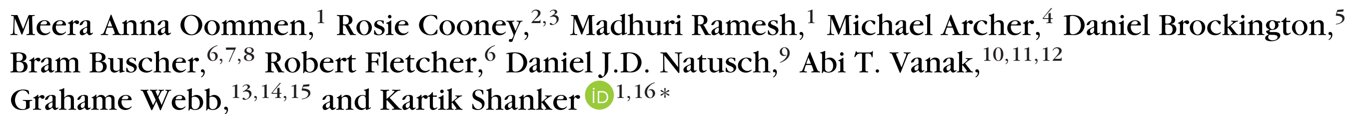
Conservation Biology

Comment

The fatal flaws of compassionate conservation



Meera Anna Oommen,[1] Rosie Cooney,[2,3] Madhuri Ramesh,[1] Michael Archer,[4] Daniel Brockington,[5] Bram Buscher,[6,7,8] Robert Fletcher,[6] Daniel J.D. Natusch,[9] Abi T. Vanak,[10,11,12] Grahame Webb,[13,14,15] and Kartik Shanker[1,16]*

[1]Dakshin Foundation, 1818, 5th Main, 9th Cross, Sahakar Nagar C Block, Bengaluru 560092, India
[2]IUCN CEESP/SSC Sustainable Use and Livelihoods Specialist Group, c/ Rue Mauverney 28, 1196, Gland, Switzerland
[3]Fenner School of Environment and Society, Australian National University, 0200 ACT, Australia
[4]PANGEA Research Center, School of Biological, Earth & Environmental Sciences, University of New South Wales Sydney, NSW, 2052, Australia
[5]Sheffield Institute for International Development, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, South Yorkshire S10 2TN, U.K.
[6]Sociology of Development and Change, Wageningen University, De Leeuwenborch, Hollandseweg 1, 6707 Wageningen, KN, The Netherlands
[7]Department of Geography, Environmental Management and Energy Studies, University of Johannesburg, South Africa
[8]Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa
[9]Department of Biological Sciences, Macquarie University, North Ryde, NSW 2109, Australia
[10]Centre for Biodiversity and Conservation, ATREE Royal Enclave, Sriramapura, Jakkur Post, Bengaluru 560064, India
[11]School of Life Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa
[12]DBT/Wellcome Trust India Alliance Fellow, Hyderabad, India
[13]Wildlife Management International Pty. Limited, P.O. Box 530 Karama, NT, 0813 Australia
[14]Research Institute for the Environment and Livelihoods, Charles Darwin University, Darwin, NT, 0909, Australia
[15]IUCN-SSC Crocodile Specialist Group, c/ Rue Mauverney 28, 1196, Gland, Switzerland
[16]Centre for Ecological Sciences Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, 560012, India

Introduction

Climate change, overconsumption, land-use intensification, widespread pollution, and other environmentally damaging factors are threatening Earth's biodiversity and its ability to provide ecosystem services essential for human survival. Efforts to address this systemic degradation require a species- and ecosystem-based focus and an equal focus on the well-being of people depending on wild resources.

Instead, Wallach et al. (2018) champion the cause of wildlife individuals as the primary focus for action under the framework of compassionate conservation. According to them, compassionate conservation "aims to safeguard Earth's biological diversity while retaining a commitment to treating individuals with respect and concern for their well-being." The 4 key tenets of this approach include: "do no harm; individuals matter; inclusivity; and peaceful coexistence" (Wallach et al. 2018:1258). They attempt to argue that compassionate conservation is the ethically most defensible approach to conservation. We agree that compassion is a laudable attribute, and support efforts to ensure ethical treatment of animals and to reduce unnecessary suffering. But, Wallach et al. propose an alarmingly simplistic approach based on concern for the welfare of individual wild animals irrespective of whether the focus on individuals threatens the survival of other life forms, including human beings, or actually delivers on conservation goals.

Our view is that compassionate conservation as conceptualized by Wallach et al. is seriously flawed. Compassion need not preclude humanely killing an animal if that reduces the animal's suffering, enhances the survival of the species or its habitat, or safeguards human life or other more threatened species. But Wallach et al. argue that to be compassionate, one should not kill animals for any reason. Furthermore, it is deeply problematic that proponents of compassionate conservation claim the

*email kshanker@gmail.com
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concept is ethically expansive when it focuses on the well-being of individual wild animals without adequately considering the well-being or worldviews of the many humans who live in proximity to wildlife. Better conservation practice requires that conservation professionals recognize the outcomes and consequences of their recommendations and actions (Saberwal & Kothari 1996; Jacobson & McDuff 1998).

Taken as a whole, Wallach et al.'s assertions: ignore or misrepresent a range of multidisciplinary insights that augment long-term conservation, including from ecology, anthropology, psychology, and history; ignore and potentially threaten the lives, livelihoods, and worldviews of indigenous peoples and local communities, especially resource-dependent communities in the developing world; and are simplistic in that they expect that one moral code can be applied globally without compromising ethical and moral obligations to humans.

Moreover, the evidence Wallach et al. assembled to support compassionate conservation is far from convincing. To highlight their erroneous assertions, we examine the limitations of their proposed universal moral code based on sentience. We also question their portrayal of India, a country that opposes the killing and use of wildlife, as a model for compassionate conservation. Through this, we seek to reveal the links between conservation ideals, practice, and outcomes in order to advocate for a consequentialist approach.

Sentience and Morality

The practical human costs of overplaying the moral salience of sentience and sapience in nonhuman animals are non-trivial. Neumann (2004) cautions against conservationists indulging in moral extensionism or humanization of wild animals and the artificial attribution of moral standing to nonhuman agents. He points to the influence of these new moral and discursive geographies in African parks, where violence has become normalized through the execution of suspected human villains (poachers), effectively imposing capital punishment without due process. This radical reordering of the moral standing of African poachers (and resource users) in relation to wild animals does not recognize the fact that the former are often the product of difficult social, economic, and political circumstances well beyond their control or are assuming traditional roles relative to wildlife that have suddenly been deemed unacceptable by conservationists.

Although Wallach et al. arrive at compassionate conservation from the perspective of virtue ethics, their ideas contribute to a distinct culture of personalizing and anthropomorphizing animals. Jepson et al. (2011) point out that transposing such concepts (e.g., elephants as companion species) to species involved in human-wildlife conflict trivializes the devastating violence people living in shared spaces have to contend with. They call for the inclusion of more subaltern and local views and specifically for the incorporation of "non-European ways of speaking for the elephant" (p. 172).

Local views can be remarkably compassionate. In many rural and traditional societies, wildlife—even that involved in significant conflict—is located within networks of reciprocal relations. Compassion and reverence for animals often go hand in hand with a multifaceted range of relationships that include eliminating problem animals, hunting for meat and sport, and deriving benefits from them, including religious and spiritual succor and companionship. Even dangerous species are incorporated into such frameworks, and individual animals involved in conflict are treated differently but in accordance with local worldviews (e.g., crocodiles [Pooley 2016]; elephants [Bird-David 1999]; leopards [Ghosal & Kjosavik 2015]). The problem with simplifying these relationships is (as, ironically, Wallach et al. themselves say) that it ends up "estranging conservation from prevailing social values" (p. 1261).

The Poor Man's India

Wallach et al. frame India as a model country through assertions that are at best uninformed. Stringing together arguments based on constitutional animal protection jurisprudence (the origins of which are highly antisecular), supposed low meat consumption, assumed general opposition to hunting, and poor characterization of conservation performance, the authors present India as an example that brings together the best principles of compassion to animals and conservation. Not only is this representation of India based on fallacious assertions about meat eating, its model of conservation can be described as compassionate and successful only if enduring and widespread brutality, impoverishment, coercion, and exclusion of marginalized communities by elites are ignored.

Wallach et al. portray India as a country with low meat consumption and production. But both historical and contemporary work on food habits in India reveal otherwise. An overwhelming majority of the population are not vegetarians, including nearly 80% of Indians over 15 years old (Census of India 2014). India is the second largest bovine meat exporter globally (FAO 2018). Many traditional societies in India also have long histories of hunting and harvesting animals. It is correct that per capita meat consumption is relatively low in comparison with Western levels. But this reflects the fact that India has the largest number of food-insecure people (FAO 2015); their limited access to animal protein is often linked to poverty and malnutrition.

The authors also overlook the critical fact that the food hierarchy in India is a function of an oppressive social

structure and heavily tied to power differentials between groups. The meat-eating habits of poor and marginalized sections of society, such as *dalit* groups, are often considered polluting by the dominant (typically vegetarian) castes and are subject to public criticism. While the recent ban on cow slaughter is couched by its proponents in terms of agricultural efficiency, *ahimsa* (nonviolence), and compassion, it has resulted in a spate of beef lynchings, in which people from minority groups have been killed for allegedly killing cows. Escalating communal violence across the country demonstrates the not-so-benign (and highly uncompassionate) consequences of pursuing compassion for animals but not people (Ramdas 2018). The compassionate conservation Wallach et al. advocate is in fact aligned with fundamentalist, divisive ideologies that perpetrate violence. Can conservation that is so socially oppressive truly be considered compassionate?

Wallach et al. also fail to acknowledge that a primary orientation toward a preservationist agenda combined with the so-called compassionate animal rights laws in India can be deeply problematic in the context of increasing human–wildlife conflict. Each year, several hundred human and many elephant deaths are reported due to encounters with each other. More dramatically, there are an estimated 20,000 deaths caused annually by rabies (Hampson et al. 2015) and ~40,000 human fatalities from snakebite (Mohapatra et al. 2011). However, animal rights agendas and general prohibitions on culling and lethal control prevent targeted control or the elimination of problematic groups, such as stray dogs, even when the victims of attacks are often small children. Wallach et al. do not address the fact that, in such situations, failure to eliminate dangerous animals due to misguided and excessively narrow ethics can have lethal consequences for people and other animals.

Conclusion

There are fundamental flaws with compassionate conservation. It is the product of blinkered thinking—a failure to understand the interconnected nature of living creatures and a heedless disregard for the current scale of environmental and social problems. Human dimensions apart, this philosophical agenda is counterproductive in the long run because it is predicated on the presumption that the welfare of individual animals should be inviolate, regardless of practical conservation outcomes. Within this framework, programs that manage entire populations, species, or habitats based on consumptive sustainable use (e.g., Fukuda et al. 2011; Naidoo et al. 2016) cannot be supported, regardless of conservation success.

Ignoring the consequences of conservation action on human well-being, especially if the goal is to be "ethically expansive," is problematic. As Guha (1989) argues in his critique of deep ecology, the social consequences of universalizing ideas such as compassionate conservation in places with different sociocultural moorings can result in significant problems, typically with the worst outcomes for already marginalized humans. As practicing conservationists, biologists, and social scientists, we argue that conservation needs to be responsive to the complexity of real-world situations. Theoretical platforms for conservation that ignore empirical practice and political contestation are unlikely to be just, effective, or sustainable.

The ethical and moral foundations of all societies are strongly context dependent. Conservationists should not presume that one set of anthropomorphized, culturally specific values is universally applicable to all and independent of regional factors or local politics (Gavin et al. 2018). We therefore argue for a broader, culturally informed approach to conservation that fully considers and utilizes the diversity of values and uses of nature.

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