



OPINION PIECE

The 'humanised zoo': decolonizing conservation education through a new narrative

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ABSTRACT: Wildlife conservation seems unaffected by decolonization movements that recently led to removing or vandalizing several statues of geographers and colonizers worldwide. Instead, we observe an increased emphasis on total protection of species and habitats that, although strategic in a period of environmental crisis, may have grossly negative impacts on living standards of local indigenous communities. In this regard, we should decolonize society, and specifically conservation, by adding new metaphoric statues to the old ones, preferably of those living side by side with wildlife. In this essay, we suggest that zoos, as popular places where urbanized people meet biodiversity, should change their messages that too often reinforce the subtle colonial ideology pervading international environmentalism and often driven by increasing animal rights activism. For example, a new storytelling ethos in zoos should communicate that, in some sensitive contexts (e.g. most tropical countries), the current over-emphasis on protected areas and military law enforcement is also causing serious human rights violations. We need 'humanised zoos', i.e. places where conservation of biodiversity is put in a broader socio-ecological context and a central role for the future of ecosystems is given to local communities, ethnic minorities and 'wise people' (i.e. people having local traditional knowledge). Zoos should direct more resources toward community-based conservation; foremost, they should shape urban and 'Western' attitudes toward wildlife with a less colonized perspective, including spreading the importance of traditional ecological knowledge in ecosystem management.

KEY WORDS: Zoos · Animal rights · CITES · Compassionate conservation · Conservation education · Decolonization · Traditional ecological knowledge · TEK

1. ANTI-COLONIALISM MOVEMENTS

The year 2019 saw an upsurge of anti-colonialist sentiment that led to the removal or vandalism of several statues of geographers and historical colonizers especially in North America and the UK, perhaps with Christopher Columbus being the most famous symbol (Diaz 2020). Statues and monuments have become major flashpoints of political conflict over the past decade by some political

groups. These groups (such as the Montréal May Anarchists, MacdonaldMustFall, RhodesMustFall, Delhi-Dublin Anti-Colonial Solidarity Brigade) frame their actions—including acts of vandalism—as an expression of their commitment to refute the typical colonial settler rhetoric (e.g. Rose-Redwood & Patrick 2020). Their goal, in North America and elsewhere, is to build a new narrative: one dealing with land and natural resource diversion from native communities to the new colonizers.

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In colonial settler societies such as Canada, the creation of monumental landscapes celebrating colonialism and identity, such as the memorial complex in Ottawa, has played a significant role in the process of erasing indigenous histories and ties to the land (e.g. Osborne 2001). The same has occurred in South Africa (e.g. Coombes 2006) and in other countries with a colonial past. We should ask ourselves whether we should erect more statues to create a more complete and shared national history that also includes a revision of the history of management of natural resources.

2. WILDLIFE CONSERVATION: UNAFFECTED BY THE DECOLONIZATION MOVEMENT?

Regarding wildlife or biodiversity conservation, this arena seems mostly unaffected by decolonization movements; on the contrary, we observe an increased emphasis on total protection of species and habitats (see the recent proposal for total protection of 30% of land cover, Waldron et al. 2020; presently, only a little over 12% is protected). Although this general goal is justified by the present climatic/environmental crisis, little concern is expressed about the potential grossly negative impacts on local indigenous communities (e.g. Anaya & Espírito-Santo 2018, Wang 2019) that are generally excluded from decisions made by what seems to be a well-connected and networked global elite, shaping conservation discourses and practices (Holmes 2011). The superiority of Western science and technology insists that biodiversity conservation worldwide follows a Western model, which is better implemented by Westerners. It should not be forgotten that the establishment of national parks in tropical countries is sometimes accompanied by the forced displacements of communities outside the borders of the parks (Agrawal & Redford 2009). Recently, the global SARS-Covid 19 world pandemic prompted the call for wildlife consumption bans. This blanket ban on wildlife consumption may exacerbate food insecurity in indigenous communities and completely overlook that in some cases, wildlife consumption is more than just for subsistence. It may also have cultural roots and should be respected in that regard (Matias et al. 2021). In the European Union, concern regarding transmissible animal diseases led to Regulation 2016/429 ('Animal Health Law') that is now being applied to each country and that, at least in Italy, 'establish[es] ... a specific ban on importing, keeping and trading in wild and exotic fauna, also to reduce outbreaks of zoonosis' (Marquès i Banqué 2021,

p. 21). Due to the wider socioeconomic dimension of wildlife trade in source, resource-poor countries, it remains unknown if such legal measures will have any positive effects on local biodiversity (Robinson et al. 2018).

3. IS SUSTAINABLE USE STILL A CONSERVATION GOAL?

The same colonialist attitude towards the total protection of a few charismatic large mammals is often observed in the framework of the Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora (CITES) Conference of the Parties. The goal of CITES is clearly one of a sustainable use of wild species to benefit countries and local communities but without jeopardizing species survival (Duffy 2013). Yet CITES is increasingly used to ban any international trade, especially of high-profile large species such as elephants. For example, the polar bear *Ursus maritimus* has twice been put forward for up-listing from Appendix II to I of CITES, affecting trade from Canada (the largest range state, and the only range state without a national ban on trade). However, polar bears are threatened by a reduction in sea ice (Castro de la Guardia et al. 2013, Atwood et al. 2016), and trade appears a very low threat. Trade is a by-product of a cultural/subsistence harvest that would continue with or without international trade (Wiig et al. 2015). Income derived from such trade by Inuit hunters would be removed, potentially leading to less engagement in conservation and more conflict killing of polar bears (Weber et al. 2015). Where international trade is not driving population decline, curtailing it is unlikely to help, yet such a result is narrated as a great conservation achievement among the urban elites of the Western world. The colonizing policy remains highly active and attractive in wildlife and species conservation, de facto contrasting recognition of local communities' voices and perspectives (Cooney et al. 2021).

4. DECOLONIZING WILDLIFE CONSERVATION: STARTING WITH ZOOS

It is our belief that we should decolonize society, and specifically conservation, by adding new 'metaphorical statues' to the old ones, preferably of those people living side by side with wildlife. Zoos are popular places where urban populations encounter biodiversity, but their message is not only dictated

by good science but also by what is considered to resonate with their Western, audiences in the urbanized society and embedded into the global environmentalism rhetoric (Gippoliti 2011). In the past, zoos were often used as showcases of national colonialism, although zoos are popular institutions even in non-colonial countries. Therefore, there is a real danger that zoos reinforce the subtle colonization ideology that pervades international environmentalism (Garland 2008), an issue that is overly neglected in the educational departments of these institutions (Gippoliti 2019). Despite an almost 20 year old early warning call (Chapin 2004), most environmental NGOs still share the same problem, as demonstrated by their immediate recent acceptance of the 30% protected areas paradigm (Waldron et al. 2020). Furthermore, emphasizing poaching and 'environmental crimes' as the main cause of species declines offers a simple message and a simple remedy — 'please support our anti-poaching and wildlife rescue operations' — that completely overshadows more complex and sometimes embarrassing explanations. The creation of a Museum of Environmental Crimes inside the Bioparco (formerly the Rome Zoological Garden) whose emphasis is on international illegal trade of animals and plants and investigative enforcement, but without explaining what legal trade is, perfectly adheres to the prevailing Western environmentalism today (S. Gippoliti pers. obs.).

Failing to address socio-economic, political and demographic issues of other countries reproduces a stereotyped idea of 'wild' typical of long-gone historical periods, often characterized by a strong imperialistic attitude. Not surprisingly, involvement of local communities against the illegal wildlife trade is often limited to a 'top-down' approach emphasizing legal enforcement while a true engagement of communities in natural resources management is very rare (Biggs et al. 2017, Cooney et al. 2017). Comparing current African elephant numbers with those estimated to be living a century ago and blaming ivory poachers for such a decline is a gross oversimplification (Kamau & Sluyter 2018), reinforcing the view of Africa as an empty continent available for well-intended environmentalists, and distracting from the complexity of the dramatic phenomena taking place in Africa (e.g. land grabbing; Mol 2011). When zoos deal with large cats, a preferred taxon, the issue of security of local communities, and related human-dimension conflicts, are rarely considered in the information provided to visitors (Naha et al. 2018, S. Gippoliti pers. obs.). It seems there are few attempts to integrate social and economic concerns into the zoo narratives, resulting in

the 'invisibility' of local communities among the prominent stakeholders. To counteract this biased colonial perspective that is now increasingly pervading the management of large carnivores in the developed world (see the large carnivore issue in Europe: von Essen 2012, Gippoliti et al. 2018), zoos can no longer be naïve, ignoring, for example, that the current over-emphasis on protected areas and military law enforcement is also causing serious human rights violations, and that establishment of private 'conservancy' reserves in some African countries follows the same original path traced by colonialism (Agrawal 1997, Kashwan et al. 2021). Considering the increasing role of tourism as a new frontier of economic development (Butler & Boyd 2000), national parks are becoming key to national economies of several tropical countries where, as denounced by some private and governmental organizations, local communities are often evicted from their territories and deprived of the rights to their land, exactly as was done in many colonial and racist regimes (Brockington & Igoe 2006; see also open letter by Agrawal et al. 2021).

5. A POSSIBLE BLUEPRINT FOR THE DECOLONIZED ZOO

It has often been proposed that zoos should become biological centres whose focus is broader than zoology. The 'Biopark' concept proposed the creation of a holistic institution that is a zoo, a botanical garden, an aquarium, a natural history museum and an anthropological and ethnographical museum (Robinson 1988). This broader perspective is essential to insert conservation education into the sociocultural context of what biologists define as '*in situ*' conservation (the wild) and is often presented as an empty world where avid poachers and loggers exert the only threats to wildlife. Where are local communities and local authorities in this rhetoric? What about conflicts between people and wildlife?

Ironically, perhaps, we need a 'humanised zoo'. While the term 'human zoos' is used in negative terms to indicate those exhibitions realized in Europe before World War II with ethnic groups of 'exotic' people (see Sánchez-Gómez 2013), the 'humanised zoo' is a place where conservation of biodiversity is put in a broader socio-ecological context, and a central role for the future of ecosystems is given to local communities, ethnic minorities and local 'wise people', i.e. indigenous communities that often own unique knowledge about ecosystems (Alcorn 1993, Rodríguez & Inturias 2018). Given their cumulative fi-

nancial power and audience, zoos should direct more resources toward community-based conservation and be cautious in supporting private NGOs that follow the 'fortress' paradigm in conservation, especially if this is based on private land that has been expropriated from local communities. Foremost, zoos should reshape urban and 'Western' attitudes toward wildlife by taking a less colonized perspective, emphasizing how different attitudes among communities often allowed the conservation of unique ecosystems and species and promoting a collaborative conservation agenda between North and South of the world. International conservation should be proposed as a collaborative task involving firstly communities and eventually other minor actors from abroad. It is anticipated that zoos could play a critical role in the formation of a new generation of researchers and activists with solid social skills and a democratic decolonized attitude (Boone et al. 2020). A more holistic conservation message, such as that of Pope Francis (Pope Francis 2015) that promotes a strong link between ecological integrity, biodiversity and social justice, should be favoured. This probably also implies that conflict must be recognized as unavoidable when dealing with coexistence between different human groups and 'wildlife' (Hill 2021) and that our conservation goal is to find a good balance between environment and human needs, with special attention for local communities that suffer the costs of wildlife conservation. Although it is understandable that zoos emphasize zoologists that become icons of specific species research, an attempt should be made in Europe and North America to invite scientists with a more 'social' background and foremost, scientists born into the countries where elephants, lions and tigers live; this would probably require a stronger international collaboration of zoo organizations such as the European Association of Zoos and Aquaria and the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. The 'humanised zoo' needs to be transparent about human victims of conflicts with wildlife, including conflicts between individuals and charismatic species such as chimpanzees that are totally ignored by Western media (Garland 2008). The 'humanised zoo' promotes a sustainable utilization of wildlife, both marine and terrestrial, while this concept had become taboo in some neo-colonized regions of Africa (Schwartz 2015) adopting de facto the 'compassionate conservation' paradigm, whose negative consequences have been already discussed (Hayward et al. 2019). On the contrary, the 'humanised zoo' should emphasize and promote conservation/management projects that utilize traditional ecological knowledge (Ramos 2018,

Molnár & Babai 2021) not as an alternative to Western science, but as recognition that ecosystems were successfully managed by humans long before colonial times. Finally, zoos need to apply higher scientific standards when informing people through their exhibits and associated interpretation panels, at a time when animal issues are poorly treated even in the prestigious media of the UK (Somerville 2017).

Conservation educators (sensu Jacobson et al. 2015) working in zoos should overcome the 'Bambi effect' (Silk et al. 2018, p. 601) and the current overemphasis on animal rights issues that attract the most interest from the media (Maynard 2018). They should use a new storytelling ethos that talks about animal species as components of complex socio-ecosystems and that includes humans, with their histories, dynamics, conflicts and paradoxes. They should use a critical and systemic approach, free, as much as possible, from urban, Western and politically correct dogmas which, like old statues, can be torn down or at least be part of a much bigger army of symbols, with new statues embracing a wider cultural diversity of stakeholders that exists today.

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