**Conservation policy**

**Diverse contributions benefit people and nature**

James E.M. Watson1,2 and Julia P.G. Jones3

1 The University of Queensland, School of Earth and Environmental Sciences, St Lucia, QLD 4072, Australia

2 Global Conservation Program, Wildlife Conservation Society, Bronx, NY 10460, USA

3 College of Environmental Sciences and Engineering, Bangor University, Bangor LL57

\*corresponding author, email: julia.jones@bangor.ac.uk

***A survey of more than 9000 conservationists in 149 countries reveals that, despite broad diversity in people and ideas, the global conversation community is not divided. Conservation policy will benefit from drawing on this diversity as international negotiations around the post-2020 agenda for conservation proceed.***

The May 2019 publication of the United Nations’ first global assessment of the state of biodiversity was a stark reminder that urgent action is needed if we are to stem the drastic deterioration of biodiversity and ecosystem services1. Although there are clear calls for an ambitious and bold conservation agenda to underpin the post 2020 framework for the Convention of Biological Diversity2, there has been vigorous, and at times acrimonious, debate about the why, what and how of conservation3,4. Published positions have tended to emphasise differences in views and suggest marked polarization within the conservation community5,6. However, the results of a survey of more than 9,000 conservationists from 149 countries, presented by Sandbrook et al.7 in *Nature Sustainability*, reveal that although conservationists are a diverse group with varied values, there is a lot of agreement. Approaches that capitalise on this shared understanding, while acknowledging contentious and difficult issues, will be helpful in the tough negotiations ahead.

A lot of attention has been given to a supposed divide between ‘new conservation’, focusing on biodiversity’s importance to people and emphasising partnerships with corporations and market-based tools for delivering conservation8, and ‘traditional conservation’, which argues for the protection of nature for its own sake and emphasises the role of protected areas and regulation9. However, the extent to which these rather academic debates reflect the views of the range of people involved in formulating and implementing conservation policy and interventions around the world was not known. Sandbrook and colleagues’ survey took the pulse of the conservation movement and provides empirical evidence on the perspectives of a much wider group than those who contribute to academic discussions.

Understanding the views of the conservation movement is no easy task given that conservationists come from all corners of Earth and there is no simple way to access a representative sample. To overcome this challenge, the authors developed a web-based survey that gives the respondent instant feedback by showing where their responses position them relative to previous respondents. This feature made the survey satisfying to fill in and greatly increased its spread (more than 16,000 have now filled it in and it is still available to complete, http://www.futureconservation.org/). The survey comprises 38 questions with Likert-scale responses that assess respondents’ views on the underlying rationale for conservation, how goals should be set, and the appropriateness of various tools to achieve those goals. The survey was distributed via relevant listservs and through social media, targeted to reach the broadest range of geography and roles in conservation. Inevitably, there was an over-representation of English-speaking respondents with easy access to the internet, but the reach achieved was impressive and the responses are revealing.

The clearest finding was a unifying message. There is strong agreement that public support for conservation is necessary if it is to be sustainable, and that conservation goals need to be based on science (Fig. 1). There is also acknowledgement that the environmental impacts of the world’s rich (including most of us reading this paper) must be reduced. The most polarising questions included whether it is acceptable to displace people for the sake of conservation. Interestingly, there is a sense of positivity that such challenges can be overcome: most respondents reject the idea that ‘win-wins’ for people and nature are rarely possible (Fig. 1).

The authors identified three dimensions of conservation thinking. Strikingly, the vast majority of respondents were in favour of ‘people-centred conservation’ (strong recognition for the role of people as participants and stakeholders) and ‘science-led ecocentrism’ (valuing nature for its own sake as well as its benefits for people, and using science to ensure species and habitats are conserved). There was far less consensus around ‘conservation through capitalism’ (engaging with corporations, using market based approaches and justifying conservation on economic grounds). Contrary to what has been suggested by the new conservation versus traditional conservation debate, there is no evidence of conservationists dividing into different camps. The mix of views is perhaps evidence of pragmatic recognition that different approaches are suitable for different contexts.

Unsurprisingly, conservationists’ views are associated with characteristics such as gender, educational specialism, age, career seniority and nationality. Women, those with social science training and people from Africa, Asia and South and Central America in particular strongly favour approaches that put people at the centre of the conservation agenda (although few people of any background disagree with this dimension). Men and those from north America are more likely to favour science-led ecocentrism. Conservation through capitalism was most strongly favoured by respondents from Africa and those in a senior position.

We argue that the survey shows that there is broad consensus that the post-2020 conservation agenda must become more evidence based and outcome focussed (something the previous 2010 Aichi targets suffered from a lack of10). Operationalising these targets must be done in way to ensure the best possible outcomes for people as well as nature11,12. This means that as well as making use of scientific understanding to set the targets, policy makers must use the rapid increase in research from a range of disciplinary perspectives, including critical social science, to put equitable conservation implementation on a firmer footing 13,14.

The survey also highlights contentious issues which cannot be shied away from. Particularly challenging is placement and management of protected areas in ways that do not exclude and harm local people 15,16. Although protected areas remain vital to protect threatened species and habitats17, most biodiversity will continue to live beyond their boundaries18 and it is clear from the surveys that there is a lack of consensus around their overall use. Achieving the long-term aspirations of the Convention for Biological Diversity must mean significant increases in effective conservation activities beyond the protected area estate17,19, and this survey reinforces the need for the conservation community to actively embrace nuanced indigenous governance, tenure reforms and other private landowner stewardship arrangements as a fundamental part of operationalising conservation goals. This is where the breadth of the conservation community comes in. Its diversity is its strength. The post 2020 framework is an opportunity to bring this diversity together, capitalize on the learning from research, and agree a cohesive plan which puts global conservation on the best possible trajectory for the next decade.



**Figure 1** | **Conservationist consensus.** Responses to Sandbrook and colleagues’ Futures of Conservation survey7 reveal strong agreement in many areas, but views are polarised regarding the role of protected areas in conservation and the extent to which pristine nature exists (n=9264 from 149 countries; adapted from Sandbrook et al.7).

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