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From grief to hope in conservation

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Article Impact Statement: Global sustainability is not imminent, so conservationists should reflect on a viable mental and philosophical response.

Being engaged in biodiversity conservation is tough at a time when bad news is all around us (Orr, 2004, 2007)—be it on species extinctions (IPBES, 2019), climate change (IPCC, 2018), or repeated political failures to address these and other sustainability challenges. Much has been said about the need to act with urgency in this “crisis discipline” (Soulé, 1985). Although actions in the biophysical, outer world are more urgent than ever, there is also inner work to be done by us as conservation professionals so that we can channel our energy in productive ways (Ives et al., 2020). In this essay, we offer our personal perspective on questions of grief and hope. We decided to share this perspective because we noticed that similar questions are increasingly on the minds of many conservation students and professionals (Cunsolo et al., 2020; Faria, 2020; Plieninger et al., 2021). With no imminent turning point for global sustainability in sight, we consider it important to reflect on what might be a viable mental and philosophical response for those engaged in biodiversity conservation.

Terms like “*ecological grief*” and “*eco-anxiety*” are increasingly used to describe the emotional responses of people to environmental degradation (Cunsolo et al., 2020; Plieninger et al., 2021; Usher et al., 2019). An analogy has been drawn to the well-studied emotional responses of individuals who are grieving and individuals given bad personal news, such as being diagnosed with a chronic or terminal illness (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018). To adapt, such individuals typically go through a series of outer and inner changes, and many ultimately accept their situation (Corr, 2019). Although the parallels between the literature on people dealing with illness and loss and ecological grief are fascinating, there is one critical difference: the fate of the terminally ill and the death of a loved one are unchangeable, whereas the fate of life on Earth as a whole is very much changeable through collective human action. Grief, with its implication of final and

unalterable loss, thus is an enticing concept for conservationists, but arguably not an empowering one.

To formulate a hopeful personal vision for how to approach conservation, we drew inspiration from the late Michael Soulé (Crooks et al., 2020). In no way do we suggest he would have necessarily agreed with our thoughts outlined here—we simply acknowledge with humility and respect that he inspired us, just like he inspired countless other conservationists. We offer the following points as conversation openers. We focus on 4 themes, namely compassion, interrelatedness, impermanence, and the need for a strong normative basis for conservation.

First, to counter anger, blame games, and scapegoating, which generally prevent transformative conversations, we would be well-advised to “broaden our beam of compassion.” This phrase and idea was eloquently presented by Michael Soulé in a public lecture at the Australian National University in the early 2000s, in which he reflected on different life-affirming movements. Whether people are active for biodiversity conservation, animal rights, human development, or simply their own families, many are in fact engaged in life-affirming activities of one sort or another. The foci are just different, and thus different outcomes are prioritized. If we recognize that at a deep level, much of humanity engages in life-affirming activities, we are much more able to engage in constructive and potentially transformative conversations with others (Scharmer, 2018).

Second, and closely related to the first point, Michael Soulé aptly emphasized that we are all related to all other life because all present life on Earth has shared ancestry in the first single-celled organisms that lived on Earth 3.5 billion years ago (Soulé, 1995 [as cited in Taylor, 2020]). Recognizing that no being exists separately from others can be helpful to approach conservation in new and different ways. In recognition of such inevitable “inter-being” (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2008), new avenues open up

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for interactions that cannot be had from the perspective of us versus them. The notion of interrelatedness gives us reason to extend our compassion to other species, but it also gives us reason to extend it to other people, including those we disagree with.

Third, we offer reflections on how to conceptualize change. Michael Soulé reminded us that he was not concerned with “death but the lack of births” (Soulé, 1985; Taylor, 2020). In stating this, he emphasized the importance of maintaining suitable ecological conditions for ongoing evolution. Implicitly, however, he also acknowledged the inevitability of ongoing change—an idea that is central to Buddhist philosophy, where it is captured by the notion of impermanence. Recognizing impermanence, in turn, can help one to remain emotionally healthy at a time when much of what we are attached to (such as certain species or ecosystems) is rapidly changing or has been irreversibly lost. We must accept that rapid and partly irreversible change is happening right now, not because we condone the particular changes taking place, but because before choosing an appropriate course of action, we must recognize that this situation is now with us (Faria, 2020; Tolle, 1999). Confronted with this unpleasant truth, however, the last thing we need is stoic resignation—a widespread grief response in the terminally ill (Corr, 2019; Orr, 2004). Such resignation would amount to giving up on a better future (Orr, 2004), and surely this cannot be the goal of our mission-oriented discipline. Rather, we should try to cultivate authentic hope, which “requires us to ... enter the future without illusions” (Orr, 2007:1393) while remaining open and fundamentally positive. How might this seemingly impossible task be achieved?

Arguably, the notion of impermanence is a powerful source of authentic hope that is grounded not in blind faith but in empirically observable truth. Eventually, the present era of ecological overexploitation and institutionalized injustice will come to an end—like all other historical eras, this one, too, will not be permanent. Taken passively, impermanence could be seen as a justification to simply sit out the bad times and wait for things to get better. Taken actively, however, we recognize that right now many trends are going the wrong way, and many species are being lost. However, if we look carefully, we also see growing momentum for positive and transformative change. For example, Bennett et al. (2016) documented “seeds” of change, showcasing dozens of positive instances of new social-ecological initiatives around the world. “Imbued in [this] concept ... is the positive feedback relationship between hope, in the sense of a pragmatic, positive, forward-looking perspective, and agency, entraining empowerment, options for the future and collective motivation” (Colloff et al., 2017:94). Similarly, Manfredo et al. (2020) provided quantitative evidence of people’s values related to wildlife changing in the western United States, in a direction that would likely be positive for conservation. Carpenter et al. (2019) argued that our current era is rife with examples of people exploring options for change, which strongly supports the argument that in historical terms, our current era is coming to an end. Unlike the case of a terminal diagnosis, our planet’s fate is not sealed—its illness is severe but need not be fatal. We can

all contribute to speeding its recovery and transition to a new, more ecologically sustainable era.

Finally, and logically following from the prior point, we suggest fluid conservation goals are likely to become more important than ever. If this is indeed the case, one might ask, what, then, should conservation be about (Backstrom et al., 2018; Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018; Graham et al., 2014). Here, too, it helps to revisit Michael Soulé’s original, dynamic vision for conservation biology. He proposed the following normative postulates as a guide for conservation: diversity of organisms is good, ecological complexity is good, and evolution is good (Soulé, 1985). These postulates remain fundamentally useful (Kareiva & Marvier, 2012) as a beacon for conservationists, despite rapid, undeniable, and partly unalterable changes taking place. “Landscape fluidity” (Manning et al., 2009)—that is, a focus on maintaining enabling conditions for the normative goals set by Soulé (1985)—in turn, could be a more viable long-term conservation goal than traditional targets focusing on fixed ecological conditions.

Taken together, compassion, acknowledgment of interrelatedness and impermanence, and a clearly articulated normative basis for conservation that acknowledges change can help provide a vision for conservation science that can withstand much of the bad news we so regularly receive. Such a vision suggests that we should not focus on any precise state of the world because all states must forever change. Rather, we should note, respect, and cherish in our world the system properties of diversity, complexity, and ongoing evolution. Together, these describe the flowing essence of life, and this is what we ought to conserve. From this perspective, we may be able to get past emotional responses of anger or resignation and instead engender agency and empowerment. By specifically acknowledging diversity in our own species with compassion, we are also better equipped to face disagreements constructively, bridge existing divides, and thereby create common ground for a better future (Díaz et al., 2018). Such an outlook will make conservation more inclusive of Indigenous people, people in the Global South, and other systematically disadvantaged members of society (Kareiva & Marvier, 2012; Sandbrook et al., 2019; Tallis & Lubchenco, 2014).

It cannot be denied that much of what we love is being lost (IPBES, 2019). However, there is no need to resign ourselves to some kind of ultimate death; while countless species are forever disappearing, the counter-movement for real and historical social-ecological change is building momentum. It is up to all of us to hasten the transformation to a new era that is more equitable and ecologically sustainable. Although this will not be quick or easy, at least for us, the rationale outlined here offers a coherent basis for remaining hopeful for conservation in the long term.

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