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The Arts of Coexistence: A View From Anthropology

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In this perspectives essay, I propose some ways in which current thinking in anthropology might inform the emergent cross-disciplinary field of coexistence studies[1]. I do so following recent calls from within the conservation science community (including this special issue), acknowledging that understanding human-wildlife coexistence in the fractured landscapes of the Anthropocene[2] requires being open to alternative approaches beyond conventional frameworks of conservation science and management (see for instance; Carter and Linnell, 2016; Pooley, 2016; Chapron and López-Bao, 2019; Pooley et al., 2020). The essay suggests that relational (non-dualist) ways of thinking[3] in anthropology, often building on Indigenous philosophy and expertise, may help ground coexistence studies beyond Euro-Western modernist conceptual frameworks—frameworks that perpetuate exploitative and colonial logics that many scholars from across academia view as being at the heart of our current ecological crisis (e.g., Lestel, 2013; van Dooren, 2014; Tsing, 2015; Todd, 2016; Bluwstein et al., 2021; Schroer et al., 2021). By proposing "relations" rather than objectified "Nature" or "wildlife" as the more adequate subject of understanding and facilitating coexistence in shared landscapes, I understand coexistence and its study first and foremost as an *ethical* and *political* endeavor. Rather than offering any conclusive ideas, the essay's intention is to contribute some questions and thoughts to the developing conversations of coexistence studies scholars and practitioners. It does so by inviting conservation scientists to collaborate with anthropologists and take on board some of the current thinking in the discipline. Amongst other things, I suggest that this will help overcome a somewhat dated notion of cultural relativism—understood as many particular, cultural views on one true objective Nature (only known by Science), a perspective that explicitly and implicitly seems to inform some conservation science approaches to issues of culture or the "human dimensions" of conservation issues. Ultimately, the paper seeks to make a conceptual contribution by imagining coexistence as a dynamic bundle of relations in which the biological, ecological, historical, cultural, and social dimensions cannot be thought apart and have to be studied together.

Keywords: anthropology, conservation, coexistence, relationally, more-than-human ethnography

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[1]The title 'Arts of Coexistence' derives from a collaboratively organized workshop of the Oslo School of Environmental Humanities and the EASA network Humans and Other Living Beings, organized together with Ursula Münster and Hugo Reinert at the University of Oslo in May 2019.

[2]Given the cross-disciplinary readership of this journal, I use the term Anthropocene throughout this essay as it has already brought forth conversation across disciplines and beyond academia. I do so in awareness that the term has acquired many meanings and its usefulness is contested. For an overview of debates relating to the term, see https://feralatlas.supdigital.org/?cd=true&bdtext=what-is-the-anthropocene.

[3]Thinking through relations, rather than dualist distinctions, does not mean to imply a harmonious, symmetrical or 'positive' state of affairs. A focus on relations includes issues of detachment, rupture, violence and exclusion as much as of engagement, connectivity or kinship.

MORE-THAN-HUMAN ANTHROPOLOGY

In order to bring greater clarity into the potential role of social scientific approaches relevant to conservation science and management, Bennett et al. (2017) present an overview of different types of social science disciplines. In the article, the authors describe environmental anthropology as primarily concerned with the study of "culture" and how it "mediates" peoples' understanding of the "natural," "biotic" world. While this description is not necessarily wrong, today its basic relativist principles would probably not hold without being challenged on conceptual and political grounds. For the sake of future cross-disciplinary conversations, it deserves some qualification.

Anthropologists, as the name implies, have traditionally been concerned with understanding the social and cultural practices of "humankind" and have therefore centered on human activity in the way they approach research topics and analyse ethnographic materials (see for instance Noske, 1989). Thus, while other living beings have always been part of these studies, they have been included based upon their function for human culture, such as their symbolic or subsistence value. In recent decades, however, the discipline has seen increased calls to open the discipline up "beyond the human" and to regard other species not only as "objects" within human society but rather to investigate their active role as participants in social worlds that they share with diverse human communities (e.g., Lestel et al., 2006; Ingold, 2013; Tsing, 2013; for overviews see Kirksey and Helmreich, 2010; Ogden et al., 2013; Locke and Münster, 2015).

A central role in what has been termed the "more-than-human" or "multispecies turn" in anthropology is played by the knowledge, expertise and philosophy of diverse groups of Indigenous people (Sundberg, 2014). Especially Indigenous notions of more-than-human personhood, sentience and sociality have fundamentally shaped the work of anthropologists interested in rethinking the central categories we use to understand and act within the world. Taking Indigenous and other local peoples' worlds seriously in and of themselves, without reducing them to one of many possible perspectives on a unified, external Nature, has been central for approaches that seek to question what constitutes reality in anthropological discourses and scientific knowledge practices more broadly (e.g., Todd, 2014, 2016; de la Cadena and Blaser, 2018)[4]. It has also led to the question of how the conceptual, methodological and ethical principles of anthropology may ultimately be transformed, if we open analysis to questions of more-than-human sociality (Ingold, 2013; Tsing, 2013) and meaning-making (Kohn, 2013; Schroer, 2019).

Foundational work that seeks to rethink human-animal and human-environment relationships, and that builds on narratives and practices of Indigenous people, especially in the circumpolar North, stems from anthropologist Tim Ingold. Ingold suggests an understanding of human-nature relationships that acknowledges the inherent co-constitution of person and organism, of the cultural and the natural (Ingold, 2000). From his approach it follows that environments and landscapes are not mere (passive) material backdrops for human and animal interactions, but rather play a constitutive role for the diverse ways in which humans (and other-than-human animals) perceive, relate and respond to the world. Together with anthropologist Gisli Pálsson, he uses the term "biosocial becomings" to describe human life as always being caught up in a relational matrix in which the social and the biological cannot be separately understood. They argue for a more integrative approach in academia that overcomes the split in the division of labor between the natural and the social sciences (Ingold and Pálsson, 2013).

In a similar vein, anthropological work inspired by feminist science studies scholars, such as Donna Haraway (2008), has variously critiqued the idea of human exceptionalism which places humans endowed with language and culture outside and above the realm of animal lives and nature. In this context, anthropologist Anna Tsing (2012) has argued that human life is essentially an inter-species affair, meaning that anthropology's central question of what it means to be human cannot be answered without acknowledging the importance of other living beings in the lives of humans.

This rethinking of dominant narratives of how we imagine peoples' relationship to the more-than-human world has also led to renewed interest in the concept of domestication (and related terms such as wilderness) in recent anthropological debates with relevance to coexistence studies. In an edited collection, for instance, Lien et al. (2018) show that the origin story of domestication has been imagined through binary couplings such as savage and civilized, domestic and wild, nature, and culture. The history of domestication, the authors argue, is closely intertwined with racial and gendered hierarchies, and has led to an hegemonic approach to the other-than-human world that orders relations based on the logics of "…sedentary agriculture, private property, coercive husbandry, and extractive industries" (Lien et al., 2018, p. 2). Yet, as the contributors to the volume show, studying human-nature relationships beyond this hegemonic discourse reveals the limits of human control and the manifold ways in which other-than-human beings have influenced human history and social organization.

This overall focus on understanding life, whether human or non-human, as emerging from an unfolding field of relations, at the same time material and semiotic as well as natural and social, is also beginning to shape and refocus anthropological studies of wildlife conservation and human-wildlife interactions. These are increasingly interested in understanding the agency of other-than-human beings, including of material processes, in shaping and affecting conservation practice and peoples' relations with wildlife more broadly (e.g., Whitehouse, 2009; Münster, 2014; Kiik, 2018; Gruppuso, 2020; Meulemans, 2020; Chao, 2021).

For example, building on Tim Ingold's notion of the "taskscape"—a relational approach that understands landscapes as emergent through human and non-human *activities*—anthropologist Germain Meulemans (2020) explores

[4]By using the terms Indigenous, local and Euro-Western to describe different knowledge practices involved in conservation, I am aware of the risk of implying a sharp division between them. This is not my aim. I follow Sundberg (2014) in highlighting that epistemes interact 'across time and space', yet I keep the terms in order also to point to their situated and particular characteristics. Especially the term local knowledge is unsatisfying as it may imply the existence of the opposite 'universal knowledge' in the form of Science. I maintain the term while keeping in mind that all knowledge including scientific discourse is always situated (Haraway, 1988).

farmer-water vole coexistence in the French Jura uplands. Through ethnographic description, Meulemans explores the ambiguous relationships between farmers and water voles as being situated both within particular ecological but also historical, and socio-cultural contexts. By investigating the relationships between changing agricultural practices, farmers' expertise as well as the changing rhythms of vole and other-than-human ways of life, Meulemans shows how the agricultural upland landscapes are shaped by farmers' and water voles' active modes of learning and responding to each other and their environments. Far from being simply antagonistic or peaceful, coexistence in this ethnographic account emerges as ambiguous, situated and constantly negotiated achievement of both humans and voles in shared places.

CONSERVING "CONVIVIAL RELATIONS" AS ETHICAL AND POLITICAL PROJECT

The development of relational rather than dualist frameworks, within the social sciences and humanities, has consequences for the study of coexistence in and beyond theoretical and applied conservation science. Once we are starting to question the logics and universality of nature-culture dualisms, it makes it difficult to regard the practice of conservation as involving the management of a detached, objectified nature out there beyond the human, social realm. Rather, as Whitehouse (2015) has argued, it helps us to refocus attention from natural "objects" to be conserved, to instead safeguarding particular, situated "convivial *relations*" (Whitehouse, 2015, p. 99)[5]—relations emergent in particular places amongst humans, wildlife and their environments. Concerning the question of how conservation may be able to "facilitate" (as formulated in the call for papers to this special issue) coexistence in increasingly fractured, human-dominated landscapes, a shift toward focussing on relations and the *practices* that sustain them has important conceptual and practical implications.

If *relations* (culturally, historically, ecologically, and biologically situated) become the *central unit* for understanding and managing coexistence, this enables us to openly approach conservation as being fundamentally *ethical* and *political*. As anthropologists have shown in diverse places, peoples' relationships to the environment—to land, animals and other living beings—are primarily shaped by ethical concerns regarding appropriate conduct and the maintenance of relationships (e.g., Cruikshank, 2006; de la Cadena, 2015; Anderson et al., 2017). People involved in conservation themselves are no exception and are guided by historically situated values and ideas that shape both conservation science and practice (see also Parreñas, 2018). Anthropologist Sophie Chao (2021), for instance, shows how corporate conservation zones in Indonesian West Papua rupture the abilities of Indigenous Marind communities to maintain bodily, affective, and spiritual relations to the forest, which need to be sustained by ongoing practices of hunting, foraging, walking, and remembering.

At the same time, a focus on emplaced (ethical) relations also foregrounds the political, as it involves attention to relationships of power and the limits and possibilities of leading a liveable life. Studying coexistence, then, can neither be divorced from questions of social and environmental justice nor from taking a clear stance against neoliberal politics and economic structures. This notion of the political has to be able to encompass more than the interests of human beings and their future possibilities for life; by acknowledging the interdependence of human and other-than-human ways of life, it also needs to be open to an understanding of agency that moves beyond the Western imaginary of the only true person—the rationally acting individual human being (e.g., see de la Cadena, 2015). As Latour (2004) has argued, non-human beings have always been already incorporated in the very fabric of what constitutes human society and politics. However, this active participation and co-constitution is rendered invisible through hegemonic ideologies that place other living beings in the "out there," in the realm of nature.

When addressing the possibilities and limits of human coexistence with wildlife in "shared multi-use landscapes,"—landscapes that in many ways bear the mark of capital-driven overexploitation and ruination—the situated ethical and political foundation (and obligation) of coexistence studies, in particular, and conservation, more broadly, cannot be ignored.

This significant shift toward a relational rather than dualist ontological, epistemological, and methodological basis of coexistence studies, would also open up a stronger collaboration of scholars across disciplinary boundaries, such as that Pooley et al. (2020) call for. As others have discussed, social science and humanities approaches to conservation problems are already receiving greater respect within conservation science (see Mascia et al., 2003; Bennett et al., 2017). However, this is the case primarily when it comes to understanding the "human" or "social" *dimensions* causing or leading to certain conservation issues. In turn, these issues (e.g., the decline of global biodiversity) are usually approached as being at the core related to safeguarding ecological or biological processes to be studied by the natural sciences.

A push toward relations, as also argued by Whitehouse (2015), would help to further question the dominant hegemony of science-centered discourses in conservation expertise. This would mean moving beyond delegating social science or humanities perspectives to the role of useful "communicators" of scientific ideas or "translators" of "local" views on "nature" as the true object of scientific inquiry (for work that aims to achieve such collaboration, see Chua et al., 2020). It would also involve, as

[5]I understand convivial here in its literal meaning as 'living with'; the term does not automatically indicate a 'positive' or 'harmonious' state of being but refers more broadly to situations in which diverse human and other-than-human beings live together in particular places (this may include relations of detachment/engagement, rupture/continuity, and conflict/peace). The term conviviality has been used by several other authors, for instance, with regards to conservation (Büscher and Fletcher, 2020) and multispecies relationships (van Dooren and Bird Rose, 2012). There are several points of convergence between what I am arguing here and these diverse approaches, yet the main aim here is to emphasise the conceptual point about shifting the core of conservation's attention from predefined 'objects' of conservation to place-centred approaches following 'convivial relations' as suggested by Whitehouse (2015).

Métis anthropologist and scholar of Indigenous studies Zoe Todd (2016) has argued, a greater awareness of the continued colonial imperatives of the academy in which Indigenous scholarship is too rarely acknowledged and included (see also Watts, 2013; Sundberg, 2014).

BEYOND CULTURAL RELATIVISM: CHALLENGING GLOBAL VS. LOCAL EXPERTISE

An approach toward coexistence with wildlife in human-dominated landscapes focussing on maintaining convivial relations would inevitably be "centered on place" (Whitehouse, 2015, p. 100), places constituted by the diverse activities of people, wild animals and their wider material-semiotic ecologies. Now, some may argue that this is already expressed in approaches of community-based' or "place-based" conservation that aim to integrate local peoples' views in order to inform decision-making processes and implementation of conservation projects (e.g., Hackel, 1999). However, as Whitehouse has shown, these approaches still take place within a discourse of conservation that is essentially *global,* rather than place-centered, hence operating within a dualist logic of global-local distinction making (see also Ingold, 1993). It is not following the logic of relationality in which all knowledge—including that of scientists—is necessarily *situated and emplaced* (Despret, 2004). A key text in the anthropology of conservation conflicts—Friction (Tsing, 2005) by Tsing—describes and explores the ways in which apparently local issues of conservation conflicts are in part manifestations of global discourses and concerns that interact with other knowledge practices in complex and not always expected ways.

Following and responding to relations as they are practiced rather than as preordained objects of knowledge may help overcome the global-local binary, and would also allow us to address the *asymmetries of expertise* that it inscribes. Scientific knowledge involved in conservation contexts often assumes an elevated position above and beyond other possible ways of knowing and engaging with the world. It has been acknowledged that the various perspectives of "local" and "Indigenous" people on what constitutes human-nature relationships *for them* have to be taken into account (as much as possible) in order to achieve the goals of conservation. Yet the answer to the question of what constitutes "nature" or "wildlife" remains firmly *outside* these kaleidoscopic views—understood as *mediated* through different cultural lenses (see above). This kind of cultural relativism—that is, the idea of many cultural viewpoints on one detached, objectified, material reality—perpetuates problematic colonial legacies based on a universal assumption of Nature outside the social realm. This view has been critiqued by Indigenous scholars and (some) anthropologists and resulted in the call to include Indigenous people as experts and authors of knowledge, rather than their anonymous and generic subsumption under local and cultural ideas (e.g., Todd, 2016).

Critiquing simplistic versions of cultural relativism in anthropology and related disciplines has also resulted in questions around how anthropological knowledge—and Western understandings of human-nature relations more widely—may be otherwise rethought and, in the process, even transformed. This could be usefully expanded to coexistence studies and conservation more broadly. It would require that we follow the ethos of relationality in which thinking and acting, mind and body, practice, and theory are always intertwined. Paying attention to relations does not involve "just another framework for understanding the same problem." It implies acknowledging that the ways we imagine and conceptualize the world have deep consequences for the way we act, experience, and perceive within it and *vice versa*.

What kind of transformational force might attention to alternative ways of thinking and acting in the world bring to coexistence studies and conservation more broadly? What other diverse imaginaries of the good life, land ethics, sentience, or personhood may exist that could result in more sustainable ways of life within places? What can be actively *learned* from diverse ways of knowing and acting in the world—if engaged carefully and without romanticizing, flattening, and/or stereotyping them. And how might the status quo be changed in the process?

CONCLUSION

I am aware that most of the diverse people involved in conservation science and practice are very much aware of the complexities, ambiguities and political and economic structures that underlie science, environmental governance, and decision-making. Conservation work is dependent on multiple factors, not the least competition for funding, through schemes that often prescribe the types of questions it is possible to ask. The ideas sketched above are an invitation to continue questioning hegemonic discourses underlying the ways in which conservation problems are defined and approached. This involves acknowledging them to be at the root ethically and politically situated—requiring an opening both to the expertise of diverse people that live in particular places but also to collaborative work across diverse scholarship in the sense described above. It also means that coexistence studies—as an academic field—has an ethical and political responsibility: it needs to speak out against the economic and political status quo not only through explicit critique but also by actively involving itself in the search for alternatives.

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The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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