservationists have a duty to protect populations, species, and ecosystems (or biodiversity). We argue compassion, thus understood, should be embraced as a core virtue of conservation.

Keywords: compassionate conservation, conservation ethics, feminist philosophy, moral residue, virtue ethics

El Sentimiento como Fuente de Entendimiento Moral en la Conservación

Resumen: Los debates recientes en torno al significado y las implicaciones de la conservación compasiva sugieren que algunos conservacionistas consideran al sentimiento como una base falsa y engañosa para el juicio moral y la toma de decisiones. Seguimos estas creencias hasta una convención sociocultural prolongada y relacionada con el género y argumentamos que el menosprecio por el sentimiento como fuente del entendimiento moral es problemático empírica y moralmente. De acuerdo con el conocimiento científico y filosófico actual, la razón y el sentimiento se entienden de mejor manera como pareja, en lugar de como opuestos. Sin embargo, ambos conceptos han estado históricamente separados, con la razón como concepto elevado asociado con la masculinidad y el sentimiento (especialmente el sentimiento de crianza) rechazado o deslegitimado en asociación con la feminidad. Estas asociaciones pueden situarse dentro de una lógica más general, dualista y jerárquica usada para mantener el poder de la clase humana del macho dominante (blanco, sin discapacidades, de clase alta, heterosexual). Sostenemos que el sentimiento debería ser ratificado por los conservacionistas por el conocimiento novedoso y esencial que contribuye a la ética de la conservación. Consideramos el ejemplo específico de la compasión y

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lo caracterizamos como una experiencia emocional de la interdependencia y la vulnerabilidad compartida. Esta experiencia resalta las responsabilidades que los conservacionistas tienen con los individuos, fortaleciendo las creencias establecidas y ampliamente aceptadas de que los conservacionistas tienen el deber de proteger a las poblaciones, especies y ecosistemas (o a la biodiversidad). Sostenemos que la compasión, entendida así, debería ser aceptada como una virtud nuclear de la conservación.

Palabras Clave: conservación compasiva, ética de la conservación, ética de la virtud, filosofía feminista, residuo moral

Introduction

Conservation is value laden and goal oriented. This much is not controversial (Soulé 1985). Yet, the particular values and goals that animate conservation efforts differ widely among conservationists (Bruskotter et al. 2019). Recent scholarship highlights compassion as an ethical touchstone for some (e.g., Ramp & Bekoff 2015; Wallach et al. 2018). Although articulating a shared commitment to the many values embraced by others in the conservation community, "compassionate conservation" is distinguished by its heightened focus on individuals, in addition to collective units, such as populations, species, and ecosystems. Summoning compassion for individuals, it is argued, would transform the very meaning of *conservation* and effect a paradigm shift in conservationists' views of, and interactions with, the natural world (human and nonhuman). Recognizing compassion as an aim in principle complicates conservation in practice because it calls into question actions that would dress callous disregard for life in a suit of scientific rationality.

Although empirical research suggests that concern for the well-being of individual wildlife is broadly shared among conservationists (Bruskotter et al. 2019), calls for compassionate conservation have elicited a strong, critical response (e.g., Driscoll & Watson 2019; Hayward et al. 2019; Oommen et al. 2019; Johnson et al. 2019; see also Wallach et al. 2020*a*). Those who defend intrusive, lethal, or otherwise directly harmful activities as effective and ethically justified conservation tools have called compassionate conservation "the most significant new threat to biodiversity conservation" (Callen et al. 2020*b*). The threat, as articulated by these critics, is largely related to anticipated negative outcomes for endangered species. If conservation were reshaped by compassion for individuals, and the social license supporting established practices in conservation revoked, critics fear conservation's defined mission to protect Earth's biodiversity and ecological systems may be at risk (Hayward et al. 2019; Callen et al. 2020*b*).

But alongside these practical concerns, it seems there is some threat linked to compassion itself. Many scientists affirm the importance of compassion in conservation (Oommen et al. 2019; Beausoleil 2020; Johnson et al. 2019), advancing a primarily consequentialist (i.e., outcome-oriented) understanding of "compassion" as efforts that minimize pain caused by human action or inaction (Hampton et al. 2018; Hayward et al. 2019; Beausoleil 2020). Thus, these authors argue that it is compassionate to humanely harm select nonhuman individuals (usually members of populations introduced or augmented by human activity) to prevent the greater suffering they would otherwise cause or themselves experience. As an alternative, recent work on compassionate conservation discusses compassion as an other-oriented virtue, that is, a disposition to attend to, relate with, and embody concern for the suffering and flourishing of others (Wallach et al. 2018; Wallach et al. 2020*a*). This notion of compassion, advanced as a call to fundamentally reshape how conservationists formulate problems, devise solutions, and generally relate with the natural world (Ramp & Bekoff 2015; Wallach et al. 2018), has been highly contentious.

Recently, critics have expressed fears that centering such a notion of compassion in conservation grants too much influence to emotion (Hayward et al. 2019; Griffin et al. 2020), allowing concern for individuals to override higher rational judgments, "because it makes us feel good" (Callen et al. 2020*b*). These perspectives are especially conspicuous in recent debates around compassionate conservation, but the biases and misconceptions they presuppose point to a larger issue that transcends the compassionate conservation debates per se. We believe that it is time to talk openly about the role of emotion in conservation and confront the enduring legacy of a gendered, binary mode of thinking that disparages emotion as the antithesis of reason.

Challenging the Reason–Emotion Divide

Scholarship highlighting the significance of emotion in conservation is not new (Callicott 1990; Nelson et al. 2016). However, ignited by proposals for compassionate conservation, recent commentaries suggest that conservation goals are jeopardized by conservationists who grant undue influence to emotion in moral judgment and decision making. For example, citing psychological research on empathy and, to a lesser degree, on compassion, Griffin et al. (2020) write, "to replace reason-based principles with principles that draw upon our empathic responses to living creatures is to formalize, legalize,

and solidify our evolutionary biases into decision-making structures." Hayward et al. (2019) argue that compassionate conservation enables "uninformed and ill-directed emotion" to influence conservation policy and action. It is unclear whether they consider emotion categorically "uninformed and ill-directed" or if only "uninformed and ill-directed" emotions are misplaced as a basis for conservation. With the latter interpretation, we would certainly agree, although the claim that compassion is "uninformed and ill-directed" still merits critical attention. However, there is some support for the former interpretation in the authors' prior dismissal of compassionate conservation as a set of "hard and fast rules driven by emotion or ideology." Such claims invoke an antiquated and gendered trope of reason and emotion that has been roundly criticized and dismissed by scholarship spanning decades (Lloyd 1983; Damasio 1994). Because this trope is still cited with authority in contemporary scientific literature, it seems worthwhile to explain why the reason–emotion divide is an empirically inaccurate and ethically problematic construct.

In the Western intellectual tradition, emotion has been influentially represented in contradistinction to reason (Nussbaum 2001). This notion was espoused, for example, by the Greek philosopher Plato in the fourth century BCE and later influentially developed in the writings of Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant (Lloyd 1983; Pizarro 2000). Emotion, according to these views, is inherently irrational; a wayward signal that detracts from higher calls of reason. More recently, philosophers have largely rejected these views, understanding emotion as a type of evaluation or judgment that involves cognition (e.g., Nussbaum 2001; Solomon 2003). These recent philosophical theories are also more consistent with (and often explicitly informed by) current scientific consensus that emotion is functionally and structurally linked to reason (Damasio 1994; Barrett 2017). Research in psychology and neuroscience has shown that emotion is integral to reasoned deliberation (Damasio 1994; Ferrier et al. 2014). The bodily cues humans experience as emotion are core to evaluative notions (e.g., good, bad, right, and wrong), which in turn are integral to what is commonly understood as rational decision making (Bechara et al. 1997; Dixon et al. 2017; Grossmann et al. 2019). It is beyond our scope to review this scientific literature, but it will suffice to note that modern scientific consensus has coalesced around an understanding of emotion as a partner to reasoning and rationality, rather than their antithesis (Lerner et al. 2015).

Nonetheless, the contrast of reason and emotion is deeply embedded in Western social and intellectual life (Nussbaum 2001). Much of the canonical scholarship in moral philosophy, for instance, describes ethical judgment and decision making as abstracted and impartial deliberative processes undertaken to temper the instincts of fundamentally autonomous and otherwise self-interested moral agents (Walker 1989; Plumwood 1991). Within this tradition, reason is the measure of moral conduct, the source of moral knowledge, and the standard by which ethical theories are judged and justified. Emotion, by comparison, has been relatively neglected among many moral philosophers as a source of moral understanding, or even a significant component of moral experience (Jaggar 1989; Nussbaum 2001). It was not until the mid-20th century that a substantial body of critical scholarship drew attention to this notable exclusion.

In Western societies, emotions in general, and nurturing emotions in particular, have been stereotypically feminine gendered in association with maternity and therefore confined to the private (domestic) sphere (Lloyd 1983; Jaggar 1989). Motherhood, and emotion by extension, was typically associated with the physical, natural, bodily, or animal, qualities that were by definition constructed as other, weaker, and lower in comparison with masculine-gendered, quintessentially human qualities, such as reason, culture, and mind (Plumwood 1988). Notably, it is on the same grounds of their lower, material, and putatively irrational nature that nonhuman beings have been objectified and exploited as things rather than morally relevant beings or persons (Wallach et al. 2020*a*), creating a conceptual and practical link between the oppression of women and the oppression of other life forms (Warren 1990; Plumwood 1993; Adams & Gruen 2014).

The conceptual maneuver whereby reason is artificially separated from and elevated over emotion – expressed also in the elevation of mind over matter, fact over value, culture over nature, and male over female – underpins a pervasive cultural narrative that serves to marginalize, disempower, and oppress those construed as other to the dominant (White, able-bodied, upper class, heterosexual) male, human class (Warren 1990; Adams & Gruen 2014). Although this maneuver is empirically untenable, politically injurious, and morally reprehensible, the dualistic "logic of oppression" (Warren 1990) has been sustained in the Western cultural imagination for centuries. Woven seamlessly into the very fabric of Western society, this logic became, and in many ways still is, accepted as a simple description of reality (Plumwood 1988; Warren 1990; Hemmings 2012; Wolf 2017).

The authority of this logic is invoked by critics of compassionate conservation who assert the primacy of putatively reason-based scientific approaches while dismissing emotion as a valid source of insight or moral knowledge. The goals of conservation science are defined in reference to certain values represented as rational, scientifically supported, and quantifiable (Driscoll & Watson 2019; Hayward et al. 2019; Griffin et al. 2020). Against this backdrop, emotion is conveyed as an ephemeral and effeminate distraction – a "fragile flower" creating a "weakness in our moral compass" that "seduces" us to

abandon the scientifically supported mission of conservation (as quoted in Griffin et al. [2020]). Compassionate conservationists are rebuked for "personalizing and anthropomorphizing" animals (Oommen et al. 2019), allowing their "narrow-minded and innumerate" empathic responses to bias them toward parochial considerations for individual animals, rather than biodiversity writ large (Griffin et al. 2020). The upshot of these arguments is neatly encapsulated in the subtitle of a recent contribution to *The Conversation*: "Just Because We Love Invasive Animals, Doesn't Mean We Should Protect Them" (Klop-Toker et al. 2020). At face value, these critiques may seem reasonable, conditioned as scientists are to avoid bias, and particularly bias rooted in sentimentality (Goodall 1998). However, the claim that emotional concern for particular nonhuman others is an "uninformed and ill-directed" (Hayward et al. 2019) basis for action is a reflection of bias: an androcentric (male-centered), anthropocentric (human-centered) bias in conservation.

To point out a bias in perspective does not necessarily mean that perspective is wrong. Rather, it is partial (Haraway 1988). Emotions may both signal and correct for partial perspectives by providing an alternative source and form of moral knowledge (Walker 1989; Donavan 2014). As observed by Hemmings (2012), "in order to know differently we have to feel differently." Compassion, for example, directs conservationists' attention to their relationships with and moral responsibilities to individual beings. Conservationists expand their perspective by surveying the moral landscape through the lens of compassion. Rather than a "fragile flower," we would name compassion an "outlaw emotion" that "enable[s] us to perceive the world differently from its portrayal in conventional descriptions…[and] provide[s] the first indications that something is wrong with the way alleged facts have been constructed, with accepted understandings of how things are" (Jaggar 1989). Emotion, on this account, serves not only as a legitimate but an indispensable source of moral understanding.

The Meaning and Implications of Compassion in Conservation

Although some of the discomfort with compassion evidently relates to its general emotionality, lingering questions about compassion itself, as specifically envisioned within a compassionate conservation approach, have also emerged as a source of unease (Rohwer & Marris 2019; Beausoleil 2020; Callen et al. 2020*a*; Santiago-Ávila & Lynn 2020). We cannot pretend to speak for the diverse group of people who, in different ways and to different degrees, gravitate toward a compassionate conservation approach. We can, however, share reflections that clarify our understanding of compassion and demonstrate the unique and powerful insights it affords as a source of moral understanding and a guide for decision making in conservation.

Compassion for the Nonfamiliar

Critics argue that compassionate conservation is problematic because of what they consider its singular concern for large, charismatic mammals (Hayward et al. 2019; Griffin et al. 2020). Their claim is somewhat puzzling because nowhere in published literature have compassionate conservationists explicitly advanced such a position (to the contrary, see Wallach et al. [2018]) Further, the disproportionate level of attention directed toward certain vertebrate species is recognized as a widespread phenomenon in conservation (e.g., Clucas et al. 2008; Kim et al. 2014). We suspect that allegations of unique species bias in compassionate conservation may be rooted in the emphasis in previous works on the moral relevance of sentience, referring to the ability to suffer (Wallach et al. 2018; Wallach et al. 2020*a*). Defining compassion in relation to suffering implies that compassion can only be directed toward those beings with the capacity for suffering, a class that may seem to exclude a large portion of Earth's biodiversity (e.g., invertebrates and plants).

Our understanding of compassion emerges from its etymology. *Compassion* comprises the roots *com* (with) and *passion* (suffering). In contrast to the understanding of compassion evinced by critics of compassionate conservation, as an act that minimizes suffering (Driscoll & Watson 2019; Hayward et al. 2019; also Wallach et al. 2020*a*), we suggest a relational understanding of compassion as an experience of suffering with others. But the concept suffering also merits careful examination. Suffering is colloquially associated with pain, which seems to point to sentience as a prerequisite for suffering with. Etymologically, however, *to suffer* means to endure, to bear, or to carry (as in, to carry a child) (https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=suffer). This meaning crystallizes in observing the relation of *passion* to *passive*, which connotes the quality of being acted upon or receptive. (Passivity is also a stereotypically feminine-gendered quality, associated with weakness or submissiveness, as distinguished from the masculine-gendered quality of agency, or action [Plumwood 1988].) Understanding *compassion* to mean suffer with in the sense of passivity reveals grounds upon which compassion may beget concern for all living beings, sentient and nonsentient.

This understanding builds on a basic insight of ecology, namely, that of interconnection (Warren & Cheney 1991; Callicott 2013). Within interconnected systems, all organisms exist in relation to each other. Relation is not a temporary or incidental interaction of otherwise autonomous units, but a basic and essential property of

being alive. All beings are beings in relation, in other words, and it is inherent to the condition of beings in relation to both act and be acted upon (Mathews 1991; Plumwood 1991; Donavan 2014). To exercise compassion, then, is to suffer with others in a condition of mutual dependency and shared vulnerability (Whitebrook 2002; Williams 2008). On this account, it is possible to suffer with a weedy plant, a native amphibian, an invasive rodent, or another human (although the physiological and psychological mechanisms may differ in each case). But compassion would also be untenable as a basis for ethical judgment and action in conservation if it could be extended only to beings with which one interacts directly – the most literal reading of suffering *with*. By combining cognition and embodied feeling, our concept of compassion clarifies the grounds on which one may experience compassion for those one does not personally know or encounter. It is based on an understanding of interrelation among living beings that one may feel compassion for particular yet anonymous others by recognizing that they, too, are embedded within and susceptible to the world (Whitebrook 2002; Curtin 2014).

We suggest compassion, thus understood, challenges hierarchical and oppressive ideals of individualism and control in conservation (Plumwood 1993). Adopting compassion as a core virtue tempers the socially ingrained instinct to view (White, male, heterosexual, upper class, able-bodied) humans as agents of a special kind, entitled to actively impose their will on the world (Wallach et al. 2020*a*).

Compassion for Collectives

Although compassion clearly supports concern for individual organisms, it less obviously provides a basis for the conservation of populations, species, or ecosystems. Some researchers have shown that empathy for individual others can foster concern for their groups (Shelton & Rogers 1981; Batson et al. 1997), but there is also research to indicate otherwise. For example, literature on stereotyping shows that individuals are often seen as exceptions to the rule (Schneider 2004), so care for one individual (rooted in compassion) may not translate into concern for the individual's larger group. The literature on compassion fade also suggests compassion for large groups may not be plausible psychologically (Markowitz et al. 2013). However, as Griffin et al. (2020) point out, there is considerable variability in how *compassion* is defined. Our understanding of compassion is predicated on interconnectivity, as explained above. Concepts like species and ecosystems refer to relational networks, which create the conditions of interdependence that enable compassion. Stated simply, there is no compassion without relation. As such, far from being dismissive, we attach profound significance to ecological collectives. Whether it is possible to feel compassion for collectives, per se, is an open, empirical question. Regardless, there are other ethical grounds for conservation of populations, species, and ecosystems (e.g., Callicott 1989; McShane 2007). Compassion for individuals does not diminish the intrinsic value of these entities or displace recognized duties to protect them.

However, it also seems that critics' core concern is not whether compassion extends to populations, species, or ecosystems, but whether compassion precludes activities that directly harm individuals to protect such collective entities (Rohwer & Marris 2019; Callen et al. 2020*a*). Compassion for individual beings may, at times, sit or appear to sit in tension with other conservation values and objectives. But these tensions indicate the complexity of the ethical questions conservationists face and the decisions they make, many of which implicate them unavoidably in some measure of moral wrongdoing (Batavia et al. 2020). Such decisions should not be easy or comfortable. Although we do not celebrate depression, anxiety, or burnout (Griffin et al. 2020), we do believe it is more appropriate for conservationists to open themselves to others than to insulate themselves emotionally in indifference. To care widely and fear deeply for all manner of beings – whether a native mammal or an introduced mollusk – is to embrace and affirm one's inherent relationality. This is part of the shared suffering we understand to be entailed in the term *compassion*. By acknowledging responsibilities to individuals and ecological collectives, conservationists become vulnerable to the world and the hard choices they often face therein (Batavia et al. 2020).

Compassionate Conservation Ethics

Finally, concerns have been raised around the notion that compassion is proposed as an exclusive value for conservation (Hayward et al. 2019; Callen et al. 2020*b*; Griffin et al. 2020). We do think compassion is integral to conservation ethics and should permeate conservation practice, from the conduct of individual conservationists to the policies and institutions that govern conservation activities (e.g., Collins et al. 2012). However, our intent is less to assert the preeminence of compassion as to expand upon its role in conservation and validate it as a source of moral understanding. We agree with Santiago-Ávila and Lynn (2020) that other values, such as justice, are important as well. We also highlight their observation that "empathy and compassion are vital to, and even considered the precursors of, ethics and ethical behavior."

In this vein, we do not see compassion itself as a discrete value, duty, or responsibility or understand it as a blueprint or template for action. We understand it, rather, as a virtue (Wallach et al. 2018). A virtue is a quality – akin to an orientation or disposition – to think, feel, and act well (Aristotle 1999; Crisp 2008). To highlight compassion as a core virtue is not to suggest conservationists should follow certain rules, but to encourage

them to be certain types of people. Some may argue this is too nebulous to be helpful; indeed, as an ethical framework, virtue has been critiqued for focusing excessively on character, while neglecting to provide concrete guidance for appropriate action (Hursthouse 2001; Hacker-Wright 2010). However, while virtues may not, on their own, prescribe clear moral rules or principles, they do carry an implied practical upshot (Johnson 2003). If virtues are understood as good or meritorious dispositions, then arguably it follows that humans ought to exemplify or strive to exemplify them (Hursthouse 2001; Johnson 2003; but see Hacker-Wright 2010 for alternative views). Thus, in highlighting compassion as a virtue of conservation, we mean compassion should animate and inspirit conservation actions, inactions, and interactions. Yet, while we believe that conservation should be compassionate, we do not believe it should *only* be compassionate. On a virtue account, conservationists should aim to act in accord with practical wisdom, by perceiving and adroitly balancing the relevant virtues and values in a given context (Hursthouse 2001). In its capacity as an emotion, compassion is especially key at the perceptual stage, to elevate concern for individuals (Crisp 2008), but conservationists should not lose sight of other concerns, including outcomes for biodiversity, human rights, and multispecies justice (among other things).

As people who all, in various ways, find resonance in the idea of compassion, we care for individual organisms in themselves and for their ecological and evolutionary roles. We also value the persistence and flourishing of populations, species, and ecosystems across fluid forms and formulations (Wallach et al. 2020*b*). The world, as we see it, is teeming with moral significance. To practice conservation with compassion is to allow this significance to impress itself upon us. Conservationists, we believe, should weigh a great many considerations in their heads and their hearts, summoning their full, combined capacities for reason, empathy, and emotional intelligence as they strive to protect life on Earth.

Conclusion

Certain values have become difficult to detect because they are widely endorsed and normalized in the conservation community. However, just because values are hidden does not mean they are absent. Compassionate conservation has been critiqued as somehow aberrant in its normativity: an "ideological" (Oommen et al. 2019; Callen et al. 2020*b*) and "subjective" (Callen et al. 2020*b*), "moral-based practice" (Griffin et al. 2020). But make no mistake: established conservation approaches that are framed as utility based, scientific, rational, and quantifiable also express moral beliefs about what is good, right, and worthy of protection (Pinchot 1910). We all swim in the same ethical quicksand.

Compassion stands out as a provocative moral framework because it affirms emotion; emotion is stereotypically feminine-gendered; and feminine is other to the dominant masculine norm. Although the association of emotion (especially caring emotions) with femininity has been problematized and critiqued (Plumwood 1988; Card 1996), it continues to exert influence across various arenas of society (Curnalia & Mermer 2014; Brescoll 2016). Meanwhile, the body of both philosophical and scientific scholarship affirming emotion as a critical input to morality continues to grow (Walker 1989; Damasio 1994; Haidt 2012; Adams & Gruen 2014). We feel it is time for conservation scientists to embrace the scientific consensus that emotion and reason are conjoined and reject the tiresome, misogynistic logic predicated on their separation. Recent work reveals that ignoring women's experiences in conservation work (e.g., as caregivers) undermines the sustainability of the conservation profession (Jones et al. 2020). In a similar way, censoring the insights furnished by stereotypically feminized emotion shutters conservationists' moral understanding. Emotions like compassion are not a siren call luring conservationists astray from the moral high ground, as revealed in the clear light of reason. They are integral to human biological, social, and moral life (Jaggar 1989; Damasio 1994; Barrett 2017), and it is neither possible nor desirable to siphon them out of conservation.

In foregrounding compassion as a core virtue, we identify ourselves with a community of people who share the feeling that there is something wrong with the way many conservation programs currently operate. We are aware these feelings, and the policy perspectives they have kindled, at times place us at odds with others in the broader conservation community. And yet, while our notion of compassion may challenge prevailing norms within the profession, it is not out of synch with the views of larger society. Efforts to center compassion as a core virtue of conservation are consistent with societal shifts that have been underway in many parts of the world since at least the mid-20th century (Manfredo et al. 2020). Compassion is also well aligned with a diverse multitude of cultures that have known the more-than-human world as part of their social and moral communities for millennia (Rose 2011; Salmón 2000; Kimmerer 2013; Robinson 2014).

Conservation has been pluralistic in its goals and values since its inception (Mace 2014), and compassionate conservation is no exception. Even among our author group, there are differences of opinion. Some of us disallow that harming individuals to achieve conservation objectives would ever be the best course of action available. Others among us acknowledge this possibility. However, this acknowledgment carries no absolution. Conservationists (and human beings) should be deeply, existentially troubled whenever they intentionally harm another, human or nonhuman (Batavia et al. 2020;

Wallach et al. 2020*a*). Compassion empowers conservationists to know other life forms as persons (Wallach et al. 2020*a*). From this perspective, the mind recoils to consider issuing any overarching judgment that it is not only acceptable, but in fact appropriate, for conservationists to kill or intentionally harm certain kinds of beings in certain ways to meet certain objectives. If we were to endorse any sort of blanket stance, it would be that conservation should strive to operate within the constraints of a commitment to nonviolent coexistence. And, if cases arise where it appears impossible to uphold this commitment, harm should not be inflicted with a hardened sense of inevitability, but with grief and a due sense of humility that acknowledges some amount of moral failure has occurred (Batavia et al. 2020). In short, destroying other lives to achieve conservation goals should not readily present itself as an option, let alone the default. We do not propose compassion as a new label for business as usual. The call for compassion is a summons for the conservation community to reflect not just on the methods, but also on the mission of conservation.

In this spirit, we offer the observation that perhaps there are core elements of conservation's mission that are best expressed as relationships, or ways of being in the world, rather than goals or desired outcomes. For example, within our author group, we aspire to wisdom and strive for integrity in our interactions with others. We seek to inhabit the world in ways that respect and affirm all life. We aim to be kind, to love broadly, to value widely, and to feel deeply, even when feeling hurts. And, we hope to help cultivate a conservation community in which sparing a life for love is not viewed as weakness, even when the life in question is not human.

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