assert that in the 21st Century, "conservationists will have to jettison their idealized notions of nature, parks, and wilderness... and forge a more optimistic, human-friendly vision...

Conservation will likely continue to create parks and wilderness areas, but that will be just one part of the field's larger goals."

Unfortunately, their article was written 100 years too late. The creation of parks and wilderness areas is a small part of the American environmental movement. If one excludes the anomalously wealthy, reserve-focused Nature Conservancy (for which two of the authors work), American environmental groups have for many decades expended the great majority of their resources on exactly the "new" task Kareiva et al. boldly assign them: better management of public and private working landscapes open to logging, grazing, mining, agriculture, development, etc.

The reason for this is obvious. Working landscapes make up a vastly larger percentage of the planet than fully protected areas. This will always be the case, because there will never be enough money, political will or even need to convert anything close to all biologically important lands and waters into fully protected areas.

Had the article been published a century ago, the author's decision to frame the environmental movement through a critique of Emerson (1803-1882), Hawthorne (1804-1864), Thoreau (1817-1862) and Muir (1838-1914) might have made sense. But alleged weaknesses of these dead white men is an entirely inadequate anchor for an essay that bills itself as a rethinking of contemporary environmentalism. Indeed, the only 20th century environmentalist mentioned in the essay is the novelist and essayist Ed Abbey. It is frankly bizarre that Kareiva et al.'s depiction of environmentalists is not based on NRDC, the Audubon Society, National Wildlife Federation, Trout Unlimited, Environment America, 350.org, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, or indeed, any environmental group at all.

Bizarre, but necessary: Kareiva et al.'s "conservationist" straw man would have fallen to pieces had they attempted to base it on the ongoing work of actual conservation groups.

Consider their take on wilderness. The straw man is constructed by telling us (without reference to an actual conservation group, of course) that "the wilderness ideal presupposes that there are parts of the world untouched by humankind." Then
Do Kareiva et al. expect readers to believe that conservation groups are unaware that American Indians and native Alaskans lived in huge swaths of what are now designated wilderness areas? Or that they mysteriously failed to see the cows, sheep, bridges, fire towers, fire suppression and/or mining claims within the majority of the proposed wilderness areas they have so painstakingly walked, mapped, camped in, photographed, and advocated for? It is not environmentalists who are naïve about wilderness; it is Kareiva et al. who are naïve about environmentalists. Environmental groups have little interest in the "wilderness ideal" because it has no legal, political or biological relevance when it comes to creating or managing wilderness areas. They simply want to bring the greatest protections possible to the lands which have been the least degraded.

The phrase "untrammeled by man" is taken from The Wilderness Act of 1964. Contrary to Kareiva et al., "untrammeled" does not mean "untouched." Indeed, the phrase was specifically chosen by Congress to allow inclusion of human-altered lands if natural processes still predominated. The law even specifies a long list of developments and structures that do not disqualify wilderness designation; it allows for continued livestock grazing and mining after designation if these were preexisting uses.

"Truth," wrote Hegel, "is found neither in the thesis nor the antithesis, but in an emergent synthesis which reconciles the two." The central problem of Kareiva et al. is that, having created an ideal thesis of conservation devoid of human impacts and interests, they are catapulted to the equally ideal antithesis of a world with only human impacts and interests. The real world of synthesis escapes them. Thus national parks "are no less human constructions than Disneyland" and "instead of pursuing the protection of biodiversity for biodiversity's sake, a new conservation should seek to enhance those natural systems that benefit the widest number of people."

So driven are they by the need to deny what they imagine is ecological pessimism, Kareiva et al. end up making an ideology of human optimism. But destruction of truth is the hallmark of ideologies. Here, it drives the authors to misrepresent, ignore, or obfuscate the science in virtually every example they give of nature being optimistically resilient to destructive impacts.

Coyotes in downtown Chicago are presented as an upbeat news story. In fact, the expansion of coyotes is due to anthropogenic habitat degradation and the widespread killing of larger, competing predators including wolves, bears, lions, and wolverines. Humans have caused every large carnivore in North America to decline over the past 200 years, while 60 percent of mid-sized carnivores, such as coyotes, have increased. This has led to cascading negative changes in the food web and even the vegetation. The real optimistic news is exactly the opposite of what the authors' contend: the reintroduction of wolves in some areas has reduced coyote numbers and reversed the negative cascading effects.

Kareiva et al. celebrate the dramatic rebound of wildlife around Chernobyl and imply the rebound was possible because wildlife quickly adapted to extreme human impacts. In fact, wildlife increased because the radiation zone was depopulated of humans. Indeed, local wildlife not only rebounded, it has exceeded pre-disaster
levels, and is now more populous in the radioactive/depopulated zone than in the still-populated zone outside the disaster area.\(^5\)

Environmentalists' "classic symbol of fragility" -- the polar bear -- we are told, "may have a good chance of surviving global warming if the changing environment continues to increase the populations and northern ranges of harbor seals and harp seals." Nonsense. No credible scientist believes that polar bears, who hunt from sea-ice platforms, will rapidly evolve to sustain themselves hunting harbor seals in open water.\(^6\) To the contrary, polar bears are projected to be extirpated from the United States by mid-century and possibly to go extinct globally by century's end if global warming trends continue.\(^7\) To call the very remote possibility of polar bears adapting to an ice-free Arctic "a good chance" is not optimism; it's denial.

The authors cite Frank et al. (2011) to claim that cod on Georges Bank have "recovered to pre-collapse levels," then denounce environmentalists for refusing to acknowledge the recovery due to a pessimism "addiction." Indeed, environmentalists won't write about it... because it is not true. Frank et al. did not say cod have reached pre-collapse levels; they said cod have reached early 1990s levels -- well after the collapse. Elsewhere Frank et al. quantify the recovery as being just 34 percent of the pre-collapse level.\(^8\) And unfortunately, a recent reassessment of the data\(^9\) concluded that the recovery is actually weaker than that, which led to new commercial fishing restrictions in 2012 and the specter of massive restrictions in 2013.\(^10\)

The endangered Sonora tiger salamander no more "specializes" in inhabiting stock tanks than inmates specialize in inhabiting prisons. We destroyed its habitat, and it simply has nowhere else to live. Far from being something to celebrate, the salamander's precarious existence resulted in its being placed on the endangered species list in 1997 along with two other species whose wetland habitat were destroyed.\(^11\)

At a time when conservationists need honest, hard-headed reassessment of what works and what needs changing, Kareiva et al. offer little more than exaggerations, straw-man arguments and a forced optimism that too often crosses the line into denial. There are plenty of real biodiversity recovery stories to tell, but to learn from them, we have to take off the blinders of sweeping generalizations and pay attention to the details and complexities of real-world conservation work. That's the breakthrough we need to survive the Anthropocene.

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1. My response is limited to American environmentalism, as that is my area of expertise. Given how erroneous and misleading the essay is in this area, however, readers should be wary of the authors' description of environmentalism in other nations. \(\text{(back)}\)


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Posted by Thomas Miller on April 4, 2012 6:22 PM