

Conservation Futures

Purpose and Design

29 October 2017

Introduction

The relationship between humanity and nature has undergone profound changes in the past decades, as our civilization becomes increasingly urbanized and globalized and the Anthropocene – an increasingly human-crafted planet - takes hold. Our demand for natural resources and ecosystem services has grown to a point where we are now seriously out of balance with the natural systems and resources on which our prosperity and prospects depend. And this exceeding of the limits may be triggering irreversible change; recent news about the massive reduction in flying insect numbers in Europe, for example, suggests we could be on dangerous ground.

In response, conservation¹ actors worldwide have ramped up their efforts and achieved many successes. Governments and intergovernmental agencies and processes, civil society organizations from the global to the local level, corporations and communities are multiplying their efforts to implement the strategies and realize the goals set for biodiversity conservation. And yet the scale and pace of the response is still far from adequate. We must not only intensify existing efforts and rally support for them, but imagine new ways to take conservation to a pace and scale that ensures lasting success. It seems highly unlikely that a mere reinforcement and acceleration of present efforts will prove sufficient to secure a healthy future for nature and natural systems. We need to think in terms of transformation - of positive disruption – to secure a healthy future for nature and people. A deep reframing of the role of conservation in supporting the interdependent relationship between people and our planet is needed.

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals enshrines the importance of integrated approaches to sustainability. This agenda – with its associated goals and targets – that now represents the central framework for the transition to sustainable development, one to which all member States of the UN have publicly committed. We must ensure that the commitments to conservation – explicit or implied – remain front and centre and are not marginalized as they were in the Millennium Development Goals.

The Paris climate agreement shows that, with sound science, strong mobilization, and a compelling narrative, it is indeed possible to reach a global agreement on a crucial issue and begin to move towards a genuine global response on a scale and – we hope – at a pace that allows genuinely sustainable solutions to be deployed. The different trajectories followed, respectively, by the climate change and biodiversity communities is worthy of serious reflection, given that both were launched together at the Earth Summit in 1992.

2020 is the next big reckoning point for the SDGs, climate and biodiversity. For the latter, it marks the end of the period set for the achievement of the Aichi Biodiversity Targets, major intergovernmental meetings including the CBD COP in Beijing, and the launch of a new strategy, goals and targets. Conservation Futures aims to make a major contribution to these.

¹ The use of the word “conservation” in this paper refers not to narrow approaches to preservation but to the broader aim of ecosystem sustainability.

What is Conservation Futures?

The challenge of achieving a lasting balance between an expanding human population and a shrinking nature is highly complex and multi-faceted, and the response must respect and respond to that complexity. *Conservation Futures* (often referred to in this paper by the shorthand “initiative”) aims, therefore, not to repeat and duplicate the many existing initiatives in this field, but to explore new and different approaches and perspectives that offer promise to improve the impact of conservation efforts worldwide. It aims to mobilize new stakeholders around the cause of conservation, to explore new thinking from a wide range of fields relevant to conservation, to identify solutions most amenable to being taken to scale, and to craft a new narrative that stresses not the dimensions of the challenge but instead reflects excitement at the potential solutions within our reach.

The **scope** of *Conservation Futures* is to achieve a clear set of breakthroughs in understanding, setting or reforming the rules of the game by which people interact with nature, the rules that determine how we wish to relate to the living planet that supports us. Those factors that most affect nature currently lie outside the remit of conservation authorities and actors, public and private. They relate instead to economic policy, to finance, to consumption and production, to technology, to governance, and to many other fields of human endeavour. Those fields all offer untapped potential for improving and reinforcing conservation practice just as they all represent an ongoing threat. We need better alignment of our society and our economy with the requirements of a resilient planet, with behaviour that undermines conservation phased out and with conservation operating in a favourable and enabling policy framework.

It is important to stress that, while much of what is proposed under the *Conservation Futures* framework would be similar to the action required to advance sustainable development, the focus of Conservation Futures is very solidly on the living environment – nature, natural resources and ecosystems. Thus, within each area of inquiry, the findings and insights will always be drawn back to the implications for conservation.

The **mission** of *Conservation Futures* is, therefore, to reframe our relationship with the living planet of which we are an integral part, and to generate as broad as possible a movement that new relationship. It is to add clear value and new input to the conservation debate, drawing lessons and insights from all relevant walks of life and applying these to the improvement of conservation impact.

Conservation Futures aims to bring about a transformation in conservation by generating a groundswell of innovation in the relationships between conservation practice and the other areas of human endeavour on which conservation success depends. We aim to draw into conservation the best of thinking and practice from the rapidly-developing disciplines around technological development, ICT, social media, behavioural science, alternative finance mechanisms, and many others to improve mobilization around conservation priorities and to greatly expand the stakeholder community demanding and working for conservation.

We aim to generate new ideas for conservation, new energy and a new sense of purpose. We aim to recruit a diverse and distributed support base for conservation, working to a new and broadened agenda. And we aim to trigger a large-scale mobilization through *Conservation Futures* to reimagine, rethink and reframe conservation, and to generate the pace and scale needed for conservation success. We wish to build momentum towards conservation, remembering that momentum is a combination of energy and direction.

Conservation Futures will locate the bulk of its action not in the traditional conservation approaches and communities – biological science, natural resource management, natural capital, etc. – but instead at the meeting point between conservation and other fields with a potential to inform and improve conservation action. It aims to supplement and reinforce conservation efforts, not replace them.

Stages in *Conservation Futures*

A **design phase** from the present through March 2018 will:

- agree the initial scope for *Conservation Futures*
- identify a range of potential co-convenors from a broad range of stakeholder communities, largely outside the conservation mainstream, agree on both a comprehensive partnership and governance model for the initiative
- develop a robust communications and outreach strategy
- undertake a comprehensive horizon scan and mapping of relevant and related initiatives underway or being planned within conservation, and find the appropriate way to engage with the key players in conservation without compromising the independence of *Conservation Futures*
- begin to map the new actors, sectors and technologies with which *Conservation Futures* would wish to engage in the discovery phase
- Undertake a focused exercise to identify the change models, change processes and change actors needed to deliver success for *Conservation Futures*
- Refine the work plan, processes and mechanisms for the “discovery” phase
- Secure the funding necessary to operate *Conservation Futures* at the required level; and
- Establish a light Secretariat.

This will be followed by a **discovery phase** in which the links between conservation and other fields are explored in greater depth with a view both to identifying what in those fields might usefully be imported or might inspire improved conservation design and practice, and to understand better how conservation objectives are affected by what is happening in those fields. The rapid development of technology, tech applications, social entrepreneurship and transformative thinking in many other areas is opening vast new perspectives. The most promising will be identified and mapped out in the discovery phase.

In this phase, *Conservation Futures* will focus on a range of “baskets” – topical or content areas that appear to hold significant promise of contributing to conservation success through new perspectives, innovative approaches or through adaptation to conservation practice of features or technologies of other fields. The work on these baskets will involve intensive framing and analytics, aiming to generate new content for conservation and making the link between developments in these new areas and the needs for future conservation success. The intention is to identify and deploy a broad range of specific new ideas and approaches, generated in the “hothouse” of *Conservation Futures* and, cumulatively, supporting a mobilization behind a positive, “can-do” approach to conservation.

An initial set of baskets – to be refined and completed in the design phase – might include:

- **Embedding biodiversity in key areas of economic activity – e.g. agriculture, land use planning and urban development**

A majority of humanity lives in urban areas and the proportion is growing. And a high proportion of productive land is given over to agriculture and livestock development.

Conservation cannot be focused largely on the land that is left but needs to find ways to thrive in all areas and under a wide variety of primary land-uses. The debate on the role of agriculture is heating up. A new image of agriculture is emerging, combining elements of a return to local production with new developments in food technology and food production systems that have a far lower negative impact on land and ecosystems.

Beyond this, the success of conservation depends on more sustainable systems of production and consumption, and on greening supply chains. While potentially vast in scope, a great deal of work has been and is being done in these areas. The design phase will identify both the areas of greatest importance and the most promising developments for conservation.

- **The promises and dangers of technological development**

The pace at which technological development is taking place is nothing short of breathtaking. Much of this development holds promise for conservation in at least four broad areas.

First, there is the whole field of bio-technology, including bio-mimicry, bio-engineering, etc. How important is it to conserve the full range of species if they or the functions they serve can be replaced through biologically-based technology?

Second, we live in an age of rapidly-developing technology based on Artificial Intelligence, Big Data, fintech, blockchain, robotics, etc. that are changing the way we approach problems and the business models that have underpinned our interactions for decades. How can the opportunities best be harnessed to conservation and the dangers avoided?

Third, developments in mobile technology, the democratization of communications, and the explosion of social media have greatly expanded the possibilities for information exchange and airing of views and priorities that are both personal and global. These present an important area of opportunity for conservation.

And, finally, there is a wide range of new technological development around remote sensing, tracking, DNA fingerprinting, drone applications and others that can be harnessed for conservation and both improve our real-time understanding of how nature and human activities are changing, and influence those changes.

- **Financial incentives and disincentives**

The way in which the economy functions is at the heart of the conservation challenge. And key to the economy is the set of rules and practices that govern flows of finance. At present the financial system is in serious misalignment with the needs of conservation, offering a wide range of perverse incentives that undermine otherwise worthy conservation efforts. We need to identify and implement reforms to the “rules of the game” governing financial and capital markets to align them with the needs of conservation and sustainable development.

Further, financial incentives strongly influence individual behaviour, and much of conservation is about changing human choice. So at all levels, finance is the hard nucleus of the conservation challenge.

In the past few years the attention to “greening” finance has grown rapidly and it is now much more clear what reforms are needed. However, much of the attention has been

focused on finance for climate action. Very little attention has gone into identifying the financial reforms needed to advance conservation and the innovations that might be implemented.

These include new thinking on cost internalization and on valuation and management of environmental risk at the sovereign and corporate levels. This is the gap that Conservation Futures aims to fill.

- **New approaches to work, coalitions, networks and business models**

The SDGs insist on a transformative change in the way we work, breaking down silos and approaching problems in new and different ways. This requires attention both to the nature of work in a sustainable society – flexible or portfolio employment, new configurations of work and leisure, the balance of types of labour, etc. - and approaches to working together. The notion of working in flexible, changing configurations, with innovation built into work methods, is a burgeoning field of study. The current rigid lines between governments, civil society and business need to be broken down and replaced with creative new configurations that allow co-creation and genuine collaboration in the design and deployment of conservation solutions. *Conservation Futures* must tap into this rapidly-developing world and apply its best lessons.

- **Demographics and conservation**

While the growing world population has always been at the centre of conservation concern, less attention has been paid to the changing nature of the world's demographic make-up and the implications of this for conservation. The demographics of Africa, for example, will have a massive impact on present and future conservation worldwide, either expanding or contracting opportunities for conservation depending on how it evolves. So too will the evolution of the age pyramid in different countries and regions – and how quickly the bulge of young people evolves towards a stabilization of population. From the present perspective, it is clear that the weight of influence on the future of the world will shift south and east, to urban centres, to young people, and to technologically savvy people; and human migration will be hugely influential. The implications for conservation need to be spelled out and addressed in conservation planning and practice.

- **Addressing the problem of specific vs general and short- vs long-term**

A fundamental challenge with conservation – and with sustainability more broadly - has been the classic dilemma relating to individual choice against broader impact (individual benefit with the cost incurred by others), and to the issue of short-term benefit versus long-term damage and cost. Conservation suffers in particular from these dilemmas. Societies, corporations and individuals are too often driven by the promise of short-term gain and tend to discount long-term consequences. And individuals too often give greater value to immediate benefit even if the cumulative consequences of such individual choices can be disastrous. Behavioural science, behavioural economics, social physics, evolutionary psychology, and other fields are examining these issues and designing new ways to understand and influence consumer decisions. And there is learning to be harvested from many fields, e.g. the nudge approach, social marketing, insights from advertising and public health – all aimed at working out how to change human decisions from short-term and self-centred to more mutualistic and longer term. A key part of this is experience on how to

influence political and corporate decision-makers to give more weight to the long-term consequences of their choices. Conservation Futures will explore the state of play in these areas and distil lessons that might improve conservation success.

- **The dark side – facing up to illegal and illicit behaviour**

It is no doubt true that most people wish to labour for the greater good and that they will contribute to it by living and operating within the law and within the social and cultural rules set by society. At the same time, we know that there is a significant part of society for whom this is not true. Conservation cannot succeed without addressing corruption, money laundering, shadow banking, anonymous or opaque corporate structures, tax evasion, the drug and arms trade, human trafficking, internet fraud and the many other elements of what makes up the “dark side” of human relationships. *Conservation Futures* will seek to understand the dimensions of the problem and its impact on the prospects for conservation in the future. It will catalogue the many efforts in other sectors to come to grips with the worst manifestations of illegal behaviour and suggest positive actions to address the challenge.

The detailed approach to “discovery” in this phase is a matter to be determined during the design phase. It might be envisaged that a lead partner be designated for each basket, and that this partner would draw together a small team that includes specialized organizations and individuals working in that field. The teams might identify and map key developments and innovations in the topic area, put out calls for input, bring together experts or hold wider conferences. They might wish to establish purpose-built networks and operate targeted communications and outreach activities. Each would likely be backed by one or several researchers and a logistical coordinator.

Finally, in the work towards 2020, we will undertake an **options development phase**, based on a broad series of stakeholder consultations and an open, participatory process. The stakeholder groups will align to some extent with the baskets, but a deliberate attempt will also be made to ensure that the stakeholders are drawn from the many segments that make up the broad community concerned with conservation. The consultations will be informed by material distilled from the discovery phase and setting out promising areas of endeavour moving forward. The aim is to identify, design and launch an expanding range of co-created initiatives that, cumulatively, will generate the pace and scale needed to reach conservation goals and begin to rebalance the relationship between humanity and the planet. These solutions – and the consultations – must be articulated at a variety of scales – global, national and local and must be aimed at intergovernmental process, national governments, corporations, communities and civil society.

The changes we aim for will be articulated for two time horizons. The first is 2020, in light of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) conference in Beijing, the first progress assessment of SDG implementation and the anticipated biodiversity summit at the UN General Assembly. *Conservation Futures* is being designed with that horizon in mind. However, we wish to lay out ambitions for 2030 as well, both to offer the basis for a realistic set of longer-term targets, and to provide a framework for the *Conservation Futures* movement.

Conservation Futures style

Conservation Futures aims not only to bring a whole range of new actors and skills to the conservation table – and in particular from the world of innovation and entrepreneurship – but also influencers from other fields such as business, media, entertainment, faith and many others. Representatives from these fields, outlooks and disciplines will be drawn into the work of the teams

in the discovery phase, in the communications and outreach activities, and in events organized under the *Conservation Futures* work plan.

Conservation Futures aims to recruit new stakeholders and new communities to the shared search for a resilient planet. The approach is not intended to replace the intergovernmental, national and private movements towards innovation and reform within the broad conservation movement. Instead, it will focus on identifying and advancing game changers through a strong focus on the change models, change processes and change actors needed to achieve success.

We wish to generate new insights, new perspectives and new options for effective conservation. In short, we wish to introduce positive disruption where it is required to break or reverse present negative trends. What emerges from *Conservation Futures* must be a substantially broadened stakeholder constituency for conservation, with a prominent focus on the private sector.

The initial *Conservation Futures* partnership

The initial partners of *Conservation Futures* are UN Environment, the Luc Hoffmann Institute, the Oxford Martin School and the World Economic Forum. These champions of the initiative are committed to engage with others on the design and on getting the initiative up and running. An early priority is to expand the partnership, bringing in a better balance and a wider set of perspectives.

Communications and Outreach

Building a movement is only possible by means of a serious effort at communications, profile building and outreach. The broad purpose is to craft a new narrative – one that excites, mobilizes, and focuses on the change possibilities, while deepening understanding of the tension generated by the present catastrophic trends.

The communications plan should be ambitious and varied. It should generate a steady stream of stories that illustrate the range of possibilities and build a sense of excitement about what can be done. The plan should carefully identify a range of target audiences.

It should include a wide range of communications tools – website, podcasts, blogs, guest articles, a reference service, twitter feeds, etc. It should recruit and deploy icons in support of *Conservation Futures*. In particular, it should look into the potential for partnerships with the entertainment industry which, in both rich and poor countries, plays a key role in opinion formation. *Conservation Futures* should engineer an approach to communications and outreach that is multi-lingual and multi-platform, and encourage multi-directional communications.

Just as climate has its 2-degree ceiling, *Conservation Futures* should seek out and consider issues that might offer symbols of both the conservation challenge and the direction of change needed. Examples are the future of red meat, or the issue of food waste. And it should carefully consider whether to build and deploy a clear visual identity and brand.

The success of *Conservation Futures* will also depend on understanding how the solutions it identifies and develops can most effectively influence policy and practice. Much conservation effort has to date been devoted to building the knowledge base and setting priorities. Moving from intention to action has been difficult because of the difficulties of moving from science to policy, politics and action. Success in future will require a far more sophisticated understanding of how to ensure that issues make it across the science-policy interface and move not only to decisions but to implementation. Knowledge on how this interface works – a how best to prepare information such

that policy makers might most readily use it – has developed quickly, but is too infrequently applied to addressing conservation challenges. This must change.

Conservation Futures should identify and target key forums in which to present its perspective – for example, in addition to the intergovernmental forums for conservation (CBD, CITES, CMS, etc.) WEF Davos, UNEA, the annual Eco-Forum Global meeting in China and many others. It should also seek out and communicate with similar change processes from related fields – for example the We Mean Business coalition in the climate field. A very deliberate effort should be placed on identifying change makers and understanding the key to their impact models.

Those interested in contributing ideas, labour or funding to this, or who simply wish for more information, should contact:

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