Like It or Not, Politics Is the Solution*

Over the 20-year life of the Society for Conservation Biology (SCB) huge strides in biological understanding have been made. Michael Soulé, one of SCB’s founders, recently noted that prior to the mid-1980s “there was virtually no awareness of edge effects, fragmentation effects, ecological sinks, extinction vortices, inbreeding effects in natural populations, habitat destruction in the seas, endocrine disruptors, island effects, ecological cascades, or top-down regulation and structuring of ecosystems by strongly interacting species,” to name only a few areas of advancement in conservation science. Soulé argues that we have enough biological information about species and ecosystems to propose effective conservation solutions in most cases. Even if this is an overstatement, two questions remain: Why has not this huge growth in biological knowledge made more of a difference? And what can be done to make more of a difference? When confronted with obstacles to conservation goals, the tendency of most natural scientists—the bulk of SCB’s global membership—is to generate more scientific findings in the hope that these findings will better persuade decision makers or otherwise guide the way. I believe this strategy is not working well because our inability to slow or halt the extinction crisis stems not from a lack of biological understanding, but from a lack of political understanding and will.

Powerful interests are arrayed against conservation, and they are deeply embedded in the organization of most societies. Virtually all societies are structurally committed to material growth and hence the transformation of ever more of nature into commodities. Many studies have documented that when humans take more, less is left for other species, and when ecosystems are domesticated or obliterated, they are no longer available to realize their autonomous evolutionary potential. There is no technological fix that will allow over 6 billion humans to generate commodities from nothing and leave nature intact. Men have been hard at work on making something from nothing for as long as there have been people, with little progress.

To counter the powerful interests bent on subduing all of nature requires organizing more-powerful interests on behalf of nature. First, this means recognizing that it needs to be done; second, it requires an understanding of how to do it; and third, it requires the will to act on that understanding. Absent political understanding and efficacy, even large amounts of biological information are inadequate to achieve conservation goals. Only engagement in the political realm can slow, halt, and reverse the destruction of nature. The ability to affect the outcomes of collective decision making (i.e., be influential) is not mostly about providing information, although it can be helpful. Influence is mostly about bringing political resources—money, votes, media, direct action—to bear in the processes of selecting leaders, making policy choices, and carrying out policy. Most simply, it is about being able to help friends and punish opponents. Conservationists make progress when they are clear and uncompromising about their goals and flexible about means, and when they can convince their opponents they will never tire or go away.

Consider the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA) as an example. On the statute books since 1973, this law requires the U.S. federal government to rely on scientific findings in making determinations about listing species as threatened or endangered and in developing recovery plans. All U.S. administrations have resisted implementing the law to some degree, mostly due to the influence of resource interests. Resistance to the law has been most successful when conservationists have not been part of the coalition that elected the executive branch or the congressional majority. The difference this can make is plainest when comparing the last two administrations: Bill Clinton, who was elected with conservation support, and George W. Bush, who was elected over conservation opposition and with the strong support of extractive industries. The Clinton administration was hardly vigorous in carrying out its duties, but on the whole it undertook significant ESA enforcement. The Bush administration, in contrast, has repeatedly broken the law. It has routinely ignored science in decision making, suppressed and distorted scientific findings of agency staff, slowed the listing process to a crawl, refused to list species that should be
listed, and encouraged legal challenges from industry to the law’s implementation, and then offered to settle with them in court.

The Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y) is illustrative from a geographical perspective. This U.S.-Canadian effort to protect the last great refuge of many of North America’s wide-ranging species has invested heavily in biological research to inform decisions about new protected areas and landscape connectivity. Despite similar amounts of scientific research and understanding north and south of the border, conservation results have been different. On the Canadian side new parks have been created in the region, informed by conservation biology principles. The biologically important expansion of Waterton Park is on the agenda. Parks Canada has adopted many conservation biology principles in its land and aquatic management. On the U.S. side, despite some important strides at the state level and with private lands conservation, the experience within the Y2Y region has been one of reversals: the roadless rule rescission, efforts to delist wolves and grizzlies, refusal to list threatened fish species, allowing snowmobiles in the backcountry of Yellowstone, and permitting more oil and gas development along the Rocky Mountain front. These differing results cannot be explained by a difference in biology, biological findings, or the respect accorded scientists by the public. The difference is political. In Canada conservationists have been part of the winning federal electoral coalition (until the recent narrow win by conservatives). On the U.S. side conservationists have been on the losing side and have been virtually shut out of the federal government. (They will have more influence in the new Congress because the majority was elected with conservation help.)

To keep things in perspective, despite the greater political effectiveness of conservationists in Canada, it is no ecological paradise. Conservationists have been unable to pass a strong Canadian ESA, fisheries policies remain shortsighted, and many provincial governments are hostile to conservation. The point is this—even where conservation efforts are doing better, we are still not doing well enough.

It is not reasonable to expect most natural scientists to master the political literature or become expert political operatives. But all must recognize that if they are involved in conservation, they are involved in policy and politics whether they want to be or not. To be effective at conservation requires

- understanding the political as well as the biological landscape, including understanding opponents (too often conservationists are surprised by how unprincipled the opposition is. To be outraged is one thing—but to be surprised means one is not paying attention);
- recognizing who the key players are and especially who the decision makers are with respect to an issue; and
- understanding how to influence these players.

Effectiveness also depends on natural scientists’ clear understanding of their direct role in influencing decision makers and, perhaps more important, in catalyzing those who in turn influence decision makers. Conservation scientists alone are not influential enough; allies are critical. It is incumbent on conservation scientists to figure out how to be persuasive with important audiences and how to talk to nonscientists or to people who do not share conservation values.

To have influence one must have the ability to move others to action. It is action that counts in politics, not what people say they believe. Going to decision makers and telling them the polls are with us does not count for much, if anything, because they understand most people do not cast their votes based on conservation issues. Only when people act (vote, lobby, organize, contribute, join NGOs) on behalf of conservation will decision makers listen.

*Where* can natural scientists get the political understanding and advice they need? The best means is by developing relationships with political practitioners and social scientists. If you are an ornithologist and at some point realize that snakes are unexpectedly eating your study animals, you might study the snakes—or you would more likely (at least to begin with) consult a herpetologist. This strategy works for gathering political knowledge as well. There is no need to reinvent the wheel here. A huge reservoir of knowledge exists on the basis of experience and research in, for example, issue campaigning, electoral campaigning, community organizing, coalition building, movement building, agenda setting, and timing and tactics. Conservation biology, as a multidisciplinary science and profession that seeks to generate and synthesize the knowledge needed to make a difference, can learn much from social movements. The labor, civil rights, indigenous peoples’ and women’s movements have a deep history with many successes and some spectacular failures, all offering lessons. Much can also be learned from the opposition about strategy, tactics, and political discipline.

It may be that the more effective we are politically, the less need there is for detailed biological information. If we can successfully protect big, unfragmented landscapes, nature is more likely to be able to take care of itself. Members of SCB know better than anyone else in the world what needs to be done to save life on Earth. That knowledge—and the proposals that come from that knowledge—will be for naught if we lack political effectiveness.

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