

Adapting Human Societies to Conservation

[S]urvival is nothing if not biological. . . [and] perpetuating economic or political institutions at the expense of biological well-being of man, societies, and ecosystems may be considered maladaptive.

Rappaport 1976

Earth is finite. The human footprint is growing rapidly. As our species commandeers more of the planet, extinction rates are climbing and ecosystems are unraveling. Growth of the human footprint inheres in the structure and dynamic of the dominant human societies of the last several thousand years, presenting conservationists with a daunting challenge. Societies are organized around a continuous conversion of the world's ecosystems to human use. The decision makers we lobby, plead with, genuflect to, and curse are embedded in and owe their positions to these societal structures. But they do not simply respond to the constraints of these structures. As Machiavelli (1996[1531]) observed, a small number of people are always intent on achieving great wealth or power at the expense of the rest of us (and nature), and it is mostly they who occupy top decision-making positions. Few political or economic leaders, including those who care about nature, will consider solutions that might diminish their power. Hence, their ubiquitous deflection of demands to address conservation problems to debates about symptoms. If existing societal structures continue as they are, most conservation achievements may turn out to have been little more than temporary stays of execution.

Some conservation professionals argue that the best our community can do is adapt our goals to the growing human footprint. To do so should be no more acceptable than accommodating racism. Other conservationists are confused because many decision makers, including the most powerful, admit that human well-being depends on nature. Indeed, hostility toward nature and the mentality of conquest have faded. So why hasn't societal behavior changed? Why do societies continue to embrace the same societal dynamic that has led to ecological ruin in many parts of the globe? Editorial cartoonist Tom Toles captures this dynamic in a piece that shows a patch of land being divided in half again and again with the cap-

tion, "The Compromise Position on Habitat Conservation. We'll only develop half of whatever is left."

What are conservation professionals to do? The eminent scientist Archie Carr (1964) declared that the future of wild things depends on human conscience, but conscience has not proved reliable. Extant human societies do not produce intense empathy (an essential element of conscience) with the natural world among sufficient numbers of people to spontaneously overcome societal inertia. To halt anthropogenic extinctions and reverse ecosystem decline, conservationists cannot avoid a strategy aimed at confronting and changing societal structures any more than did those who ended apartheid.

Changing the structure of society is challenging, and to most conservation professionals, including those who work in the policy realm, it seems utopian or hopelessly grandiose. But just as no one in the biological sciences would assess a species' prospects without reference to the ecological landscape, so conservation professionals should not dismiss the potential for structural change without assessing the political and economic landscape that governs much human behavior affecting conservation.

A first step in altering societal inertia is determining what conservation-compatible societies look like. Most conservation professionals would say this determination is outside their expertise. Yet no other group has the requisite motivation to make the determination. Conservation scientists understand the trophic relationships that are fundamental in evaluating the relative effects of alternate societal structures on biological diversity. They need not and cannot craft a complete vision for nature-compatible societies; that is a task for societies as a whole to undertake.

Serious objections can be raised against pursuing nature-compatible societal reform. First, efforts at large-scale, fundamental social change often fail and have caused great misery. There is truth in this objection, but past efforts have invariably involved enlarging human power and control over nature and other humans. Dismantling power and control does not necessarily present the same problems. Second, grand vision often comes unhinged from its analytical moorings and becomes a faith; but this is not inevitable. Third, conservation

professionals differ over what they consider to be a good society, so including social reform in the conservation agenda will divide us. Some will part company over differing visions of nature-compatible societies. Nonetheless, the costs of divisiveness are less than what will be lost biologically without changing the structure of society. Fourth, no vision based on material sacrifice can obtain the critical mass of support needed. This is so, but creating nature-compatible societies is not about sacrifice; rather, it is about offering people the incentive of reconnecting with other people and with the natural world.

In addition to envisioning nature-compatible societies, conservation professionals can engage in overcoming the structural obstacles and leadership recalcitrance that stand in the way of achieving them. Structural change can be advanced by making better use of divisions among societies' top decision makers when divisions exist and helping to create divisions when they do not exist. The opportunities presented by the crises that permeate modern societies offer another path to steer societies toward more ecologically compatible forms.

When top decision makers are unified they are effective at limiting policy options even in so-called democratic societies; when decision makers are divided the policy debate is often more robust and a wider range of viewpoints gain legitimacy, including grassroots viewpoints. Often arguments made by a powerful faction can be reconfigured to support policies directed at structural change. When the powerful are divided, each faction usually needs support from less-powerful groups to help it prevail. This increases the ability of less powerful groups to enter the debate and extract policy concessions. When factions of the powerful must rely on other groups, the latter gain access to the powerful. The ensuing interaction provides opportunities to encourage powerful individuals to use their influence to restore and protect biological diversity and wild places. John Muir's (albeit limited) influence on U.S. President Teddy Roosevelt is one example.

It is not necessary to wait for divisions to emerge. Organizing by less powerful groups in support of far-reaching claims usually divides the powerful, if only on how to respond. A good understanding of the differing interests among the powerful allows policy objectives to be framed in ways that resonate with some factions and divide them from others.

Division is no magic bullet; policy disputes are distinct from the desire of those with power to keep it, and this desire is a major motivation for unity among the powerful. Policy gains made with this approach are usually limited but can be surprising. Piecemeal reform is not the enemy of fundamental change so long as the conservation community remains focused on the overarching goal. Obtaining results by dividing decision makers also depends on the conservation community's ca-

capacity to reward and punish decision makers. Abolitionist Frederick Douglass (1985[1857]: 204) admonished that "power concedes nothing" except to demands and struggle.

Crises offer wide-ranging opportunities for those who can anticipate or quickly identify them, understand them, and act. Some crises, such as the current global economic crisis, are cyclical, and indeed this one was predicted by some observers (e.g., Berry 1991). Had conservation professionals and allies been prepared, public outrage and the temporary weakness of big business might have allowed laws restoring public good requirements in corporate charters. We were not ready. Next time we need to be. Climate change, water and energy shortages, and the rise of new power centers in the next few decades will cause crises. Scandals happen. Wars never go right. Under siege from massive and sustained antiwar protests U.S. President Nixon supported many far-reaching environmental and conservation laws to regain voter approval (Repetto 2006). When systems or leaders lose legitimacy, aspiring leaders may have much greater autonomy from structural constraints and be more susceptible to pressure from below. Crises combine with regular events such as elections to create opportunities.

More serious crises usually offer greater opportunities for deeper change, so the nature of each crisis must be grasped. An economic collapse or major technological innovations can change the relative power of groups in a society, generating opportunities to influence meaningful shifts in leadership, reallocation of power to new groups, or setting of new social priorities. Without decisive action and adequate resources for influence, opportunities will be lost. Conservation professionals as a group do not enjoy great influence, but can often obtain it through alliances with those who have influence. The right alliances would allow us to bargain from a position of strength rather than as supplicants. Too often we think our values and knowledge will by themselves carry the day. Too often we do not demand needed support from allies, despite giving our support to their causes. We often refrain from pressing boldly for action for fear of outpacing supporters or losing our seat at the table. The first problem is best addressed by bringing supporters along, the second by the conservation community's pursuit of both insider and outsider strategies. Politics is not just the art of the possible; it is also the art of changing what is possible.

Taking advantage of crises and divisions among the powerful to alter societal structure and goals has paid off. Apartheid and the Berlin Wall are gone. Labor and women enjoy rights in many parts of the world where they once did not. Achieving such change requires an understanding of the nature of power, avoiding the temptation to accept too little just to maintain access to decision makers, and not being afraid to push hard for reform. We cannot

forget this is a life and death struggle for the species and systems we claim to care about.

Recognizing that decision makers respond to pressure is not meant to suggest that we abandon cooperation or dialogue or civility. But history is clear—no meaningful reform has been achieved without some groups engaging in conflict that the powers that be have called unruly, uncivil, or worse.

I am not urging the Society for Conservation Biology to become an advocacy organization or our members to become political operators en masse. But whatever role each of us chooses for ourselves, or we choose collectively for SCB, understanding the social and political context of our work is important to realizing our vision of a biologically vibrant world. In this sense conservation is as much a political endeavor as a scientific one. Research will continue to be vital, but it will never be enough. Scientific findings and conservation values become policy through organizing and action.

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