Call for harder line on how we judge conservation

November 24 2022

Credit: CC0 Public Domain

James Cook University scientists say a more direct approach should be taken to conservation planning—with greater focus on the real impact of conservation actions and less attention paid to targets or actions that

misrepresent progress.

Dr. Patrick Smallhorn-West is a Research Fellow at JCU's ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies. In a recent article he said that conservation only functions by changing human actions, so if conservationists make choices that avoid interfering with human damage to nature, they are also necessarily limiting their impact.

"For example, marine protected areas can incur costs to fishers, and national parks can incur lost opportunities for agriculture, mining, logging, or grazing," said Dr. Smallhorn-West.

"Controlling these activities therefore carries political and societal costs. But fishing, agriculture, and mining are also some of the key activities affecting nature."

He said much of conservation planning and research focuses on minimizing the costs incurred by fishing, logging, and mining.

"But this widespread emphasis on minimizing costs has resulted in the paradoxical development of conservation goals with little actual impact for nature," said Dr. Smallhorn-West.

He said one example of this was the 2004 rezoning of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, which increased highly protected areas from 4.6 percent to 33.3 percent of the Park, but still only reduced the extent of business-as-usual trawling by less than 5 percent and areas trawled more than once by less than 1 percent.

This same pattern followed the 2018 design of Australia's National system of Marine Protected Areas, where high protection was greatest in deep water (>500 m), and had negligible overlap with pelagic longlining areas (0.4%) or trawling grounds (0.1%), and only limited fishing by 1

percent and petroleum extraction by 4.5 percent.

He said the results aren't limited to Australia—globally, the largest 10 marine protected areas, collectively making up 53 percent of the world's coverage and whose main purpose is to limit fishing, are almost all situated in remote areas that already have low levels of fishing.

Dr. Smallhorn-West said if these vast conservation networks fail to change any present-day actions, then the question needs to be asked about what exactly they are meant to achieve.

"We understand that nature conservation is only one of society's values, and hence needs to be balanced with other things we hold dear. But if we accept that preserving nature through reduced resource consumption is a goal of conservation, then we must also accept that minimizing costs will also minimize impact.

He said there should be a change in the language of conservation to focus explicitly on the differences conservation actions make, with more value assigned to their practical impact.

"The value we attribute to a conservation action should be correlated to the extent to which it changes human actions—after all, if human impacts were not causing harm to nature, then nature conservation would not be necessary," said Dr. Smallhorn-West.

"Put another way, the predominant question should be 'how much does/will this intervention change what people are doing'? This would extend the idea through society that conservation is about giving something up, while balancing these societal values with others such as reducing poverty and inequalities."

He said organizations, governments, and other bodies promoting

examples of easy conservation wins with minimal disruption of present-day actions should be viewed with caution.

"The only chance these projects have of achieving impact is by their potential effects of future human actions, which is problematic in three ways: first, it lets business as usual continue in areas needing protection; second, it passes the responsibility for change onto future generations; and third, there is always the possibility of conservation programs being canceled in the future. We need to act now.

"Making the language used to communicate conservation progress, targets, and planning more honest and more explicitly focused on the differences our actions make will help to realign our efforts with the effective preservation of nature," said Dr. Smallhorn-West.

More information: Patrick F. Smallhorn-West et al, Why does conservation minimize opportunity costs?, *Conservation Science and Practice* (2022). DOI: 10.1111/csp2.12808

Provided by James Cook University