

Just conservation is where environmental issues and social justice commingle

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Natural resource management needs to incorporate both social justice and environmental conservation. Credit: Sarah Bird/Michigan Tech

More people, limited resources. Environmental ethicists consider best practices for conflict resolution and fairness when people and the

environment are at odds.

Conservation is increasingly stymied by people who object to particular conservation actions-claiming them to be unfair for one reason or another. In a new paper published in *Biological Conservation* ([DOI: 10.1016/j.biocon.2018.02.022](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2018.02.022)), the authors propose principles for resolving such conflicts-principles that redress shortcomings in existing methods for addressing conservation conflicts.

"Social justice and conservation each represent great values of our society," says John Vucetich, professor of ecology at Michigan Technological University, who led the study. "We aimed to examine those values from first principles to better understand how to respond when [social justice](#) and conservation seem to [conflict](#)."

Vucetich's co-authors include Jeremy Bruskotter from Ohio State University and a team from the Wildlife Conservation Research Unit (WildCRU) from Oxford University-Dawn Burnham, Ewan Macdonald, Alexandria Zimmerman, David Macdonald and Silvio Marchini, who is also associated with the University of São Paulo. Vucetich explains the foundation of the analysis is recognizing that social justice is the fair treatment of others judged according to three principles: equality, need and desert.

Who are the "others" in social justice? Vucetich says this is "the first question and it is especially basic." To answer, the team synthesized scholarship in social justice and environmental ethics; they arrived at a principle to help guide the adjudication of conservation conflicts.

"No human should infringe on the well-being of others any more than is necessary for a healthy, [meaningful life](#). The "others" in this principle would include not only humans but also many nonhumans, especially many nonhuman animals."

While that principle is closely related to many well-vetted ideas in social justice and environmental ethics, they also point out that application of this principle in the governance of natural resources would be a radical departure from current practice.

Take this example. Whether wolves, lions, bears or some other large predator, advocates for carnivore conservation ask ranchers to accept that predators are going to kill-on rare occasion-some of their livestock. Livestock owners often say the losses are unfair.

Similar conflicts readily come to mind: hard-working citizens of modest means no longer allowed to harvest forests on their property for the sake of some rare species of bird; to protect a rare ecosystem-a mangrove, for example-people are dislocated; in a different instance of mangrove protection, a land developer claims the restrictions unfairly infringe on their livelihood.

Mindful of such conflicts, Vucetich and his team show how one can address those conflicts with the three principles of social justice: Desert as in deserving; need meaning what you require to realize a healthy, meaningful life; equality in the sense of avoiding inappropriately unequal wealth and resources.

"We applied those principles to three general scenarios that cover quite a few real-world conflicts," Vucetich says. "In particular, we address cases where a conservation action would cause a group to abandon a traditional cultural activity, financial loss to some human stakeholders or an involuntary loss of employment."

The team's analysis suggests that current methods for resolving conservation conflicts would more likely realize both [conservation](#) and social justice if they better attended the three principles of equality, need and desert.

More information: John A. Vucetich et al, Just conservation: What is it and should we pursue it?, *Biological Conservation* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.biocon.2018.02.022](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2018.02.022)

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