

The intrinsic value of nature

Commentary on [Treves et al.](#) on *Just Preservation*

Joanna E. Lambert

Ecology and Evolutionary Biology
University of Colorado Boulder

Abstract: Treves et al. explain the need to preserve the rights of nonhuman species, human youth, and future generations. Although conservation biology has claimed to have an intrinsic valuation ethic since its inception in the 1980s, many aspects of the field have taken a decidedly anthropocentric and instrumentalist trajectory. This has important consequences for conservation-related policy and practice at all scales: local, regional, and global.

[Joanna E. Lambert](#), Professor of Environmental Studies, department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, University of Colorado Boulder, studies wild primates and carnivores, especially in equatorial Africa. [Website](#)



Conservation biology’s ethical “muddle”. I call myself a conservation biologist, although when I was in graduate school (late 1980s and early 1990s), there were virtually no university programs with the word “conservation” in their monikers. Indeed, the journal *Conservation Biology* was established only in 1986 and nonprofits that explicitly included “conservation” in their names only sprang forth in that same decade or thereabouts (e.g., *Wildlife Conservation Society*). I mention this timeline because in “Just Preservation”, Treves et al. delve to the center of a moral dilemma (the ethical “muddle”) that conservation biologists have never fully confronted, although it has been inherent in the discipline since its inception. This ethical muddle, as described by the authors is that: *“conservation biology and its ethics remain confused about whether we have responsibilities to individual organisms, how we should meet those responsibilities, and what an inheritance of evolutionary outcomes implies. Nor does conservation biology emphasize the importance of preserving nature (as opposed to conserving natural resources) for future generations of humans and non-humans”*.

There are good reasons why distilling the normative postulates of conservation biology has been tricky. The vast majority of conservation biologists (such as myself) are neither ethicists nor environmental philosophers and thus lack the vocabulary and training to give this discourse the treatment it deserves. Moreover, the recognition that nonhuman species have sentience has drawn mainstream attention only recently. Pragmatically (as is made evident by Treves et al.), explicating the rights and interests of nonhuman species, human youth and future generations without anthropocentrism is a nontrivial challenge. Yet, addressing the dissonance inherent in so many conservation discussions in order to *“level the playing field between humans and non-humans”* is more than just an academic pursuit. How scholars and practitioners contend with these ethical concerns has practical implications for the conservation of nature – implications for both policy and strategy in the field. It was hence

deeply gratifying to read “Just Preservation”. I applaud the authors for venturing into the intellectual fray. Few scholars have the training, temerity, and talent to do so as elegantly.

Instrumental versus intrinsic value in conservation. The value of a thing (in this case, “nature”, “non-human species”, “future generations”, etc.) can be *instrumental* (utility for humans) or *intrinsic*: an objective value, in and of itself. From its inception, conservation has considered the value of species and habitat to be intrinsic: “*Species have value in themselves, a value neither conferred nor revocable, but springing from a species’ long evolutionary heritage and potential*” (Soulé 1985). Yet, intrinsic value is rarely brought into practice at the policy level. As Treves et al. note: “*we find recent interpretations of a non-anthropocentric principle continue to side-line the well-being of the non-human world and contain a vexing speciesism (creating a hierarchy of value with humans at the top and justifying human use of individual non-humans as long as populations, habitats, or ecological assemblages remain apparently unharmed)*”.

Despite claims to the contrary, conservation biology has become decidedly instrumental, assimilating precepts of an earlier anthropocentric and instrumentalist model of natural systems and their products (such as the timber that forests can provide; Pinchot 1914). The mission statement of the [United States Forest Service \(USFS\)](#), for example, is to “sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation’s forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations”. That of the [US National Park Service \(NPS\)](#) is “to preserve unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System (NPS) for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations”. And that of the [US Bureau of Land Management \(BLM\)](#) is “to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations”. In each case, “generations” means *human* generations, not those of nonhuman species.

The ethical missions of the USFS (1905), NPS (1916), and BLM (1946) were written long before the advent of contemporary conservation biology and considerations of intrinsic value and animal sentience, but anthropocentric instrumentalism still prevails globally today. In the [United Nations Millennium Ecosystem Assessment \(MEA\)](#) (2006), the most ambitious attempt to identify the value of nature, it was categorized in terms of “ecosystem services” – assessing nature in terms of its benefits to humans. Written by more than 1,300 authors from 95 countries, the MEA represents consensus about the roles and value of the natural world, with implications for policy and action at an international scale. Fruit-eating, seed-dispersing animals, for example, are deemed valuable because they facilitate optimal reproduction and recruitment of trees that yield resources for humans (e.g., timber, food crops) — *not* because of the relationships between fruiting plants and fruit-eating animals that have evolved over the past 65+ million years. It is the fact that these animals provide ecosystem services to humans that imbues them with instrumental value.

If the natural world is identified by the United Nations as having value only for human beings, vast elements of our biota will go unnoticed, ineligible for conservation action. Apart perhaps from the case of pollinating honeybees, never to my knowledge has recognition that an animal species can provide ecosystem services been based on the value of protecting the species for its own sake rather than just ours.

References

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CLOSING DATE: 24 JANUARY 2020.

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