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Culture and Conservation: Beyond Anthropocentrism

Nathan Poirier
Canisius College

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BOOK REVIEWS

Culture and Conservation: Beyond Anthropocentrism

ELEANOR SHOREMAN-OUIMET
AND HELEN KOPNINA
ROUTLEDGE,
OXFORDSHIRE, UK, 2016
256 PP. \$145 HARDCOVER; \$54.95 KINDLE

REVIEWED BY NATHAN POIRIER

Culture and Conservation: Beyond Anthropocentrism by Eleanor Shoreman-Ouimet and Helen Kopnina is an attempt to help resolve conflicts between the disciplines of conservation and anthropology while preserving the interests of both. Book chapters range widely in topics touching on many ways this could be accomplished. Considering that anthropologists frequently work with people and places that are situated at the nexus of where culture and conservation collide, each chapter tackles a different aspect of conservation and how anthropologists can play a pivotal role. A few overarching themes dominate: human overpopulation, taking a practical and balanced approach to conservation, and extending conservation concerns within anthropology to include nonhuman species.

Discussion of human overpopulation is ubiquitous throughout the book. Population growth, density and sheer size are continually brought up as contributing in multiple ways to exacerbating issues surrounding both human rights and conservation issues. The authors point out the folly of both conservationists and their detractors in not acknowledging the

significant and pervasive role human numbers play: more people simply consume more. This plays into the hands of capitalists insatiably looking for new or growing markets. This in turn brings infrastructure development which serves to crowd out many Indigenous peoples. Many other problems caused by too many people, as well as the added pressures population puts on social and environmental justice, education, gender equality and species extinctions, are raised throughout the book alerting the reader that overpopulation is indeed an issue *now*, and its consequences can be seen and felt in human and nonhuman based rights or conservation work.

A second major theme within *Culture and Conservation* is embracing a balanced approach to conservation. The authors are skeptical of tactics that use economics as an incentive for conservation such as Payments for Ecosystem Services or Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation. However, they also speak favorably about differing approaches to conservation when these methods translate into efficacy.

An important example of trying to balance the needs of all living creatures is found in the Introduction where the authors suggest 'industrocentrism' as a means for one to grasp what is at the core of conservation issues. Industrocentrism is used as a framework for finding common ground from which to unite proponents of either the ecocentric philosophy or the anthropocentric philosophy. There has been a historic divide between these two schools of thought but the modern capitalist economy is a point of intersection. As both humans and nonhumans have been devalued in the relentless pursuit of international development, industrocentrism encourages an attitude that both earth systems and living beings are vulnerable and likewise all should be protected. Thus, instead of arguing whether an ecocentric or anthropocentric worldview is more appropriate, the authors suggest that efforts should be unified towards addressing the harms caused to both humans and nonhumans by modern globalized industry.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 handle topics such as conflicts between mainstream vs. grassroots conservation (Ch. 3); the usefulness of local community involvement in conservation (Ch. 4); and the efficacy of incentive-based approaches (Ch. 5). Each side of these debates is carefully considered. For example, in regard to mainstream versus alternative conservation, the authors observe that in some cases, multinational organizations, while usually viewed as a threat, can play an important role in environmental protection simply because they possess the resources needed to achieve results. However, the concomitant risks are also noted when nature is treated as a commodity that can be traded or profited from. Further, large but influential incentive-based programs like Payments for Ecosystem Services or Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation also do not necessarily help protect biodiversity and can oversimplify the ecological value of organisms.

The mainstream approach is then balanced with careful consideration of grassroots activism from the Environmental Liberation Front and the Animal Liberation Front. Such groups are presented as steeped in ethics with a respect for all life, noting how such groups have regularly acknowledged and fought for indigenous rights. Thus, there are lessons to be gleaned from both mainstream and non-mainstream organizations and hence, conservationists and anthropologists may be best advised to at times use strategies from both.

The third major thrust is a broadening of conservation discourse to include issues beyond human interests only, extending out to the planet itself. For some authors and/or readers, the subtitle *Beyond Anthropocentrism* might imply extending considerations only to certain (and likely charismatic) species. However, this could be another form of anthropocentrism as this would mean humans are basing moral considerations on human interests. Shoreman-Ouimet and Kopnina range further, considering the needs of *all* those affected—both human and nonhuman animals, plants, and ecological systems.

As an example, Chapter 6 discusses a multi-species ethic inclusive of animals, plants and the environment. Particularly interesting is a section on ethical considerations for plants. Cultural history is examined via ethnobotany to highlight the close and sometimes personal relationships and interdependencies of plants and humans. Attention is given to modern scholarship arguing that moral considerations should be extended to plants in an effort to help protect against ecological ravishing and to move beyond seeing any part of nature as a commodity for irresponsible use. If humans could accept the idea that plant life is indeed inherently valuable, then this would likely spread upwards to include nonhuman animal and human life too.

In the political realm, Chapter 7 invites the reader to consider the idea of extending democracy to include nonhuman species. Environmental justice is defined as addressing the imbalance caused by “inequitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens” resulting from “unequal exposure to environmental risks” (147). Shoreman-Ouimet and Kopnina bravely and honestly dispel the myth that the rich cause all the damage; the poor do as well due to their more rapidly rising population and overall larger numbers striving to consume as developed nations do. We also read that while some indigenous cultures have had a nonthreatening impact on the environment, one needs to be reminded that many traditional practices no longer exist, but have been converted to modern means of production. Thus, everyone has a responsibility to protect the environment. This includes a responsibility towards nonhuman species as they deserve their fair share of natural resources as well.

Purely human-centered or eco-centered environmental justice claims do not take the needs of the other group fully into account, though. To provide equality, the case is made that nonhuman species should be given fair consideration in the democratic process on the basis that to do otherwise constitutes discrimination and a form of environmental *injustice*. This is especially true given that nonhumans comprise the

vast majority of Earth's inhabitants, and that the very survival of other species may hang in the balance. However, alone, democracy may be insufficient due to a tendency to settle on short-term fixes that have the veneer of success but are not actually stable over time.

An unfortunate omission of this book is the threat that meat consumption poses to culture and conservation. In addition to its major contribution to climate change, animal agriculture's rapid development in the least developed areas of the globe is dispersing, enslaving and/or killing human and nonhuman occupants (Steinfeld et al. 2006). This puts enormous strains on goals of effectively protecting endangered species, human rights, or environmental justice. *Culture and Conservation* treats population at length but leaves out any significant mention of the effects of animal agriculture. Culture plays a major role in food choice and perception of the nonhuman world and this seems like a missed opportunity to bring in the impediments of eating animals to conservation and anthropology as another source of common ground.

Overall, the authors embrace an intersectional viewpoint condemning all oppression and championing equal and fair treatment for all in the name of conservation, and hopefully, within anthropology. Widely agreed upon by anthropologists is that letting individual people and/or cultures die out is completely unacceptable. Yet an analogous viewpoint towards the disappearance of nonhumans is not held by many in anthropology and the disappearance of nonhumans is often considered acceptable. An early question the authors pose resonates vibrantly throughout the book, "whether anyone, advantaged or disadvantaged, has the right to prioritize their own interests to the extent that other lives are deemed expendable" (33).

This book is particularly aimed at students, who have a special interest or are taking classes in introductory, environmental, or sociocultural anthropology, and practitioners of anthropology. Those in other social sciences or conservation could access this book

just as well. Upper-level undergraduates through experienced researchers could all find something valuable in this book. The hefty price may be the biggest hindrance for acquiring a physical copy, although a Kindle version is available at about a third the cost.

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