

## Conservation Science Shouldn't Be All About Us

By [Marc Bekoff, Psychology Today / Animals Emotions](#)

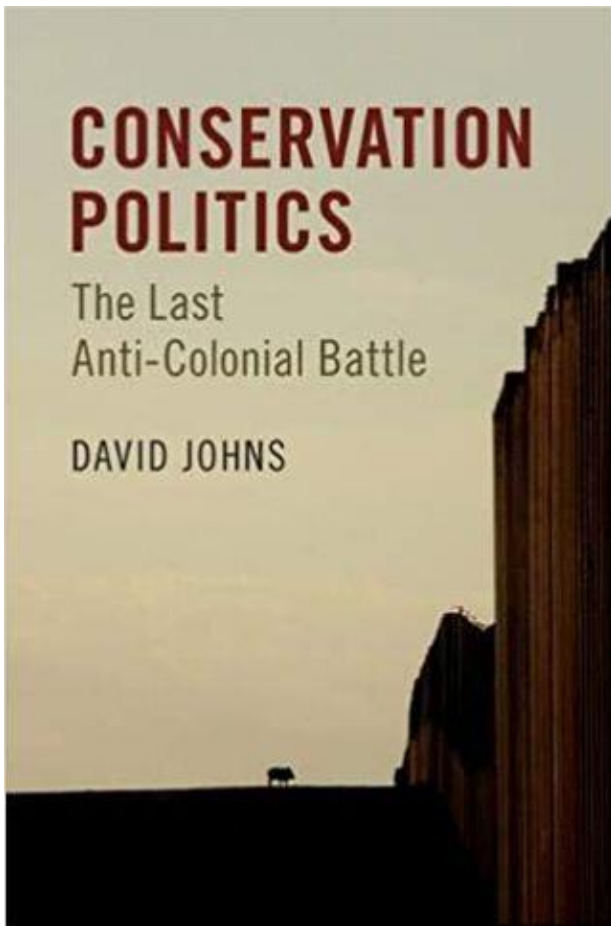
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David Johns writes about freeing Earth and other species from human domination: "We live in a time that may in the future be called The Great Dying."

It's my pleasure to offer this interview with conservation activist, political scientist, lawyer, and strategist Dr. David Johns about the invaluable and forward-looking essays in his book *Conservation Politics: The Last Anti-Colonial Battle*.<sup>1</sup> His words are an excellent sequel to two previous pieces about the perils of human-centered conservation, [Do Individual Wolves Care If Their Species Is on the Brink?](#) and [The Personal Side of Extinction: The Case of Orca Scarlet](#).

### Why did you write *Conservation Politics*?

We live in a time that may in the future be called The Great Dying. Many of the world's forests are gone, replaced by tree farms. Some creatures are gone forever, extinguished by an explosion of human population and consumption, roads and dams and toxic chemicals. Almost 70 percent of the world's vertebrate populations have been snuffed out in the last two human generations, as we have stolen their homes, taken their lives, paved over their food or converted it to our food, eaten them, caused disease, and spread plastic everywhere. With a mixture of intention, thoughtlessness, self-absorption, and clumsiness, human societies have brought about this great loss. There are some people, of course, who are awake, who feel the outrage and sadness, and have acted to save our covoyagers and their livelihoods.



Source: David Johns, with permission

## Conservation Science Shouldn't Be All About Us

Page 2 of 3

This book is mostly addressed to them and how they can be more effective at what they do. Conservation is at heart an anti-colonial struggle. It's an effort to free the Earth and other species from human domination and control.

In *Conservation Politics*, I try to summarize the lessons of other such efforts and make them available to those engaged in helping life. We don't have to invent the wheel—we have dismantled oppressive regimes before.

The real challenge, which this book can only encourage but not bring about, is to generate caring and reconnection. But I hope to generate a greater focus on underlying causes and encourage decisive action. We need to be unafraid of where dismantling colonialism takes us.

### **How does your book relate to your background and general areas of interest?**

In another time, I was engaged with civil rights in the US, and halting aggressive wars aimed at peasants in Vietnam, Nicaragua, and elsewhere. For whatever reason, I experienced injustice against others personally and felt the need to act. Even then, I felt those struggles against injustice were incomplete. One did not have to dig too deep to find limits to justice; human progress was built on the exploitation and domination of the non-human world. Endless growth—the ideology of the cancer cell as Edward Abbey called it—was considered a foundational good, as if no one had to pay the price. I recognized that to seek justice for humans and balance the books on the back of Nature was not a solution to the problem, but I was still struggling to articulate it.

### **What are some of your major messages?**

The challenge conservation presents to the status quo is social, economic, cultural, but primarily political. As with slavery, labor, and women's rights, ending apartheid and toppling oppressive regimes there must be a clear and bold vision. In the case of conservation, settling aside at least half the Earth for other species is critical. Humans are one species among millions; we take too much. Since the early 1990s, it has been argued that setting aside half—the right half—should ensure other species and ecosystems can thrive. E.O. Wilson lent his support to that early on and more recently announced his [Half-Earth](#) effort.

One reason having a vision is so important is that [goals](#) and strategy flow from it. Vision is the foundation of any effort, the place from which one starts. Without it, one becomes bogged down in the near term and never gets beyond it. Movement toward the vision involves starting with it and backing up to the present, step by step. It's the art of changing what's possible, not the art of the possible. Abolitionists were constantly told that slavery ran too deep and was too essential to be ended. But they kept at it. Perseverance is essential.

Politics is a primitive business: fundamental change involves creating sustained political action and pressure—an organization or organizations that can reward decision-makers for doing the right thing, punish those that do not, or replace them. Organizations of activists—check writers can't generate the needed energy and commitment—must overcome the pressure brought by opponents. As one official put it: Don't expect me to do the right thing; make me. Our own movement over the decades, and other social movements, remind us that we must not only mobilize and organize people but make a change on a variety of fronts simultaneously. Institutions, some very large and deeply rooted such as militaries, banks, energy, transport, and chemical must be transformed or dismantled. Wildlife-friendly institutions must be created. People, especially children, must become re-embedded in the natural world as part of socialization and enculturation. Literature, film, theater, song, ritual, and other cultural practices must come to reflect an intimate, compassionate, and caring relationship with the natural world, even though the world is not always friendly. We need new mythology; rather than one based on human suffering, we need one that embraces all life, not just humans, and focuses on this world and not the millennium.

## Conservation Science Shouldn't Be All About Us

Page 3 of 3

Hierarchy is a result of large-scale society. With fewer of us, hierarchy becomes superfluous and we can afford to be generous rather than selfish about the Earth.

Mobilizing and organizing can only be based on a combination of emotion—caring, a strong feeling for justice—need states such as belonging, and the cognitive: values, [morality](#), stories about the sacred. Too often NGOs focus on only one, and academics tend to study only the last. Political practitioners tend to focus on emotion, but only for the short term. The key to conservation is the long term—pressure must be sustained over the long haul as those forces which corrode life are dismantled.

We have an obligation to the Wild—self-willed lands, creatures, waters. Historically, it is our home whether we can feel it or not. We cannot be at home on the Earth if we base it on stealing the homes of others.<sup>2</sup>

There will be many paths to protecting half of the Earth. We are still a distance away. Less than 3% of the ocean is strictly protected. About 12% of the terrestrial Earth is highly protected, but unlike the oceans, there is no independent verification. Governments make claims and no international body will challenge them. One path to protection is political campaigns—national and global-- that demand protection. These may succeed depending on how well organized conservationists are, their leverage, and what is at stake: good soil, minerals, oil, water, hydropower. Much also depends on what is being demanded and by who. Big NGOs are inclined to compromise to protect “access” to the powerful and appear reasonable. Grassroots campaigns are usually less willing to compromise but often trigger repression. A fundamental problem, as we know, is that lions, gorillas, and grizzly bears do not get to vote, have lunch with prime ministers, or to suggest to prime ministers that if they don't behave they will be lunch.

There are a variety of other paths to protection. Scientists have often led campaigns that can be quite effective if they have leverage for their goals such as foreign exchange earnings from tourism. Moral pressure may work, as with whaling by some countries—it also may not. But, conservation is mostly a moral fight. Marine conservation presents special issues. Marine mammals enjoy popular sympathy, but overall the ocean is alien to us. We don't tend to see the damage done unless fish disappear. When we look at the ocean, we see our reflection, and there is a [bias](#) that the ocean is too big to damage. We use water to ritually purify—but the ocean can be polluted.

Much conservation involves restoration of damaged areas, but little restoration is ecological in nature. Mostly restoration is meliorative—partial and involving only the recovery of those aspects favorable to humans.

Conservation will always be a fight because of societal inertia—millennia of hierarchy and efforts to control the world; because humans are myopic and selfish, because often conservationists don't understand power and the need to fight in the way Frederick Douglass did. “Power concedes nothing without a demand,” he wrote. “It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.”