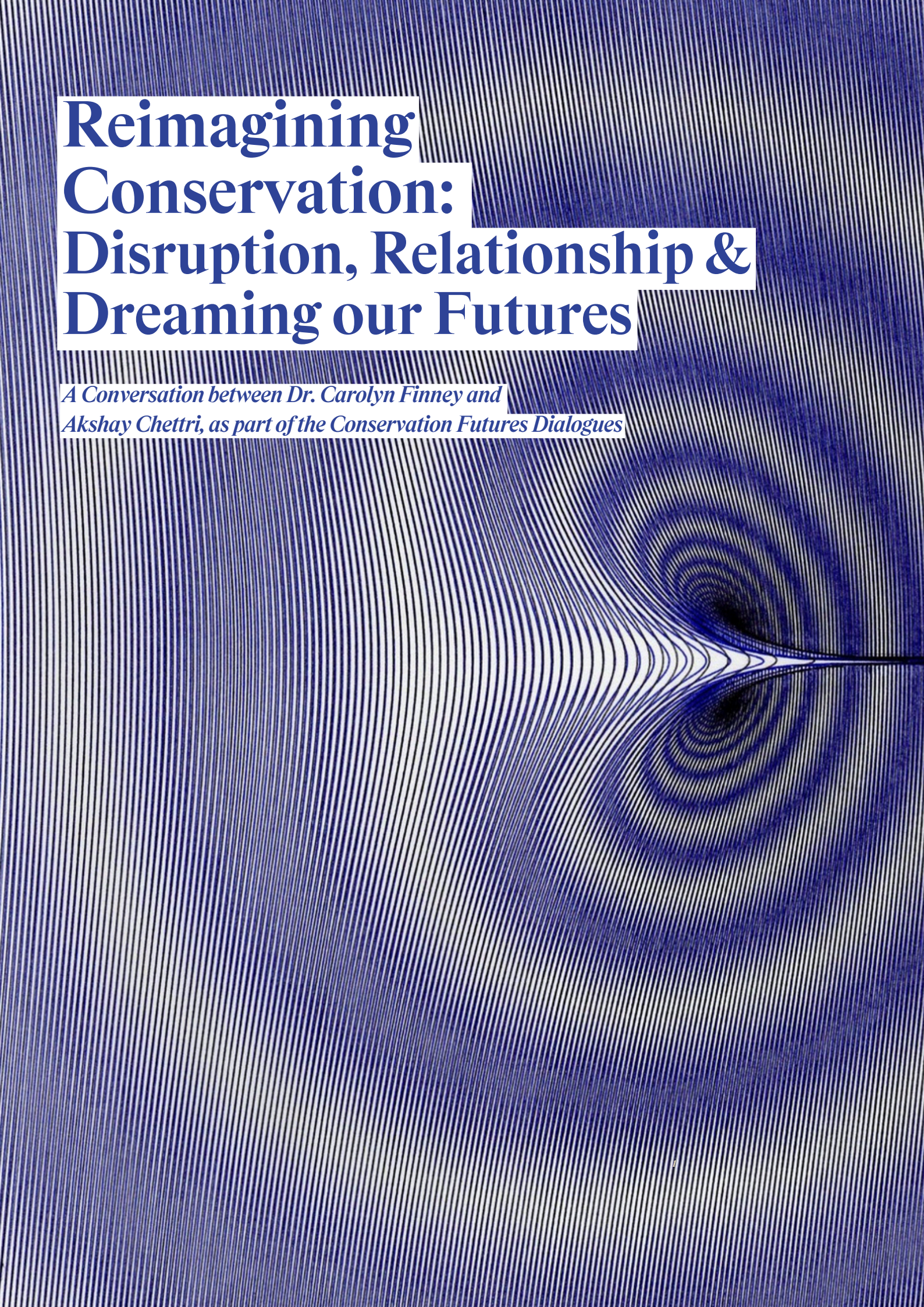
Reimagining Conservation: Disruption, Relationship & Dreaming our Futures

A Conversation between Dr. Carolyn Finney and Akshay Chettri, as part of the Conservation Futures Dialogues



1: In this conversation, Carolyn Finney and Akshay Chettri - members of the team producing the Conservation Futures Dialogues - discuss their respective understandings of the current politics and future potentials of the field of conservation. Their conversation is enriched through footnotes and marginalia offered by Emily Caruso & Francesca Masoero (Global Diversity Foundation).

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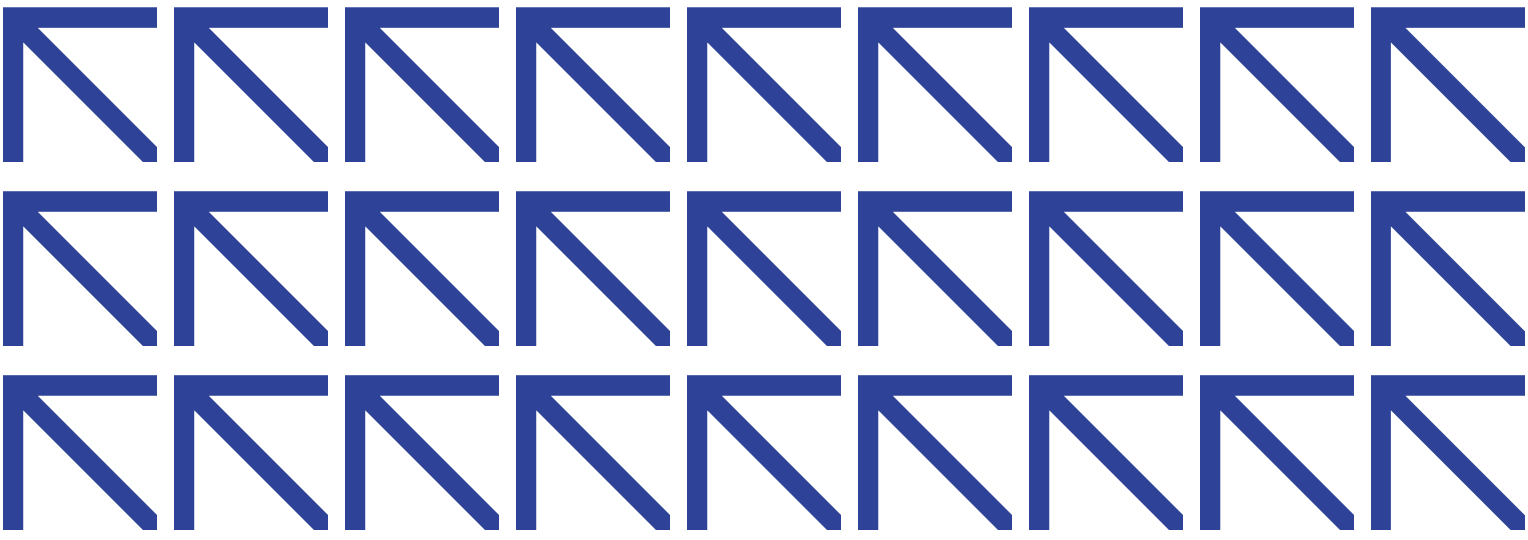

Introduction

Who we are

Carolyn Finney (CF): I am a storyteller who explores who we are (and in the process, who I am) in relationship to the world we all live in. My stories express themselves in different ways - sometimes as essays and other forms of writing; in documentary films and podcasts; through consulting and advisory relationships; and in the classroom where I explore, along with my students, issues relating to conservation, environment, climate change, identity, difference, belonging and representation. But most of all, I use my voice to speak to/with people and share stories of home wherever I'm invited to show up. While my academic training as a cultural geographer has given me the intellectual legs to run, it is my background as an actor and my years of backpacking throughout the world that feed the heart and soul of my work: interrogating our past and dreaming a future that is just, liberatory, and green. I am also a Black woman, an American, descended from working-class roots and two lineages - my adopted family who raised me and my biological family that brought me into the world. While I started life in New York City, I have had the privilege of creating "home" in fifteen places, both inside and outside of the U.S. I presently reside in Burlington, VT where I am a scholar/artist-in-residence at Middlebury College.

Akshay Chettri (AC): I am a socio-ecological researcher from Darjeeling, a small town in the eastern Himalayan region of India. As a child, I grew up surrounded by nature, and it fascinated me. I enjoyed spending as much time around it as possible. But it was only while I was working on my Master's dissertation in the outskirts of Singalila National Park, in Darjeeling, that I learnt that there was more to it than just seeing nature as aesthetic and peaceful. In retrospect, I think this is when I decided to pursue understanding this complex interaction further. As a mid-career researcher, much of my work is informed by policy research and advocacy on inclusive conservation, and through my engagement with the Van Gujjar pastoralists and tribal and other forest-dwelling communities across the country. I enjoy writing and engaging with this space, but I am also conscious of my identity and how I show up in it. I am currently working as a freelance consultant, supporting communities and grassroots organisations, and networks in various projects, including institutional strengthening, proposal development, fundraising, and research.

Brief about the Conservation Futures Dialogues project

Conservation, as we see it today, is in a phase of transition. We see notions of exclusions being dismantled and the nature of relationships within the conservation sphere changing - and yet, we know a lot of work still needs to be done. A just and equitable future where conservation is ontologically grounded in the inseparability of humans and nature is yet to be achieved. While there has been a general acceptance in the international conservation community[2] for the recognition of Indigenous Peoples' and local communities' rights and territories, their voices in conservation governance, especially 'on the ground', continue to be strikingly limited.[3] [4]

2: The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework adopted in 2022 by the Conference of the Parties (COP15) offers an example of this. It is considered by some as "the most ambitious multilateral agreement on biodiversity to date" as it calls for a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to halt and reverse biodiversity loss worldwide.

3: Moving from the goals of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, in her crucial article "Now is the time for conservationists to stand up for social justice", E.J. Milner Gulland develops a nuanced analysis of the complex dynamics on the ground, and what the large flow of international funds for "nature recovery" will likely detrimentally produce, as long as local communities remain at the margin of conservation practice.

4: Examples of the ongoing exclusion of indigenous and local communities from conservation governance are...

Introduction

Global Diversity Foundation (GDF), based in the UK and the US, works in collaboration with grassroots and civil society organisations in the Global South on the topics of biodiversity, livelihoods, and territorial governance. Through the Conservation Future Dialogues (CFD), GDF curates spaces that foster (often difficult) conversations between multiple stakeholders holding diverse positions, perspectives, and approaches to conservation. One of the bigger challenges in the conservation discourse is how it has been approached. The dualistic lens, juxtaposes perspectives, ideas, approaches, and stakeholder groups — for example, the Global North versus Global South, grassroots organisations versus donors, scientific knowledge versus traditional knowledge, limiting the scope of dialogue and the imagination, and impeding the achievement of effective, just, and equitable outcomes. ***Through the Conservation Futures Dialogues, we seek to reimagine conservation's futures and possibilities, moving from our entrenched, sometimes contrasting, positions in the field to a collective enquiry***. It is an invitation to different stakeholders to dive deeper into the intricacies that govern our interactions, approaches, and philosophies, and to collectively explore the challenges each one of us faces, as individuals and within our institutions and contexts. While it is easier said than done and the journey ahead still poses challenges, it also presents an opportunity. We can explore how to move from dialogues and arguments that set us apart from each other, to modes of action that are rooted in how we are all 'in this together', both as a human community and a community of planetary beings.

Methodology

CF: Over the course of six months, we have interviewed 11 individuals who work around the world in the field of conservation and related areas such as environmental justice, philanthropy, and public lands management. In addition, I moderated two public panels - Part i: When Things Fall Apart and Part ii: Sites of Experimentation, and facilitated three workshops with graduate students based in the UK who work in conservation. Akshay and I are also part of a team that provided intellectual and creative input and technical support that was integral to the success of this project. In total, forty-four people participated in it. While all the interviewees are currently engaged in this work in various capacities, they hail from diverse geographies and backgrounds.[5] We designed an interview script that invited both personal and professional responses, reflections and considerations. There were twenty questions divided into four sections: Introductions, Motivations, Reflections, and Directions. We carried out some interviews together and some separately because of time considerations, availability of the interviewees, and our respective locations in India and the U.S. in relation to where an interviewee was located. Each interview took approximately one to two hours. All interviews were conducted virtually and, with the consent of all participants, were recorded and transcribed.

countless - here are just two examples from the Nagarahole Tiger Reserve and the Ogiek villages, part of Kenya's Mau Forest. A TED Talk by Joycelyn Longdon - also one of our interviewees for this essay, captures the issue brilliantly.

5: Aliya Ryan (Local Partnership Lead, Awana Digital), Chris Sandbrook (Director of the Conservation Research Institute, University of Cambridge), Nigel Thomas Crawhall (Chief of Natural Sciences / Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS), UNESCO), Shelton Johnson (Park Ranger, Yosemite National Park, National Park Service), Ameyali Ramos (Deputy Chair of the IUCN Commission on Environmental, Economic and Social Policy), Joycelyn Longdon (Award-winning Environmental Justice Technologist, Author, Speaker, Designer and Educator), Malika Dreyfuss (Programme Manager, Fondation Hans Wilsdorf), Patrick Knodel (Head of the ChanceMaker Foundation and INNOVATION for IMPACT GmbH), Preety Sharma (Regional Manager of Eastern Himalayas at GroundUp Conservation) & Samson Luari (Assistant Project Officer at the Ogiek Peoples Development Program).

Introduction

Approach to this essay

CF: After completing the interviews, workshops, and moderated panels, we (along with the team) identified the following key themes that emerged: Disruption, Relationship, and the need to redefine Conservation. Taking those themes as our starting point, we have chosen to lean into this essay as a conversation between Akshay and myself that considers both the experience and knowledge of those who have shared their reflections with us, and our own positionalities, thoughts, interpretations and considerations as two people who also work in and/or contribute to conservation in its broadest form. We intend to be transparent about our point of view, considerate of our diverse histories and experiences, and willing to be both playful and rigorous with this emergent process.

AC: Throughout the essay, we engage with different topics within the ambit of the three broader themes. We have drawn these three themes from reflections on the limitations and impasses currently being felt in the conservation sphere, and the need for transformations in our ideas, practices and institutions. In their own ways, the themes serve as opportunities to interrupt the accepted ways of doing things in existing systems. We begin with disruption, taking the opportunity to examine conservation from a critical lens, by questioning its inherent frameworks, rooted in colonialism and inequity, and the necessity for change. In this context, the understanding that conservation faces and responds to crisis becomes not just environmental but also dives into other realms of being. In this essay, we use crisis to describe not just isolated ruptures, but overlaps of ecological breakdown, climate disruptions, and humanitarian emergencies happening simultaneously. We frame it as a way to draw attention to historical injustices and the current global socio-political unrest that have fueled the disruptions we discuss, as well as to our limitations in responding to them. We explore the complexities of these crises and how we attend to them. If crisis is what establishes a sense of urgency, then how we take risks determines how we respond to that urgency. We engage with risk here not just as a response to an immediate crisis, but as a mechanism for building resilience and a readiness to transform.

An exploration of transformations calls for us to question not just systems at a macro level, but how we are placed within that system, too. How we interact with ourselves, with fellow humans, and our ecology and environment forms an integral part of attending to a crisis. Our capacities to take risks are dictated by the relationships we establish and maintain. Extractive relationships without respect and empathy are a result of oppressive systems that view one group as dominant and the others as subservient, thereby creating a hegemony in relationships where power structures, decision-making, and spaces, favour one over the other. One can argue that hegemony is itself a crisis, and the risk of breaking such hierarchies of dominance requires us to change our approach to relationships. This means for us to reflect on our identity, to question power structures, and the positions we occupy, as individuals and as institutions.
We end by exploring the role of care, empathy, and respect in addressing the complexities that we highlight in the essay, and what that may look like in practice. We speak of these values not only as vague abstracts but as functional principles in our approaches and collaborations. We share examples from around the world where people have begun to talk of these things and to put them into practice. These stories serve as moments of reflection as well as pathways to redefining conservation.

*A final note on footnotes and marginalia

Given the dialogic structure of the essay, rather than interrupt the flow of the conversation between Akshay and Carolyn, we have chosen to offer footnotes as key spaces for deeper reflections, tangential musings and additional storytelling. We also bring other voices - those of the editors of the Conservation Futures Dialogues - into the discussion through the marginalia. Our hope is that both of these devices create a sense of a conversation unfolding, where ideas continue to be explored and deepened.

Part i: Reclaiming Disruption

CF: When we talk of disruption, it is often perceived negatively as something to resist and/or avoid, obscuring its full complexity and potential.[6] In the context of conservation, I've been wondering how we can reclaim and adopt a more nuanced understanding of disruption, going beyond a narrow interpretation of the term. I think that it would be helpful to stop using a binary framework (good vs bad, right vs wrong, black vs white, dark vs light) to understand disruption. How might we look at disruption through the lens of complexity? A binary approach implies there are only two options, while a framework that embraces complexity creates space for multiple interventions to arise. While having anything disrupted implies potential loss, confusion, and uncertainty, in its purest form, I believe disruption is about change. And if we take judgment off the table and instead use discernment as a way to engage the moment, that change becomes an opportunity for something *new*. How are we supported to show up at this moment, individually and in community? As a geographer, I often think about scale, so I have to ask: at what scale are we engaging disruption? One of the ways we measure disruption is by the impact it has on our lives. What is the impact on me? My body, mind, and spirit? What about my family and friends? My community? The country I call home? What about the world? Considering all of these entry points can be overwhelming. Perhaps the better question is not "at what scale are we engaging disruption", but "*at what scale are we able to engage*"?

AC: "In its purest form, disruption is about change." Thank you, Carolyn, for putting it in perspective! We are at a phase of transition, and here disruption becomes an opportunity, an opportunity to move away from structures rooted in oppression and hegemony. It is also an opportunity to alter our understanding of 'disruption' itself, like you've suggested, to move away from a binary framework of good and bad. A more nuanced perspective, examining its causes and consequences, our capacities and will, would enable us to engage with it in its potential as a catalyst for transformation. The question of scale, depth, and impact that you have brought up is equally important for us to consider. Do we have the capacity for it?

The conservation governance status quo has historically been an exclusive approach through the marginalisation of Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and other minority groups, the non-recognition of rights over their territories, and large-scale displacements.[7] Colonial and hegemonic systems of environmental governance replaced traditional approaches,[8] which gradually became the norm, taking different forms through racial, class, caste, gender, and other forms of discrimination in the context of access, management, utilisation, and preservation of land. The efforts to break this historically unjust system are disruptions that are not necessarily negative. They push us towards reflection and innovation in our approaches, to recognise where we have gone wrong, and what systems, practices, and ideas we need to let go of, what new spaces we can create.

EC: The assumption underlying this argument is that conservation in its existing form needs disrupting and that our role as practitioners in the field of conservation is therefore to 'engage disruption'. From the Latin dis- (apart) and rupere (to break), disruption entails a forcible breaking apart. I understand its use in the context of this piece to mean the need for sundering of conservation both from its historical roots in colonialism and its contemporary embeddedness in neoliberal territorialisation, market mechanisms and commodification practices. I am fascinated that this is the jumping off point, because it suggests that the conversations informing this essay, to a certain degree at least, converged here - in the contemporary imperative for disrupting the status quo. Our task, as Carolyn says, is to figure out how and to what extent we are able to integrate this needed systemic breakage into our everyday work.

6: While exploring the potentials of the notion of 'disruption' as a condition for the emergence of radically different ways of belonging to one another and our environment, it is important to recognise and critically engage with the ways in which techno-capitalism has already appropriated the term to claim and name "innovative" processes and technologies, praised for their capacity to create new markets, business models, and growth. This article explores and explains the role of disruptive technologies in our lives.

7: See for instance, M. Dowie, Clash of cultures, The Guardian (2009) [link]

8: Salvaging Nature: Indigenous Peoples, Protected Areas and Biodiversity Conservation by Marcus Colchester examines the history of protected area conservation, its impact on Indigenous people and local communities, and the role of conservationists, NGO's and other conservation institutions in maintaining power imbalances in conservation. Through policy analysis and empirical case-studies. Colchester argues for approaches that respect Indigenous sovereignty, knowledge systems and conservation stewardship.

Part i: Reclaiming Disruption

Additionally, we also need to consider the role of time in our understanding, and engagement with, disruption. Take forest fires, for instance. For many Adivasis[9], Indigenous Peoples, and other local communities, forest fires have played a central role in their forest management systems, from controlling large-scale wildfire or the spread of invasive species, to allowing the regeneration of flora, and so on.[10] State laws and policies, which in many places are rooted in colonial legacies, have viewed fire as destroying ecosystems. The Soliga Adivasis from Southern India have practiced taragu benki, meaning litter (forest floor debris) fire, as a form of forest management, a practice that has now been banned.

FM: Akshay's proposal is here to treat the need for disruption in the field of conservation the same way as indigenous peoples understood the need for fire to rejuvenate and maintain ecosystems. They knew that the longevity of a forest depends on regular, controlled fire to manage accumulated debris and invasive species. We now must collectively awaken to the fact that if conservation is to truly 'work', we need to implement practices of (controlled) burning and breakage to regenerate it, to sever it from its rotted roots in colonial systems. Time will gift us clarity on what can emerge from the ashes, and allow us to move away from fear of losing what is.

CF: Yes! I agree that a more holistic view of disruption gives us room to play. My first thought is to separate "disruption" from "crisis". While they may be connected, they are most certainly not the same thing. In one of our panel discussions, Ameyali Ramos[11] brought up the importance of considering "collapse, continuity, and care" as a way to frame and practice how we move forward collectively. A focus on continuity and care implies a focus on relationships and accountability. What is the responsibility of individuals, community groups, and institutions when determining a direction forward? Whose vision counts? Dr. Jocelyn Imani asks the question: "How do we build structures that last in the rubble?" I ask: who gets to build? What vision is privileged? How do we avoid making the mistakes of the past, and what does that require? How do we, in the words of Dr. Imani, "cultivate curiosity as a central value", especially when confronting truths that are contentious and painful? What can looking back teach us about how we might move forward differently? What can we do now? I wonder if we can learn to hold multiple visions of possibility in a way that is less hierarchical and driven by monetary concerns and is instead bolstered by our belief in and trust of each other and our understanding that without a healthy planet, we will not survive.

In Part II: Sites of Experimentation, the panelists and I explored how using "different mediums" to "bring people together that maybe can't see eye to eye" is a gateway to creating new imaginaries that are not bounded by one language and one worldview. People connect with the land in different ways and "conservation" as it is traditionally understood (particularly in Western contexts) is expanded and given new life.

9: The use of the term 'Indigenous People' is a contested topic in India. The Government of India does not consider any specific community in India to be Indigenous. While India is a signatory to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 107, the government of India considers all of its citizens to be Indigenous. Alternatively, the term 'Scheduled Tribes' is used for conferring administrative privileges, protection and benefits to certain social groups who are historically disadvantaged, under the Indian Constitution. Art 342 of the Indian Constitution outlines the process for the listing of Scheduled Tribes, while Art 366 (25), states that 'Scheduled Tribes' are those who are recognised under Art 342. However, the use of the term 'Scheduled Tribes' is also contested because not all groups are recognized as 'Scheduled Tribes'. However, many activists and scholars argue that the definition under the Constitution is paternalistic and discriminatory and rests upon colonial articulations, and prefer the term 'Adivasi' which translated to 'original inhabitants' for its emphasis on ancestral land rights, self-identification, and resistance to dispossession.

10: This article from the US National Park Service highlights the uses of fire by Native Americans and speaks to the cultural interpretation of the use of fire within these communities

11: Ameyali Ramos is deeply engaged in rethinking and reimagining conservation at different scales, working directly with communities from the ground up, with NGOs and with funders and donors. Her work focuses on transforming conservation practices beyond conventional frameworks, centering Indigenous and local knowledge systems, and nurturing different ways of doing and being with the world around us. For over 20 years, Ameyali has worked with Indigenous Peoples and local communities on environmental governance, sustainable livelihoods, fire management, and human rights. She has been a strong advocate for recognizing the pivotal role these communities play in stewarding nature and strengthening their collective capacity to shape global environmental policies. Her experience spans engagements with international policy processes, including the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. With a background in social and environmental governance, Ameyali is passionate about supporting Indigenous Peoples and local communities in continuing to care for their territories and ways of life on their own terms. She holds a PhD and MSc from the University of Oxford and currently serves as the Deputy Chair of the IUCN Commission on Environmental, Economic, and Social Policy (IUCN-CEESP).

Part i: Reclaiming Disruption

Panelists spoke about song, ritual and revolution in the same breath, and the role all three play in strengthening people's connection to land. We can honor our past and birth a new future by finding old rhythms to create new songs and movements. Molemo Moiloa put it this way: "when we change the language, you will find that conservation belongs to everyone...sometimes we need to see the images [and] we need to tell the stories in order to shift and broaden those imaginaries."

AC: Having 'multiple visions of possibilities' becomes all the more important because the crises we face are manifold in themselves. These are not merely isolated events, but structural, relational, and ongoing. These crises often extend beyond our immediate horizon, and are the culmination of processes and systems that have evolved over time. Biodiversity loss and climate change do not have singular causes. They are consequences of socio-political, economic, cultural, environmental, and other breakdowns happening simultaneously, and their impacts, too, are not limited to singular species, ecosystems, or human communities. They are processes that operate as branching and intersecting cascades. Conservation-induced displacement, for example, impacts community land use and resource management patterns, which directly affect biodiversity and ecosystem structure, altering in turn the socio-economic demographic and cultures of those displaced. Now, if we look at the reasons for this displacement, the argument is usually to prevent biodiversity loss. Ameyali shares, "I think it happens so easily because it's a way to justify the displacement, but you displace such a profound connection that they're no longer the same people. You know, you can't take someone and displace them and expect them to be the same." We have long viewed crises as technical issues that need to be solved, and our approach to them has been reactive rather than proactive. Additionally, if we look at it historically, the ethical aspects of our remedial mechanisms have either been overlooked or sidestepped. In the Indian context, the compensation package provided is based on the monetary valuation of the possible costs, without taking into account the loss of culture and relationships, particularly with the land.

FM: As we explore and reflect what it means to reclaim 'disruption', we can also look at the work that a number of scholars have done around the notion of 'breakdown'.
In his article "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructures" Brian Larkin describes infrastructures as 'matter that enables the movement of other matter' and invites us to understand and look at the role of breakdown as a condition where "other" forms of life are allowed to rise, to emerge. Or, when it breaks down, the normally invisible quality of working infrastructure becomes finally visible.
Does this mean that we could shift from a mentality of "emergency" to one of "emergence", to follow artist Jeanne van Heeswijk?
Or, as Ameyali put it in our public talk "Part ii: Sites of Experimentation" [link], what if we paid more attention to the fact that as "systems break down, movements [that have long been there resisting or co-existing] break through"?

12: Dr. Jocelyn Imani in Part II: Sites of Experimentation [link].
Dr. Jocelyn Imani is a storyteller, educator, and community builder with over a decade of experience as a public historian; she joined the Trust for Public Land as national director of the Black History and Culture program in 2022. In her work, she is focused on reimagining how Black history and culture sites are activated and aims to make shared spaces more relevant and accessible to all populations. Prior to joining TPL, Dr. Imani spent time as an interpretive ranger with the National Park Service, served as historian at Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site, and worked in the Office of Curatorial Affairs at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. She has taught U.S. history at Fisk and Howard Universities, as well as Washington Adventist University, Coppin State University, and others. Dr. Imani holds a PhD in African diaspora and public history from Howard University and a BA in History from Fisk University. She is a member of the Nashville Metropolitan Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc and the Junior League of Nashville. She also serves on the Board of Directors for Progress, Inc., an organization that promotes health, happiness, and safety for people with disabilities and senior adults needing care.
13: Molemo Moiloa shared a story that illustrates this point in Part II: Sites of Experimentation [link].
Molemo Moiloa lives and works in Johannesburg, and has worked in various capacities at the intersection of creative practice and community organizing. She currently works on notions of ungovernability, social infrastructures of cultural organizing, and relationships to nature. She is one half of the artist collaborative MADEYOULOOK, who explore everyday popular imaginaries and their modalities for knowledge production. Molemo also co-leads the Open Restitution Africa project, an Africa-focused research platform for restitution of African heritage under the auspices of Andani.Africa. She also co-leads the ungovernable, an experiment in communitary practice and ungovernability. Molemo is a Soros Arts Fellow 2023/24, was a Chevening Clore Fellow 2016/17, and winner of a Vita Basadi Award for 2017. MADEYOULOOK were selected artists of the South African Pavilion for the Venice Biennale 2024, were DAAD Artists-in-Berlin fellows for visual arts 2022 and Lumbung artists at documenta fifteen, 2022.
14: Debunking Government Claims: The Truth About Maasai Rights in Ngorongoro and Loliondo,Tanzania [link]
15: While at Kalpavriksh, my colleague Neema P. Broome and I, conducted a short study on the impact of relocation from Corbett Tiger Reserve, on the Van Gujjars, and we found that the "monetary compensation" originally decided was not paid to those displaced, while many families were not even registered for compensation, due to bureaucratic hurdles. For the community, who are traditionally pastoralists, the shift from pastoralism to agriculture, the relational loss due to moving away from the forests, have deeply impacted their culture and their relationship with the forests and their cattle.

Attending to crisis from a varied and wider lens also calls for a process of inclusive decision-making. Who defines what the crisis is? Who are the most vulnerable to it? Who benefits most from the solutions? If crisis is what establishes the sense of urgency and becomes a stake for which we need to act, then how we attend to it, how we take risks, determines our response to that urgency. The questions then arise: what risks take priority, and what capacities do we need to build to take those risks?

In conservation, risks are often viewed as outcomes, and as a circumscribed set of possibilities that must be avoided, managed, or mitigated. This has fuelled reliance on solutions that are technical in their approach and focus only on ecological variables. While these are important, they often do not provide the complete picture. All conservation work involves risk in some sense, whether it is protecting a forest or a species from extinction, land regeneration, or recognising land rights. It is embedded in the choices we make and the future we envision. Conservation risks are not just ecological and immediate, but also ingrained within socio-political, economic, and cultural systems, locally and globally. An international treaty on conserving a particular species, for example, impacts land use patterns locally, affecting use, access, and management regimes, and thereby cultural and traditional practices of those associated with the land. This, in turn, affects the regional economy. We need to be more intentional in how we view risks and how we choose to assess them and their environmental and social impacts. We need finer and more complex frameworks of analysis to understand who bears the costs of the interventions, whether our governance structures are sufficient to handle risks (and how we can improve these structures if they're lacking), and how we will act when we face them. Our capacities to take risks also need to go beyond mere crisis management to approaches that focus on building individual and collective resilience. It means strengthening our ability to respond and to adapt across scales. Risk capacity is not just about managing the risk itself, but more so about the readiness to transform. Transformations need to be both environmentally and socially oriented, not just one of the two, and this means letting go of ideas and practices that hinder such transformations.

16: 'Our Land Our Voices: Voices from the Edges' is an anthology of case studies by grassroots conservation practitioners from the Global South. One particular case study titled 'The Mistreated Communities: A story of conservation and hope' by Valery Binda from Cameroon, talks about the challenges in project implementation created by leaving out communities, in the conservation of the white-billed Pangolin. Speaking of the need for inclusive decision making, Valery writes, "We came to realize that conservation could not work if these indigenous communities who are the true custodians of the forests are not put at the forefront of conservation transactions." You can hear Valery and other grassroot conservation practitioners also in our podcast "Rewor(l)ding Conservation #2: The Point of Impact.".

17: The conservation of one-horned rhinocerous in Kaziranga National Park, Assam, in India is a great example of the risks and impacts of conservation. Kaziranga was established in 1916 as a Game Sanctuary, and was later declared as a wildlife sanctuary in 1950. In 1974, it was declared as a National Park under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. It was also declared as a Tiger Reserve. Kaziranga holds approximately 70% of the world's population of One-horned Rhinocerous. Due to its importance as a rhino habitat, there has always been a growing demand for imposing stricter conservation regimes in the park to conserve the rhinos. Since 1974, its area has expanded multifold, and currently spans over 1090 km2. Militarized protection in Kaziranga has been in place since the 1960s to curb poaching, and the measures have gotten more stringent since then, with a formalized 'shoot-to-kill' anti-poaching policy set in practice since 2010. While the park has seen an increase in the number of wild rhinos, the number of human killings are also very high, with reports suggesting more than 100 people have been killed in the last 20 years. The extrajudicial powers given to the guards have been a topic of heavy criticism by local activists, who have claimed that the tribal and other communities residing in the nearby regions face constant fear of being killed. The lack of accountability in justifying killings raises concerns on the type of risks that park managers take in protecting species and landscapes and the risks faced by the local communitie who bear the brunt of it.

18: In her 2024 article, E.J.Milner-Gulland expands on the need for conservation monitoring frameworks to embed principles of social justice. It requires more effort and takes time in achieving socially and environmentally just outcomes, but it is a necessity.

Part ii: Remaking Relationships

CF: Your words bring two thoughts to mind. Who gets to decide which risks take priority? And are we talking about taking a risk because we're afraid of losing something or are we taking a risk to gain something new? I think that sometimes the word "risk" becomes a catchall for what we should avoid, particularly within conservation circles.

What happens when we frame risk as an opportunity to practice what Pat McCabe calls "fearless generosity and radical abundance"?

How does our approach to risk change when we think of it as transformation? When I think about conservation and the personal risks people take, what comes to mind is the story of Don Scheuler and Willie Brown, two gay men, one white, one black, who in 1968 committed to caring for what they called, "the least worst land" in Mississippi for twenty-five years, eventually creating a preserve called The Place that is now protected by The Nature Conservancy. Despite having to contend with racism, bigotry, loss, hurricanes and eighty acres of worn-out land that had been logged, burnt, and ravaged, they tended to the land, restoring an ecosystem that eventually grew to two hundred acres. Human beings have always taken risks - history shows us it's in our nature to do so. I don't believe we have to further cultivate our ability to take risks though. What we need is a willingness to shift away from supremacy as it is currently embedded in conservation work - and prioritize and operationalise other ways of knowing that are non-extractive and non-transactional, center relationships (between humans and with other species) as a primary tenet of any effort moving forward and, in the words of Dr. Imani, "cultivate curiosity as a central value". Because here's the deal: we have everything to lose *and* everything to gain.

EC: I am excited by the statement "I don't believe we have to further cultivate our ability to take risks". This goes against most current orthodoxies, particular those of the techno-capitalist class, for whom risk-taking is a calling-card, a virtue. What I read between the lines, though, is that the conservation world as a whole needs to 'take the risk' (so to speak) of shifting away from the supremacy, oppression and structural violence that have long run in its veins. Prioritising relational ways of knowing, as Carolyn mentions, ought to be a 'primary tenet' going forward. Yet this means changing pretty much everything about conservation from the root to the tip - from the language used ('resources', 'management'), to the systems of data collection and analysis, to who gets to decide how to solve a problem. For many conservation practitioners, truly rooting their work in relational ways of knowing is a huge risk: to their career, reputation, self-image, and even to their ability to make a change. Nevertheless, there are those out there who are doing exactly this: challenging underlying doctrines, assumptions and habitual thinking (e.g. Carmenta et al 2025 or Wehi et al 2023). We can only hope that more such research and ideas will emerge, as the much-needed process of disruption continues.

FM: As I read this, I can't help but think about an old Arab proverb and story. In there an old man, in his nineties, tend to his bountiful garden and while planting crops for the upcoming harvest, he also seeds a sapling. His neighbour, startled, looks at him and asks him as of why he did that, since by the time the tree will be fruiting, the old man will be long gone.
And the old man turned to him, and smiling says: "They planted and so we ate, we plant so they would eat".

What else if not the radical care for an undetermined future other than that of the 'risky' business of stewarding the land for fruits that we will never see?

AC: The willingness to move away from supremacy is truly the need of the hour, and it can be tricky and difficult, yes, because as conservation actors, we are also part of these structures and have internalised their premises, as reflected in the way we tend to function and in our worldviews. To recognise and to address the

19: Pat McCabe (Weyakpa Najin Win, Woman Stands Shining) is a Diné (Navajo) mother, grandmother, activist, artist, writer, ceremonial leader, and international speaker. She is a voice for global peace, and her paintings are created as tools for individual, earth and global healing. She draws upon the Indigenous sciences of Thriving Life to reframe questions about sustainability and balance, and she is devoted to supporting the next generations, Women's Nation and Men's Nation, in being functional members of the "Hoop of Life" and upholding the honor of being human. Her primary work at the moment is the reconciliation between the masculine and feminine, Men's Nation and Women's Nation, remembering, recreating or creating anew a narrative for the Sacred Masculine, and addressing the Archetypal Wounding that occurred in our misunderstanding and abuse of technology in prayer, ceremony and science.
20: Scheuler, Don. 1997. A Handmade Wilderness. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishers.

historical injustice that many have been subjected to is perhaps one of the first steps towards that path. How we do it then becomes the next question. This would mean questioning and reflecting on our individual and institutional positionality, the privileges we come with, the hierarchies we form or become a part of due to our identity, and the spaces we occupy. To question whether we have been right in taking a linear path towards conservation, whether all voices have spoken, and whether all voices have been heard. We are constrained by the fact that dominant narratives are still driven by those with power and privilege, and that the spaces for a plurality of opinions are limited.

CF: Well said, Akshay! I've been thinking a lot about our collective ability to, as you put it, "reflect on our individual and institutional positionality," particularly at a moment when many of the histories, experiences and spaces that some of us occupy are being diminished, dismantled and erased. I can't help but think about what's happening in the U.S. right now - conservation efforts that center justice as a primary focus are having their funds revoked as are academic institutions that rely on scientific research as one way to better understand and mitigate climate change. Public spaces such as National Parks are removing stories and information that highlight the contributions of Black and Brown people, women and members of LGBTQ communities. There is even a list of a hundred words that have been flagged as words that should be "limited or avoided" by government agencies (including climate science, equity, indigenous community and racial justice). I think we need to build our capacity to support multiple strands of activity as we consider the future of our planet. What is the role of reparations and reclamation? How do I see you and your past as not just an experience wholly different from mine (and one that implicates me and/or my ancestors), but also as a reality that informs the ecosystem we are both a part of? How might that recognition and yes, sometimes, an apology (as one form of acknowledgement), open us both up to a new way of being together to do this work?

FM: As I read this, I started thinking about what philosopher Marina Garcez wrote in the article "Honesty with the Real". I want to offer it here, as I think it offers us to take a step forward in the directions Carolyn is discussing, but also because it helps to highlight the (intended or unintended) risks of so-called transformations that reduce themselves to just a public apology, a "recognition".

Garcez's article explores a somewhat recent shift in western contemporary artistic creation: it's thematic and procedural re-politicisation. Yet she notices that very often, "[w]e see how easily they reproduce new forms of banality and new spaces for self-consumption and recognition." In order words, she argues that the majority of these 'political' practices (which we can eaily expand to other realms of practice), are not actually honest with the reality of the world. These latter pertain to either transformations in the realm of representation (how to think about something), or intervention (how to transform something), but they miss the question of how to handle and deal with reality, hence how to treat it and be, truly, with and in it.

Treatment feels a much more radical, difficult and vulnerable space to be in, as it calls into question our affects, our ways of being, perceiving and (profoundly) relating to others. This is not to be understood as a mere intellectual exercise, but rather a positioning that, as artist Jeanne van Heeswijk describes it, is an embodied experience of relationship which demands to let go of one own's subjectivity to be fully capable of listening to, and be affected by the ways in which others are and exist in the world. This process of letting go oneself is an extremely risky 'business', one that most people don't feel much comfortable with (even more so those that have occupied positions of inherited power and privilege). And yet, this is the quintessential precondition for collectively preparing for the not-yet, for engaging in a process of radical re-imagination.

19: Pat McCabe (Weyakpa Najin Win, Woman Stands Shining) is a Diné (Navajo) mother, grandmother, activist, artist, writer, ceremonial leader, and international speaker. She is a voice for global peace, and her paintings are created as tools for individual, earth and global healing. She draws upon the Indigenous sciences of Thriving Life to reframe questions about sustainability and balance, and she is devoted to supporting the next generations, Women's Nation and Men's Nation, in being functional members of the "Hoop of Life" and upholding the honor of being human. Her primary work at the moment is the reconciliation between the masculine and feminine, Men's Nation and Women's Nation, remembering, recreating or creating anew a narrative for the Sacred Masculine, and addressing the Archetypal Wounding that occurred in our misunderstanding and abuse of technology in prayer, ceremony and science.

20: Scheuler, Don. 1997. A Handmade Wilderness. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishers.

21: A. Betts, Harriet Tubman webpage targeted amid Trump-led anti-DEI efforts, The Guardian, (2025) [link]

22: K. Yourish et al. These Words Are Disappearing in the New Trump Administration, The New York Times (2025) [link]

Part iii: Redefining Conservation

How might we understand that the opportunity to redeem ourselves is not only an act of power, but an act of love? We need to redefine what "power" is - how we covet it, how we use it, and how it gets articulated in our conservation practices. We need to be fearless when it comes to calling ourselves out, so that we can call ourselves in to healthier relationships with each other and the earth. National Park Ranger Shelton Johnson invites us to consider that acknowledging our past is "an act of testimony", one that can strengthen our ability to "embrace the totality" of who we are and transform how we do conservation work. I know it's easier said than done, but I don't believe we can keep running from our past, politically or culturally. What's that saying? Wherever you go, there you are...

AC: As I hear you speak on the need to call ourselves into 'healthier relationships', and to transform how we do conservation work, I am drawn to speak on the nature of relationships within conservation spaces. A lot of what you've shared, from questioning who decides what risks take priority, to redefining power, and the role of reclamation and reparations, centres around relationships, and here I think it is crucial to dive deeper into how relationships dictate conservation governance, and vice versa.

Despite efforts at an inclusive approach, conservation processes continue to be centralised. The great majority of large conservation organisations, who influence national and global conservation discourse, are based in Western countries, and they remain hardly accessible to actors in the Global South. This centralisation undermines an essential principle of healthy and just conservation governance - that is, collective action and collaboration. Whether it is because of the money it brings in, or a sense of ownership or control over the land and people they work with, or even when led by good intent, centralised approaches often do not result in meaningful collective action. I refer to collective action not only in the effort, but also in terms of giving due recognition to all those who contribute. This sometimes means that "leading" institutions need to take a step back and make way for others to take the lead.

For conservation action to have positive outcomes, it also needs to move away from 'project-oriented intervention', which I believe is one of the main barriers to building long-lasting collaborations. While funding is central to conservation activities, the nature of funding patterns, who gets the funding, how projects are developed, and the implementation agencies are important factors that need consideration and proper deliberation.

23: There are a number of stories that spring to mind that explore redemption, power & love: Civil rights lawyer Bryan Stevenson & the Equal Justice Initiative and this story he shared on NPR: https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=607029920110122); the book, The Best of Enemies: Race and Redemption in the New South (later turned into a movie), a true story of a Black civil rights activist and a member of the Ku Klux Klan who came together in North Carolina in 1971 to forge an alliance to desegregate schools.

24: You can learn more about Shelton Johnson's work and his book GloryLand: https://joytripproject.com/2021/03/gloryland/

25: A great example of someone having a personal epiphany about the impact of their choices on others and the planet is this essay Giantstones by Andri Snær Magnason and short film about his journey entitled The Last Ice Age [link]

26: Nigel Crawhall, Chief of Section, Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems programme, Natural Sciences Sector, UNESCO, who we interviewed as part of the CFD, when discussing the role of both national conservation actors (such as national park entities) and other large, private entities (such as Big-size NGOs or funding bodies) highlights especially the frictions and dysfunctions produced by their bureaucratic proceeding, often exacerbating the gap with the ways in which communities experience and practice sustainability.

27: Many of the individuals we interviewed shared this, highlighting in particular the continuous centralisation of governing powers in organisations located and operating from the Global North. You can listen to more on this topic in the [PODCAST #2 - Rewor(l)ding Conservation].

28: This point is further discussed by Jupta Itoewaki and Preety Sharma in [PODCAST #4 - Rewor(l)ding Conservation]

29: A report titled 'Greening the Grassroots', by Maliasili and Synchronicity Earth on funding of conservation projects in Africa, brings out some of the challenges faced by civil society organizations and by Global North donors in funding conservation projects. It highlights funding policies and practices established by funders, restricted access to funders and then having to "convince" them as some of the major challenges faced by the civil society organizations working on conservation. The report also examines the role of INGO's as the intermediaries for channelling funds, and the unequal distribution of resources between the INGO's and CSO's working on the ground.

At the same time, those contributing in other forms that are equally necessary but not monetary do not get equal say in decision-making, leading to hierarchies being formed, most perniciously so, on the ground where conservation is practiced. As Samson Luari shares, “The challenges I see in conservation are that most of the communities who are the real conservationists are not recognised. Many policies and consultations are done with people who live in the cities, who don't even know the history of the forest and its conservation”.

While such processes may achieve their goals in one aspect, they often create ripples of inequity in others. This monetisation of conservation, which is rooted in hierarchies and power imbalance, in the broader sense, causes more damage than good. The same can be said about the intellectual property of indigenous communities, who contribute to data generation and knowledge creation, but often do not find themselves in spaces of decision-making at the national or international level, or in research publications and conferences, and become mere data or statistics themselves.

Collaborations need to be mutually beneficial and serve the interests of all parties involved. This requires collaborations to be rooted in mutual respect, shared and inclusive decision making, and long-term relational accountability. Funding is a major aspect for achieving conservation goals, but we need to be conscious of the fact that it is not the only factor, and other factors such as labour, intellectual contribution, time, and values need to be respected. Preety Sharma highlights, “I think the conservation finance narrative has to accept that a lot of money, a lot of resources are already being put in by local communities. They are not [...] waiting for your money to do the work they want to do.”

As a whole, collaborations require building trust, receiving consent, prioritising transparency, and distributing equitably risks, benefits, and responsibilities.

30: Samson Letuya Luari is an Assistant Project Officer at the Ogiek Peoples Development Program (OPDP). He also coordinates the Ogiek Cultural Centre as the manager. A member of the Ogiek community, he grew up in an environment where traditional survival methods were deeply rooted. Samson is passionate about nature and conservation. He was a member of the first cohort of the ‘Communities and Conservation’ Fellowship programme hosted by the Global Diversity Foundation, and a participant to the Conservation Future Dialogues.

31: Aliya Ryan, speaking on data sovereignty, highlights the barriers to access of technology that leads to the establishment of hierarchies. While local communities centrally engage with data collection processes, once the data is uploaded to a particular portal, they usually lose access to it, and they are not able to see where and how the data is being used. More often than not, their role in data collection processes are not recognized, either. Ryan highlights how Awana Digital has been bridging this gap by codesigning new technology with Indigenous communities so that data collection and analysis does not remain centralized with a few experts. The data that are collected can be monitored and analyzed by the communities themselves in internal decision-making within the villages, while also giving due credit to the data collectors.

32: Some instances could be, and are not limited to, taking Free, Prior, Informed Consent (FPIC) of the communities while engaging in any conservation activity, mutual agreement on activities, goals, visions and outcomes, co-defining the methodology and framework of intervention, and benefit sharing, collaborative proposal development, transparency on the funding patterns and timeline, collaborative knowledge generation including co-authorship of reports, papers, and considering local cultures and traditions in their engagement.

33: While I was coordinating a project while in Kalpavriksh Environment Action Group, Pune, in collaboration with the Van Gujjar Tribal Yuva Sangathan, in Uttarakhand, India, we had the funding organisation visit the field along with us. This allowed for all of us to sit together to discuss process activities, strategies, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, challenges, and to bridge the gap between the different actors who were engaging in different capacities in the landscape. It also meant breaking down perceived and established hierarchies amongst ourselves by understanding one another’s goals, and challenges at a more personal level.

34: She goes on to explain “There's no savior complex there. There should be no savior complex. If you really want to work on biodiversity conservation, then you have to work with local communities. There is no other way, especially in areas where local communities are a part of the ecosystem. So, I feel like the narrative right now in conservation financing needs to become more of identifying and understanding what it is that the local communities are doing. The power shifting happens when we start accepting that the local communities are self-sufficient people. They are the best survivors because they are surviving in a world where the polarity of power is huge. Money and power is sitting in one place. And even then, if these communities are surviving in a nature-dependent system, there is a reason why they're surviving even without the kind of money that billionaires and the West have. So, conservation financing has to start from there. The narrative has to start from there. And then I think once you have that kind of bent of mind, be it nature-based solutions, be it economic solutions, you will know which solutions will work for the landscape, for the community. It's as simple as that”.

CF: Your response really resonates with me, particularly when I think about individualisation vs. collective action and collaborations. A focus on relationships as integral to a conservation project invites the whole person to show up, whether they are a funder, a community member and/or a researcher. We are not just the job we do and for many of the people we've spoken to for this project, working in the field of conservation is a calling and an aspiration to honour, as Joycelyn Longdon put it, "a deep love of the natural world". Relationships built on respect and common intention can find their way through the visioning process where multiple belief systems and differing needs may butt up against each other and threaten to stall any progress made. And yes, it takes time and spaciousness to get to know people, to understand their perspective and their history. But we can - and must - make this part of the practice, part of the work of conservation. We defined the rules and I believe we can change them. What we get in return is a chance to lean into trust instead of transaction; a chance to evolve as human beings instead of extracting what we need from people and the environment in order to feel whole; and build something that all participants have a stake in, be it family, community, or the place they call home. Creating an ethics of care is a strategic act that invites everyone involved to step up and step in, wholly, unabashedly, together.

AC: I agree, and I'd like to further add that the role of care is not something widely discussed within conservation circles. To think of love and care not just as sentimental values but as philosophical and political principles driving the work that we do. At a time of social and environmental crisis, what better way can we think of than to realign our methods, values, and practices, from dominance to equity, from ownership to stewardship, from a transactional relationship to reciprocity and kinship, to address the deeper issues we face moving forward. We as humans are part of nature, not separate from it, and we are accountable to the non-human world as much as we are to humans. Treating love, care, and empathy as operational principles means moving away from a system that enforces hierarchies, oppression, and marginalisation through exclusion.

"I think part of it is to help people step out of their traditional roles, rediscover each other more humanely, and give people permission to listen and talk," says Nigel Crawhall, on power imbalances and how to move away from them. We must challenge those framings that limit conservation to projects, or ones that value knowledge as external, categorising it into verticals of importance and significance. There is no one way to do it. We are diverse in our geography, ecology, cultures, and needs, so it makes all the more sense to prioritise governance in a contextual frame, taking into account local values, traditions, and approaches rather than an umbrella or top-down approach.

What may work in one area may not be equally effective in others. Our capacities to govern need not just technical skills but situational awareness and long-term relationships that are built on trust.

35: Another story in 'Our Land our voices', 'Restoring the Barotse Floodplains: The Land of the "Kuomboka" and Haven for Biodiversity by Swithin Kkashulwe (Pg 32-37) highlights how a collaborative effort was successful in clearing the invasive Memoso pigra and restoring the Barotse floodplains in Zambia.

36: While we are often up against a sense of urgency in conservation work, I believe there is also something to be gained from taking the time to get to know a people and a place. I recently read an interview where the sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild talked about her recent book, "Stolen Pride: Loss, Shame and the Rise of the Right". She spent seven years getting to know people in rural Kentucky gaining their trust and listening to their stories. While this book is not about conservation per se, it does touch on similar themes and suggests how we might practice moving forward differently. In particular, her emphasis on understanding the "deep story" that people hold about themselves and their history that defines their politics and their choices and the art of listening while temporarily turning off one's own moral framework can inform how we build common ground while treating each other with respect. [link]

Part iii: Redefining Conservation

An attempt to move away from an extractive top-down system towards more harmonious co-existence requires love, care, and trust to be functional. We are seeing examples of this growing, in different spheres. We are witnessing an increasing number of Indigenous voices in leading positions, grant organisations changing their funding patterns,, community-led conservation initiatives being granted more recognition, and systemic changes within organisations and institutions. Formal educational systems are also mainstreaming justice and equity into their conservation curricula, signalling a more inclusive approach to the subject. The Master's in Conservation Leadership at the University of Cambridge, headed by Chris Sandbrook whom we interviewed, is a wonderful example of such an initiative. **Awana Digital's** mission of data autonomy and sovereignty, and making it accessible for local communities to protect their cultures and ecosystems while being holders of the data generated, is a welcome change to the larger digital data ecosystem that has traditionally been very extractive and exclusionary. The community conserved areas portal is another such initiative on democratising data access and knowledge generation, contributing to policy advocacy for recognition of community conservation initiatives in India and South Asia,. These shifts are not nearly enough, given the challenges we face and the journey ahead. Yet, we are heartened by the shifts we see. We are hopeful, but we remain deeply conscious of the road that remains ahead of us.

CF: Mic drop! You are saying all the things, and I'm down for it. Emphasising equity over dominance; stewardship instead of ownership; and kinship over transactional relationships. My first thought is to remind ourselves that some of the work of operationalising love, care and capacity has already been done by Indigenous communities (and others) who have intuitively generated organising principles that honour their cosmologies and their needs.

37: See https://ictnews.org/news/ancestral-voices-native-leadership-brings-change-to-conservation-efforts/

38: H.O. Ibrahim, Indigenous Peoples Are the World's Best Conservationists. Climate Funders Must Recognize That, Time (2024) [link]

39: One of the other processes I am involved in is providing technical and administrative support to the 'Indian Pastoral Communities Network'. It is a network of pastoral communities and grassroots organizations focusing primarily on the interface between pastoralism, biodiversity conservation, and youth and gender inclusion. One of the main objectives of the network is to provide a platform for pastoral communities to represent and speak up for themselves in spaces that have traditionally ignored their voices. The network is relatively new, and currently comprises members from eight states in India, representing a handful of pastoral communities. The network is about 10 months old, and as such receiving funding is a major challenge. The network is supported by the ICCA Consortium South-Asia Chapter, and also recently received a small grant from Synchronicity Earth. For a budding network that aims to challenge established power hierarchies, the flexible funding provided by these two organizations have been deeply meaningful for the network to perform its activities and mobilize people. The financial support provided extends beyond just the grant amount. It speaks to the establishment of a bottom-up approach that brings out marginalized voices, by marginalized voices.

40: See Maliasili's 2024 report From Pledges to Practice

41: On decolonizing education and knowledge, Patrick Knodel speaks of the Chancemaker Foundation supporting alternative education approaches in Mali "So for example, we are funding alternative education approaches. It's not directly about conservation but I'm giving you an example that has relation to nature. So Yanick has founded Kabakoo academies in Mali and what they're doing is they're trying to bring together Western technology and AI with indigenous wisdom. For example, you can do a rendering of an effective housing model and all of that digitally, but you can use the local material that has been used in Mali for the past 2000 years because it's hot there. So it doesn't make sense to make a building out of concrete because that takes a lot of energy and you don't have that. So why don't we go back to what people have been using there for the past 2000 years, because they knew why they did it. And we totally have forgotten that. And now we're building concrete buildings all over Africa with 40 degrees. Doesn't make any sense. And that's, that's a typical way in which we have been approaching things, it's always either this or that, either it's tech or it's nature, either it's big or it's local and, and we are working on bringing that together and bridging it a little bit because without it, a lot, especially the identity and cultures of local people are getting lost".

42: See, for example Maliasili's 2024 report Seeding Solutions

43: Nigel on the structural changes within UNESCO highlights "In 2017, UNESCO proposed its first policy document on engaging with Indigenous peoples, which align directly with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which is a key normative human rights instrument. And the executive board noted that and accepted that. And that now is part of how we plan. In the years that I've been inside UNESCO, I was a consultant before, but in the time that I've been a full -time staff member, there's been a huge expansion of the understanding of the staff about who are indigenous peoples, what their rights are, that there is a policy document, there is a normative system. So that part's grown. Gender equality is another whole dimension of that. That's been a huge growth area within the UN system. But UNESCO has had quite a lot of success on issues around gender equality and understanding rights -based approaches to gender. And there are other dimensions of that. So now this new decision at COP16 of the CBD of recognizing the role of Afro-descended communities, we knew that was there. We were working with some of those communities, but now this is moving up to a global scale of recognition.

I'm not talking about appropriating that knowledge - I'm talking about the recognition and reprioritising of what's important in conservation work (dismantling hierarchies in service to something better, connecting and collaborating with indigenous worldviews in service to the planet and ourselves). But I want to be careful here - I am not saying that we should necessarily prioritise indigeneity or any form of "knowing" over another as we can be in danger of creating new hierarchies and forms of extraction. Indigeneity has evolved, adapted and expanded like any other human experience and understanding of land and more-than-human nature. One of the challenges is how we leave room for that change in our consideration of what conservation can be. What exchange becomes possible when we share our knowledge? When we move away from, as you say, the "umbrella approach" and move towards a web of relationships and experience that is multidimensional and connected? What becomes possible when we honour our past and imagine our collective future?

How do we define love when doing this work? When my father put his hand in the soil, on land that was never his, and did so every day for fifty years, isn't that a kind of love? We say, "show me the money". What happens when we say, "show me the love"? What does that look like in institutional and community practice? How do we remove the judgment from what is shared - be it money, time, knowledge, space - and instead imagine these exchanges as acts of love? How is our ability to see each other and the more-than-human species that we share this earth with, with a deeper vision?

AC: Thank you, Carolyn, for putting it beautifully, and it is in the same spirit that I would want to end the piece with as well. I think one thing that all conservation practitioners, indigenous people, local communities, and others working in this field have in common is a feeling of love and respect for the earth, the landscape, and the species we work for, and that is why we do what we do. How we approach 'conservation' may be different, but attempting to understand each other better could help us find a common ground. Can we be more empathetic to the next person? As one of our interviewees shared, "to see humans as humans rather than just a name that sits behind something you find annoying in a publication". And I am not implying that we turn a blind eye to the complexities we find ourselves in, and that we don't question hierarchies and power structures. But is it enough to only question others and not ourselves? Where do we stand in the larger scheme of things? As Preety shares, "understanding where we belong in the system of problems and solutions will make it easier for us to identify what our role is and where we can help." This means for us to question ourselves, the beliefs we hold, the relationships we maintain, the power and position we occupy. And, there are signs of hope because we are seeing change in different parts of the world. The examples we have shared in the course of this essay are just a few amongst the many that people are already talking about and implementing both individually and in their institutions. individual and institutional levels.

44: National Park ranger Shelton Johnson shared this thought: "But we have to recognize that there is a problem with science...science sometimes rules out or often rules out that indigenous perspective, that sense of something that we enter that is sacred. And this is the point that I'm making, is that you are much more likely to protect something that you hold dear, that you hold with the heart and with the spirit, as well as the mind, than if you only look at it as an intellectual vision. There's a point...where science and spirit intersect because they're both responses to the same mystery. Science is a response to, How did this come to be? Religion is a response to, how did we come to be? And that intersection is where there's clarity. That intersection provides depth of field."

45: A recent art exhibit in New York explored "love" as the root to justice: https://hyperallergic.com/830346/at-the-root-of-justice-are-different-kinds-of-love-ford-foundation/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=NY062823&utm_content=NY062823+CID_9ba08ab2295c5ffaea23381de8c8a15e&utm_source=hn&utm_term=At+the+Root+of+Justice+Are+Different+Kinds+of+Love

46: There is a great documentary that explores love and activism in the face of climate change by environmental activist and filmmaker Josh Fox, How to Let Go of the World and Love All the Things That Climate Can't Change

47: A story that continues to move me is the relationship between Andre Bauma, a park ranger in Virunga National Park in the DRC, and the mountain gorilla Ndakasi: https://virunga.org/wildlife/primates/mountain-gorillas/gorilla-orphans/ndakasi/

On a more personal reflection, this process itself was immensely valuable to me, having the opportunity to speak with a diverse group of people, and to understand how they've navigated conservation in their time, and to do it alongside you, Carolyn. The many conversations we've had in the last couple of months have helped me learn what I didn't know and question what I did. All this has been challenging for me, but it has definitely been more fruitful.
I think we're at an interesting point in time. Conservation is transitioning, there are several hurdles along the way, and this is why we need to be more flexible and welcoming to diversity in opinions, beliefs, and practices. Given where we find ourselves right now, the privilege of rigidity is not a choice we can afford to take.

CF: Akshay! Thank you for sharing your truth and knowledge so willingly. Writing this piece with you has been a gift. Sharing our visions for our collective future with each other and all the committed and brilliant people we have been in conversation with throughout this project has been, dare I say, a necessity. Let me be honest - these are challenging times and I, for one, have not been immune to feelings of despair and rage about what we've done in the past that has not served and the growing fear that we/I might not be able or willing to do everything differently. Well, maybe not everything - we may not need to throw out the baby with the bathwater, but we definitely need a new bathtub. And I wholeheartedly agree with you that the work of change begins by looking in the mirror and taking stock of all the things that define us: our history, our beliefs, our geographies, our dreams. Not to shame us into action, but to allow us to have our eyes wide open and to be clear about where we each stand. In that way, we improve our chances at creating relationships built on trust, transparency, respect, and yes - love - not just of other people or species, but also for ourselves. In July of this year, Joanna Macy, an American scholar and environmental activist, passed away at 96 years old. Her work influenced people all over the world who work in and for conservation, be they scientists, activists, or those who run environmental organisations. Her belief in our ability to "do better" was shaped, in part, by her Buddhist practice. But one does not need to be a Buddhist to find solace and direction in her words. In an interview entitled, "Befriending the Pain of Our World" she asks us to face that fear, sadness, and anxiety that we feel and turn it into action. "The key is in not being afraid for the world's suffering," If we can do that, she states, "Then nothing can stop us".

So it is in this spirit that I would like to move forward. What's that saying? "Courage is not the absence of fear but the willingness to do what needs to be done in spite of that fear." I think the choices we need to make right now reflect all the things we've talked about here: they're risky, difficult, in some cases unproven, different, unorthodox, creative, and as of yet, unwritten. The implications are tremendous - on the one hand, we might lose position, money, friendships, access, and opportunity. And yes, that can and will hurt. But what we might gain is the world that many of us dream about. A world where, as author and activist Elissa Sloane Perry puts it, liberation and sovereignty, accountability, and responsibility for all beings is a reality. Sloane Perry reminded me if we believe in these precepts, then we are doing faith-based work. For what is faith if not the strong belief in a set of ideals that elevate every living being?

48: Befriending the Pain of our World - an interview with Joanna Macy [link]. Her work was also explored in a recent piece by Michael J. Coren [link]
49: I recently had the good fortune to engage with Elissa in a retreat with eleven other Black, Brown and indigenous women who are environmental writers, activists, artists and knowledge holders. As one of the co-facilitators she held the space with thoughtfulness, playfulness and grace [link]

There is a poem that has sprung to mind that I'd like to close out my comments with. For me, the poem is about possibility, openness, audacity, and love for the mystery of life. The words remind me that I don't need to know or have everything worked out before I move forward. I just need to be willing to take that leap.

A blind man told me of the most vivid dream
Where a man with no arms taught him how to embrace
– Abraham Velaquez, Peace Poet