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**Involving Anthropology**

*Special Forum: Environmental and Social Justice?  
The Ethics of the Anthropological Gaze*

HELEN KOPNINA

Nobody Likes Dichotomies (But Sometimes You Need Them)

VERONICA STRANG

Comment: Dichotomies: Yes We Need Them, But Not as Much as We Think

THOMAS REUTER

Comment: Nature and the Self: Liberal Individualism is the Problem, not the Solution

PAIGE WEST

Comment: An Anthropology for 'The Assemblage of the Now'

HELEN KOPNINA

Rejoinder: Nobody likes Dichotomies (But Sometimes we Need Them)

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**Nobody Likes Dichotomies (but sometimes you need them)**

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**Abstract**

*Environmental anthropologists attempt to accommodate social justice while seeking to reconcile more-than-human relations and responsibilities towards their habitats. This article acknowledges areas of tension between local livelihoods and international conservation efforts, between indigenous peoples and wildlife, between traditional lifeways and development, and finally between different types of ethical assumptions that underlie anthropological advocacy. A number of dichotomies that are inherent in these tensions are discussed. With regard to the ecocentric / anthropocentric dichotomy, I argue that while human and environmental interests are sometimes intertwined, ecocentrism is necessary if non-humans are to be protected outside of utilitarian interests. With regard to the ‘neoliberal conservation / local communities’ dichotomy, I argue that blaming conservation for the violation of social justice depoliticises the issue of ecological injustice. Through a critical discussion of these dichotomies, the article examines the role of environmental anthropology in addressing today’s pressing environmental issues, particularly the loss of biodiversity, with respect to the “conservation” of communities and that of protected areas.*

**Keywords:** anthropocentrism; conservation; ecological justice; environmental anthropology; neo-colonialism

**Introduction**

Environmental justice usually refers to social justice or peoples’ ‘rights to nature’, and to their unequal exposure to environmental risks and benefits (Gleeson and Low 1999). Sometimes, environmental justice includes ecological justice or ‘rights of nature’, referring to the justice between species (Kopnina 2014a). The advocates of the ‘rights to nature’ approach support different groups’ entitlements to the benefits derived from natural resources and ecosystem services (e.g. Chapin 2004; Corry 2011; Holmes 2013; Nonini 2013; Fletcher *et al* 2015).

Environmental anthropologists, political ecologists and human ecologists have focused their research and considerations on the social and economic rights of disadvantaged communities, on the unfair distribution of the benefits of conservation, or on the grievances caused by the establishment of protected areas (for example, Büscher 2014; Holmes 2013; Fletcher *et al* 2015; Duffy *et al* in press). Conservation is criticised for displacing local communities (for example, Chapin 2004), and privileging environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOs) or other parties with financial resources (e.g. West and Brockington 2012; Minter *et al* 2014). Anthropologists have highlighted the social inconsistencies associated with conservation alliances, arguing that they entrench economic inequality and require global consumption practices (such as in the domains of tourism or trophy hunting) to generate conservation revenue (e.g. West and Brockington 2012; Sullivan 2014).

In the context of neoliberal management, nature and conservation are often considered to be a social construction and to reflect ‘nature as capitalist imaginary’ (Fletcher *et al* 2015) by neo-colonial, elitist, western ‘environmentalists’ who have ‘produced nature’ (Castree 1995) or even ‘fictitious conservation’ (Büscher 2014). Some have argued that the intellectual and political dichotomisation of the ‘wild’ and ‘domesticated’, or the ecocentric and the anthropocentric, is artificial and unhelpful (for instance, Ingold and Pálsson 2013). In a tellingly-titled article, *Against Wilderness*, Fletcher (2009, 178-179) reflects: ‘So what we need is to eliminate the distinction between the wild and tame entirely, to realize that the “wild” is a human idea, that it has never truly existed as an objective reality, and that, in the final analysis, it has caused us more harm than good.’ Thus, he concludes, ‘...we find ourselves confronted with a counterintuitive truth: As long as we need wilderness we will never be free’ (2009, 178-179).

In opposition to this view stands the argument that wilderness is *not* socially contingent and that the recognition of nature is a cross-cultural phenomenon (Dunlap and York 2008). In Leopold’s (1949, 188) formulation, wilderness is ‘the raw material out of which man has hammered the artifact called civilization’. Leopold’s vision is that wilderness, interconnected with diversity, complexity, and subtlety, has been an inspiration and impetus for the multitude of human cultures that exist across the globe. This vision has profound implications for the cultural possibility of preserving nature before ‘the only wilderness that remains is one that is colonized, domesticated, and manufactured in the neoliberal image’ (Derby *et al* 2015, 384). Supporters of the ‘rights of nature’ perspective (e.g. Cafaro and Primack 2014; Kopnina 2012a, 2014a) point out that the refusal to acknowledge the objectivity of wilderness is a denial ‘that we are residents on a planet where there is nature that transcends humans, and that various organisms pursue their own lives independently of our culture’ (Rolston 1997, 40). Supporters of conservation point out the multiple instances of nonhuman displacement and ecocide, or killing of millions of nonhumans for meat or other uses, or destruction of or loss of ecosystem (Higgins 2010), and call for the recognition of ecological justice (e.g. Strang 2016). This is also the point of view this paper will discuss, and defend; it will do so by addressing the underlying anthropocentric bias and the question of “neo-colonialism”.

The following sections will address the tensions between human and indigenous rights on the one hand, and ecological justice on the other. It will begin by discussing the dichotomous

perspectives of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, and follow by exploring the related dichotomy between what is seen as neo-colonial, neoliberal conservation on the one hand, and marginalised local communities on the other. Following Strang (2016), I will argue that justice needs to be considered more broadly as something that depends not only on upholding the simultaneous common good of the human, but also of the non-human.

### **Anthropocentrism / Ecocentrism Dichotomy**

Anthropologists have often argued that the anthropocentrism versus ecocentrism (or biocentrism) dichotomy entrenches the problematic culture-nature dualism (e.g. Ingold and Pálsson 2013; Sullivan 2014). It is argued that political ecology cannot be properly conceptualised unless the Nature and Culture dichotomy is dissolved (for instance, Brockington 2002). It is also assumed that human and nature interests largely coincide, and that the so-called pragmatic anthropocentric approach leads to positive environmental outcomes (for example, Norton 1986). The Nature/Culture dichotomy is seen as an obstacle to finding the common ground, since the two ‘camps’ (that prioritise one over the other) tend to be rigid, exclusive, and confrontational (Flores and Clark 2001).

Yet, empirically, ecological and human interests do not always converge. According to Katz (1992), anthropocentric motivations for environmental protection can *sometimes* be beneficial to nature. This is, however, *only* the case in the context of human-connected environments – in the case of the availability of (clean) water, air and soil, for example – but *not* in the context of species extinction. Indeed, at present, many species go extinct as human welfare is not contingent on their survival. Therefore, moral ecocentrism is *necessary* if the interests of non-humans and their habitats are to be protected outside of utilitarian interests (Rolston 1997; Crist 2012).

In deconstructing the dichotomy between humans and non-humans, we might be simultaneously erasing the issue of human chauvinism and speciesism. For example, if we were to reject the dichotomy between slaves and slave owners (because they are all humans, after all), we might be also de-politicising the necessity to critically address the institution of slavery itself. Similarly, if we reject the distinction between the categories of men and women (again because they are all humans, after all), feminists might lose the reason to support the gender discrimination argument.

Nobody likes dichotomies such as that between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, or humans and nature. Yet, practically and ethically speaking, they may be necessary, particularly where blatant discriminations against nonhumans continue. Such discriminations are evident with respect to animal treatment in the meat industry, in medical experimentation, or in the incidence of roadkill (Thorne 1998; Crist 2012; Desmond 2013). Invoking peoples’ understanding of their moral relationships with nature-beyond-the-human in non-anthropocentric terms is a necessary measure (Sullivan 2014).

### **ENGO and Local Communities Dichotomy**

Another relevant dichotomy that needs to be questioned is that between the capitalist, colonial, neoliberal ‘imperial enterprise’ and the marginalised, discriminated, traditional cultures, or poor people. Critics have pointed out that conservation has colonial origins and restricts or prohibits local practices under the auspices of protecting wilderness (for instance, Brockington 2002; Chapin 2004; Carrier and West 2009; Baviskar 2013). It has been argued that national parks, pioneered in the United States, denied indigenous peoples’ rights, evicted them from their homelands, and provoked social conflict (Keller *et al* 1999; Cultural Survival 2015).

Von Hellerman (2007) and Von Hellerman and Usuanlele (2009) have argued that narratives of environmental crisis served to justify colonial and post-colonial conservation intervention. These ‘dominant discourses about wildlife, poaching, and the extinction crisis’ (Holmes 2013, 74) resulted in a ‘politics of *hysteria* in conservation’ by Western environmentalists (Büscher 2015). West and Brockington (2012, 2) further state:

Environmentalism went south, so to speak, and inserted itself into the power struggles over environmental governance in the recently decolonized nations. While there, it got snugly in bed with its old enemy, corporate capitalism.

Colonialism, corruption and capitalism are often linked together by those that claim that environmentalists are ‘waging war to save biodiversity’ (e.g. Duffy 2014). According to Duffy and St. John (2013, ii), ‘poaching in Sub Saharan Africa was produced via the historical legacy of colonialism’. Likewise, Holmes (2013, 75) gives the following interpretation of the case of wildlife spearing in Amboseli:

here resistance was effective because it targeted highly visible flagship species, such as lion and elephant, where attacks on wildlife could relatively easily lead to a noticeable decrease on their numbers, the preservation of which were a key conservation goal. Attacking high value, high profile wildlife was a high impact form of resistance which carried few risks or costs, giving local people a trump card which could cause conservation to fail. Yet such powerful low risk options are rarely available, and the literature suggests that while such weapons of the weak can have some impact in limiting or delaying certain protected area policies, they are generally unable to seriously challenge the existence of protected areas or their ability to protect biodiversity.

These ‘weapons of the weak’ (killing wildlife to express community discontent with conservation policies) are rarely condemned by supporters of exclusive social justice. In a similar way, illegal deforestation and other environmentally damaging practices are excused when local people profit from it. For instance, Von Hellerman (2007) states that the Taungya cocoa and plantain farms in the state of Edo, which transport thousands of tons of plantain to Lagos every week, are indeed ‘illegal’ because they are largely unknown to senior forest officers. Yet, these activities provide a vital source of livelihood for the many farmers and traders involved. Thus, according to Von Hellerman’s interpretation, this ‘illegality’ needs to

be questioned. Those that condemn anti-poaching efforts imply that the victims of these efforts are the poor local communities (Büscher and Ramutsindela 2016).

### **The Issue of Political Correctness**

As Jane Goodall (2015) has written, the struggle over poaching is not between conservation elites and poor communities, but between heavily armed poachers using equipment ranging from helicopters to advanced weaponry and operating as part of international criminal cartels, and those that try to protect the most vulnerable animal communities. For example, the traditional snaring of African rhinos for bush meat has largely been replaced by targeted shooting using assault weapons and high-powered rifles in order to obtain the horns (Bennett 2015: 191). Most violence that occurs in conservation areas in the name of conservation is in no way directed towards the local people, but towards the criminal poaching gangs.<sup>1</sup>

While I am aware of contexts in which indigenous claims have emerged, and very much support indigenous rights, additional ethical questions need to be addressed. What gives one group of people the right to hunt? For example, why do the Inuit people have an exclusive right to seal hunting? If these same indigenous peoples (or poor farmers, or discriminated minorities) become rich and move away from their homelands, do they also lose their exclusive right to their traditional practices? What are the moral basis for eliminating numerous members of wildlife in order to safeguard human rights? In other words, what justifies – on philosophical, ethical or practical grounds – exclusive social justice?

With population growth, ‘traditional’ and commercial activities have merged and hunting weapons have improved. The exclusive right given to Australian Aborigines to hunt wallabies, or to the Inuit people to hunt seals, seems to predominantly reflect political correctness motivated by post-colonial guilt. The preoccupation with the heritage of colonialism influences even multispecies ethnography:

The orangutan herself was subjected to constraints of space rooted in colonial and postcolonial histories of making territories. And those constraints were, for her, gendered insofar that her sex affected her relationship to space. For instance, whenever managers thought she should get pregnant, she would be forced into captivity with a male orangutan for the purpose of procreation (Salazar Parreñas 2015).

The deliberate abuse, and even massacre, of wild apes (Eckersley 2007) and their enslavement can indeed be compared to colonial practices. In fact, the inverse relationship between human interests and the wellbeing of ecosystems bears remarkable resemblance to instances of colonial, racial, and gender inequalities (Shoreman-Ouimet and Kopnina 2015b). However, in the quote above it seems that colonialism and gender preoccupations overshadow the perception of a simple fact: the orangutan was caged and forced to mate.

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing this article, February 2016, a British conservationist Roger Gower was shot dead by the poachers in Tanzania's Katavi National Park (Tremblay 2016).

Some of the ‘colonial’ practices or ideologies stemming from the European Enlightenment such as the drive for equality and individual rights are largely supported by anthropologists. Most anthropologists even implicitly support selected colonial prohibitions such as tribal wars, infanticide as a traditional means of birth control, or other ‘savage rituals’ condemned by the UN Resolution on Human Rights. Such attitudes stand in sharp contrast with those adopted towards other traditional practices that did not place human life above that of nonhumans.

For example, early anthropological descriptions of rituals connected to the violation of tree taboos are discussed in *The Golden Bough* by Sir James Frazer (1854 – 1941). Frazer (2012 [1922]) described severe punishments for violating the trees in ancient Germany (for example, ‘The culprit’s navel was to be cut out and nailed to the part of the tree which he had peeled, and he was to be driven round and round the tree till all his guts were wound about its trunk’ (2012, 98), as well as in Africa (for instance, the Ewespeaking peoples used to honour some of the silk-cotton trees by occasionally sacrificing humans, which were fastened to the trunk or laid against the foot of the tree (2012, 99). It is unlikely that anthropologists would celebrate such traditional rituals today.

It is therefore ironic that while many anthropologists today defend traditional culture, they would probably cringe at practices such as human sacrifice that have once placed human life on the par with non-human lives. No such cringing occurs in cases of ‘traditional’ animal hunting. A very Western language of human rights and economic entitlements is evoked. While Martin *et al* (2015) speak of ‘intolerable social impacts of conservation’ and call conservationists to consider distributive justice in the case of vulnerable communities, distributive justice among non-humans (and their entitlement to a fair share of resources) is simply not discussed. As noted by Strang (2016), environmental justice defined in social terms, while articulating ideas about citizenship and enfranchisement, is entangled with economic development. The ‘rights *to* nature’ approach tends to assume that local communities have a right to profit from nature, while the ‘rights *of* nature’ approach questions the very economic rationale of exploiting the environment. We therefore need to draw a line between a legitimate criticism of neo-colonial practices, and the negation of ecological justice for the sake of economic development under the guise of pursuing social justice.

### **Demographic and Life-style Changes**

While so-called traditional ways of living are often linked to relatively sustainable subsistence practices, this sustainability was only possible because of low population densities and pre-industrial methods of production. By contrast, modern lifeways are characterised by a high population density as well as the conversion of traditional practices and ideologies into the global market mentality (Sponsel 2013). With the introduction of Western medicine, most populations have expanded many-fold. For example, between 1991 and 2006 the Indigenous population of Australia has increased by 2.6% per year on average (ABS 2015), while the population of wallabies has drastically declined (Strang 2016).

A growing human population tends to exacerbate the problem of resource scarcity (Bateson 1972; Smail 2003). While in the past, small population densities and simpler technologies of production did indeed allow for ‘sustainable communities’ to effectively manage their resources, this situation has drastically changed (Sponsel 2013). Demographic pressure leads to an increased demand for land, as well as increased instances of wildlife killing to protect harvests (Sinclair 2015). As Bateson (1972: 497) has observed, the very first requirement for ecological stability is a balance between the rates of birth and death. For better or for worse, humanity has tampered with the death rate, especially by controlling the major epidemic diseases and the death of infants. Today, there is a growing proportional difference between the number of humans (over seven billion) and the number of nonhumans, especially the apex predators left in the wild. While apex predators are normally controlled by environmental constraints, this is no longer the case for humans. It seems that ‘the bigger the population, the faster it grows; the more technology we have, the faster the rate of new invention; and the more we believe in our "power" over an enemy environment, the more "power" we seem to have and the more spiteful the environment seems to be’ (Bateson 1972:494).

### **Anthropocentric Bias**

An anthropocentric bias extends to poaching and to dislocation, since critics of conservation do not discuss non-human displacements or indeed colonisation in a broader sense. The defining characteristic of ‘colonisation’ in general, along with the increase of social inequalities, is the ever-greater instrumentalism in human engagements with non-human inhabitants (Strang 2016). This entails the self-proclaimed right to undermine another species’ very existence and the evolutionary unfolding in the noble quest for social justice (Cafaro and Primack 2014; Kopnina 2012a, 2012b, 2014a), in effect condoning ‘nonhuman genocide’ (Crist 2012, 140). Accusations that conservationists are ‘out of control’ to save the near-extinct species (Büscher 2015) testifies to a robust anthropocentric bias, and a refusal to acknowledge the legal repercussions of ecocide (Higgins 2010).

The perpetuation of social inequality and the increasing extinctions of non-human species fundamentally alter the ethics of anthropological practice. These ethics are subject to value judgements – of what or who is accorded rights, and in what proportion. Caplan (2003) has argued that extreme cultural relativity (in which it is possible, for example, to ignore major abuses of human rights) is an abdication of moral responsibility. By the same token, presenting even the concern over loss of biodiversity as a social construction of sentimental elites, or by profit-seeking neo-colonial regimes, abdicates moral responsibility to nonhumans.

The proponents of social justice keep perpetuating the dichotomies between the indigenous communities and the Western elites (for example, Chapin 2004), or between poor rural peasants and neoliberal conservationists (for example, Holmes 2013). However, historically, protected areas were rarely created to benefit particular groups of people (such as tourists), because most national parks have been established *for* the people, everywhere in the world, and not just in postcolonial nations (e.g. Doak *et al* 2015). In fact, national parks can be seen

as *protecting* cultural identity against severe changes to the local environment, such as logging. As Brosius (1999, 39) has noted in the case of Penan in Malaysia, ‘logging not only undermines the basis of Penan subsistence but, by transforming sites with biographical, social, and historical significance, also destroys those things that are iconic of their existence as a society’. Conservation does not threaten people’s liberty, as Fletcher (2009) would have it - rather it enables one to live in a world of natural richness. In the words of Wakild (2015, 44):

... history in many cases shows that people were not kicked out; national parks were designed with them in mind. Yet, the ways parks and peoples merged did not stop the rapaciousness of development around them. The lack of historical introspection, context, or nuance in denunciations like Chapin’s beg a re-evaluation of the broader conservation landscape.

The critics of the national park model forget that the point of the *American Wilderness Act* (1964) was the protection of wilderness *for the people* (Shoreman-Ouimet and Kopnina 2015b). While the critics talk of exclusion, the parks were in fact created in order to be accessible to the public, and in most cases allowing people to either profit from or enjoy nature as a national and widely shared good (Doak *et al* 2015). Local communities are often direct beneficiaries of biodiversity conservation, which also alleviates poverty and provides nutrition for the most vulnerable communities (e.g. Goodall 2015). Thus, while in some cases, dichotomies between the ‘guilty’ and the ‘victimised’ are necessary, in other cases they obscure realities. To quote Crist (2015, 93):

The literature challenging traditional conservation strategies as locking people out, and as locking away sources of human livelihood, rarely tackles either the broader distribution of poverty or its root social causes; rather, strictly protected areas are scapegoated, and wild nature, once again, is targeted to take the fall for the purported betterment of people, while domination and exploitation of nature remain unchallenged. The prevailing mindset of humanity’s entitlement to avail itself of the natural world without limitation is easily, if tacitly, invoked by arguments that demand that wilderness (the last safe zone for species, processes, ecologies, non-human individuals, climatic disruption, and indigenous ways) offer up its “natural resources”—in the name of justice.

Allowing *all* people to profit from nature is not realistic in the long term. Due to population pressures and increasing scarcity of land, supposedly ‘traditional’ practices, such as slash and burn agriculture or swidden farming (Henly 2011), are occurring in so many localities, and without restrictions, that the ‘sustainability’ of even ‘traditional’ farming on this scale becomes highly questionable.

### **Dichotomies and Divisions**

The issue today is that while some social scientists highlight the importance of combining social and ecological interests in their work and suggest alternative models, many seem

implicitly opposed to conservation altogether. The reconciliation will not be easy. As Kashwan (2015, 3) explains, the ‘rather simplistic tradeoffs between social justice and environmental conservation does not necessarily lead to the proverbial win-win solutions at the intersection of social justice and environmental conservation’.

The polemical extremes of social and ecological justice stances emphasise the importance of a middle road of cooperation that acknowledges human as well as non-human rights (Shoreman-Ouimet and Kopnina 2015; 2015b). Environmental anthropology, with its emphasis on self-reflexivity, cultural relativism and political ecology, can play an important role in suggesting solutions to the environmental issues if, and only if, the anthropocentric bias is removed.

I do acknowledge the complexity of interactions within conservation and appreciate the fact that many social scientists have highlighted the detrimental ecological outcomes of social injustices in conservation contexts. Yet, I cannot condone strategically-employed dichotomies of the ‘guilty’ elites and the ‘oppressed’ communities. While not all people can be held accountable for environmental destruction (e.g. Sponsel 2013), neither can all ‘conservationists’, ENGOs, or ‘environmentalists’ be conflated with the capitalist, neo-colonial enterprise. Yet, while economic development remains a powerful and complex constellation of public and private agencies including multilateral and bilateral donors and a vast array of NGOs ranging from small grassroots concerns to large transnational organisations (Lewis 2005), the same is true of conservation.

There is a widely shared assumption that poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation are often caused or exacerbated by industrial development (for instance, see Adams *et al* 2004; Duffy and St. John 2013; Duffy *et al* in press). Despite the optimism of ecological modernisation and post-material-values theories, wealthier societies continue to be the drivers of unsustainable production and consumption (e.g. Kopnina 2014b). However, a fair distribution of natural resources does not diminish environmental degradation. In dividing the economic ‘pie’ between people, debates about fair division still ignore the question as to *what* is in the ‘pie’. Whether the ‘pie’ feeds the lucky few or the ‘bottom billion,’ the environment is still, metaphorically speaking, stuffed in the crust.

It does not help that some academics are turning against conservation in the name of the oppressed. The dichotomy between vulnerable communities and profit-seeking conservationists obscures what conservation really stands for. By focusing on conservationist violence against poachers and the ‘militarisation’ of conservation, a sense of proportion is lost. When one talks of ‘war to save biodiversity’ (Duffy 2014), no proportional ‘body count’ is done. If it had been done it would clearly appear that the main victims are non-humans.

### **Efficacy of conservation**

The ‘fortress conservation’ model (Brockington 2002) is not just about the rights of people, human poverty, and social injustice, or about a manipulation by the elites. Ecological data shows that strict protection can be efficient. There is strong evidence that strict protection

with limited access for eco-tourism can be crucial to the survival of many species (for example, Bekoff 2013; Cafaro and Primack 2014; Wuerthner *et al* 2014; Doak *et al* 2015; Wakild 2015). The creation of large, strictly protected areas, with wildlife corridors as well as rewilding programs, can minimise human-wildlife conflicts and the damage to crops (for instance, Butler 2015; Doak *et al* 2015). More generally, ‘wilderness preservation was meant as a gesture of planetary modesty and a badly needed exercise of restraint on the part of a species notorious for its excess’ (Nash 2012, 304).

At a time when efforts to conserve biodiversity correspond with green grabbing by large corporations and food insecurity, one needs to be concerned about vulnerable communities. During a horrendous period of colonial history, many indigenous populations have shrunk due to massacres and diseases. But this is not the whole picture. I agree with Strang (2016) that as anthropologists, we should campaign for justice for people, but we should also recognise the short-sightedness as well as the moral deficiency of prioritising this care at the expense of non-humans. Ultimately, we cannot have justice for people *before* justice for the environment, because separating these will lead to neither. We need to consider justice more broadly, as something that depends on simultaneously upholding the common good of the human and the non-human.

It is one thing to claim that militarisation by conservationists in order to counter wild-crime will not achieve their goals to conserve, yet it is a very different thing to assert that such militarisation efforts are *per se* immoral, unjust, and anti-human. If the distinction between poachers, ‘traditional’ hunting practices, and retaliatory killing of animals by local communities is blurred, the mass slaughter is likely to continue.

### **Reflection: Common Interests**

The overall thrust of the social justice argument is that the moral duty is exclusively to vulnerable people. Yet, ironically, the social justice, human rights, and equality that enlightened (and politically correct) academics embrace, although outwardly noble and admirable, are not a cross-cultural phenomenon. In fact, an anthropocentrism, or rather industrocentrism (industrialist ideology), which is not sufficiently cognisant of non-human species, is in itself a product of Western heritage (Kidner 2014). Exploitation of nature is nothing more than a product of our industrial ideology. This industrocentrism equally affects ecosystems and cultural systems and is a clear signal that human symbolic abilities have been parasitised by a system which is hostile to, and ultimately replaces, the natural order from which it emerged (Kidner 2014). While environmentalists are far from a uniform, at its core conservation fights the same ‘enemy’: industrocentrism and injustice. Recognising this, supporters of both social and of ecological justice object to the commodification of nature, either because it promotes social injustice (Sullivan 2014) or because it demotes non-human species to commodities (Crist 2012).

As Holmes (2013) notes, despite the claims that community consent and cooperation is essential for the success of conservation, local support is not always essential for conservation. Perhaps it is time to start asking whether indigenous peoples are allies of

conservation, what sort of nature they protect, and under what conditions they protect it (Nadasdy 2005). What deserves more attention are the cases of defence of environment is instigated by native communities themselves. There is plenty of evidence that grassroots resistance movements are not an elitist enterprise and that protection of nature is a cross-cultural phenomenon (e.g. Dunlap and York 2008; Milfont and Schultz 2016). While the list of Western conservationists and environmentalists continues to lengthen, there is an even longer list of indigenous environmental activists (Kopnina 2015; Shoreman-Ouimet and Kopnina 2015b). Besides the internationally recognised activists, such as the Noble prize-winner and the founder of the Green Belt Movement, Wangari Muta Maathai, there are many less-known non-Western activists. Costa Rican Jairo Mora Sandoval (Fendt 2015) and Cambodian Chut Wutty (Global Witness 2013) have both sacrificed their lives defending nature. These are examples of local conservation organisations or individual activists that, while motivated by different value sets, can be generally regarded as oppositional to an industrocentric way of relating to nature (Kidner 2014). What seems more constructive than the bashing of international ENGOs is to direct criticism to industrocentrism, which denies prospects for nurturing alternative values and practices (Lewis 2005; Martin *et al* 2013; Sullivan 2014). Some progress is already made, as many anthropologists are already at pains to work with and support conservation activities and organisations, instructing conservation practitioners who can learn from local idioms for understanding people's surroundings (West and Brockington 2006). Indeed, understanding the meaning-production within different sociocultural groups, based on history, language, and social practices (Strathern 1980, in West and Brockington 2006), can be very helpful in providing alternative models for thinking about nature and sustainability.

I would like to expand the notion of justice by highlighting the need to consider animal rights and ecological justice (Rolston 1997; Crist 2012). While the scope of this article does not allow for a review of the animal rights literature, a reasonable hypothesis can be made that all living beings do not want to die and want to avoid pain. Supporters of social justice fail to recognise the victimhood of non-humans who will never be able to speak in their own defence, even when threatened by extinction (Crist and Kopnina 2014). While non-humans cannot convey their point of view, this is not a sufficient reason for excluding them from moral consideration (for example, Eckersley 2007).

In the vacuum created in the 'after nature' (Escobar 1999) space, nobody can hear an animal scream or a tree fall. To oppose this tendency, we need to resist settling for a colonised environment as an easy substitute for the wild(er)ness (Derby *et al* 2015). Instead, a re-conception of combined social and ecological rights could serve to expose the 'common enemy': rapacious and self-serving industrial capitalism. Butler (2015, xxiv) notes, the 'conservation movement arose as a counterrevolutionary force in response to the land degradation and wildlife holocaust associated with the expansion of industrial civilization, a wave that extirpated indigenous cultures as well as native species'. Indeed, the conservationist's 'foremost tool—protected areas—rejects a colonialist, imperialist attitude toward the living Earth. The designation of protected areas is an expression of humility about the limits of human knowledge and a gesture of respect toward our fellow creatures, allowing them to flourish in their homes without fear of persecution' (Butler 2015, xxiv).

Many environmentalists' greatest concern is with the downtrodden, specifically downtrodden non-humans. In the words of Kay Milton (1995, 12):

Environmentalists also speak for other categories whose needs might otherwise go unrepresented. In particular, they speak for non-human species, for 'nature'... 'mother earth' or some other personification of the biosphere, and for future generations of human beings. Environmental disputes often take the form of a struggle to establish the needs of these categories. With no voice (and no votes) of their own, non-human species and future generations are at the mercy of interests whose advocates compete for the right to define their needs...

As Milton (1995, 2) has noted, an environmentalist critique of anthropology emerges to question some of the discipline's central principles, just as the feminist critique did in the past, 'yet for the present, this possibility remains largely undeveloped'. I would like to open up this possibility. By highlighting the blatant anti-conservation rhetoric, I tried to demonstrate that the truly significant dichotomy is that between those who care and do not care about the lives and suffering of nonhumans. To overcome this division, the ecological outcomes of conservation, beyond the question of social utility, need to be considered.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have discussed dichotomies between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, between local livelihoods and international conservation efforts, between indigenous people and wildlife, between traditional lifeways and development, and finally between different types of ethical assumptions that underlie anthropological advocacy. While some of the critique directed at top-down conservation is well-taken, in particular in the context of social inequalities and economic vulnerabilities, it must also be noted that conservation critics view conservation only in relation to local communities and dismiss ecological justice. As far as both the rights *to* nature and the rights *of* nature are concerned, the dichotomy between elitist capitalist conservation and indigenous, poor communities is false. This dichotomisation lacks the long-term perspective on the state of the planet, characterised by increased human population and industrialisation, and affecting both the flourishing of local environments and the people. Considering that dichotomies serve as potentially powerful rhetoric devices, the lack of concern for the outcomes of conservation is worrying. The accusation that conservation violates social justice testifies to a robust anthropocentric bias, a refusal to acknowledge mutual interconnectedness of human and environmental interests as well as the legal repercussions of ecocide.

It was argued here that it is indeed important to recognise that the issue of conservation cannot be seen as purely ecological because it always involves people. It is the people who bring their different assumptions about nature and culture to the environmental table, and it is social relations and structural inequalities between people that often influence the outcomes of conservation. But it is equally important to emphasise that while non-humans are unable to bring anything to this negotiating table, we cannot exclude them from considerations of justice simply because they cannot speak our language. We therefore need more robust

theories of human-environmental relationships. We need models that recognise the mutually constitutive processes that compose people and environments (Strang 2016). We need to enable a bioethical position that encompasses the needs of other species and gives *simultaneous* consideration to justice for humans and non-humans.

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**Comment: Dichotomies: Yes We Need Them, But Not as Much as We Think****Veronica Strang***Anthropology, University of Durham*

Kopnina's article is concerned with the multiple dichotomies integral to debates about conservation and human and non-human interests: nature *vs.* culture; indigenous *vs.* ecological rights; conservation *vs.* social justice; anthropocentrism *vs.* ecocentrism. She provides a thoughtful and systematic view of the ways such dichotomies support opposing intellectual and political positions, preventing progress on several fronts, most particularly in relation to the protection of non-human rights and interests.

The introduction makes a key point, that dichotomies are heuristically necessary to provide rhetorical contrast and enable comparison. Dichotomies have been a longstanding area of interest in anthropology: Lévi-Strauss (1963) drew on Hegel and Jakobson to argue that thought processes require dialectical or binary concepts for organisational purposes. Post-structuralism deconstructed them to provide a more fluid view; and debates about binaries continue to enliven the cognitive sciences. With particular relevance for the following comments, Derrida suggested that a strong tendency towards binaries was particular to Western thought (1982:41).

Kopnina's focus is on how dichotomies play out in the political arena, where categorical dualism seems to lead all too readily to irreconcilable differences. This is readily evident in relation to concepts of nature and culture. Fletcher (2009) and others have questioned both the wisdom and the ubiquity of such categories, and resisted the argument that ideas about 'wilderness' are pan-human (Leopold 1949, Dunlap and York 2008).

Certainly ethnographic research with hunter-gatherer societies challenges the normalisation of nature-culture dualism, and as for untouched 'wilderness': where on Earth is that? For Australian Aboriginal communities, whose cultural landscapes are co-inhabited by sentient non-human ancestral beings, notions of nature as a separate unacculturated 'object' cannot sit comfortably with ideas and values about shared consciousness and reciprocity between human and non-human worlds. In such collaborative human-environmental relationships the

non-human can indeed be ‘cheeky’ (disruptive) or ‘clean’ (well-ordered), and there are times – for example if people transgress ancestral Law – when the non-human can be angry and punitive, but it is always fully engaged with and by humankind.

Nature-culture dualism is therefore better understood as a historical and cultural ‘bifurcation’ which, as Plumwood argued (1993, 2002), emerged alongside ideas and technologies of instrumentality and human dominion (see also Harrison 1999). Such bifurcation has, over time, given increasing distinction to both categories, but they are more usefully regarded as polarities. A helpful analogy (given that nature and culture are often conflated with these) are categories relating to gender, in which it is clear that there are many possible locations for gender identity along a continuum, and in all of these the putatively ‘opposed’ female and male ingredients are both present to varying degrees.

As I have argued elsewhere (2005), it may be similarly realistic to consider a continuum in which nature may be closely conflated with ‘self’/human, or more distinctly ‘othered’/seen as non-human. This reveals nature and culture not as separate categories, but as ways of understanding different human-environmental relationships, in which each societal engagement with non-human and material worlds has a specific balance of human and non-human agency.

Once we are there, in a theoretical position that situates humankind within a continuum of potential environmental relations, the issue of non-human rights and interests looks rather different. Our mutual interdependency with non-human and material worlds is foregrounded, raising not only moral issues, but also bringing home the reality that mere self-interest demands that we extend social justice beyond the human and adopt more mutually supportive approaches to the other inhabitants of global ecosystems.

But here’s where continua and ‘matters of degree’ become tricky. Supposing we accept Kopynina’s framing of human action *vis a vis* the non-human as a process of colonisation. This seems to me to be an excellent way to express the overbearing instrumentality that many societies have applied to non-human beings, and the multiple ways in which this overrides their needs and interests. It highlights the point that the imposition of colonial rule over indigenous communities, and the instrumental ‘dominion’ of the non-human, *both* represent the creation of highly unequal power relations and impede access to justice for the less powerful.

In these terms, the dichotomy of human rights *vs.* conservation can be seen not as an ‘either/or’ but as a differential prioritisation of rights. This is undoubtedly useful. But even accepting the need to extend social justice to the non-human, how many anthropologists would give non-human beings priority over the interests of human groups severely disadvantaged by colonial (and neo-colonial) appropriations of their land and resources? It is difficult for our profession to think counter-intuitively to a century of advocacy on behalf of such communities. But is supporting ‘traditional’ rights necessarily in conflict with conservation?

Kopnina cites a dilemma from my own ethnography (Strang 2015) – the issue of whether Aboriginal communities should be able to shoot wallabies in Australia’s National Parks. Wallabies are a traditional bush food in Cape York, but there is no doubt that the use of guns means that a higher number of them can be killed. However, their population numbers have probably been more heavily affected by the competition for grazing presented by intensifying cattle farming on the peninsula,<sup>2</sup> and the issue of whether grazing should be allowed in national park areas has also been contentious, with conservationists arguing that these should be safe havens for ‘wildlife’, protected both from agricultural activities and hunting. A further complexity is the high number of feral animals (introduced species such as pigs) in national parks and elsewhere, and *their* impact on indigenous flora and fauna. Thus there is a concurrent debate about whether feral species should be tackled by recreational hunting; taken as alternative bush food by indigenous hunters; eradicated more systematically or (a rare viewpoint in Australia, but relevant to Kopnina’s discussion about rights) simply left alone.

In Cape York, where only a century ago settlers could shoot Aboriginal people without censure, the argument that indigenous hunters should not shoot wallabies for bush food was emotive. Conservation in Australia is deeply entangled with conflicts over Native Title, which, as Ross points out (1994) ‘is more than just about land rights. It is also about land use... to deny Aboriginal people their rights to traditional hunting is "a new dispossession”.’

Having assisted the Aboriginal community in Kowanyama in their lengthy efforts to regain Native Title to the contiguous National Park area – renamed *Errk Oykankand* following the eventual success of this claim – I would argue (as have others), that respect for their cultural heritage is of paramount importance. And indigenous rights to maintain traditions have to some extent been accommodated in Australian State and Commonwealth legislation (such as *The Queensland Nature Conservation Act 1992*). Such legislation typically steers a course in which Aboriginal rights to hunt and gather are upheld, provided that this is only for ‘traditional purposes’, and subject to laws protecting the environment. Section 70 of *The National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1975 (Cth)* provides an example:

(1) Subject to subsection (2) and to the operation of this Act in relation to parks and reserves and conservation zones, nothing in this Act prevents Aborigines from continuing in accordance with law, the traditional use of any area of land or water for hunting for food-gathering (otherwise than for purposes of sale) and for ceremonial and religious purposes.

(2) The operation of sub-section (1) is subject to regulations made for the purpose of conserving wildlife in any area and expressly affecting the traditional use of the area by Aborigines.

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<sup>2</sup> Populations of the agile wallaby fluctuate according to various factors: numbers have fallen with intensification in grazing on the peninsula; and with low levels of rainfall. They have recovered with the removal of cattle from protected areas; and with the culling of dingoes and other feral animals. Hunting is only one of the factors affecting the wallabies’ well-being, and their gregarious character means that population numbers are generally quite resilient.

- Traditional hunting and foraging to be permitted subject to limitations on the hunting of certain species where the species is officially designated as endangered, nationally rare, threatened or locally of rare or of unusual occurrence in the Park; and occurs in numbers significantly below the natural capacity for that species (34.2.4).

Debates in the political arena about hunting in National Parks have by no means disappeared, but there has been some successful negotiation of these issues where Aboriginal communities have regained a degree of managerial control over their traditional clan estates. Joint management of national parks (with the parks and wildlife service) has allowed them to reassert their own values in relation to the non-human, and to apply their own knowledge and expertise in maintaining sustainable human-non-human relations. In this respect they do, after all, have a vastly longer and better track record than that demonstrated by the settler population over the last 200 years.

But indigenous management is by no means a panacea either. While Aboriginal communities continue to try to retain their own values and lifeways, they, and their reclaimed land, are irretrievably enmeshed in wider Australian society and its practices. The environment has changed radically, not just because of introduced plant and animal species, but also with soil degradation, the effects of water overuse and pollution, and – in some areas – great swathes of land have been poisoned by the salination produced through crop irrigation. Climate change appears to be increasing the variability of rainfall and wet/dry extremes. Pockets of preservation, whether maintained through Aboriginal management or that of conservation groups, will not solve Australia's wider environmental problems nor ameliorate their global impacts.

So the strongest argument for upholding indigenous rights is not a matter of whether such groups deserve compensation for dispossession, or whether they or conservation groups have a greater capacity to preserve biodiversity, but the much more important point that there is an urgent need for all of us to uphold cultural diversity, in particular that which promotes relations with the non-human which are more reciprocal, and thus intrinsically more sustainable.

Which brings us back to dichotomies. Perhaps another important dichotomy in this debate is that of short-term vs. long-term thinking. Anthropologists have tended to think about redressing indigenous rights in the immediate term. Conservationists are inclined to focus ecocentrically on the long-term well-being of the non-human, and (sometimes) to regard humankind as a regrettably destructive parasite addicted to short-termism. Our collective impact on the non-human, amply demonstrated by the long and lengthening IUCN list of anthropogenically erased or endangered species, gives some justification to this view.

But the problem with promoting a shift to ecocentrism is that to some extent it simply reaffirms the nature-culture dualism which has been fundamental to the breakdown in human-non-human relations.

Many indigenous groups' efforts to reclaim their land and reassert their own lifeways and values are part and parcel of their broader critiques of colonial ideologies of exploitation and short-termism in relation to the environment. However, theirs is not an ecocentric position. With a worldview that assumes that all people have permanent, inalienable relations with place, indigenous Australian communities have a deep concern for 'future generations', and for them this means interdependent human and non-human wellbeing. In co-inhabiting the world reciprocally with the non-human, they offer not 'romantic harmony' with a thing called nature, but something much more interesting: a model of how to think about human-non-human relations integratively, and without reifying alienating dichotomies.

Such models resonate with early efforts to conceptualise an inclusive 'biosphere' (Vernadsky 1986[1920]). They also inform more recent bioethical theories that resituate humankind within a world mutually composed of and by human and non-human agents and agentive processes. A dualistic vision of nature and culture has no place in these ways of thinking. Which just goes to show that while we may need dichotomies a bit, to provide cognitive and rhetorical clarity, we don't really need them very much.

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**Comment: Nature and the Self: Liberal Individualism is the Problem, not the Solution**

**Thomas Reuter**

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Helen Kopnina's article provides an excellent review and analysis of conflicting calls for social vs. environmental justice in anthropology. It recognizes the voraciousness of neoliberal developmentalism as the primary cause of the pervasive violation of rights, both to and of nature. Unfortunately, however, her own argument remains captive to liberal individualist cosmology and derivative notions such as subjectivity, rights and justice. I would like to illustrate the limitations of this accommodative approach, and argue the case for adopting a radically different cosmology.

In absolute terms, a distinction between nature and humans is patently false. Science has proven that human beings (and human minds) are utterly and eternally a part of nature. Human-nature dualism is nevertheless deeply ingrained in prevailing individualist models of identity. Humans are naturally prone to identifying with the act of thinking and essentialising the thinking process, ascribing to it the status of a separately existing subject. This inspired dualist philosophers like René Descartes to engage in metaphysical conjecture, postulating that such "subjects" exist on a transcendental plane, detached from the field of nature. Liberal individualist philosophy, with its emphasis on the rights and privileges of (human) subjects, takes its departure from this fallacious metaphysical assumption. It relies heavily on the separate existence of a subject or 'individual' as the bearer of (human) rights and, conversely, as a moral agent culpable for trespassing the rights of others. A sense of separation from our own natural condition, from other humans and from nature is thereby glorified and given an air of sanctity, rather than exposing it as an essentialism and a hoax, which is what non-dualist (monist) cosmologies tend to do. The resulting misconception is so pervasive and pernicious that it excludes nature from the special domain of human subjectivity, and no amount of contrary scientific evidence seems to register. This is evident in many figures of speech as "my body" or "my brain," not to mention "my land" and other such claims of property by the transcendental subject against the field of nature.

Kopnina's argument does not consider the alternative, unitary perspective of scientific, philosophical or religious monism, and hence does not pause to question the assumptions of liberal individualism that underpin the notion of human exceptionalism and have their roots

in Christian transcendentalism. Instead of questioning the metaphysics behind the idea of human subjectivity, she urges us to extend it to nature: Members of other species of life are to be treated as subjects, brought under the protection of the rule of law and afforded justice. Having tempered competitive interactions among humans, in order to end the cruel law of the jungle that presumably once held sway among us, the law of man is now to be extended into the jungle itself, to curb the extremes of competition among species. Ironically, it is men who are committing these excesses in interspecies competition, causing a mass extinction event of a magnitude rarely found in the history of life.

This noble plan is unlikely to save the environment. To begin with, granting subjectivity to nature negates the transcendentalist assumption in individualism that supports human exceptionalism, while simultaneously utilising the derivative discourse of rights. This is inconsistent. Second, we must wonder what “rights of nature” actually means. Individualism has encouraged us to feel separated not only from the field of nature, but also from each other. The logic of the market has in fact brought the so-called law of the jungle into human affairs by celebrating the idea that competition in greedy pursuit of self-interest is a good thing, and seeking to limit the moderating effect of the rule of law to a minimum (cf. the disparaging liberal rhetoric about the “nanny state,” “overregulation” and “green tape”). The formal codification of the rights of members of other species, within a framework of liberal cosmology, would thus make no difference to their fate. While liberalism does envisage social processes by which legal norms are established, to serve as a constraint on the violent pursuit of self-interest, the contestation of individual rights in legal practice remains an adversarial process whereby the battle for survival is simply fought with different means, and the strong continue to prevail over the weak as they presumably did in the jungle. Narrow self-interest is tempered but is not fundamentally questioned, and in practice it is tempered only very slightly. There is no moral commitment to the whole.

Kopnina rightly notes that human history is characterised by rights violations on a systemic scale, and points to (neo-)colonialism and globalising neoliberal imperialism as the most pertinent examples in the contemporary world. Indeed, the sanctimonious rights discourses of liberal individualism conceal an underlying celebration of egotistic pragmatism that has not only legitimised the enslavement of nature but, in some of its more laissez-fair forms, has also fostered a social Darwinist attitude toward presumably less-than-equal social classes, races or ethnic groups, including indigenous people. Why should we expect it suddenly to pay anything more than lip service to others’ “rights to nature,” let alone the “rights of nature” itself?

In short, we need not quarrel over social justice vs. ecological justice. While Kopnina is right to call for a measure of both, neither form of justice actually exists because liberal individualism fosters an atomistic sense of identity. This narrow view of human identity or selfhood does not provide a moral foundation or a motive for compassion, such as a broader sense of identity would.

Rather than extend liberal individualist subjectivity to nature, I would like to advocate for a very different understanding of human identity, though it is still, inevitably,

“anthropocentric.” For this purpose I would like to draw on the concept of the *Anthrôpos* in early Gnostic and Hermetic thought, especially in Poimandres. There we find the origins of an intellectual current that led via alchemy to the contemporary scientific worldview, and which marks, from the very beginning, a radical departure from the individualist idea of human identity prevalent in the early Christian world. The *Anthrôpos* is at once the symbol for spirit of man and for the world soul in this cosmology.<sup>3</sup> The symbol thus points at the inherent potential human beings have of embracing an expanded sense of identity beyond their individuality. This is accomplished by cultivating an inner state of ‘feeling at one with the world’ that accurately reflects the unitary nature of objective reality. It rejects the metaphysics of individualism, which separates self and other, and does so on the empirical grounds that every organism and every species is much like a wave rising and unfolding within and merging back into the ocean of existence. Awareness of the unity of the cosmos, in the Gnostic tradition that led via alchemy to modern science, can be cultivated, gradually, until it permeates our lived experience on the relative level of daily life, where differentiation is a pertinent and relevant feature of life. The *Anthrôpos* perspective does not sanctify a sense of self that is based on essentialising the Ego Cogito as a separate transcendental entity, and hence it discourages human exceptionalism. The impulse arising from such an expansive notion of identity is to pursue justice spontaneously, not because there is a bothersome legal code that constrains us from egotism, but because we are permeated by a sense of identity with all sentient beings. If our ultimate Self is in fact the world soul, as this literature sought to demonstrate in the West and as non-dualist Vedanta and Buddhist philosophy similarly proposed in the East, then our purpose clearly is to safeguard the whole of nature and, and within those parameters, to safeguard the basic needs of all humans.

This is of course a statement describing an ideal spiritual and moral condition. While such enabling monistic concepts as the hermetic *Anthrôpos* and the vedic *Brahman* have been around for millennia, few have lived their lives in conformity with this ideal. Even a moderate broadening of human identity, however, away from a narrow subjective self concept and toward a more world-embracing and objective sense of Self, could have a great impact on the fate of other species of life. Whether this is happening or will happen, on a popular level, is really the moot question.

There are a number of current trends supportive of a shift towards broader notions of Self. For one, improved communication and mobility are making it increasingly difficult to postulate hard social boundaries of “us” and “them.” Younger people today have much more in common across cultures than was ever the case before, and many see themselves as global citizens. Secondly, modern biology has amassed much knowledge to deepen the time scales by which we evaluate humanity’s story, and this is challenging hard conceptual boundary between humans, animals and plants. The evidence suggests life is a unitary process, both in terms of its evolutionary history and in its design. The unity of life has been further highlighted by post-modern biology and its discovery of ecosystem processes, showing that

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<sup>3</sup> The Corpus Hermeticum from *Thrice Great Hermes: Studies in Hellenistic Theosophy and Gnosis, Volume II* at The Internet Sacred Text Archive.

species are linked together by coevolution in a web and interdependences so intricate, we may never be able to map and comprehend it completely. Enter the real law of the jungle!

Why has this knowledge not yet broadened our sense of identity, inspiring compassion and solidarity with all of nature, human or non-human? I agree with Kopnina that we do need to reflect deeply on how each and every human decision impacts on non-human nature. In order to motivate us to change our ways, however, our ecological condition must not just be thought about more, it must be felt more strongly, and that will happen only when the idea of unity informs our very sense of Self. I do believe this transformation is slowly taking shape.

If the effect of this transformation is slow, that is largely due to organised resistance by the vested interests of the “winners” in the mad contest for individual profit. We are experiencing a severe crisis of political representation today, disempowering the 99.9% so systematically that it instils a false sense of futility rather than motivating action within the middle classes, so long as life remains liveable. Those at the margins, who have no rights to nature, may be more motivated by dint of desperation but often lack the resources to challenge vested interests, or they are violently constrained. My work with elite actors, finally, has shown me that even those who are most “empowered” will routinely legitimise their ecologically irresponsible decisions by arguing there is a systemic problem they cannot change alone. In short, contemporary society as a whole has a massive collective action problem.

This complex array of oppression, lethargy and procrastination conceals how much our sense of Self in relation to other life has nevertheless changed. We know what should be done, but hesitate. This will change soon because an expanded sense of identity will increasingly impose itself on us out of sheer necessity, as our predations impinge more and more on our own life support. Unless we succumb to fear, the desperate need for peaceful collective action in response to global challenges will encourage a globalisation not just of trade and commerce, but also of identities – by which I mean a pervasive sense of ourselves as one people. Identities will need to expand into the non-human domain as well, to support a universal recognition of human stewardship of, and service to, this living planet as a whole, wherein lies our true purpose as conscious beings.

A committed environmentalism will see us well on our way toward achieving the ancient ideal of the *Anthrôpos*, as envisaged by the forefathers of science. In his book *Aion* (1951), which is history of western understandings of Selfhood, Jung cites the alchemist Athanasius Kirchner (*Arithmetica*, 1665), who sums up the idea nicely for us and thus reminds us what science set out to accomplish in the first place: “Everything perceived by the senses must ... be elevated to ‘reason,’ to ‘the intelligence’ and to absolute unity. When in this way we shall have brought back the absolute unity from all perceptible, rational and intellectual multiplicity into the infinitely simple, [...] then nothing more remains to be said.” (Jung 1951, 265, f111).

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**Comment: An Anthropology for ‘The Assemblage of the Now’****Paige West***Anthropology, Barnard College and Columbia University*

At this point within anthropology, it has been well documented that conservation organisations are institutions of governance and governmentality, that the projects that they devise offer particular visions of the world, and that these visions impose order on human / non-human assemblages. Conservation projects thus offer a vision of how the world is and how it ought to be, as well as a plan to alter the world so that it conforms to that desired vision. Sometimes these impositions of order succeed and sometimes they fail. It is also well documented that people, including conservation scientists, anthropologists, and the indigenous and non-indigenous inhabitants of various conservation areas, all assume (1) that their perspectives on how the world works mirror the actual structure of the world, (2) that their ideas about how the world should be, mirror the moral/ethical logics and the appropriate socio-biophysicality of the real, and (3) that their own plans for getting to the best socio-ecological world possible are the most appropriate plans. Sometimes these perspectives, ideas, and plans intersect and sometimes they do not. Finally, anthropologists have shown, repeatedly, that all of this is intertwined with the circulation of capital and the material and nonmaterial infrastructures that allow for its circulation.

In the past fifteen years, a series of excellent book-length ethnographies of environmental conservation efforts have been published; these have both critiqued and praised conservation and have pushed the anthropological thinking about conservation forward. Indeed, they have contributed to the view that I have articulated above. For example, if I look at the stack of books on my desk right now, I see the seven conservation-related anthropological texts that offer extraordinary insights into the workings of conservation. Each of these books shows us that the complicated, historical, multi ethnic, multiracial, multi species assemblage that is ‘the now’, can be understood with careful attention from anthropologists. A short review of these works will help to locate my understanding of the anthropology of conservation.

In *Environmentality* (2005) Arun Agrawal shows how villagers in Kumaon, India transitioned from forest burning to forest conservation over the course of the 1900s. With this he shows how environmental consciousness emerges, changes, and is refracted through colonialism, the state, and various conservation and development institutions. In *A Future for Amazonia*

(2012) Michael Cepek shows how environmental conservation efforts on Cofan lands in Ecuador became a political movement that allowed Cofan to defend their lands and culture and created the conditions for them to fight against oil companies, armies, colonising farmers and others, and to gain scientific expertise and political agency. In *Stealing Shining Rivers* (2012), Molly Doane shows how externally-generated conservation interventions in Chimalapas, Mexico, moved through every fad in conservation over a twenty-year period (1990 to 2010), rarely taking into account either the actual biophysical environment, the indigenous people and farmers living in the area, or the Mexican state. She clearly shows the detrimental effects to both people and ecology of this lack of attention to the on-the-ground. In *Governing Indigenous Territories* (2013), Juliet Erazo examines the intersections of native land rights movements and the push for collective titles in the context of shifting global priorities around conservation and development in Ecuador. Through her analysis of how indigenous sovereignty intersects with state power and expectations, outside interests, ecological history, and other social movements, she shows the complexity of human-landscape relations in modern nation-states and makes clear that we must attend to states if we are to protect both the environment and the people who live in it. In *Territories of Difference* (2008), Arturo Escobar shows how extraordinarily complex processes of politics, ethnic identification, social movements, and ideas about territory, social and ecological justice, and recognition of culture and sovereignty play out in the face of capitalist extraction in the highly biologically diverse and variously protected Pacific rainforest region of Colombia. With this he shows that race and ethnicity must be part of our conversations about how to best conserve. In *Emergent Ecologies* (2015), Eben Kirksey writes about how new forms of conservation can emerge as hopeful in our current global environmental crisis if we all (anthropologists, conservation scientists, local people) work together to reframe our approach to environmental problems. He does this with attention to both the circulation of capital and humans (Kirksey 2015). And finally, in *Friction* (2004), Anna Tsing disentangles the interfaces between rainforests, capitalists, environmentalists, people who live in rainforests, and many others in Indonesia. She shows that environmental conservation efforts are never simple and in situ, but rather that they are nodes in global networks and assemblages.<sup>4</sup>

There have also been a large number of review articles focusing on the anthropology of the articulation between humans and their environments. Some have focused specifically on the anthropology of conservation (Little 1999; Orlove and Brush 1996; West, Brockington and Igoe 2006; West and Brockington 2006). Others have focused specifically on the relationship between indigenous peoples and environmental politics (Dove 2006), the environmental anthropology of climate change (Crate 2011), and environmental anthropology more broadly (Biersack 1999; Kottak 1999; Orr, Lansing and Dove 2015). These all build on earlier reviews (Vayda and McCay 1975). Finally, there are excellent readers that focus on how the environment is approached in anthropology that have chapters and sections specifically on conservation (see Crumley 2002; Dove and Carpenter 2008).

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<sup>4</sup> I literally picked these books because they are sitting on my desk in front of me as I write this, I could have also cited a very long list of truly excellent work on conservation by many other scholars.

I, personally, have spent the past seventeen years writing about conservation in ways that have been meant to create conditions whereby conservation-related actors come to understand that all externally-conceptualised or generated conservation interventions carry with them a set of ontological propositions and epistemic practices that are *ex situ* to most socio-ecological systems that exist in ecologically diverse places (West 2000, 2001, 2005, 2006, 2016), that this mismatch creates conditions whereby conservation fails (West 2006, 2008; West and Kale 2015)<sup>5</sup>, and that global capitalism alters human subjectivities and ecological systems in ways that are bad for both (West 2012, 2016). Additionally, I have worked in conservation in Papua New Guinea as a co-founder, board member, and volunteer mentor and teacher for The Papua New Guinea Institute of Biological Research and as the head grant-writer and volunteer anthropologist for Ailans Awareness, two small NGOs focused on small scale conservation projects created by indigenous peoples and their national conservation scientist colleagues (see Aini and West 2014; West and Kale 2015).

Sadly, “Nobody likes Dichotomies (but sometimes you need them)”, fails to engage any of this work, or any of the other of the hundreds of articles and books that give a nuanced and careful analysis of conservation practices, in a substantive way. What the paper does do is set up a poorly constructed “straw man” positioning the paper’s approach against something it calls the “rights to nature” approach. The paper, although winding through a range of polemics, bases the argument that there is a “rights to nature” approach on a selective misreading of the literature. Indeed, the paper selectively cites a limited set of literature, picking out points that set up polarised positions, rather than capturing the richness of the anthropology of conservation literature or the nuances of the issues at hand. The paper tenuously links the shakily constructed “dichotomy” above to other so-called dichotomies (Anthropocentrism / Ecocentrism, ENGO / Local Communities) before it spirals into a deeply problematic section accusing scholars who attempt to understand the complexities of the social impacts of conservation of “political correctness” and, in which the author attempts to show that indigenous people can be really bad sometimes and that because of that, anyone who dares to demonstrate instances where colonial, post-colonial, or neo-colonial interventions into their lives are disastrous is not doing scholarship, but rather demonstrating “political correctness”. The basic argument is as follows: any scholarship that is critical of conservation has an anthropocentric bias that gives preference to local people over dying animals. This argument does not make sense given the literature that I have reviewed briefly above. The end of the paper, in a strange move, shifts focus to something the author calls “industrocentrism” which “equally affects ecosystems and cultural systems”. The fact that many of the authors the paper critiques actually make the argument that capitalism and global, industrialised political economies (and the subjectivities that come with them) are the key factors in both the loss of global ecological and cultural diversity, seems lost here (for example Castree 1995; West and Brockington 2012).

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth mentioning here that the key architect of the conservation project that I write about in my first book (West 2006) has now published his own book-length account of the project that comes to the same conclusions I did regarding the mis match between external ideas about conservation and local practices (Mack 2014).

It is too bad that the paper did not demonstrate a more broad and careful reading of the literature, since the point that we need to re-think is how we theorise the global assemblage of all life today (given our current socio-ecological planetary conditions). And in my most generous reading of this paper, that is what I think motivates it. In the rest of this comment I will lay three of the many things that I feel are crucial for the future of the anthropology of conservation specifically, but also for environmental anthropology more generally if we want to push this vibrant and important field forward in ways that help us move to an anthropology of the Assemblage of the Now.

As a scholar of socio-ecological relations, I have recently begun to think of with the phrase “The Assemblage of the Now” to remind myself that narration of, and nostalgia for, any ‘prior’ state of the world is inextricably tied to a perspective from late liberalism, indeed that the idea of “the governance of the prior provides an essential formation of tense and event to the governance of difference in late liberalism” (Povinelli 2011:34). The formation of tense in our very thinking and our fixation on what *was*, occludes our understanding of *what could be*. As Povinelli argues with regard to settler states and how they attend to indigenous peoples, “the logic of the priority of the prior” becomes the fundamental “foundation of governance” (Povinelli 2011:36). Yet, with regard to various manifestations of socio-ecological assemblages, which are what I think the anthropology of conservation wishes to understand and theorise, any prior thinking embeds the very structures of social and economic power that have contributed to our current planet-wide socio-ecological catastrophe. So, my first point is that we need to engage with an auto critique through which we come to understand any scholarly or activists motivations we have and that derive from this kind of prior thinking.

Second, and clearly not unrelated, we need to go through a process of decolonisation in terms of our epistemic practices. As a field we have continued to rely on the hallmark methods of cultural anthropology even when these methods have been critiqued, discarded, and re-invented by indigenous scholars. We are at a watershed moment in the history of our planet and it is glaringly clear to anyone paying attention that the fate of humans and non-humans are inextricably linked. Our methods must robustly uncover worldings and new possible worlds, and our old method set and approach will not push knowledge far enough to meet these challenges we face today. Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (2012) groundbreaking book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, gives us a ‘why’ and ‘how’ for decolonial knowledge production practice. I don’t have space to review it adequately here. In short, she argues that for any field to overcome the legacies of its colonial origins, it must self-examine how it has historically produced knowledge, how those process have been tied to dispossession, occlusion, erasure, and violence, and how its methods of both so called ‘data collection’ and writing do not and do fit with indigenous and other-colonised or marginal peoples epistemic practices. Finally, it must be willing to radically transform methodologically in order to co-produce knowledge, sometimes, and know when it is not the place of outsiders to know and make knowledge at all (see also Denzin et. al. 2008; Kovach 2010; Tallbear 2014). Part of a de-colonizing practice also means engaging with the work of our indigenous scholar colleagues. It is still too rare in the anthropology of conservation and environmental anthropology that we see a careful engagement with indigenous scholarship on

space and place (Gegeo 2001; Ka'ili 2008; Mahina 1992, 2010) sovereignty (Coulthard 2014; Kauanui 2008; Simpson 2015), dispossession (Barker 2011), socio-ecological assemblages, (Tallbear 2013), environmental politics (Kabutaulaka 2008, 2000, 1997) and representation (Kabutaulaka 1997; Stella 2007) among many other topics.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to having some hard conversations about our methods of collection, we need to have equally hard conversations about our methods of sharing knowledge. First, we need to think about our insistence on publishing only in pay per view peer review journals and in expensive monographs. I'm not advocating that we stop doing either, rather I'm interested in us having a more robust voice from within the anthropology of conservation and environmental anthropology in debates about what other forms of publication might come to "count" for securing jobs, tenure, and promotion. Additionally, we need to think carefully about our own assumptions about what a 'prestigious' or 'important' publication looks like. How many times have we heard a colleague make derisive comments about a junior scholar's publishing on a blog instead of 'focusing on the book' or 'getting another peer-review out there'? Given the number of people who read the average anthropology journal article, might it make more sense for us to see a broad range of publications as important and worthy? Since almost all of the people we write about and collaborate with in our research sites – conservation-related actors, indigenous community members, local political leaders - have internet access, we should begin to value blog posts, on-line articles in popular media, and the like as these sources are most certainly read more often than our other forms of scholarly production.

We also need to think about who can read what we write no matter where we put it. I take it for granted that hard and complex thinking often results in complicated arguments and articulations. I'm not calling for a dumbing down of anything. Rather, we need to think about how our writing habits and practices exclude the conservation actors and locals who live in the places we write about from the knowledge we produce. How could we write in ways that return knowledge in an accessible form to the people we work with? And how could we encourage our field to value clear writing? As above, how many of us have been in situations where we have heard our colleagues put down someone as 'not very smart' or, the ever-dreaded, 'not very theoretical' because their work is easy or a pleasure to read? As scholars we produce knowledge, and I am not one of those people who assumes that all knowledge must have a practical application as defined by some agency, organization, or the state (as in the case of recent moves by the United States Congress to enforce a kind of rule demonstrable economic or social benefit to American for projects funded by the National Science Foundation). Rather, my sense is that the knowledge we produce may well be for the sake of knowledge production yet I am troubled by the increasingly difficult-to-access language used in environmental anthropology. What if our pure knowledge is someone else's answer to a socially and ecologically equitable way forward for a community-generated conservation project and they can't find an access point into any of our publications?

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<sup>6</sup> This is a very small slice of the literature connected to the anthropology of conservation and environmental anthropology by indigenous scholars. Much like the monographs mentioned in footnote one, these are books and papers that are literally on my desk right now for a course I'm teaching in the fall.

Thinking with *The Assemblage of the Now*, a revised and decolonized anthropology of conservation could begin to tackle the following crucial questions: What is the lived experience or quality of life, for all beings, in the socioecological now and how does one capture it textually? And if we believe that our textual practices can help to push forward new ways of thinking and knowing, perhaps even alternatives to dominate powerful ways of thinking and knowing, how do we narrate the now? And finally, what forms of narration can carry epistemological weight in ways that might help with futures otherwise?

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**Rejoinder: Nobody likes Dichotomies (But Sometimes we Need Them)****Helen Kopnina**

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**Strang:**

I very much appreciate Veronica Strang's references to an indigenous all-inclusive worldview, in which they offer 'not "romantic harmony" with a thing called nature, but something much more interesting: a model of how to think about human-non-human relations integratively, and without reifying alienating dichotomies'. However, as in the case of my reaction to Reuter (below), pragmatically speaking, can we really use the indigenous worldview as an alternative on a global scale?

Also, I absolutely agree that a dualistic vision of nature and culture should have no place in holistic ways of thinking. Yet, to me, this means that humans and nonhumans should be treated equally. Deconstructing the dichotomy implies no discrimination on the bases of being nonhuman – no medical experimentation, no close confinements within the concentrated animal-feeding operations, no euthanasia or sterilisation of pets. Deconstructing this dichotomy also implies that those who kill animals should be tried for murder. Obviously, this is not happening, other than in very isolated incidents of killing of poachers, which human rights advocates decry as violating human rights. I am not sure whether any of us are prepared to go so far in carrying out the logical implications of deconstructing dichotomies.

The primary problem is well-summarised by Strang: 'But even accepting the need to extend social justice to the non-human, how many anthropologists would give non-human beings priority over the interests of human groups severely disadvantaged by colonial (and neo-colonial) appropriations of their land and resources? It is difficult for our profession to think counter-intuitively to a century of advocacy on behalf of such communities'.

**Reuter:**

Thomas Reuter makes a number of insightful observations as to the need for a radically different cosmology in order to achieve the broadening of human identity away from a narrow subjective conception of Self, and toward a more world-embracing and objective

sense of Self. I fully agree. I am afraid we are very far from achieving the ancient ideal either of the hermetic *Anthrôpos* and the *Vedic Brahman*. As Reuter himself reflects, his proposal describes an ideal spiritual and moral condition, and while both the *Anthrôpos* and the *Brahman* have been around for millennia, few have lived their lives in conformity with this ideal. As an idealist, I believe these embracing cosmologies will always shine light in the dark. As a pragmatist, however, I suspect that without employing the increasingly globalising language of liberal individualist cosmology and derivative notions such as subjectivity, rights and justice, very little can be understood, and more crucially done, either by academics, policy-makers, political leaders and society as a whole to advance the ambitious objectives of ecological justice.

I agree that we must work harder to strengthen small-scale economies through cultural protection. On the other hand, I do doubt whether this is realistic on a global scale. The simple fact is (and this is part of ecological data we rarely discuss in anthropology) that *Homo sapiens* is a relatively large animal (an apex predator). If we had about seven billion apex predators, let us say lions, walking around on this earth, it is likely that without technological innovations in the production of antelope meat, the lions would end up following the Hobbesian path of war and starvation. Small scale antelope consumption, as in the olden days of demographic balance between predator and prey, seems unlikely.

#### **West:**

Paige West accuses of me being ignorant of what she sees as relevant literature, creating straw men, and of selective reading. She follows this with an extended reflection on open access publication that seems to have little to do with the main subject of my article – ecological justice.

The straw men accusation goes both ways. In many self-references, West presents a common critique that reduces ‘environmentalists’ to neocolonial capitalist imperialists. For example, West and Brockington (2012, 2) argue that environmentalism ‘went south’ to the recently decolonised nations, and while there, ‘it got snugly in bed with its old enemy, corporate capitalism’. Unfortunately, West also seems to be very much selective in her (mis)reading of conservation.

Addressing the ‘ignoramus’ issue, many references that West recommends are in fact referenced in my own publications, which I suspect West is unfamiliar with. I would also recommend to West a lot of cross-disciplinary readings, particularly in the fields of biology (Edward O. Wilson 2016) biological conservation (Michael *Soulé and Reed Noss* 1998) environmental sociology (Riley Dunlap and Kent Van Lier 1978), conservation psychology (Paul Stern 2000), deep ecology in environmental ethics (Arne Naess 1973), animal rights (Peter Singer 1977), critical animal studies and an emerging fields of animal law (Anne Peters 2016) and earth justice (Polly Higgins 2010). Very little of the interdisciplinary work that directly relates to my article is to be found in exclusively anthropological references that West recommends.

West and I fully converge in the argument that ‘capitalism and global industrialised political economies, and the subjectivities that come with them, are the key factors in both the loss of global ecological and cultural diversity’. Yes, I agree that the rich and the powerful are to blame for most environmental destruction. I wonder, however, whether it is possible to ever realistically eliminate social inequalities – especially in the world of competition for limited resources. In this sense, if an alternative path to the present idea of economic development cannot be found, raising the global living standards will have potentially-catastrophic impacts on both the ecosystems and human wellbeing. In my own publications (most of my research is based in my own Western consumption society) I discuss these alternative paths – the cradle to cradle, circular economy, de-growth, steady-state-economy, etcetera.

### **General comment:**

This leads us to one of the salient points regarding dichotomies. Both what might be termed deep ecology scholars as well as more ecumenical, post-modern, open, inclusive, plural, anthropocentric, etc. scholars, reject the human/nature dualism, but they do so for different reasons, drawing diametrically-opposed ethical conclusions from their opposition to it. The reason why some conservation critics argue that humans are part of nature is to show that, as products of evolution, our presence in ‘nature’ is natural, and so are human-made objects – in other words, there is no distinction between ‘artificiality’ and ‘wilderness’, as William Cronon or Robert Fletcher, among others, have argued. In other words, the human co-optation of the elements of biosphere then becomes as unobjectionable as any other phase of evolution. In this framing, it is assumed that since human beings are part of nature there is no reason to insist upon the detrimental role of communities.

In this context, the term, ‘nature’, does not adequately designate the intended object of conservation. From the deep ecology perspective, humans are indeed also seen as part of nature, and products of evolution. In deep ecology, human beings are also seen as one of many species on this planet and not morally privileged in relation to other elements of nature, but must share those resources equitably with other species. Reserving some areas exclusively for the use of non-human species is then consistent with the non-dualist stance of deep ecology.

The deep ecology (Naess 1973), land ethics (Leopold 1949), and animal rights (Singer 1977; Peters 2016) conceptions of unity with nature require recognition of the integrity of ecosystems and a certain balance of needs, which can be interpreted in terms of interspecies egalitarianism or equity (Baxter 2005). If the questions of interspecies equity and animal rights were taken seriously, the planet would need to be divided on the basis of species’ natural resource requirements (e.g. Noss 1992; Mathews 2016), and not on the basis of what one single species proclaims to be its entitlement. Most critics I cited in my initial article are specifically drawing attention to situations where strict designations of human and nature made by groups of ‘environmentalists’ –who are generalised, and often misrepresented as misanthropic –‘can effectively sever indigenous/local people from their land and livelihood(s), and that environmentalist/local relations should be understood through the lens of power indifferences. My criticism of this position is that by displacing entire *non-human*

*communities* – and in some cases annexing their entire habitats and exterminating them – the perpetrators of ecological injustice seem unaware that they themselves support the apparatus of oppressive governance that entirely discounts the most vulnerable groups – those of nonhumans.

Thus, the issue at stake is not so much whether humans are part of nature or not – of course they are in one way or another – but whether their influence endangers all other elements of nature. After all, Ebola virus is part of nature as well, yet it is questionable whether the spread of its population and influence should be welcomed by other species. The fact that, when we speak of justice for all, we do not speak of *all* communities of life on this planet, seems lost here. Just as we have become attentive to the ways that conservation can disadvantage local communities, I hope that we can also avoid discriminating against all other species, in practice and in our academic writing.

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