

J. Michael Scott, John A. Wiens, Beatrice Van Horne, and Dale D. Goble. *Shepherding Nature: The Challenge of Conservation Reliance*. London, Cambridge University Press. 2020. 399 pages. \$39.99

Conservation is chocked-full of philosophical concepts, assumptions, and arguments. Though this reality is often overlooked by both philosophers and conservation practitioners, conservation science and management offer a trove of opportunities for important philosophical analysis and input. Conservation policy and management are almost always the embodiment of some concept or belief, reflected upon or not, that merits philosophical scrutiny. Sustainability, restoration, conservation triage, assisted migration, and compassionate conservation are all contemporary examples. The concept of conservation reliance is no exception.

According to Scott et al. “[a] species is conservation reliant if it is vulnerable to threats that persist and requires continued management intervention to prevent a decline toward extinction or to maintain a population” (3). One estimate suggests that in the US alone, four out of every five species is conservation reliant (5). This reality prompts others. One is that our hands are almost always going to get dirty whatever we do. We need to understand the tradeoffs we would make to save a species, but that these tradeoffs create a kind of triage mentality where harm or even moral wrong is not easily, if ever, evaded. That reality forces us to understand and find ways to manage moral residue in conservation.¹ Scott et al. suggest that this also implies that humans become tantamount to a “shepherd,” whose job it is (if done well) to watch over and care for nature (318).

Conservation reliance is often, but not always, a concept applied to species preservation efforts, which tend to dominate conservation. While for some species a short-term management action alone might be enough to allow them to become self-sustaining, for many species, conserving them is not like turning the key to start an engine which in turn largely runs on its own. Rather, for many species, saving them is more like propelling a railroad handcart with the continued need of humans pumping a central lever to make progress.

When conservation reliance is focused on biotic systems, the same spectrum of the necessity of human intervention applies. In parts of the US Pacific Northwest, for example, the latest trend in stream restoration—dubbed “Stage 0”—involves using heavy machinery directly and intrusively in stream beds that had previously been channeled to create a more meandering stream bed. Once the basic structure

¹ C. Batavia, M. P. Nelson, and A. Wallach, “The Moral Residue of Conservation,” *Conservation Biology* 34(5) (2020): 1114–1121.

of the stream is restored, the idea is that the stream and its biota are put back on the right path and further human intervention is unnecessary. Restoring a prairie ecosystem, however, requires the continuous intervention of human action in the form of burning.

One such effort in conservation reliance is the attempt to save the declining native Spotted owl in the Pacific Northwest region of the US by shotgun killing non-native Barred owls which can outcompete Spotted owls. Currently, intensive experiments on the effectiveness of killing Barred owls to increase Spotted owl abundance are underway. If deemed successful, and if a decision were made to use this method to save the Spotted owl, the perpetual killing of Barred owls (likely many thousands, and over time many more than that) by humans would be required. This creates a challenging dilemma for managers and the public—captured wonderfully by Oregon poet Pepper Trail.

Killing Barred Owls
by Pepper Trail

For a moment we regard each other
You, the well-upholstered citizen
Surrounded by your possessions, at ease
In the good quiet woods, enjoying the ownership
You have fought for, and won

I, thin in the arms, thick in the middle
Hatted, coated, booted, gun-bearing
Briefly triumphant, thinking not of you
But of the other, the shy, the threatened, the absent
Until our large brown eyes meet, and then

I squeeze the trigger, and you explode
Like a burst pillow, and it takes a long time
For all the feathers to settle, my ears to stop ringing
The space you filled now empty, available
If there was only a Spotted Owl to fill it

This is the way we want it
We want it like it was before
Before we did everything that we did
So now this is our plan, to do this, I guess
Forever²

This last stanza of Trail's poem illustrates some of the intellectual challenges of conservation reliant efforts: that conservation is a human desire whose goal sometimes seems unclear or even arbitrary. We are often engaged in restorative justice exercises in conservation (putting things back the way they were before we humans messed them up); we will engage in such actions indefinitely though we

² Used by permission of the author, first published in *Windfall*, Fall 2012.

do not always seem to recognize that, and we are often tentative when we realize what these conservation efforts will actually require.

From within the conservation community the focus of conservation is almost always an exercise in a set of actions. Therefore, it is almost always action-oriented rather than intellectual. There is seldom engagement in careful and creative thinking about what the ideas or beliefs were that might have led to the state that we now wish to remedy. There is seldom an examination of the necessary philosophical and ethical underpinnings of our past, or even current, conservation efforts. Many of us from within the environmental humanities have argued for decades that any effort to remedy our current environmental crises must also examine the underlying belief system(s) that created these crises in the first place.

There are two notable philosophical/ethical touchpoints in *Shepherding Nature*. The first is that Scott et al. seem to recognize that where one comes down on the side of conservation reliance might be, to a large degree, premised upon certain philosophical notions. They contrast the ethic that is “biocentric (preservationist, species have intrinsic value, needs of nature come first, conservation is a moral obligation, save all species and functions)” with one that is “anthropocentric (utilitarian, species have instrumental value, needs of people come first, conservation should be pragmatic, save species that are useful)” (61), and suggest different attitudes toward conservation reliance are a reflection of the holding of these different ethical positions.

I have three quibbles with the philosophical set up here. First, I disagree with their simplistic categorization of these two ethical camps. It seems that one could be both a utilitarian and believe in preservation (or be utilitarian and non-anthropocentric), one can believe species possess intrinsic value and recognize their instrumental value, and one could be both driven by pragmatism and a sense of moral obligation. In fact, we know from some of our own lab’s work that, when measured empirically, humans are indeed quite morally pluralistic.³

Second, Scott et al. portray the biocentric and the anthropocentric ethical camps as dichotomous when in fact one is an accretion onto the other. Those who attribute intrinsic value to species can and do also recognize how those species benefit humans. There is a famous quote in ecological modeling from George E. P. Box: “All models are wrong, but some are useful.” The same might be said of dichotomies; though often useful, dichotomies should be viewed with considerable suspicion when offered as an accurate description of the world.

Third, while Scott et al. focus primarily on the various value or ethical assumptions that underpin conservation reliance, they miss an opportunity to have also inducted certain metaphysical assumptions about both the nature of nature and the nature of humans into their “why conserve species?” model. Arguably, what we might think about conservation reliance would be greatly influenced by our assumptions about nature’s fragility or sturdiness and by our assumptions about the metaphysical rela-

³ E.g., M. L. Gore, M. P. Nelson, J. A. Vucetich, A. M. Smith, and M. A. Clark, “Exploring the Ethical Basis for Conservation Policy: The Case of the Inbred Wolves on Isle Royale, USA,” *Conservation Letters* 4(5) (2011): 394-401.

tionship between humans and nature. Our ethical presuppositions inform only part of our vision of conservation and therefore our attitude toward conservation reliance.

The second philosophical/ethical touchpoint is this notion of shepherding nature itself. Suggesting that humans need to conceive of themselves and act as metaphorical shepherds carries certain connotations; some we might appreciate, some we might be less comfortable with. A shepherd has a charge and the duty to care for and protect that charge. Suggesting that humans need to act with care for and duty toward nature certainly resonates with much environmental ethics literature. It is, however, a less obviously comfortable metaphor when we consider what ultimately happens to the animals that the shepherd cares for, and whose end those animals serve.

Apart from the potentially uncomfortable shepherd metaphor, however, the book ends with an important recognition that accomplishing the goals of conservation will require “nothing less than a transformative change in how people relate to the environment, nature, and one another . . . [f]or meaningful change to be successful, conservation actions must have a firm ethical foundation” (324), Scott et al. write. In other words, conservation success requires philosophy and ethics. The full acceptance of this truth, however, is not captured in Scott et al., nor in conservation discussion writ large. Healing the philosophical and ethical mindset that brought about our environmental crises in the first place requires not only a different set of actions or even different kinds of thinking, but also requires of us no less than becoming different kinds of people. That, in fact, might be the greatest challenge of conservation.

The pages of *Shepherding Nature* are filled with both contemporary and classic conservation dilemmas. Moreover, the reader gets a rendition of, and glimpse into, these dilemmas from people who were often on the front lines of these efforts. These would be great fodder for any environmental philosophy course, and many of them would be ripe for more serious philosophical analysis by student papers in class or by professional philosophers in publications.

The concept of conservation reliance also reveals an important but challenging assumption about Western conservation. If conservation success is measured by the degree to which species and ecosystems function without humans, and failure is indicated by reliance, we are manifesting a dichotomous relationship between humans and nature. Arguably, that dichotomy is an important part of the worldview that led to the harms that conservation intends to remedy. This reveals a truth that conservation often evades, namely that for conservation to succeed it must be as much about the remediation of the Western worldview as it is about some set of specific actions and policies on the ground. Until we rethink our basic philosophies of humans and nature, conservation will, at best, be a set of stopgap measures, a thin wall of resistance reinforcing and readily overwhelmed by a ruinous mindset.

Michael Paul Nelson*

* Ruth H. Spaniol Chair of Renewable Resources and Lead Principal Investigator, HJ Andrews Long-Term Ecological Research Program Department of Forest Ecosystems and Society, College of Forestry, Oregon State University; mpnelson@oregonstate.edu.