

## **Taboo Topics in Conservation Biology – The Conservation Biology Emperor's New Clothes**

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**Abstract:** *In spite of being relevant to the science of conservation biology, two topics have never been discussed in this literature: habitat off-limits to all humans, and the native vs. exotic status of humans.*

**Keywords:** *human-free, off-limits to humans, conservation biology, taboo May 27, 2014*

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*"Of what avail are forty freedoms, without a blank spot on the map?"*

Aldo Leopold

*"For every living creature [including humans!], there are places where it does not belong." p.251 "I believe it is a public responsibility to safeguard what we can of wilderness before the great push of man's numbers; and to safeguard with it ... the shy wild ones that need man-less expanses in which to thrive." p.262. Paul L. Errington, Of Predation and Life*

*"I confess to further disquieting thoughts as to how much moral right man actually has to regard the Earth as his exclusive possession, to despoil or befoul as he will. Man has or should have some minimal responsibility toward the Earth he claims and toward the other forms of life that have been on the Earth as long as or longer than he has." Paul Errington, A Question of Values, p.153.*

*"If you want to be good to the environment, stay away from it." Edward L. Glaeser*

*"The biggest thing for habitat and grizzly bear conservation is managing human access. If you can keep people away, you can keep grizzlies safe. Over 90 per cent of grizzly mortalities in Alberta are caused by humans." Carl Morrison*

*"It is true to say that large tracts of Tropical Africa are still sealed off from settlement by man because they are occupied by the tsetse-fly" V. B. Wigglesworth, The Life of Insects, p.311.*

*"As humans we live with the constant presumption of dominion. We believe that we own the world, that it belongs to us, that we have it under our firm control. But the sailor knows all too well the fallacy of this view. The sailor sits by his tiller, waiting and watching. He knows he isn't sovereign of earth and sky, any more than the fish in the sea or the birds in the air." Richard Bode, First You Have to Row a Little Boat, p.3.*

*"There is a way that nature speaks, that land speaks. Most of the time we are simply not patient enough, quiet enough, to pay attention to the story." Linda Hogan*

*"We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander." Henry David Thoreau*

Conservation biology, a science that began with great promise, has ended up just as hide-bound as all the rest. I predict that this essay won't be published.

How can there be a science with taboo topics? Science, by definition, is not supposed to be constrained by tradition. Yet here they are, as plain as day: areas off-limits to all humans, and humans as an exotic species.

It's obvious that wildlife prefer human-free habitat. As kids, the very first thing that we learn about animals is that they run away whenever we try to approach them. This is not rocket science; they are voting with their feet, and telling us that they don't want us around (and, obviously, for good reason!). Of course, this being an "inconvenient truth", we ignore that fact, and never give it another thought. The proof? We don't even have a word for human-free habitat. The closest candidate, the word "wilderness", has evolved from a scary, intimidating place to a human playground. There are areas that are de-facto human-free, due for example to danger (e.g. Chernoble, the Korean DMZ, or the interior of a volcano), but, to my knowledge, there isn't one square inch of the Earth that is off-limits to all humans. The closest are areas, such as the northwest Hawaiian Islands, that are off-limits to everyone except biologists.

Why is this important? Besides the obvious application to conservation, it has important uses in politics! The Korean DMZ functions to reduce conflict between North and South Korea. Since political conflict is so dangerous, we should be seeking any possible tools to reduce it. Separation by human-exclusion areas is one such promising (but greatly under-utilized) tool. Just think of all the areas of the world where human groups have failed to resolve their differences, even after centuries of conflict! The Israelis and Palestinians have given ample proof that they can't get along. Why not kill two birds with one stone (please excuse the anthropocentric expression!), and give the land that they are fighting over back to the wildlife, from whom we stole it? What does a mother do when her kids can't agree on who should get to play with a given toy? Take it away from both of them! A fortiori a serious armed conflict! Wherever there is a similar failure of governance, we should seize the opportunity to repay our debt to other species....

Another application: SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence). Given our horrible track record in getting along with the wildlife here on Earth, why should we be allowed to explore and disturb other living worlds? We can't even communicate with the intelligent life on this planet!

So why should conservation biologists be afraid to even discuss such a possibility??? The only possibility is cowardice.

What about humans as an exotic species? Exotic species are usually defined as species transported by humans to an area where they have never lived. But that is not scientific. It doesn't illuminate the issues. It's not about us. Every species is new at some point. It makes more sense to define a native species as one that has been around for a long time, say long enough for the other species in the area to adapt (via genetic changes) to the newcomer. But look at books that discuss the topic of exotic and invasive species. They never mention humans! The native vs. exotic status of humans is a taboo topic. Why??? What are we afraid of??? I suggest that the only possibility is cowardice.

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