

Expanding Parks and Reducing Human Numbers: A Superior Alternative to Embracing the Anthropocene Era

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Introduction

RECENTLY, THE CLAIM HAS BEEN MADE THAT EARTH HAS ENTERED A NEW GEOLOGICAL ERA. The Holocene has ended and the Anthropocene has begun, in which humans have become an important geochemical force, and perhaps the dominant ecological force on the planet. Moreover, conservationists are advised to *embrace* the Anthropocene era, in which humanity not only dominates, but *rightfully* dominates, the biosphere.

Now that we have entered the Anthropocene, according to Peter Kareiva, Emma Marris, and other prophets of this new dispensation, conservationists should give up outdated goals that no longer make sense. These include trying to protect all Earth's species from anthropogenic extinction; ridding wild lands of invasive species; designating wilderness areas or parks that are off limits to most human economic activities (in order to minimize human interference in relatively wild ecosystems); or managing parks with the goal of meeting ecological baselines that reflect wilder, less human-influenced ecological conditions.

Wild nature is over, we are told, if it ever existed at all. Any baseline we choose is arbitrary. As Emma Marris puts it: "A historic moment in the past" is not "the holy moment that we always have to return every piece of land to.... Not just because it's getting more and more difficult with climate change and so on, but because those baselines we have grown up with are somewhat arbitrary.... The more we learn about how much people have changed the earth over the centuries and over the millennia, the more we know that 1491 in the Americas or 1776 in Hawaii were just moments between two different human landscapes."¹

Besides, such goals reflect a foolish desire to keep nature "pure," a misanthropic hatred of humanity, and an outmoded metaphysics that sees a sharp line between humanity and the rest of nature. *We* are just as much a part of nature as bluebirds or buffalo; a vacant lot or an agricultural field is just as "natural" as a remote Arctic river.

So conservationists need new goals. According to Kareiva, in his article "What is Conservation Science?" we should protect ecosystem services for a growing human population, and do our part to accelerate economic development in a world where so many people are

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poor.² We should avoid “fencing people out” of wildlands; that is old school. Instead, we must find creative “win/win solutions” where people use resources while preserving nature. We should learn to tolerate and even appreciate invasive species, which in many cases *increase* local biodiversity. Similarly, we should make our peace with the extinction of species that are maladapted to the new conditions of the Anthropocene. Rather than try to save every species on Earth, or as many as possible, we should content ourselves with preserving whatever biodiversity ten or twelve billion people find useful or interesting, and which can muddle through in the new conditions humanity is creating.

I believe that conservationists should reject this bold call to selfishness and human racism. Preserving wild nature is still the heart of conservation. Sharing the landscape generously with other species remains a necessary part of any reasonable, morally justifiable land ethic. But that necessarily involves setting *limits* to human demands on nature, not endlessly accommodating them. It involves setting *limits* to the degree of human influence that is acceptable in our national parks and other wildlands. And that, in turn, limits the degree to which real conservationists can accept the dominant trends of the Anthropocene.

Rather than embrace the Anthropocene era, conservationists should try to rein in its excesses. Among our key goals, we should work to expand parks and protected areas; increase the acreage kept free from intensive human resource extraction; and lessen human impacts that degrade wildlife habitat, such as air and water pollution, and the continued transfer of exotic species into new areas. Conservationists should advocate for humane measures to reduce human numbers, gradually and non-coercively. Recognizing that humanity is bumping up against ecological limits to economic growth, conservationists should avoid any temptation to make our peace with the current endless growth economy. Instead, a central part of our agenda should involve creating a truly sustainable economy: one that recognizes limits to growth.

Above all, conservationists should affirm the right of every species on Earth to pursue its unique destiny, free from human-caused extinction. I believe such a course is morally and prudentially superior to uncritically embracing the Anthropocene era.

Acceptable and unacceptable change

I agree with Peter Kareiva and Emma Marris that we have entered the Anthropocene era. Where I part company with them is in their *embrace* of the Anthropocene.

Sometimes, the Anthropocene is presented as a positive good, as when Marris rhapsodizes over how much more biodiverse Los Angeles is today than it would have been one hundred or two hundred years ago, before people came and planted so many species of exotic trees; or, about the many opportunities we have to today to *create* new nature. According to Marris, embracing the Anthropocene is “a much more optimistic and a much more fruitful way of looking at things.... If you only care about pristine wilderness ... you’re fighting a defensive action that you can never ultimately win, and every year there’s less of it than there was the year before.... But if you’re focused on the other values of nature and goals of nature, then you can go around creating more nature, and our kids can have a world with more nature on it than there is now.”³

Sometimes, the Anthropocene is seen as regrettable, but *inevitable*. “Look, I don’t like this brave new world any more than you do,” some Anthropocenists say. “But you are just kidding yourself if you think this juggernaut can be stopped, or even slowed. It is a new reality to which we have to adjust, if we hope to achieve maximal conservation.”

There is some truth to this: conservationists do have to make our shifts with “the way things are,” if we hope to achieve conservation victories out in the real world. But conservation also involves *changing* the way things are, and raising the alarm that “the way things are” will lead to great losses. Too often, proponents of the Anthropocene seem more interested in *normalizing* these losses than in stopping them.

For example, in 1973, the US Congress, looking at “the way things were,” passed the Endangered Species Act. The ESA affirmed a national commitment to prevent any and all native species from going extinct due to human activities. The legislation specified that economic goals were not to be allowed to trump the very existence of other species.

Today, according to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, *Ursos arctos*, the grizzly bear, is threatened with extinction due to the effects of climate change. In fact, hundreds of thousands of species are threatened by extinction by climate change; according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s *Fourth Assessment Report*: “Approximately 20–30% of species assessed so far are likely to be at increased risk of extinction if increases in global average warming exceed 1.5–2.5°C.... As global average temperature increase exceeds about 3.5°C, model projections suggest significant extinctions (40–70% of species assessed) around the globe.”⁴

What do Anthropocene proponents have to say about species extinctions? Here is Peter Kareiva, in an article titled “Conservation in the Anthropocene”:

Ecologists and conservationists have grossly overstated the fragility of nature ... In many circumstances, the demise of formerly abundant species can be inconsequential to ecosystem function. The American chestnut, once a dominant tree in eastern North America, has been extinguished by a foreign disease, yet the forest ecosystem is surprisingly unaffected. The passenger pigeon, once so abundant that its flocks darkened the sky, went extinct, along with countless other species from the Steller’s sea cow to the dodo, with no catastrophic or even measurable effects.⁵

About the polar bear in particular, which to many people symbolizes the threat of climate change to wild nature, Kareiva has this to say:

Even that classic symbol of fragility—the polar bear, seemingly stranded on a melting ice block—may have a good chance of surviving global warming if the changing environment continues to increase the populations and northern ranges of harbor seals and harp seals. Polar bears evolved from brown bears 200,000 years ago during a cooling period in Earth’s history, developing a highly specialized carnivorous diet focused on seals. Thus, the fate of polar bears depends on two opposing trends—the decline of sea ice and the potential increase of energy-rich

prey. The history of life on Earth is of species evolving to take advantage of new environments only to be at risk when the environment changes again.⁶

Note the way Kareiva's account normalizes past extinctions and the possible extinction of the polar bear. That's just "the history of life," adapting or failing to adapt to changing conditions. Note the disappearance of any sense of *human agency* for the threat to the polar bear: the polar bear's fate depends on "two opposing trends" as "the environment changes"—not on whether or not humanity ratchets back greenhouse gas emissions. Finally, note the glibness with which Kareiva talks about the extinction of this magnificent beast.

Extinguishing species through the continued expansion of human economic activities is okay with Peter Kareiva, at least as long as we do not harm the "ecosystem services" upon which humanity depends for its own well-being. Well, it's not okay with me.⁷ I believe that if our actions threaten to extinguish the polar bear and a large fraction of the species on Earth, then we need to *change* our actions. And it seems to me that any real conservationist should agree. The problem with embracing the Anthropocene is that it accepts an unacceptable status quo.

We have a choice

Thankfully, we have a choice here. It is just not true that our only path is ever further into the Anthropocene. We can instead work to ratchet back the current, excessive human footprint on Earth, and make a place (many places!) for other species to also flourish on our common home planet.

Question: Does this talk about ratcheting back the human footprint, mean that people are "bad"? That they make natural areas "impure" by their very presence? That conservationists want to return to an imaginary, Edenic past of unsullied innocence?

Answer: of course not! People are great. Human culture, with all its achievements, is great. Cities can be great. But all of this is only great *within limits*.

Culture must be balanced by nature, in a well-rounded person or society. People need to limit how much habitat and other resources we engross, in order to leave enough for other species to flourish. An appreciation of limits and a recognition of the need for this balance, I think, are the key differences between those who embrace the Anthropocene and those who seek to create something better.

In any case, I insist that we have a choice in these matters: about whether or not to further the human domination of the world. Consider the conservation goals I suggested earlier:

- We can work to expand the number and size of parks and protected areas, or not. We can work, where possible, to keep biodiversity protection their primary mission, rather than resource extraction or other human economic uses.
- We can work within mixed-use, "working landscapes" to prioritize biodiversity protection rather than commodity production or other human economic uses.
- We can work to lessen human impacts that degrade wildlife habitat, such as air and water pollution. (We know that Everglades National Park is not "pristine," still, we can take steps which will significantly decrease the phosphorus running into the park, or not. It is a choice.)

- We can work to stop the transfer of exotic species into new areas. (We know that international trade will continue to transfer species around the world. But we can take steps to limit those transfers, or throw up our hands. It is a choice.)
- We can work to stabilize and then reduce human numbers, gradually and non-coercively.⁸ (We know that it is very likely that the human population will continue to grow over the next few decades. But the United Nations Population Fund estimates that 215 million women around the world have an unmet need for contraception; meeting that need could help reduce the world population in 2060 from a medium or “most likely” 9.4 billion to 8.2 billion people instead. Conservationists can engage with population policy debates, or to continue to neglect them. It is a choice.)
- Finally, we can work to explore alternatives to the endless growth economy; or, like the proponents of the Anthropocene, we can redefine conservation in its service, and cut our goals to fit what the current, life-destroying system gives us. Here again, I affirm that conservationists have a choice. With the evidence continuing to grow that humanity is bumping up against ecological limits, even those who only care about people have good reason to begin to look for alternatives to the economic status quo. Those of us who care about wild nature have even more reason to do so.

We need to move from an economy premised on the goal of ever-more stuff for ever-more people, to an economy designed to provide a sufficiency for a limited number of people. I do not know what this will look like, in detail, and I do not mean to say that land managers and other conservationists should drop all our current efforts to preserve what wild nature we can within the current system. However, we need to be realistic, as the Anthropocene advocates advise. *There is no long-term future for wild nature under the economic status quo.* Along with our current work, then, conservationists need to begin working on the transition to a truly sustainable economy: one that respects ecological limits.

Above all, those of us who care about wild nature need to affirm that it is *wrong* for humanity to displace and dominate nature. It is wrong to drive other species extinct; wrong to create a world in which whether or not other species live or die depends solely on our whims, or on whether they can manage to survive in the interstices of our economic projects; wrong to further tame or displace Earth’s remaining wild lands. Aldo Leopold said it well, sixty-five years ago, in *A Sand County Almanac*: “A land ethic cannot of course prevent the alteration, management and ‘use’ of these ‘resources’ [wild lands and other species], but it does affirm their right to continued existence, and, at least in spots, their continued existence in a natural state.” This generous and just view must remain a cornerstone of our conservation philosophy.

Endnotes

1. Andrew Revkin, video interview, “Emma Marris Explores Earth’s ‘Rambunctious Garden,’” embedded in Andrew Revkin, “Emma Marris: In Defense of Everglades Python,” *New York Times* Dot.earth blog, August 17, 2012.
2. Peter Kareiva and Michelle Marvier, “What is Conservation Science?,” *BioScience* 62 (2012): 962–969.

3. Revkin interview with Marris.
4. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report* (Geneva: IPCC), 51–52. Online at www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar4/syr/ar4_syr.pdf.
5. Peter Kareiva, Robert Lalasz, and Michelle Marvier, “Conservation in the Anthropocene: Beyond Solitude and Fragility,” *Breakthrough Journal* (Fall, 2011): 33.
6. *Ibid.*, 34–35.
7. Winthrop Staples III and Philip Cafaro, “For a Species’ Right to Exist,” *Life on the Brink: Environmentalists Confront Overpopulation*, Philip Cafaro and Eileen Crist, eds. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 283–300.
8. Philip Cafaro and Eileen Crist, *op. cit.*

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