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The great conservation tragedy? A critical reflection of (neo)protectionism in relation to the '30 × 30' global biodiversity framework

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ABSTRACT

The 2022 Global Biodiversity Framework aims to bring 30 per cent of the earth under protected areas (PAs) and 'other effective area-based conservation measures' by 2030 to halt the biodiversity crisis. The steady expansion of PAs since 1960 has not hindered the crisis from intensifying, however, while it has been achieved against strong scholarly and indigenous critiques. Why, then, do (neo)protectionist ideas remain so powerful in global conservation policy? This paper argues that an ignored element in critiques is (neo)protectionism's rootedness in biological fieldwork and the emotional-institutional power this carries in conservation circles. This further fuels an enduring 'great conservation tragedy'.

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Introduction

After much COVID19-induced delay, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) finally adopted a new global biodiversity framework in late 2022. Presented as the international community's answer to the cascading biodiversity crisis, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) was hailed as 'historic' and 'paradigm-changing', amongst others because indigenous people's rights and contributions were greatly emphasised (Greenfield 2022; Greenfield and Weston 2022). Global environmental treaties are often greeted with such jubilant rhetoric. In reality, as rich literatures on 'global event ethnography' have shown, they are highly complex and contradictory outcomes of long and conflictual negotiations that involve, amongst others, intense politics of knowledge, scale and performance (Campbell et al. 2014, 4). The CBD is no different. Its GBF has no less than '23 action-oriented global targets for urgent action' that address widely divergent issues from protected area expansion, invasive alien species control and reduction of pollution to eliminating harmful subsidies, gender equality and integrating 'multiple values' of biodiversity in policy and 'development processes'.[1]

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[1]Cop15: Final text of Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. https://www.cbd.int/article/cop15-final-text-kunming-montreal-gbf-221222, accessed 3 April 2024.

Some of these targets – if implemented – will surely have positive outcomes for biodiversity. At the same time, the GBF follows a long line of environmental treaties that rarely attained any of their targets during implementation (Büscher and Duffy 2023). Indeed, mainstream global conservation in general – despite important successes – has recently been described as 'failing forward': a 'failed attempt to render global capitalism sustainable in the face of its intensifying social and ecological contradictions' (Fletcher 2023, backflap). Without using these terms, this central contradiction highly influenced the GBF negotiations (Obura 2023). Its outcomes emphasise the rights and contributions of indigenous peoples and 'non-market-based approaches', while also promoting neoliberal conservation mechanisms such as 'sustainable intensification', 'payment for ecosystem services, green bonds, biodiversity offsets and credits'. Fundamental choices regarding the overall direction were lacking. Commentators therefore wondered:

> will the global community move forward with a business-as-usual implementation by focusing on just nominal implementation of favored conservation-focused targets such as "30 by 30" (i.e., raising protected area coverage to 30% of all land and sea areas by 2030) […]? Or does the potential for transformation within the GBF mark a real turning point? (Obura 2023, 80)

The answer remains open, though the accumulated weight of the 'failing forward' history of mainstream conservation and early evaluations of implementation progress do not inspire confidence that serious attempts beyond 'business as usual' are made (European Parliament 2024). The opposite seems more realistic: critical literature has shown that the CBD has been instrumental in deepening 'business-as-usual' conservation by 'increasingly cultivating the terrain for green grabbing' and creating 'conservation enclosures' through 'the privatisation of rights to nature' and 'the creation of new commodities and markets from nature' (Corson and MacDonald 2012, 263–264). The GBF does little to acknowledge or halt this green grabbing unleashed by the CBD. If anything, it further facilitates it (targets 15, 19).

At the same time, the GBF's most prominent outcome, the '30 × 30' target to bring 30 per cent of the globe under 'protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures' (OECMs) by 2030,[2] is anything but 'paradigm-changing'. While the OECM concept may be new, area-based conservation measures and especially protected areas have been *the* central pillar of mainstream conservation since its nineteenth-century origins (Adams 2004; Brockington et al. 2008). This pillar, furthermore, has been quite successful: global protected areas across all IUCN categories – ranging from strict protection to sustainable use areas – increased from about 1% in 1960 to around 17% now. The major contradiction is that this success has not hindered a massive intensification of the global extinction crisis (Rada et al. 2019; Spiliopoulou et al. 2023). Thus, if protected area-based conservation mechanisms have not been able to halt the extinction crisis in the last six *decades*, why will it be different in the coming six *years* to 2030?

While critical literatures have explained how and why neoliberal conservation continues to be hegemonic in policy settings in general (Fletcher 2023) and the CBD specifically (Campbell et al. 2014; Corson and MacDonald 2012), less attention has been given to why (protected) area-based conservation mechanisms continue to be so popular in global conservation policy. This question is not only relevant because of the above contradiction,

[2]Cop15: Final text of Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. https://www.cbd.int/article/cop15-final-text-kunming-montreal-gbf-221222, accessed 3 April 2024.

but also because of strong scholarly and Indigenous critiques of the protected area model and its well documented injustices vis-à-vis indigenous peoples and local communities (Dressler et al. 2010; Ramutsindela, Matose, and Mushonga 2022; Dawson et al. 2023; Montgomery et al. 2024).

To better understand the sustained appeal of the protectionist ideas at the root of GBF's '30 × 30' target three, the article presents a brief history of *neo*protectionism: recent incarnations of older, Euro-American protectionist ideas that inspired the modern protected area movement. Neoprotectionism has been critically scrutinised (Büscher and Fletcher 2020; Hutton, Adams, and Murombedzi 2005; Wilshusen et al. 2002) but to date, a focused analysis of how this influential conservation thinking developed over time, including in relation to critiques, is lacking. In fact, the term (neo)protectionism itself needs conceptual clarification, seeing how it keeps evolving and influencing policy and practice in powerful ways.

Based on a rereading of core neoprotectionist and conservation biology literatures, I argue that a crucial though overlooked element in critiques is (neo)protectionism's rootedness in biological field research and the institutional value and power this carries in conservation circles.[3] Precisely because this element has been hiding in plain sight at the core of conservation's epistemic-institutional configuration, I venture that critiques have underestimated the power it carries and how it helped facilitate the (discursive) inclusion of diverse business, state, NGO and Indigenous actors in what an essentially mainstream neoliberal-protectionist conservation policy like the GBF.

In the penultimate section, I theorise this (neo)protectionist power as rooted in a 'love/failure dialectic' where the urge to protect loved natures becomes greater the more threatened they become. This dialectic has a contradictory relation to political economy. On the one hand, there is an increasing awareness that (capitalist) economic growth is at the root of biodiversity loss and that this cannot be tackled without recognising the continuing historical legacies of colonialism and imperialism in conservation. On the other hand, there is a persistent inability to do this justice, theoretically or in policy. One key reason is neoprotectionism's grounding in a biocentric epistemology central to the biological-ecological sciences (Crist 2019), which in turn is rooted in the institutionalisation of personal connections to (threatened) natures through biological fieldwork. Both of these have become part of the 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1965) of modern conservation, leading to a subterraneous though important focus on 'protection' that drives and enables diverse policy coalitions.

Each time, however, that this renewed effort towards protection does not lead to the hoped-for breakthrough to halt the global extinction crisis, an intensification of the love/failure dialectic inspires a new, transmogrified round of *neo*protectionist thinking. This dialectical cycle is part of the 'great conservation tragedy' of our time where increasing global conservation efforts go hand-in-hand with a deepening global biodiversity crisis. Neoprotectionism's inability to fully acknowledge and act on the complex political-

[3]This article is the outcome of a decades-long empirical and theoretical engagement with conservation policy and practice, and the power of conservation paradigms specifically. As part of this engagement, I have critically studied (neo)protectionism before, both empirically in Southern Africa, as well as conceptually on the global level (Büscher and Dietz 2005; Büscher and Dressler 2007; Büscher and Fletcher 2020). The unexplained and surprising centrality of neoprotectionist thinking in the GBF, however, led me to revisit, reread and rethink some of this earlier work, which led to the current paper.

economic and imperial-colonial historical roots of the dialectic further fuels the tragedy, which finds its most acute expression in the intensifying critique of racialised injustices, violence and inequities in mainstream, protected area-based conservation (Murdock 2021; Ramutsindela, Matose, and Mushonga 2022; Sène 2023). The article concludes that this dialectic not only further elucidates the 'failing forward' dynamic of global mainstream conservation, but that breaking this cycle means accepting and rethinking the complex relations between protection of 'loved natures', power and political economy in policy, science and beyond.

A brief history of neoprotectionism and its critiques

Neoprotectionism as a powerful discourse in global conservation (re-)emerged in two waves: the first in the 1990s, and early 2000s and the second after 2014. But before discussing these two waves, it is important to reflect on *Neo*protectionism's prequel, *protectionism*. Protectionism was not as clearly delineated as, for example, preservationism in the early-modern conservation movement in the United States during the late 19th century. Preservationists like John Muir argued for wilderness protection that excluded human use or habitation that was, to some degree, acceptable to conservationists like Gifford Pinchot, the first head of the US Forest Service. Protectionism mainly connoted with the former, and this is how critical literatures habitually refer to the term. But its actual historical use in relation to non-human natures is complex.

There are, arguably, two dominant historical connotations to the term, which front a much deeper set of complex understandings of and attitudes to human-nature relations. The first is a commonsense use where protection connotes shielding something from harm and 'generally included all types of safeguarding: species, landscape and habitat protection' (Wöbse 2011, 333). This usage was central at the start of modern conservation's institutional heartlands in Europe and North America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In fact, 'nature protection' was more common than 'nature conservation', at least until the 1930s–1940s. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) started its institutional life in 1948 after all as the *International Union for the Protection of Nature*. The name change in 1956 followed a heated debate where protection's second connotation became a lightning rod: its association with preservationism and being 'against people'. Key 'change-proponents' argued that 'conservation' enabled them to enrol powerful economic and political actors into the fold, whereas 'protection' often hindered such ambitions (De Bont 2021, 213–216).

According to De Bont (2021, 214), the change needs to be situated in broader ('dichotomous') discussions of preservationism versus conservation whereby the former connotes with strict wilderness protection and the latter with 'the sustainable use of natural resources'. 'In practice, however, the distinction between preservation and conservation was far from clear-cut, and, to complicate things further, the terms tended to shift meaning through time'. These complications and shifts continue and are important for my argument. Central here is the 'who and how' behind both terms, particularly in the historical context of Euro-Western imperialism and settler colonialism and the fact that Western conservationists became increasingly concerned with conservation in the colonies (Eichler and Baumeister 2021). As Murdock (2021, 237–240) shows in relation to the above Muir-Pinchot debate, for both these white men, the 'who' that either of

these approaches were meant to benefit were other whites. The 'how' varied but habitually entailed the exclusion (and forced eviction) of non-white, indigenous peoples.

Similarly, the fact that 'conservation' proved more useful to 'enrol powerful economic and political actors into the fold' must be read within a highly exclusionary racialised constellation: it was white, often very racist conservation actors that challenged, accommodated or otherwise interacted with other white 'economic and political actors', both in Europe and North America, but also in the colonies (Murdock 2021; Spiro 2009). It is in this broader context that 'nature protection' was effectively erased from the discourse such that 'conservation' enjoyed a significant discursive consensus after 1956 (De Bont 2021, 215–216).

Its use thereafter expanded in response to dynamics in the world, most prominently the 1960s-1970s decolonisation and emancipation movements. As a direct response to the imperial-colonial exclusion and dispossession of local and indigenous peoples, conservation actors started talking about 'people and parks', while developing forms of 'community-based conservation' (CBC) and 'integrated conservation and development programmes'. In relation to both 'powerful economic and political actors' and previously dispossessed local and indigenous actors, conservation became more expansive in its goals, the networks it encompassed and the issues it incorporated (Adams 2004; Dressler et al. 2010).

Importantly, the first wave of neoprotectionism in the 1990s was a response to this decades-long expansion to accommodate both these actor groups.[4] This wave was built around four key books: John Oates' (1999) 'Myth and Reality in the Rainforest', John Terborgh's (1999) 'Requiem for Nature', Terborgh et al's (2002) 'Making Parks Work', and Brandon et al.'s (1998) 'Parks in Peril'. The first to analyse this wave was Wilshusen et al. (2002), followed by Hutton, Adams, and Murombedzi (2005), Lu Holt (2005) and others (Büscher and Dietz 2005). Wilshusen et al. (2002, 20–21) identified five overarching arguments in this first wave: '(1) protected areas require strict protection; (2) biodiversity protection is a moral imperative; (3) conservation linked to development does not protect biodiversity; (4) harmonious, ecologically friendly local communities are myths; and (5) emergency situations require extreme measures'.

Hutton, Adams, and Murombedzi (2005) included further nuances but the basic elements remained in place; the core being that 'proponents believe that conservation programs should stop trying to be all things to all people and simply focus on the central goal of nature protection', especially the 'strict enforcement and defence of protected areas' (Wilshusen et al. 2002, 21). For Terborgh (1999, 94, 170), 'protection is a necessary first step towards preservation, the ultimate goal', which must be sustained through top-down enforcement. Neoprotectionists thus advocate prioritising the ecological integrity of specific bioregions by ensuring that direct human access, use and exploitation of resources is significantly reduced or completely forbidden through enforcement, fines and regulations or changes in human behaviour.

This first wave of neoprotectionist literature led to heated debates, prompted by a combination of the predominantly white Euro-American positionality of most neoprotectionist authors and the ferver with which they made their point. Take Terborgh and

[4]Naturally, both actor groups were not accommodated equally, with economic and political actors holding much more power than often-marginalized indigenous actors.

van Schaik (2002, 6): 'no apology should be required for adhering to the accepted definition of a (national) park as a haven for nature where people, except for visitors, staff, and concessionaires, are excluded. To advocate anything else for developing countries, simply because they are poor (one hopes, a temporary condition) is to advocate a double standard, something we find deplorable'. Such sweeping statements led to critiques that neoprotectionist 'reasoning is incomplete, not necessarily because of factual oversights but as a result of significant blind spots that overlook the deeply politicised nature of nature protection' (Wilshusen et al. 2002, 18). Most importantly, the fact that western conservationists pushed a strict protectionist agenda as *the* morally dominant one was deplored. This was seen as a neocolonial, western imposition on biodiverse areas and Indigenous peoples in the global south, analysed by Lu Holt as a 'conservation catch-22'.

Lu Holt argued that Indigenous peoples are not only essentialised in demeaning ways but that neoprotectionist arguments are illogical and historically incorrect: 'a Catch-22 can be found in the rhetoric of protectionists who ascribe conservationist ethics to people in a state of limited technology, subsistence production, and low population pressure, and conversely view people as incompatible to conservation when they have modern technologies, market involvement, and higher population densities' (Lu Holt 2005, 207 and 208). Hence:

> the conditions under which people are seen as ecologically friendly under the protectionist viewpoint are the same conditions under which we would not expect conservation to develop. But when people are faced with a situation that may promote resource stewardship (such as increased population pressure or resource exploitation for market), under the protectionist viewpoint they are then perceived as obstacles to conservation.

This conservation Catch-22 was recognised by many who at the height of CBC at the time defended CBC fiercely. I saw this personally when I started research in Southern Africa around 2002 and attended several conservation meetings. Leading intellectuals like Thembela Kepe, James Murombedzi, Masego Madzwamuse, Webster Whande and others heavily debated the neoprotectionist upsurge and sought to counter it by further researching and improving CBC (Whande et al. 2003).

The point, though, was never that protection and people should not go hand-in-hand. Early critiques emphasised 'not whether there should be biodiversity conservation, but how this is best achieved. It is not about protected areas, but how they are implemented' (Hutton, Adams, and Murombedzi 2005, 365). Wilshusen et al. (2002, 18) stressed that their 'article is not a statement against nature protection'. Rather, its 'intent is to encourage debate on how biodiversity conservation strategies are conceived and carried out in order to increase their chances for achieving the goal of protection'. Reflecting on the 2003 World Parks Congress where these debates came to a head, Brosius (2004, 611) summarised the tenor: 'we cannot afford to perpetuate the polemic that the goals of conservation and indigenous rights are at odds with each other. The fate of biodiversity rests in part on how the conservation community responds to the challenge posed by indigenous, mobile, and local communities and whether it is able to embrace this opportunity to create new alliances for conservation'.

The debates continued for some years, then quieted down somewhat. This changed in 2011–2012, when several publications under the 'new conservation' banner triggered a

second wave of neoprotectionism. Responding to the influential notion of the Anthropocene and its alleged end of 'untouched' wilderness, 'new conservationists' forcefully challenged protectionist premises. Publishing books such as 'The New Wild' (Pearce 2015) and 'Saving Nature in a Post-Wild World' (Marris 2011), they questioned conservation's enduring obsession with wilderness and PAs as an effective long-term strategy for saving biodiversity. They also acknowledged the historical wrongs perpetrated by protectionist conservation and argued that indigenous peoples' concerns must be recognised. Their preferred form of conservation needed to become more people-centred *and* fully part of the capitalist economy.

These arguments amounted to major red flags. Responding in books like 'Keeping the Wild' and 'Protecting the Wild' (Wuerther et al. 2014, 2015), prominent neoprotectionists – again predominantly white Euro-Americans – argued that this 'most dangerous worldview' (Wilson 2016, 74–75) was 'delusional' and that it would 'hasten ecological collapse globally' (Soulé 2013, 896). Harvey Locke (2014, 147) even noted a betrayal of trust:

> In the last twenty years a more subtle and perhaps equally dangerous group has snuck up on conservationists. They come in stealth, professing to be allies with a fresh approach. They come armed with altruism – concern for the poor and disenfranchised humans around the world. Sharing this moral value, we conservationists listen to them, strive to accommodate their concerns, and then learn to our dismay that they don't share our basic goal of conserving wild nature.

Hence the second wave of neoprotectionism was on, reaching its zenith between 2014 and 2018. The focus was, again, on the need for strict protection, but now taken to another level entirely. In 2016, E. O. Wilson published 'Half Earth', which catapulted an emerging neoprotectionist idea into the global limelight: that 50% of the planet should be reserved for biodiversity protection to halt the extinction crisis. Backed by a 'nature needs half' movement, this idea of '50 × 50' (50% of the planet protected by 2050) has obviously influenced the GBF 30 × 30 target, despite the latter being phrased more inclusively.

More can be said about this second wave, but Büscher and Fletcher (2020) have done so elsewhere, including sustained attention to the nuances and contradictions across the different camps. Swiftly, however, the second wave led to new and familiar critiques. Reflecting on the Half Earth proposition, Büscher et al. (2017, 2) came to five. First, the proposal 'ignores the powerful engines of resource extraction and consumption that are the main drivers of biodiversity loss globally'. Second, it would have major social impact if implemented – perhaps even displacing over a billion people (Schleicher et al. 2019). Third, the earlier question of 'who controls protected areas (who creates them and dictates what may be done there)' remained unresolved. Fourth, the new neoprotectionist ideas ignored 'decades of thinking about building relationships between protected areas and human societies.' And fifth, it does not have an 'agenda for the biodiversity in a human half of Earth'.

Importantly, the second neoprotectionist wave was (even) fiercer than the first in terms of its arguments, discourse and (deliberate) boldness of its proposals, and also led to fiercer debates. Coinciding with growing calls for the decolonisation of conservation (Collard, Dempsey, and Sundberg 2015; Collins et al. 2021; Murdock 2021; Dawson et al. 2023), the idea that mainly white, western conservationists could somehow tell the rest of the world how to conserve biodiversity led to much scholarly, indigenous

and activist critique. Especially contentious, again, was the relation between indigenous peoples and conservation, and the frustrations with unjust, racialised (neo)protectionist approaches were articulated ever more sharply. A landmark event where many 'Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists and experts' came together was the 'Our Land, Our Nature' congress in Marseille in September 2021. It resulted in a 'people's manifesto for the future of conservation' and concluded:

> decades of research and experience have shown that the mainstream approach to biodiversity conservation has had a devastating impact on Indigenous and other local people's lands, livelihoods, and rights. This has largely been based on the flawed thinking that believes in a "nature" devoid of human presence. This single-minded focus has led to a model of conservation that is often violent, colonialist, and racist in approach—seizing and militarizing the land, criminalizing and destroying the ways of life of Indigenous and local communities, while ignoring their knowledge. This model, despite the pain it causes, has never prevented the destruction of the ecosystems that it claims to be protecting.[5]

Around the same time, WWF's systematic human rights abuses became headline news (Minority Rights Group 2020), while academics documented the rise of militarised, violent approaches to conservation around the world (Duffy et al. 2019; Ramutsindela, Matose, and Mushonga 2022). All this, critics insisted, as the result of a continuation, even intensification of protectionist conservation approaches trying to curb a worsening biodiversity crisis (Eichler and Baumeister 2021; Sène 2023).

The trouble with (neo)protectionism

Despite sustained criticisms, resistance, and inconsistencies, the imaginaries of Wilson's Half-Earth agenda not merely persisted; they gained considerable momentum in global policy corridors. One reason is that the neoprotectionist discourse toned down substantially after 2018. Indeed, in 2021, prominent neoprotectionists including Harvey Locke joined forces with mainstream, new and other conservationists like the 'Business for Nature' coalition and the 'capitals coalition' to plead for a 'global goal for nature' to ensure a 'nature positive' planet by 2030 and 'full biodiversity recovery' by 2050.[6] This savvy political maneuvring certainly aided the nature-needs-half agenda. But alone it does not explain why particular forms of (neo)protectionist thinking remain so powerful, certainly not considering how the growth of protected areas over the last six decades accompanied rather than halted the growing biodiversity crisis. What, then, is missing from the critique? What is the trouble with (neo)protectionism?

It is not, as emphasised by critics, that protection is inherently 'bad'. Even William Cronon (1995, 81), the famous author of 'the trouble with wilderness', stated that 'it is not the things we label as wilderness that are the problem – for nonhuman nature and large tracts of the natural world *do* deserve protection – but rather what we ourselves mean when we use that label'. Hence, the trouble must be located within systemic, institutional elements underpinning (neo)protectionism, especially those that resonate powerfully within diverse conservation communities. One starting point is the argument made by critics that what matters in practice is *who* does the protecting and *how*. This is left rather vague in most mainstream conservation discourses. The GBF is paradigmatic,

[5]'A People's Manifesto for the Future of Conservation' https://www.ourlandournature.org/manifesto.
[6]https://www.naturepositive.org/

despite its explicit recognition of 'the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities'. Note the wording of target three:

> Ensure and enable that by 2030 at least 30 per cent of terrestrial, inland water, and of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, are effectively conserved and managed through ecologically representative, well-connected and equitably governed systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, recognizing indigenous and traditional territories, where applicable.[7]

This recognition was hailed by the *Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas* consortium as important 'in light of historical, continuing, and potential future injustices in the name of conservation, including through protected areas'.[8] At the same time, they and other critics (rightly) frame their arguments as merely a *starting point* for a much *broader* set of socio-political transformations that foreground certain actors above others (Dawson et al. 2023; Sène 2023). This is in contrast to the GBF, where a nebulous 'all of society' is responsible for implementation.[9] The GBF's target three makes it seem as though certain actors get centre stage but ultimately does not care much who pursues protection or how – all actors and all 'area-based measures' count, *as long as it 'effectively' adds up to 30%*.

This focus on *who and how*, then, is part of the trouble with protection. For starters, the acknowledgement of marginalised voices is often done by mainstream actors in a way that is decidedly *apolitical*, whereas more radical actors rather aim to *politicise* conservation relations (Eichler and Baumeister 2021). More troubling is that this focus leaves the centrality of protection itself untouched, and hence also core (neo)protectionist logic. This core is often a narrowing of conservation debates to the question *how much* protection is needed to prevent mass extinction. Take neoprotectionist Eileen Crist:

> While protected areas have increased in recent years, the increase has not been sufficient—in quantitative, ecosystem representation, connectivity, and effective management terms—to conserve Earth's species, population abundances (including migratory phenomena), ecological complexity, and evolutionary potential. To be sure, size of terrestrial and marine reserves is only one variable for safeguarding biodiversity. Yet large-scale protection is requisite to prevent biodiversity depletion from spiraling into a mass extinction event.

The trouble with protection thus ultimately concerns the idea of protection itself. This sounds contradictory: if protection is not 'inherently' bad, but the trouble is still the concept itself, where to locate the trouble? Crist provides a clue when she argues that 'all conservationists might unite in advocating for the recognition that human and nonhuman worlds are both due justice and the right to a good life. Underlying these educational and ethical directives, I would argue, is the spirit of protection: Protection is a beautiful idea, conjoining *action from love* that yields a sense of safety in others'.[10] She harks back to the *common-sense* understanding of protection, and gives it depth: it connects with the notion that most people – across racial, class, gender or other differentials – will do anything to protect the things or persons they love; where the 'yielding of a

[7]Convention on Biological Diversity. '2030 Targets (with Guidance Notes).' https://www.cbd.int/gbf/targets/
[8]See Ramos, Rodriguez, and Koko Ngomo (2024).
[9]Convention on Biological Diversity. 'Introduction to the GBF.' https://www.cbd.int/gbf/introduction/
[10]Quotes from Christ (2022), emphasis added.

sense of safety in a (nonhuman) other' provides a deep sense of moral virtue and – if successful – relief.

This 'action from love' is where I argue we must locate the deeper trouble (and perhaps also a basis for action going forward, as I will argue in the conclusion). To be sure: my interest here is not in the morality of (neo)protectionist 'action from love', but in its political role and consequences in conservation debates and policies. Hence both elements around protection are equally important: *how a love for nature under threat logically leads to an urge to protect, which often narrows debates to the how/who of protection*. Critiques have mostly focused on the how/who, but this article centralises the idea of love for (threatened) nonhuman natures and how it is nurtured through the institutional centrality and importance of field research in conservation (biology). This creates, following Raymond Williams, a (neo)protectionist 'structure of feeling' that links the political economy of biodiversity destruction with a deeply institutionalised attachment to and love for that same biodiversity within the core of a diverse conservation epistemic community.

Field research as the basis of institutional attachment to biodiversity

In 2004 (xii), Adams wrote: 'scratch a conservationist, and beneath every upbeat line about success stories, there is usually a depressingly downbeat assessment of the retreat of nature over their lifetimes'. He already pointed out the important role of personal experience in relation to threatened natures at the heart of modern conservation. An important historical foundation of this experience is the emergence of biological field research in the 19th century and its role in the advent of modern, institutionalised conservation. As De Bont (2015, 11; *emphasis added*) argues in his book on European field stations:

> while large-scale capitalism gradually took over the landscape, remaining places of 'picturesque beauty' became increasingly accessible for the growing number of tourists. (…) Contemporaries usually perceived all these sweeping changes optimistically as being part of the conquest of nature, but in several milieus there was also a sense of loss. *The latter feeling would among others fuel the foundation of the first association for nature protection*. Naturalists who were stationed in nature itself were obviously close witnesses of the environmental changes mentioned. *Often they would use this privileged position to explicitly profile themselves in the debates* about how to actually administer nature in an urbanizing world – both as an economic resource and as a haven for the soul.

These two elements – how field researchers were seen to be in a 'priviliged position' to witness environmental changes, and how this leads them to become more outspoken advocates of conservation – are central in neoprotectionist and general conservation biology literatures. A full history of this focus on 'naturalist' field research is beyond this article's scope, but clearly this history is anything but linear (Kohler 2006). One influential neoprotectionist, E. O Wilson (2006, 218), writes in his autobiography, for example, that naturalist traditions steeped in field research were under great pressure from emerging molecular biology in the 1950s.

Despite this pressure, Wilson (and many others) continued to hold naturalist field research in high esteem and this has not waned since. This can, for instance, be gaged by the many field stations that have been maintained over long periods: Tydecks et al.

(2016) counted at least 1268 biological field stations around the world, emphasising that this excludes many stations not formally registered.

The value of field research and experience is also clear in the neoprotectionist literature. For example, the backflap of *Requiem for Nature* states: 'for ecologist John Terborgh, Manu National Park in the rain forest of Perú is a *second home*. He has spent half of each of the past twenty-five years there conducting research'. Over this time, so continues the blurb, he 'has been witness to the relentless onslaught of civilisation' (Terborgh 1999). Correspondingly, all book endorsees stress Terborgh's field experience: Jared Diamond refers to Terborgh as 'one of the world's greatest field biologists'; Kathryn Fuller, then WWF president, emphasises his 'many years of scientific research in Peru's remote Manu National Parks and his extensive travels to parks and PAs around the world'; while E. O. Wilson writes that the book is 'an important dispatch from the tropical conservation front by a distinguished biologist who has studied most of the forests of the world on which he reports'.

Another influential neoprotectionist pioneer is Thomas Struhsaker, who was John Oates' mentor. His 2022 autobiography *I remember Africa: a field biologists's half-century perspective* emphasises the direct relation between field research, attachment to nature and conservation:

> 'Once I began studying rain forest primates, I became acutely aware of how rapidly their populations and forests were being degraded and destroyed due to hunting, logging, and agriculture, driven primarily by unsustainable growth in human populations and their ever-increasing needs and wants for material things, some necessary, many not. *Humans* never have enough. My response to this realization was to become more engaged in conservation activities to the point where it seemed like I was putting at least as much effort into conservation as I was into research'. (Struhsaker 2022, 211; *emphasis added*)

Struhsaker subsequently makes the case for PAs explicit:

> 'Although I have published books (…) and a number of articles advocating conservation actions (…), I am not sure how effective these were. For example, I have seen no evidence that any of my recommendations, or those of many others, have influenced logging operations in the tropics. Logging in the tropics is still largely a pillage and plunder operation for short-term profits with no concern for longterm sustainability or for the animals that live there. As a consequence, it seems to me that the most effective way to conserve tropical forests and their wildlife is through the creation of national parks. I believe my most effective conservation work resulted from my lobbying efforts and support of anti-poaching activities. No single person creates a national park. It took 23 years of lobbying by me and many others to have Kibale declared a national park'. (idem)

And, finally, he brings the message home: 'in my opinion, anyone who studies and/or is interested in wildlife should do what they can to preserve these natural systems. Failing to do so, will, of course, increase the chances of losing these systems, which we study and enjoy' (idem). Struhsaker has been nothing but steadfast on these issues. At the start of his career 50 years prior, he already conveyed his worries in classic neoprotectionist language: 'The encroachment of the *ever-expanding human population* is exerting profound pressures on the rainforests of Africa and their faunas. If carried much further, these pressures will result in the virtual destruction of the rain-forest ecosystem' (Struhsaker 1972, 103; *emphasis added*). Struhsaker shows an appreciation of the complex links between population, economic growth and other elements, but still concludes that

'the problem is basically the result of the human population explosion'. Then he has a practical suggestion:

> 'I have become convinced that scientists wishing to conserve tropical rain forests for study purposes to the exclusion of economic exploitation must be prepared to purchase such forests or to lease them on a long-term basis. The price should be equivalent to what would otherwise be earned through timber exploitation by the government concerned'. (1972, 108)

Oates endorses this proposal in his neoprotectionist classic, *Myth and Reality in the Rainforest*: 'Struhsaker suggested that *Western* scientists, in particular, should be prepared to purchase examples of the rain forest or arrange for long-term leases, if they wished to protect the forest against commercial exploitation'. He subsequently emphasises two points in particular, one being that Struhsaker 'recommended for special conservation attention *forests that he knew personally*: the Taï Reserve in Cote d'Ivoire, the Douala-Edéa and Korup Reserves in Cameroon, and Kibale' (Oates 1999, 29, *emphasis added*).

Next, Oates (1999, 29) approvingly argues that 'in the light of future concern for the tropical rain forest, this was a farsighted statement by Struhsaker, yet it also reflected long-held concerns of *Western, and especially American, conservationists*'. Referring to Thoreau and others, he recounts how he was also transformed through field research: 'seeing a range of East African parks for myself in the early 1970s strongly persuaded me of the efficacy of what is now sometimes called 'conventional' or 'exclusionary' conservation (the establishment of parks and strict reserves under the management of national government)' (Oates 1999, 31; *emphasis added*). With later experiences in India under his belt, Oates recounts the lessons he learned, especially that despite political, economic and population pressures ''conventional' protection of tropical ecosystems could work'. He adds (Oates 1999, 40):

> the chances of success in conserving an area seemed to be greatly improved if individuals who had a special concern for it were prepared to fight a long battle for its protection (as witnessed by the efforts of Mervyn Cowie on behalf of the Nairobi National Park, Tom Struhsaker on behalf of Kibale Forest Reserve, and Rauf Ali on behalf of Kalakkad-Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve). It was apparent that scientists studying rain forests could play an important role in stimulating conservation efforts, and that conservation was most effective where a long-term research program existed, with resident scientists.

This, of course, we see in many PAs around the world: resident (colonial) scientists and naturalists who were foundational in their creation. Some, like the Jim Corbett National Park in India, still carry the names of these individuals. (Neo)protectionist impulses instigated by field naturalists/scientists where thus not only vital in early struggles to set up parks, but have been vital to build the justification for (oft-exclusionary) parks generally. It is therefore no coincidence that the preface to *Making Parks Work* starts with: 'In August 1999, thirty conservationists from field sites, universities, and conservation organisations throughout the world assembled'. Next to universities and conservation organisations, 'field sites' are the prime home for neoprotectionists and many conservationists.

This is repeated in much of the second-wave neoprotectionist literature, though here there seems to be even more of an emphasis on attachment to (threatened) natures. Throughout the two above-mentioned volumes, many authors including Jane Goodall, Kathleen Dean Moore, Michael Soulé and Marc Bekoff, relate their personal experiences

and attachments to nature and advocate this as a general principle going forward. The central premise, as articulated by Jane Goodall (2015, 26), is that 'when people acquire a deeper understanding of the natural world (…) they are more likely to care and to want to help save what is left'. In turn, conservation education, getting people 'outdoor' and emphasising the intrinsic over the instrumental values of nature are central in this literature (Noss et al. 2015, 19 and 20).

More examples can be mentioned, but the point is that the fieldsite, and the specific type of connection with nature it enables, has become part of the 'structure of feeling' of conservation. Williams (1965, 64) famously yet ambiguously argued that this term 'is as firm and definite as 'structure' suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity. In one sense, this structure of feeling is the culture of a period: it is the particular living result of all the elements in the general organization'. My interpretation of the term emphasises the specific epistemic situatedness of fieldwork and the intangible yet real power it has in the field of conservation (biology/ecology). It foregrounds how conservation biological knowledge is *generally organised* and so builds an epistemic culture around real-life dynamics of ecological systems and the animals and plants that inhabit them, and how they are (often negatively) influenced by a broader political-economic pressures (habitually reduced to 'too many humans and their needs').

Kohler (2006, 275, 278), in his history of biodiversity collectors in the USA, corroborates this structure of feeling. He shows there was a general shift in the 1930s/1940s when species collecting (and shooting) in the field of 'natural history' made way for a 'conservation-minded' focus on biological observation in the emerging field of ecology: 'Popular movements for wildlife preservation reinforced scientific reasons to observe rather than collect, and legal restrictions on wildlife harvesting tarred scientific and commercial collecting with the same brush'. This shift, in turn, provided a major impetus for the further development of field stations for scientific observation with two important implications. First, the epistemic techno-scientisation of conservation, leading to the well-rehearsed and often criticised development of 'objective-universal' knowledge and its displacement of indigenous, local and situated knowledges (Fox 1981, 108; Mabele et al. 2023). Second, the positionalities implicated in the development of this science also afforded deeply personal experiences in and love for natures under study, which provided a particular legitimacy and logic of action that resonates broadly across conservation.

Hence, the specific 'structure of feeling' I advance here connects the political economy of biodiversity destruction, a particular techno-scientific conservation knowledge and a deeply institutionalised attachment to and love for biodiversity within the conservation (biological) epistemic community. (Neo)protectionism is the logical linking pin between the central elements of this structure of feeling, which also structures conservation (biology) more generally. A recent book dedicated to fieldwork in biology, '*Curious for Nature: A passion for fieldwork*' illustrates the point. The foreword by Ian Newton states that:

> for biologists like me, the outdoor world is the only place where wild plants and animals can be studied in their natural settings, behaving as they should, interacting with other plants and animals around them. Without field studies, biology would be little more than laboratory-based anatomy and physiology – for the scientist, life in a white coat. But for me fieldwork involves much more than this. It gives the sheer pleasure of being outdoors, escaping the claustrophobic and pressurized human world for a while. (Burt and Thomson 2020, xx)

Numerous books, articles and other outputs about the importance of direct access to and experience in nature further ensure that the structure of feeling resonates broadly in conservation communities. While this is often seen as innately positive given the urgency of the extinction crisis, the question *who* partakes in this structure of feeling and *how* they do so is critical. While arguing that 'for many ecologists and other field-based scientists, field experiences have served as a rite of passage by cementing their identities as ecologists', Morales et al. (2020, 2) explicitly acknowledge a 'well-documented' 'underrepresentation and lack of diversity in ecology and related sciences'. They argue that this must be tackled in order to spread the 'transformative opportunities' that field experiences can provide 'for many individuals who eventually pursue ecology, natural resource, and conservation careers' (Morales et al. 2020, 2).

Most neoprotectionists would no doubt enthusiastically support this. They applaud and encourage – as do Struhsaker and Oates above – individuals from Global South countries to share in the love for nature that field-based research facilitates, and so join the cause to create or expand protected areas. At the same time, Struhsaker and Oates also recommend that 'Western' scientists take direct responsibility for erecting exclusionary protected areas in the Global South. The structure of feeling therefore has a clear direction: neoprotectionists are open to everyone joining their biocentric project based on a joint love for nature, as long as it helps to create (exclusionary) protected areas that save biodiversity, provide opportunities for scientists to study 'natural settings, behaving as they should', and to escape 'the claustrophobic and pressurised human world for a while' (Burt and Thomson 2020, xx). Arguably nowhere is this direction clearer than in Terborgh's (2015, xi) foreword for the 'protecting the wild' book, where he argues that 'biophilia – an inherent love of nature and its creatures – is manifested in the fact that nearly all 200 or so nations on this planet have formally designated areas for nature protection'. Love of nature, for Terborgh, directly equates with the institutional act of designating protected areas.

Important to note, however, is that this structure of feeling does *not automatically* lead to neoprotectionist policies. There is no *direct or necessary causal link* between attachment to nature via fieldwork and (neo)protectionism. Indeed, some biologists are critical of this link. Brooks and Agosta (2024, vii; *emphasis added*), for example, point out that their recent book is

> best understood by knowing first that we are field biologists, the professional descendants of Alexander von Humboldt, Alfred Russel Wallace, and Aldo Leopold (…). Field biologists are not better scientists than others, *but they have special knowledge stemming from cultivating a personal relationship with nature*. They think that if they approach nature with an attitude of open curiosity, nature will show them aspects of the living world that cannot be experienced, much less comprehended, without spending considerable time in close contact with it.

Following, they explicitly state that more protected areas as a response to the biodiversity crisis is 'well-intentioned but wrong'. According to them, 'at best, this way of thinking detracts from what should be the focus of conservation: safeguarding, maximising, and facilitating the deployment of the evolutionary potential stored in the existing biosphere' (Brooks and Agosta 2024, 189–190). This argument is also present in the structure of feeling of conservation (biology), through its resonance is marginal compared to

(neo)protectionist thinking. Hence, although there is no *necessary* link, the fact that neoprotectionist thinking continues to highly influence the conservation structure of feeling and global conservation policies despite much critique and an intensifying extinction crisis still needs an explanation.

A love/failure dialectic?

In this section, I theorise the continued power of neoprotectionist logic in conservation policy as arising from a 'love/failure dialectic'. Central here is that the need to protect loved natures becomes greater the more threatened they become. But when this protection – despite insulated successes – ultimately fails to stem the overall tide of biodiversity loss *and* this same failure is not attributed to 'the trouble with protection', it may lead to a new, intensified round of (neo)protectionism. Deep institutional attachment to and love for nature is critical in this process as it renders protectionism the logical thing to do, despite failure. The result is an intensified love/failure dialectic, which amounts to a 'great conservation tragedy'. Several considerations based on the above material corroborate this argument.

Crudely (over)simplifying history, this theoretical logic works according to a process of narrowing and broadening the interests accommodated in (neo)protectionist discourse. Protectionism started when naturalists, scientists and others noticed declines in species and destruction of ecosystems and in response started promoting the protection of nature (increasingly mythologised as 'wilderness'). Despite some early successes, including around the first protected areas, the term protection gave way to conservation to enable the expansive enrolment of developmental, business but also indigenous and local community interests. This succeeded quite well (more so for business interests) but did not alleviate the extinction crisis. Hence the urge within the first *neo*protectionist movement to get 'back to the barriers' (Hutton, Adams, and Murombedzi 2005) and refocus on protecting threatened natures. After the first wave of neoprotectionism and resultant critiques, the discourse broadened (again) to enrol diverse interests, until the latter were seen to be against – even 'betray' – what is considered the core of conservation (*protecting* biodiversity), leading to an intensified second neoprotectionist impulse. This wave, too, initially pleaded for a narrowing of interests in conservation only to broaden again into the 'global goal for nature' and the wide-ranging GBF.

Across these (neo)protectionist impulses, a critical foundation for discourse and action is the direct experience in and love for threatened natures. This started as a 'hobby' impulse, as Fox (1981, 107) argues in relation to the American conservation movement: 'the first public alarms about endangered wildlife, trees, rivers, and wilderness were raised by enthusiasts like Muir who might take firmly practical ground in arguing their cases but who acted ultimately from a love of unspoilt nature'. But it rapidly became part of the institutional core of conservation and the sciences it built on. In this context, it is perhaps no coincidence that E. O. Wilson coined the idea of biophilia to express 'a biologically based, inherent human need to affiliate with life and lifelike processes', and a deep 'relationship to nature' (Kellert 1993, 42). For me, Biophilia expresses the importance attributed to the love of nature in the conservation (biology) structure of feeling. This love of nature, I argue, renders protection a first-order response or impulse, namely the first thing that comes to mind when dealing with urgent threats. The more

complicated task of trying to understand, let alone respond to the complex political-economic and social roots of a problem is a second-order response, less easily accommodated in an atmosphere of urgency, threat and crisis.

Having said that, love of nature does not *necessarily* distract from the complex political economic and colonial-imperial roots of the biodiversity crisis. There is nothing, in principle, that deters people from doing this difficult work – and again, many do. What in practice makes even this second-order response difficult, I argue, is conservation's biocentric institutional-epistemological orientation, which neoprotectionists habitually emphasise (Soulé 2014, 74; Crist 2015, 89), and the related, widely-held idea that generic 'human' population growth is *the* foundational cause for biodiversity loss (Fletcher, Breitling, and Puleo 2014; Hughes 2023).

This leads to another strange contradiction at the core of the neoprotectionist structure of feeling: how it is desperate to share its biocentric project built around a deep love for nature with as many people as possible *while simultaneously insisting that generic 'humanity' is the problem for biodiversity*. The fact that the latter argument taps into a deeply engrained yet still disturbingly popular (white) Western trope where 'overflowing' populations of poor people (of colour) threaten both the security of wealthier nations through immigration and the environment through their direct resource (Fletcher, Breitling, and Puleo 2014, 1195) is often not understood or acknowledged by neoprotectionists.

Take Crist (2015, 88–89), for example, who is upset that 'those who love the natural world – and want to protect its freedom, diversity, abundance, and inexhaustible beauty and mystery, as well as our covenant with all this which preceded and once surrounded our very existence' are criticised for promoting a human-nature dichotomy and the idea 'that humans defile or taint the natural world, which would remain pristine in their absence'. Instead, she emphasises that 'those who love the natural world' also 'love human *being*'. For Crist, 'nature's adversary is not human *being* in some essential sense, but the supremacist identity fashioned by the dark side of civilization'. This supremacist identity, for Crist and many neoprotectionists, is directly connected to 'humanity's' anthropocentrism – 'humanity' placing itself above and so 'colonising' the rest of nature. She believes this 'human-centredness co-emerged with civilisation – and especially through its herald of crop and animal agriculture' and subsequently led to a 'stunted imagination' of 'the religion of growth in the modern era' (Crist 2019, 52, 60).

Love of nature, in this discourse, becomes a good and evil story, pitting 'supremacist humanity' against 'those who love the natural world'. Only the latter stance affords a 'human being' that logically leads to 'the beautiful idea of protection'. Thus, again, the door is opened for others who love nature to join in the (neo)protectionist mission, which is appealing to many who wish to pursue conservation careers (Morales et al. 2020). Yet it simultaneously comes with a biocentric form of 'authorised knowledge' (Paredes and Kaulard 2023) that does not recognise how its scientific discourse is deeply implicated in colonial-imperial legacies (Grove 1995). Add here the urgency of the need to protect loved natures under threat, and it becomes clearer why the space to seriously deal with these more complex issues is often highly limited.

The point is not that this more complex engagement is absent altogether, but rather that it is mired in unreconcilable, even disturbing contradictions. Take Fletcher's (2023, 159) argument that a major tragedy of mainstream conservation is its continuing belief

in 'an impossible fantasy of capitalist redemption' where the logic behind biodiversity destruction can be harnessed to save biodiversity. This holds true for much of mainstream conservation, but not for most neoprotectionists. Many are highly critical of growth, consumerism and other capitalist dictums (Büscher and Fletcher 2020). Soulé (2014, 72–73), for example, cites Edward Abbey to label the capitalist 'agro-industrial empire' a 'crackpot machine'. Just before this statement, however, he writes that 'if you live long enough, you will discover that most of the wild places you loved as a young person have been peopled to death'. This combination of statements is typical in neoprotectionist discourse and shows that there is a persistent inability to do political economy and social inequalities justice, theoretically or in policy.

Fletcher (2023, 161) explains this by arguing that ideological faith in the ultimate efficacy of capitalist market-based mechanism persists through failure; that failure is never due to the logic of capital itself but always due to it not being 'properly implemented'. His argument explains the 'neoliberal' part of the continuation of the 'neoliberal-protectionist' logic, but less so the protectionist part. Protectionism is not just about continued faith in neoliberal fantasy but has more material-personal roots in an institutional-epistemological structure of feeling that centrally revolves around love for nature, 'objective' techno-scientific epistemology and a deep concern for biodiversity destruction.

This, I argue, translates into a concrete mechanism of 'failing forward': a 'love/failure dialectic' that helps to further explain why protectionism, despite its ultimate failure and many critiques, continues to enable diverse policy coalitions and inform conservation policy so centrally. More specifically, it explains that despite not doing justice to the complex political-economic and colonial-imperial roots of the biodiversity crisis, a protectionist impulse still taps into something foundationally shared by most people, especially those who work closely with it: a love for nature under increasing threat.

Conclusion

'The central irony of the 20th Century for conservationists is that the remarkable growth in size and influence of their movement has been accompanied by accelerating destruction of nature. Indeed, strangely, it is that destruction that has fuelled the growth of conservation' (Adams 2004, 228). This ironic dialectic pointed out by Adams two decades ago has since morphed into 'the great conservation tragedy'. This tragedy firstly relates to the continued acceleration of biodiversity destruction despite increasing conservation efforts. What makes the tragedy 'great', however, is that it is rooted not merely in neoliberal 'fantasies' (Fletcher 2023) but also in a real attachment to, and love of biodiversity under threat. The basis for this is the central but overlooked issue of conservation biology's rootedness in ecological field research and the institutional value and power this carries in conservation circles.

Importantly, my intent is not to ridicule this love of nature. To the contrary: I believe this to be a foundational human emotion that is shared widely above and beyond conservation biology communities, including indigenous and other communities around the world. My aim, rather, was to show how it is part of a deeply institutionalised-epistemic 'structure of feeling' within mainstream conservation – one that links love for biodiversity to the political economy of biodiversity destruction and techno-

scientific conservation knowledge – and the *political role and consequences* it has within broader policy and real-world contexts of dealing with the biodiversity crisis. Three are especially pertinent and deserve urgent follow-up in conservation science, policy and practice.

The first consequence is the fact that (neo)protectionist ideas remain very powerful in global conservation policy, even as critiques and the extinction crisis intensify. Here the political role of the love of nature nurtured through fieldwork and personal experiences is the enabling of a broadly shared structure of feeling that allows the building of diverse policy coalitions around the urgent need to protect threatened natures. A second, related consequence is that this epistemic structure of feeling prefers a biocentrism that eschews critical political-economic analysis and the roots of systemic inequalities, as well as the more complex forms of (collective, revolutionary) action this points to. The political role here is to render protection a 'first-order response' that drives action and policy impulses – in practice translated into more protected areas, reserves and 'other area-based conservation measures'.

This failure to break the dialectical cycle and the eschewing of critical political-economic analysis that also takes colonialism and imperialism seriously triggers a third consequence, namely reinforcing already intensifying critiques against racialised injustices and inequities in conservation (Ramutsindela, Matose, and Mushonga 2022; Sène 2023). It creates the strange contradiction where in mainstream policy neoprotectionists and (some) indigenous actors can find each other in their diverse desires to protect loved natures while in practice it often leads to deeply racialised injustices, which reinforce and worsen deeply felt historical injustices. In other words, the historical, racialised political economy of diverse manifestations of 'love of nature' and how they interact across diverse institutional, practical, scientific and other settings requires urgent attention. They should be seen in the context of what Kyle Whyte (2019, 5) calls 'relational tipping points' whereby indigenous actors often find themselves in situations where they have 'few consensual, trustworthy, reciprocal, or accountability traditions with the societal institutions' they 'have to deal with'. Whyte wrote this in relation to 'climate tipping points', but his argument and call 'against urgency' matter equally, if not even more, for conservation.

These consequences are, in turn, part of a broader historical 'love-failure dialectic' where each time a renewed effort towards protection does not lead to the hoped-for results, an intensification of this dialectic inspires a new, transmogrified round of neoprotectionism. This complex dialectical cycle is part of the 'great conservation tragedy' of our time, which is not only built on neoliberal fantasies but on foundational emotions and feelings vis-à-vis (the destruction of) biodiversity. Illuminating this tragic dialectic serves two purposes: to do justice to these foundational emotions *and* to critique mainstream conservation's inability to break the dialectical cycle even as the jubilant rhetoric around yet another global environmental treaty likely turns out to be just that: jubilant rhetoric that rapidly drowns in the impossibilities of trying to implement 'business-as-usual' as a form of structural transformation that do not take urgent calls for justice and historical reparations in conservation seriously.

Breaking this cycle, I conclude, means accepting and rethinking the central relations between the protection of 'loved natures', power and political economy in conservation policy, science and beyond. It means embracing the deeply contradictory 'trouble with

protection' as something that is not 'inherently' bad *and* as something that needs to be understood, framed and transcended within broader historical, political economic and social contexts, including, especially, relational tipping points regarding Indigenous actors and how this is situated within historical capitalism. The upshot is that we cannot narrow the conservation debate to the who/how of protection, as both proponents and critics of (neo)protectionism often do. Instead, those concerned with biodiversity need to acknowledge the trauma of its destruction and find a way to move beyond the (neo)protectionist impulse to render conservation part of a broader political-economic struggle for a systemic transformation beyond capitalism. The (increasingly visible) alternative is that mainstream conservation is reduced to protecting some animals and ecosystems in a world that is falling apart while sacrificing relations with those key other actors, especially local and indigenous peoples, whose own love of nature could provide a deep basis for joint revolutionary action.

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