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Bringing Biodiversity Conservation onto the Global Justice Agenda: A Case for an Egalitarian Approach

Review of Global Justice and the Biodiversity Crisis – Conservation in a World of Inequality by Chris Armstrong

Chris Armstrong's 6th single-authored book lays the groundwork for political philosophers to think about conservation and global justice in tandem, a nexus thus far neglected in the field. In six highly accessible chapters, Armstrong makes a compelling case for protecting biodiversity through policies that are explicitly oriented along egalitarian principles. These, he claims, are most likely to tackle the structural drivers of biodiversity loss and prevent exacerbating existing inequalities, two dimensions that current conservation practices fare poorly on.

Armstrong grounds his case in empirical evidence that suggests a positive correlation between biodiversity loss and inequality at different scales. Most importantly, he highlights that the burdens of conservation practices are frequently placed on the most disadvantaged, a problem that is less related to the fact that the lion share of biodiversity is concentrated in the Global South than to the colonial legacy of conservation practices themselves.[1] Armstrong traces how the Western 'fortress' conservation model was from its onset characterised by the displacement and exclusion of local and indigenous peoples from their lands in the name of protecting biodiversity.[2] To this day, decisions about conserva-

1 Drawing on Adam (2014), Armstrong explains that the international legal framework underpinning contemporary conservation has its origins in colonial law, which falsely blamed colonised peoples for biodiversity destruction to justify their dispossession. Hence, instances of burdening already marginalised populations in the name of protecting biodiversity today represent a certain continuity (p.24).

2 As Armstrong details, historically, conservation projects relied on a socially constructed idea of pristine wilderness that negated the extent to which landscapes had been shaped by indigenous peoples, and legitimated their displacement (see for instance Neumann, 1998). Contemporary conservation projects, such as those established within the REDD+ framework, have been found to produce similar outcomes (Leach and Scoones, 2013:965) (pp.119-120).

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tion are often made undemocratically, and frequently end up curtailing the opportunities of already marginalised and poor communities. Hence, Armstrong convincingly argues that since both environmental degradation *and* proposed solutions have problematic implications, it is crucial to develop an approach to conservation that attends both to ecological and justice concerns.

The philosophical basis of Armstrong's argument is marked by a certain pluralism which, while perhaps unsatisfactory for political philosophers interested in theoretical depth, gives his claims broad appeal. An illustration of this is his elaboration of the individualist zoocentric perspective that underpins his justice-based case for conservation: he does not explore any theory of interspecies justice in detail, instead his claim is that hierarchical, egalitarian and capability approaches all point towards far-reaching political changes that give significantly more priority to non-human animals. This leads him to present a multi-layered argument listing intrinsic and instrumental reasons to preserve functional and resilient (which typically implies diverse) ecosystems for individuals' basic rights and flourishing. He defends the latter on grounds of justice following egalitarian principles, according to which it is unjust if some have access to rich natural environments that allow them to flourish while others do not.

The version of egalitarianism Armstrong invokes throughout the book is a hybrid form that incorporates both objective and subjective criteria. As in previous work, his preferred metric is access to well-being (cf. Armstrong 2017), which combines concerns about financial fairness and poverty reduction with relational aspects. Based on this, he elaborates a two-step argument for the distribution of conservation burdens already sketched in his work on ocean justice (Armstrong, 2022). The *Contributor Pays Principle*, he argues, is adequate provided that its application does not push people into poverty and that contributors are causally connected to the damage in the right way, i.e., they are aware of their behaviour's effects and have feasible alternatives. If these conditions are not met, Armstrong proposes the *Ability to Pay Principle*, i.e., if contributors cannot pay without slipping below an "average sustainable level of well-being" (p.65), costs should be distributed following a system akin to progressive taxation. However, he does not specify further what such an average level of well-being might look like and concedes that a "rough-and-ready proxy" (p.66) might be more practicable. Hence, while intuitively highly appealing, his account leaves open some of the thornier questions. Nevertheless, he can be forgiven for being vague on this point as trying to answer these questions conclusively far exceeds the scope of a short book that aims primarily at starting a conversation about conservation in global justice scholarship.

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What such a conversation might look like is illustrated by Armstrong's nuanced discussion of existing conservation efforts which makes visible the injustice current conservation tools entail. His examination of baseline-setting for opportunity costs, the standard way to determine the compensation for people who forgo certain activities in favour of conservation, exemplifies this. He compellingly argues that it often results in the exploitation of the poor and the overpayment of the rich because compensation is typically specified based on what people would have earned had conservation not occurred, or what they are willing to accept. Hence, both approaches tend to perpetuate existing inequalities. Armstrong also rejects a third approach, a static anti-poverty baseline, as he rightly considers it unduly harsh to people just above this very low threshold. Instead, he proposes an egalitarian baseline according to which opportunity costs should be calculated in comparison with "an equal sustainable standard of living" (p.81). Certainly, he leaves open the difficult question of how to specify and implement such an egalitarian baseline given the power of actors that status-quo or willingness-to-accept baselines usually overpay. However, his key achievement lies in emphasising the importance of attending closely to the taken-for-granted conceptions of justice that current conservation practice contains, which strengthens the case for political philosophers to draw up alternatives.

Indeed, one of the book's key strengths lies in the practical changes Armstrong suggests for current practices. While exploring the problems associated with market-based conservation practices in particular, he does not dismiss them outright but presents ideas for improving them that have appeal even for those who might disagree with his more radical arguments. An example of this is his examination of biodiversity offsetting, which denotes the idea that the destruction of a certain part of nature can be compensated by the preservation of another. Although offsetting should be the last resort according to the so-called 'mitigation hierarchy', it has become standard practice (Arlidge et al., 2018: 337). Importantly, offsetting depends on setting a baseline for the normal rate of biodiversity loss. Often, negative baselines are adopted, meaning that offsetting is considered successful even when biodiversity continues to be lost. Another issue relates to determining how rigidly the equivalence of aspects of nature should be defined, i.e., what element of biodiversity can plausibly be considered equally valuable to and thus an adequate offset for another. This is further complicated by market actors lobbying for more flexibility and pessimistic baselines because this lowers development costs. Armstrong concedes that these problems could be designed out, hence pointing to ample room for improvement within the current framework. However, he stresses that other

issues inherent to the practice are deeply problematic from a justice perspective which becomes evident when comparing the case for biodiversity offsetting with the argument employed in favour of carbon offsetting: even if one accepts the flawed claim that if the exact same amount of CO2 is captured as is emitted, no harm occurs, Armstrong shows that this argument cannot hold even theoretically in the case of biodiversity where offsetting necessarily involves destruction, killing or harm – his individualist zoocentrist perspective suggests that such harm cannot be compensated by preventing similar harm elsewhere. This point is strengthened when considering the attachment of communities to specific environments, whose loss is not mitigated by protecting a comparable environment far away. Armstrong's discussion thus draws attention to the need to ground theories of conservation justice in their geographical and relational realities to assess their adequacy.

This approach also characterises his critique of the Half Earth proposal, i.e., the idea to place 50% of the planet's surface under protection (see for instance Wilson, 2016: 3). It has attracted widespread attention and support from those who, like Armstrong himself, demand a more comprehensive approach to conservation. However, his argument reveals Half Earth to be problematic when considering what its materialisation would entail, unless accompanied by significant side policies. Amongst other things, Armstrong suggests Half Earth could become another neo-colonial, fortress conservation project on an enormous scale, excluding and displacing local populations particularly in the Global South, thus unjustly burdening them. Furthermore, he asks how the planet's natural half could be governed fairly, and how the increased pressure on the human half could be handled, which would include preventing pollution spilling into the natural half. Most importantly, he problematises that the endeavour enshrines the harmful human-nature dichotomy. For each of these problems, he sketches how they might be mitigated if one wanted to hold on to Half Earth. However, Armstrong's main argument against Half Earth is comparative: citing evidence from community-led conservation projects, he suggests that area-based conservation can be rethought in ways that do not require mass-displacement and allow for harmonious cohabitation of humans and the non-human world. Significantly, he urges us to broaden the idea of what constitutes conservation. Returning to a thread he weaves throughout the book, he argues that targeting consumption patterns in the Global North, removing environmentally harmful subsidies, and forgiving the debt of Global South countries might be the most promising and feasible way to tackle the biodiversity crisis' root cause.

In conclusion, Armstrong's book convincingly shows why what is conventionally understood as conservation does not only produce negative side-effects

but is likely less effective in terms of preserving biodiversity and reducing inequalities than strategies that address the structural drivers of biodiversity destruction. However, this perspective does not lead him to be dismissive of current practices. Rather, he discusses them fairly, acknowledging their benefits, differentiating their problems, and offering productive suggestions for making them more just, for example by setting baselines differently or adopting side-policies. Combined with his pluralist account of justice that relies on the considerable overlap between different principles, this gives his argument broad appeal, even for those who might disagree with his conclusions. He backs his case up with rich empirical literature, which further strengthens his normative claims. Certainly, the book remains superficial at times and from the perspective of global justice scholarship, his hybrid egalitarianism could be elaborated more fully. However, when read in light of his aim – to initiate a long overdue debate about conservation in political philosophy – Armstrong's book excels. It covers enormous ground and provides a reader-friendly overview of the various threads that political philosophers have compelling reasons to follow.

Maja Klostermann
Postgraduate Candidate
Department of Political and Social Sciences
Universitat Pompeu Fabra
maja.klostermann@gmail.com

the global justice network

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