

Setting minimum targets for wildlife conservation excludes restoration and ecosystem management, researcher argues

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Although the grizzly is featured prominently on the California state flag, the golden bear has been extinct in the wild since the 1920s.

In response, some conservation advocates have promoted the idea of returning it to the California wilderness, modeled on other wildlife-reintroduction efforts. And while there are instances in which large mammals have been restored to their historic range, there also are hidden obstructions keeping bears on the flag but off the land, according to Benjamin Hale.

Hale is an associate professor of philosophy who teaches in the Department of Environmental Studies at the University of Colorado Boulder, where his focus is on environmental ethics.

In a recently published [paper](#), "The Bear Minimum: Reintroduction and the Weakness of Minimalist Conservation," Hale and co-authors Lee Brann and Alexander Lee argue that conservation policies too often gauge the success of conservation initiatives by setting minimum targets for conservation, which can be short-sighted. The paper is published in the *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences*.

"When conservation policy sets minimum standards for the protection of nature, objectives like restoration, novel ecosystem management, rewilding and other novel issues in intervention ecology become unsupported and underrepresented," the authors note.

Recently, Colorado Arts and Sciences Magazine asked Hale to expand on these topics. His responses were lightly edited and condensed for space.

What, specifically, is wrong with doing the bare minimum when it comes to conservation?

Well, first of all, it's a losing proposition for conservation to do as little as possible or to only set a minimum goal and not aspire to something

greater. I think that it ultimately ends up being self-undermining of conservationist efforts.

As it is, many times the protections kick in once it's already pretty late in the process. That doesn't leave a lot of time for error, partly because we tend to focus efforts on protecting what little remaining value there is in the world. That is to say, Here is a valuable entity, let's try to protect it and prevent harm from coming to it.

And once these minimums are imposed, very often the discussions about how conservation can best proceed are effectively over, even in the face of new developments. From the standpoint of keeping the discussion open, I and my co-authors have suggested that we should take steps to focus more on establishing communities of experts offering their expertise in an ongoing way.

Why do you believe many conservation efforts seem to focus on minimum goals rather than something more expansive?

I think it's just the direction we've been going since the Endangered Species Act was passed. When policies are set, they impose restrictions on whole groups of people, and when groups of people object to the imposition of those policies, generally the question becomes something like, "Well, how much can we do?"

That question, I think, yields the minimalist position. There's some minimum threshold that you're aiming for, resulting from a practical concern, which ends up being a sort of default position for a lot of conservationists.

In your paper, you talk about 'new conservation

science.' How is it different from traditional conservation, and how does it fit into minimalist conservation?

New conservation sort of burst onto the scene in the past 10 or 15 years with some work by folks like Peter Kareiva, the former chief scientist and vice president of The Nature Conservancy. He and some other folks basically thought that traditional approaches to conservation were protectionist and that traditional conservationists were using the Endangered Species Act in ways that were absolutist.

The "new conservationist" science advocates thought we should be more careful to triage [conservation efforts](#), given that there is a limited amount of natural resources. New conservation scientists also suggested we redirect conservation efforts for more anthropocentric concerns.

A lot of people in the old conservation community saw those ideas as a kind of threat to what they had committed their lives to do, which is to protect nature for its own sake.

This has been a very hotly debated topic, and in fact, I co-authored another paper with some of my other CU colleagues, including Dan Doak and Bruce Goldstein, in which we directly challenged the ideas put forth by Peter Kareiva. That article was heavily cited at the time we published it.

Even today, the debate is ongoing.

Conservation minimalism can take a number of different forms; are there also a number of alternatives to minimalism?

Yes. I guess the first thing I should say is that when we are outlining these varieties of minimalism, we don't intend to suggest that all of these are descriptive of actual, deeply held commitments on the part of some in the conservation community. Rather, we're sort of using some methodologies of philosophy to try to explore the idea of minimalism in its various forms and to highlight potential issues with those concepts.

This allows us to then make the argument, "OK, if I can't be a minimalist, then what should I do?"

And it is also worth pointing out that the alternatives to minimalism (presented) are not widely held beliefs. Some are conceptually absurd. For example, we introduce the idea of maximalism, which is the idea that we should protect all of nature. A maximalist about [grizzly bears](#) might say, "Let's maximize grizzly bears. How many grizzlies can we pack onto this planet?"

Nobody in the conservation community today is really advocating for that. We're introducing this idea so that the reader can challenge it and then dispense with it.

In your paper, you put forward the idea of using 'reasonabilism' to make decisions about conservation. What, exactly, is reasonabilism and why is it a better alternative to the other methods?

Well, it is a made-up term. We created it as a way of talking about getting us to consider a reasonable approach to conservation in which all participants are engaging with one another in a kind of deliberative, discursive exchange, almost like a town hall.

The idea behind reasonabilism is that it's not dependent upon a small

panel of experts to dictate what the ultimate outcome is going to be. Conservation is better served when we take more aggressive steps to democratize the process through which conservation decisions are made.

Reasonabilism is sort of a playful term, but the hope is really that it can serve as a useful contrast to rationalism, which is actually quite common in the environmental policy discourse.

Would reasonabilism suggest that grizzly bear reintroduction in California is possible, maybe with certain stipulations or limitations?

I think it's possible, although maybe politically challenging. If you were to get all the communities together that are going to be affected by grizzly reintroduction and try to develop a process for the reintroduction of the grizzly that would help justify it, the outcome of that process wouldn't necessarily make everyone happy, but it would at least provide a process for deliberation. It's important to have all voices at the table.

I will say by way of comparison that it's relevant that the recent effort to reintroduce the wolf to Colorado was determined by plebiscite (a popular vote). I think Colorado, in some ways, is doing it right by trying to get as many people as possible involved in the discussion.

Again, this is not to say that we're going to avoid all conflict, because conflict is common with these kinds of pretty significant environmental changes, but it is important to make these decisions through the democratic process. That's the kind of idea we're after. We think this is what would make it "reasonable": because people can reason through it.

Do you think the idea of reasonabilism could catch on with conservationists, if not broader parties that

would be involved in conservation discussions?

It may or may not catch on. I don't know about the idea itself, but I think that the objective of the paper is to say, There is an alternative to imposing of the standard value propositions that dominate the conservation discussion and then insisting upon one of the varieties of minimalism or maximalism or rationalism.

Part of the job of the conservationists and wildlife managers is to pay attention to the variety of voices that contribute to this effort—even if they're dead set against the grizzly's reintroduction, or wolves, or whatever the case may be.

In a way, that's what we're doing in CU's environmental studies department. We have faculty from across campus with diverse areas of expertise, but we're all coming together in one unit with the objective of expanding the discourse.

More information: Lee Brann et al, The bear minimum: reintroduction and the weaknesses of minimalist conservation, *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s13412-023-00865-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/s13412-023-00865-2)

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