

Beyond placebo discussions

Bram Büscher

A colleague once told me that many conservation biologists see the interaction between humanity and biodiversity as sitting in a bus that is going downhill without any breaks. Would it then not be nice if conservation of the world's biodiversity could go hand in hand with unbridled economic growth, international peace and freedom, and an end to poverty? Of course it would. And neoliberalism promises just that. Yet, in this short opinion piece I wish to argue that following the neoliberal model is going to be a big mistake in the long run.

Let me start with an example. Popular with conservation biologists these days is the concept of 'payments for environmental services'. Simply put, this neoliberal concept does three things. First, it changes biodiversity's intrinsic and utility values into exchange values, that is, the value biodiversity would get on a market. Second, it creates a market around biodiversity. As such, roles are assigned to 'stakeholders' based on their economic interaction rather than their social or political relations. Third, it chops biodiversity up into little pieces that can be traded on the market. All this sounds straightforward enough; I can hear the reader think. Why, then, won't it work?

Well, because it is like putting little short-term plasters over a wound, creating dynamics that ultimately will make the wound worse in the long-term. In the 'straightforward' model whereby biodiversity is transformed into 'environmental services' that can be 'paid' for in a market, certain assumptions are made that have proven not to hold, time and again. First, there is a limit to the extent that people can be regarded as *Homo economicus*. The neoliberal model mistakenly assumes that in principle everything can be traded, that everybody understands how trading works, and that everybody keeps to the rules. The second point is that in the process of turning biodiversity and people into a market, other dynamics such as competition and commercialisation are stimulated. Both these processes have steadily (although not linearly) accelerated over the past centuries and are generally recognised to lead to greater resource extraction, increased use, and the generation of waste. All these processes are part of the problem and thus cannot be the solution. The last—and arguably most dangerous—dynamic stimulated by neoliberal conservation is that it becomes profitable to pollute.

One merely has to think about the commercial possibilities unleashed by,

for instance, those benefiting from and marketing mitigation services to deal with pollution, to understand how real this danger is.

In sum, the neoliberal 'solution' will only increase the environmental problems in the long run. Yet, the basic mistake that is made over and over again is that simple solutions are forwarded for what everybody recognises are immensely complex problems. It is time that conservation biologists—and others—start looking for the real breaks on the bus. And let's not fool ourselves: this is no easy task. Simple answers are just not available and shouldn't be expected in a world as complex as ours. Still, there are ways to avoid yet another placebo discussion. We could start by questioning the sacredness of economic growth or the unbridled escalation of advertising and marketing everywhere. Some conservation biologists are already seriously discussing these issues but they are still few and far between. With this kick-off I hope to entice the readers of *Current Conservation* to chip in and let their opinions be heard on the subject of conservation and neoliberalism, specifically by addressing the issue of economic growth.

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Bram Büscher is at the Department of Anthropology and also a Project Officer, Centre for International Cooperation, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands. He is also affiliated to the Department of Political Sciences, University of Pretoria, South Africa (be.buscher@fsw.vu.nl).