Conservation in troubled times

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The return of a far-right incumbent following the recent US presidential election has caused unprecedented concern, with serious risks of shredding environmental and climate agreements, emboldening autocrats, weakening Ukrainian statehood and entrenching Israel–Palestine power differentials. The far right also runs several European states and attracts growing support elsewhere. Although Brazil no longer has a far-right president, Argentina has now elected one. The EU Green New Deal has been weakened by farmer backlash on agrochemicals, despite public support for controls. China's economy is tottering, adding risks of the leadership moving against Taiwan as a diversionary tactic. Then there are the issues in Russia, the Middle East and a dozen other vicious wars. For many, the crisis is already here.

Conspiracy theories flourish and politicians have learnt the value of big lies (McIntyre, 2018). Devastating fires in California are used as an excuse to loosen planning controls, whilst distracting public attention by focusing on a few looters; a common tactic (Solnit, 2009). With increasing rejection of evidence-based science and a proportion of the global electorate influenced by disinformation, we can no longer rely on factual information to guide decision-makers (Applebaum, 2025).

Nature conservation is increasingly under assault. Protected areas could become less secure, with populist leaders enacting protected area downgrading, downsizing and degazettement (PADDD; Golden-Kroner et al., 2019) on a much larger scale. Agricultural pollution, and land-use and climate changes have mounting impacts on biodiversity and ecosystem services (IPBES, 2019), including in protected areas. The race for critical raw materials is increasing mining pressure, including in the Arctic. Climate change deniers are resurgent, focusing on rolling back net-zero commitments and attacking renewable energy, handsomely supported by fossil fuel interests. A growing number of companies are stepping back from environmental commitments, emboldened by complaisant governments. Global governance mechanisms such as the UN climate and biodiversity conventions are weakened by resistance from a few countries, and many states are failing to meet agreed commitments (Whitehorn et al. 2019).

The next decade is going to be difficult for conservation, possibly very difficult. Issues of climate change, environment and biodiversity can be overwhelmed, even among sympathetic people, when other immediate crises seem more pressing. But we do not have the luxury of setting aside our concerns for the environment until a theoretical future when things are easier. So what can we do if governments and many of the electorate lose interest in nature conservation?

Rather than hand-wringing, we need to plan our responses as professionals and activists. Many talk about retrenching to address local issues. This is worthwhile, but insufficient if support for environmental issues appears to be declining globally. 'Appears to be' is important though. Despite the challenges, support for conservation, restoration and protected areas remains high, often transcending political boundaries and creating a means for conflict resolution. Concern about climate change is also growing, with many starting to feel its effects.

What can we do? Firstly, we need to keep doing what we have been doing, and find alternative ways of working if finance dries up or jobs disappear. Ironically, the conservation sector may be in a better position than most in such turbulent times. Because funding is often uncertain, many of us are already used to innovating, volunteering and working across disciplines. Secondly, alongside striving to live a sustainable life—and leading by example—there are several important steps we can take:

Build a bigger coalition of the willing Identify and work with people sympathetic to the conservation message. This means strengthening and where necessary repairing links with Indigenous peoples, local communities, sympathetic industry members, sub-national governments—any group that can deliver positive change. When building coalitions, we should look outside our comfort zone, finding synergies and multiplier effects with others championing sustainability. These are the people who can help ensure that governments and industry do not slip environmentally damaging changes through while attention is directed elsewhere. Cities are often important sources of support. Studies have shown that in urban areas, combining nature-based and circular solutions for the built environment delivers the greatest environmental, economic and health benefits (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2024).

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Oryx, 2025, 59(1), 1–3 © The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Fauna & Flora International doi:10.1017/S0030605325000286
https://doi.org/10.1017/S0030605325000286 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Bring along the uncommitted public Rather than worrying about skeptics who will never change their minds, focus engagement and lobbying on those who are sympathetic, or at least not opposed to environmental action. People in unlikely places can be supporters if we spark their interest. For example, most industry innovations, such as voluntary product certification, have come from individual leaders rather than being the product of government or industry-wide initiatives. Interest in circular business models continues, bringing synergies with conservation, reducing resource extraction and encouraging the adoption of regenerative processes that support biodiversity (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2024). Sympathizers who are part of, or close to, ruling governments are particularly useful in helping encourage positive change.

Focus on issues people are willing to engage with Even hardened opponents in some fields—such as climate-change deniers—may be sympathetic to other, less controversial issues. Land degradation is an enormous global problem, and restoration boosts biodiversity, supports ecosystem services and benefits people. The Land Degradation Neutrality target of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification is something many governments could get behind (UNCCD, 2022). Even amidst US-centred tariff wars, governments remain interested in sustainable trade. In 2024, Costa Rica, Iceland, New Zealand and Switzerland concluded a pioneering Agreement on Climate Change, Trade and Sustainability to deliver trade commitments that address climate change and other environmental challenges. Rewilding is another movement inspiring people across political divides.

Mobilize the underutilized Help inactive sympathizers build ownership and take pride in protecting, restoring and managing for a balanced environment, bringing urban and younger demographics more into the action. People disempowered or separated from nature need both incentives and opportunities to engage. Mobilization means finding tangible, attractive and meaningful ways to create a joint sense of ownership and stewardship. This is not confined to people living in comfort: colleagues in Ukraine are defending their protected areas despite harrowing conditions (Timmins et al., 2023).

Focus on the sources of future restoration The pushback against reforming energy and agribusiness means huge areas will stay degraded, making sanctuaries critical. This includes not just protected areas, but pesticide-free zones, restoration or rewilding areas, zero extraction zones, connectivity areas, regenerative food systems, areas important for biodiversity as climate changes (Redford & Dudley, 2024), and other areas that can function as nature refuges. Creating and defending these remains a priority, focusing on the most intact ecosystems, selected through systematic planning. Target 3 of the Convention on Biological Diversity's Global Biodiversity Framework, calling for 30% of land, freshwater and ocean to be in protected and conserved areas by 2030, provides the political clout to encourage wavering stakeholders.

Step up pressure on companies and major consumers Use strategic pressure on producers, retailers and civil society, especially those with opaque operations (e.g. food retailers buying from multiple sources, finance companies). This includes calling out climate deniers and greenwashing while supporting attempts to transform business models and consumption patterns. It means ensuring that commitments are met, for example by putting pressure on companies that signed the New York Declaration on Forests to halt deforestation by 2030 but have done little to achieve this goal (Forest Declaration Assessment Partners, 2024).

Use economic arguments strategically Approaches that save money, such as nature-based solutions and circular business models, are particularly valuable. This includes avoiding waste, removing perverse incentives and harmful subsidies, and showing the economic benefits of redirecting these funds to sustainable alternatives. Many countries have poor insulation and energy efficiency standards; raising these saves money and reduces greenhouse gas emissions (Christopher et al., 2023). Strategies to reduce the use of agricultural pesticides are beneficial for farmers and biodiversity (Pretty & Bharucha, 2015). Economic arguments are especially pertinent to sectors that face the immediate costs of climate change, such as the insurance industry.

Challenge post-truth politics We have done a poor job of skewering disinformation, underestimating the cunning and sophistication with which lies are peddled. Better, sharper, more innovative strategies are needed. New ways of putting across the message may be useful when some people remain deeply suspicious of science. Leaders of ideological resistance to conservation are often motivated by financial self-interest, and corruption must be exposed. The noise made by politicians does not always reflect popular opinions. A survey in the USA (Pew Centre, 2023) found that 74% of people thought the country should participate in global efforts to address climate change.

It's easy to make a list. These eight steps all need strategies, people, funding and support, and more steps could be added. Rethinking approaches is hard in a crisis, so the sooner we start the better. Fear and despair are understandable but demotivating, and they will not sustain us or inspire others. Successes need to be celebrated, no matter how small. Renewable energy, for example, was initially resisted, mocked and derided by governments and industry, but has

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0030605325000286 Published online by Cambridge University Press

since boomed (Hassan et al., 2024). There are plenty of reasons for hope. Crises often bring out the best in individuals and communities. We need to hold our nerve. Nature can be very resilient, and we need to be the same.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0030605325000286 Published online by Cambridge University Press