

# Homo conservationensis

WILLIAM M. ADAMS 

The conservationist is a strange beast: *Homo conservationensis*, the human who cares for the rest of nature (Sandbrook, 2015). As I step off the editorial board of *Oryx*, I have been thinking a lot about what *Oryx* has to say about us. How has conservation changed since its first issue in 1950? Three things in particular strike me.

Firstly, the way we frame our concerns has certainly changed. The original incarnation of *Oryx* was as the *Journal of the Society for the Preservation of the Wild Fauna of the Empire* in 1904. The society's members were big-game hunters, and their idea of preservation reflected Victorian notions of land and game ownership, of sporting codes and the suppression of poaching (Prendergast & Adams, 2003). Before the second world war, their journal offered an explicitly colonial view of the world of conservation and extinction: this was the metropolitan gaze of white men, looking out from the smoking rooms of London clubs or the residencies of colonial governors, remembering the crackle of camp fires and the view down rifle barrels. Now conservation is very different, seen through the lens of the natural sciences, structured by statistical analysis, shaped by modelling and GIS, powered by rafts of data from digital devices and automated research processes. Since *Oryx* began, conservation has lost much of its amateurism. It is now a major university subject, at undergraduate and graduate level, and is served by legions of conservation scientists. The result is greater rigour, greater attention to evidence, greater clarity and authority.

At the same time, despite all the science, the conservation gaze today remains Eurocentric—outsiders look at rural landscapes and societies, diagnose problems and prescribe rules to shape human relations with non-human nature. The knowledge of northern experts directs the flow of funds to protect wildlife. International agendas are dominated by Western ideas about humanity and non-human life (e.g. Kothari, 2021). Much has been written about the need to decolonize conservation, and about its diversity and divisions (e.g. Milner-Gulland, 2021), and this remains important. Open-access journals—like *Oryx*—enable published ideas to be read widely (Fisher, 2020), but it also matters who gets to write about conservation and whose ideas receive attention. Efforts to diversify authorship can be effective, and can work. In *Oryx*, the proportion of articles with first authors from countries outside North America, Europe, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa was 11%

in 2000 but 55% in 2023 (86% if you include second authors; M. Fisher, pers. comm., 2024). This is not the pattern for most journals.

The second thing that strikes me about the world of *Homo conservationensis* is how little some things have changed. The founders of the Society for the Preservation of the Wild Fauna of the Empire were most concerned about the demise of large mammals. The journal's first issue led with a memorandum to Lord Cromer (Governor-General of colonial Sudan) about a game reserve: its signatories were 'deeply interested in the preservation of the larger animals, some of which are so rapidly disappearing under British Control' (sic, SPWFE, 1904, p. 2). Justified by arguments about keystone or flagship species, large mammals still hold their place in conservation hearts (Walpole & Leader-Williams, 2002; Lorimer, 2015). They also remain key concerns of *Oryx* authors: over half the papers in volume 57 (2023) concerned mammals. Although I share a cultural attunement to mammalian charisma, this predilection troubles me: we may speak of biodiversity, but if people look closely at what we do they will see the continuing pull of charismatic megafauna. Fortunately, there are voices warning of the dangers of taxonomic tunnel vision, and pointing out the worlds beyond charisma (e.g. Fisher, 2019), and beyond multi-cellular life (Redford, 2023). Mammals have given some ground: *Oryx* has had recent sections on plant conservation (July 2019, and this current issue of September 2024) and reptiles and amphibians (January 2023 and May 2024). But the issue persists: we remain as besotted with our flagships as any retired admiral.

My third observation about *Homo conservationensis* is how much more attention is now being given to the social dimensions of conservation. When I started my involvement in *Oryx*, conservation journal papers rarely explored how people live alongside wildlife, or how their economies or societies worked. Papers were about wildlife, and humans appeared mainly as threats, to be opposed, outwitted, diverted or controlled. Understanding them was secondary. In time, calls to make wildlife pay its way (e.g. Eltringham, 1994) or debates about community conservation (e.g. Adams & Hulme, 2001) evolved into work on markets for wildlife, or how inequality, ethnicity, gender and power shaped biodiversity and social outcomes. Yet no human appeared on the cover of *Oryx* until 2005 (volume 39(4)). It was an understated debut—a tiny *Brookesia* chameleon on a rather grubby human thumb (Carpenter & Robson, 2005). People now feature more often (e.g. once each in the 2021, 2022 and 2023 volumes). This is possible because more authors now wish to write about people and conservation

wa12@cam.ac.uk

Geneva Graduate Institute, Geneva, Switzerland, and Department of Geography, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

Downloaded from <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0030605324001285> on 22 Mar 2025 at 09:09:09, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at <https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms>.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0030605324001285>

(e.g. sections in *Oryx* on gender in November 2021, human rights in May 2023, and human–wildlife interactions in July 2023).

So, has *Homo conservationensis* learned to ‘think like the human’ they are (cf. Adams, 2007)? Somewhat. Most conservationists still study biology first, but they are often now taught about human society, and how to research it (especially in graduate courses). There is a considerable literature on conservation social science for them to read (Scales et al., 2023). Yet conservation research remains narrow and empirical in the questions it asks about human society. Papers on people in conservation journals tend to be quantitative and not qualitative in method and often appear without any discussion of theories about how societies work. Many are relatively narrow in disciplinary terms, drawing on economics, sociology or psychology more than on anthropology, political science, human geography or political ecology—let alone the humanities, where debates about being human and non-human (fundamental to conservation) are both rich and compelling.

So, although *Homo conservationensis* has certainly started to try to understand humans and their societies and economies, we do so with the caution of laboratory scientists poking a novel virus in a containment lab. We are also more comfortable using social science to look out at society than to look in, at ourselves (social science for conservation not social science on conservation; Sandbrook et al., 2013). This is understandable, but short-sighted. The comparison with development studies, a discipline predicated on the eradication of poverty, is instructive. Critical analysis of development policy and its powerful institutions (the World Bank for example) is regarded as essential to keep development efforts moving and on course.

If I am allowed one last observation, it is about how *Homo conservationensis* writes, and for whom. Conservation debates, at least within academic journals, too easily become a dialogue among relatively privileged researchers (Gossa et al., 2014). The promotional games beloved within universities reward so-called impact, but too many papers are speculative, outlining methods, procedures and tools for people on the ground who don’t have the time to read about them, or the freedom, money or power to try them. Moreover, the clipped, passive–aggressive style of academic writing often serves, as Latin did for medieval clerics, to distance ordinary people. Yet conservation depends on such people utterly, both conservationists on the ground, and the many other individuals, communities and interest groups affected by what they think, say and do.

So it is important to write in ways that non-academics will understand. Complex ideas, and complex data, do not need to be unreadable (as the *Economist* demonstrates on a weekly basis). And while we are thinking about communication, surely formal research papers are only one way to get ideas across: how about poetry, song (Verissimo, 2024),

fiction (Brockington, 2024) or satire (Adams, 2010)? Not all ideas are best expressed in stilted academic prose. Greater diversity of conservation writing (with all its risks in terms of potential loss of scientific authority and power) seems to me an important part of speaking, and thinking, like a nature-caring human.

This Editorial and the *Oryx* articles cited are available as a virtual issue at [cambridge.org/core/journals/oryx/virtual-issues](https://cambridge.org/core/journals/oryx/virtual-issues).

**Acknowledgements** My thanks to Martin Fisher for many years of wisdom and sound advice.

## References

- ADAMS, W.M. (2007) Thinking like a Human: science and the two cultures problem. *Oryx*, 43, 275–276.
- ADAMS, W.M. (2010) Conservation plc. *Oryx*, 44, 482–484.
- ADAMS, W.M. & HULME, D. (2001) If community conservation is the answer, what is the question? *Oryx*, 35, 193–200.
- BROCKINGTON, D. (2024) *Samti and the Forest Thief*. Africa Proper Education Network, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.
- CARPENTER, A.I. & ROBSON, O. (2005) A review of the endemic chameleon genus *Brookesia* from Madagascar, and the rationale for its listing on CITES Appendix II. *Oryx*, 39, 375–380.
- ELTRINGHAM, S.K. (1994) Can wildlife pay its way? *Oryx*, 28, 163–168.
- FISHER, M. (2019) The small, the hidden and the less loved: conserving other species. *Oryx*, 53, 199–200.
- FISHER, M. (2020) Democratizing knowledge for conservation: *Oryx* becomes open access. *Oryx*, 54, 591–592.
- GOSSA, C., FISHER, M. & MILNER-GULLAND, E.J. (2014) The research–implementation gap: how practitioners and researchers from developing countries perceive the role of peer-reviewed literature in conservation science. *Oryx*, 49, 80–87.
- KOTHARI, A. (2021) Half-Earth or Whole-Earth? Green or transformative recovery? Where are the voices from the Global South? *Oryx*, 55, 161–162.
- LORIMER, J. (2015) *Wildlife in the Anthropocene: Conservation after Nature*. Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, USA.
- MILNER-GULLAND, E.J. (2021) The global conservation movement is divided but not diverse: reflections on 2020. *Oryx*, 55, 321–322.
- PRENDERGAST, D.K. & ADAMS, W.M. (2003) Colonial wildlife conservation and the origins of the Society for the Preservation of the Wild Fauna of the Empire (1903–1914). *Oryx*, 37, 251–260.
- REDFORD, K.E. (2023) Extending conservation to include Earth’s microbiome. *Conservation Biology*, 37, e14088.
- SANDBROOK, C.S. (2015) What is conservation? *Oryx*, 49, 565–566.
- SANDBROOK, C.S., ADAMS, W.M., BUSCHER, B. & VIRA, B. (2013) Social research and biodiversity conservation. *Conservation Biology* 27, 1487–1490.
- SCALES, I., MILLER D.C. & MASCIA, M. (2023) (eds) *Conservation Social Science: Understanding People, Conserving Biodiversity*, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, UK.
- SPWFE (1904) Memorial to the Right Honorable Earl Cromer, K.C.B. and the Governor-General of the Sudan. *Journal of the Society for the Preservation of the Wild Fauna of the Empire*, 1, 2–4.
- VERISSIMO, D. (2024) [x.com/verissimodiogo/status/1787525098364153880](https://x.com/verissimodiogo/status/1787525098364153880) [accessed 9 July 2024].
- WALPOLE, M.J. & LEADER-WILLIAMS, N. (2002) Tourism and flagship species in conservation. *Biodiversity and Conservation* 11, 543–547.