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Convivial Conservation Prospects in Europe—From Wilderness Protection to Reclaiming the Commons

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Abstract

Recent high-end EU discussions on biodiversity conservation support the strict protection of wild nature, thereby amplifying concerns about environmental and social injustices. Parallelly, grass-roots and academic proposals advocate for the fair recognition of community-protected areas and broader political negotiations regarding human–wildlife interactions. This paper argues that land commons offer valuable lessons toward implementing the convivial conservation vision as advanced by Büscher and Fletcher (2019). For example, the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 endorses strict protection of wild nature as a core element of economic relaunching. However, the focus on wild nature rules out the development of various biodiversity hotspots under human impact. Against this strict separation, various initiatives converge to make visible the efforts of indigenous peoples and local communities who combine resource governance with biodiversity conservation beyond free-market logics and human–nature dichotomies. This contribution takes the case of the Romanian forest commons and explores the synergies between these historical institutions and the convivial conservation proposal which advances post-capitalist conservation politics. The paper argues that the translation of conviviality to concrete pathways towards transformation is timely in Europe, and the commons offer valuable lessons which could advance a transition to more democratic and just forms of conservation.

Keywords: wilderness, commons, conservation governance, convivial conservation, Romania

Abstract in Romanian: https://bit.ly/32U9QOz

INTRODUCTION

Current tendencies to support the strict protection of nature have prompted worries about justice and equity in global conservation. This article examines how Romanian forest commons can contribute to discussions around an emerging convivial conservation vision based on democratic governance and social justice. In September 2020, the *5th Global Biodiversity Outlook* published by the UN acknowledged that the international community has failed to meet all the Aichi Biodiversity targets set by the Convention on Biological Diversity in 2010 (Secretariat CBD 2020). Similarly, in the European Union (EU), the recent *State of the Environment Report 2020* shows limited progress from the 2010 baseline towards the 2020 targets, with Europe continuing to lose biodiversity at alarming rates (EEA 2019: 74). The EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020 failed to deliver on its targets, and the continued deterioration of some habitats and species outweighed the improvements (EEA 2019). Despite these massive failures, both the CBD and EU have announced bold new targets for the current decade, of which increasing the percentage of protected areas (PAs) to 30% of landmass and seas and strong support for strict conservation are the most acclaimed. These proposals have already attracted serious criticism from academics, independent researchers, and other actors defending indigenous peoples who question the lack

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of proper acknowledgement of these targets' environmental, social, and economic costs (Agrawal et al. 2021).

Aiming to respond to some of these challenges, Büscher and Fletcher recently advanced the convivial conservation vision. This proposal emerges from a stream of progressive movements such as radical ecological democracy (Kothari 2014), economic degrowth, and the commons' reinvigoration (Büscher and Fletcher 2019). This vision advances governance principles around social and environmental justice and structural transformation towards a new conservation politics (Büscher and Fletcher 2020a). The present paper contends that the convivial conservation proposal has the potential to shape biodiversity conservation within the EU by amalgamating already functioning rights-based conservation approaches such as the indigenous and community conserved areas (ICCAs) championed by initiatives like the ICCA Consortium. Moreover, it argues that the current European political moment can constitute a window of opportunity for more socially equitable conservation approaches, a space for cross-fertilisation to remake conservation governance around conviviality (Büscher and Fletcher 2020a engaging directly with Illich 1973) and rights-based approaches (Corson et al. 2020). By focusing on the EU, the paper aims to recentre the discussion on a region traditionally considered a source of various colonial forms of conservation to be imposed upon others, but not within its borders.

As part of the European New Green Deal (European Commission 2019), the Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 proposes bold conservation and restoration targets, including strict protection for at least 10% of the landmass and the complete protection of all old-growth forests hosted by the Member States (European Commission 2020). Although the document proposes an integrated approach to conservation, it constitutes the first binding policy which conditions the economy's relaunching to giving nature more space. This radical move builds upon more than a decade of attempts to increase the role of the strict protection of unfettered nature on the continent (WILD10 2015). This movement comprises mapping projects and documenting primary and old-growth forests, gazetting wilderness reserves, and establishing private PAs across the region (Promberger and Promberger 2015). The EU's current wilderness momentum is synchronous with the series of calls for transformative change in the governance of biodiversity conservation which advocate for increasing the percentage of PAs to 30% by 2030 (Waldron et al. 2020) or to half of the earth by mid-century (Wilson 2016). Multiple planetary crises and concerns about biodiversity decline and climate disruptions have been rightfully used to justify ramping up support for enlarging PAs. Still, critics point towards the social injustices coupled with these proposals (Schleicher et al. 2019) and to the fact that the real causes which triggered such crises are left unaddressed (Büscher et al. 2017).

In Europe, the growing anxiety about environmental collapse has made neo-protectionism enticing to the point that it is slowly becoming an official policy. While putting 'self-willed nature' at its centre, this move advocates for the expansion of PAs and stricter conservation law enforcement. As almost everywhere worldwide, European PAs overlap with territories inhabited by local communities and indigenous peoples, who consider these lands central to their livelihoods and culture. Nevertheless, reserving more space for nature is considered the path to human wellbeing and economic recovery as an official policy of the European Commission (European Commission 2020).

For a long time now, the role of indigenous peoples and local communities in conservation has been documented by rich scholarship (Stevens 2014), and it has been slowly recognised by international bodies like the UN or the CBD (Borrini-Feyerabend et al. 2004; Kothari et al. 2013). In Europe, community-conserved areas have started to be examined as ICCAs only recently (Vasile 2019), while these institutions have a long history in all biogeographic regions (RRI 2020) and literature on the functioning of European commons is well developed (Sikor 2004; Bravo and De Moor 2008). I turn to the example of Romanian commons to show how historical bylaws and cultural resilience have made these institutions important but unacknowledged conservation actors. These commons are juridical institutions representing historical associations of commoners governing natural resources according to customary principles which survived over centuries (Stahl 1998). They re-emerged during post-socialist land restitution reforms (Vasile and Mantescu 2009) and currently play an important role in governing human–environmental relations in many rural areas (Vasile 2019). While they feature a multitude of democratic governing principles and are, in most cases, examples of the successful conciliation of human and nonhuman needs, commons could offer important lessons for the development of the convivial conservation vision in Europe centred on justice and democratic governance.

I begin with a brief description of the methods and data which inform the analysis. Next, I revisit some of the theoretical tenets of convivial conservation proposals relevant to this radical proposal's future progress within the EU. A discussion of the current wilderness momentum in the EU and further consideration of the role played by ICCAs in biodiversity conservation will offer more context to the analysis. I then provide empirical material on the rich experiences of governing commons in Romania, focusing on their conservation efforts. The discussion section will outline possible synergies and cross-fertilisation between the convivial conservation proposal and the already existing ICCAs in Europe.

Methodology

This article is partially based on ethnographic fieldwork undertaken between May 2017 and March 2018 with members in the commons around Făgăraș Mountains in the Southern Carpathians, Romania. That research aimed to understand the contention around establishing a large private wilderness reserve in a region considered a biodiversity hotspot and home to a dozen community-based institutions which have governed the environment for many centuries. Aside from conducting

participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and policy analysis, I spent the period walking the land accompanied by locals, foresters, and rangers alike (Ingold and Vergunst 2008). Previously, from August 2016 to March 2017, I was part of a team which documented Romanian commons' diverse history, governance, and livelihoods using a mixed methodology which included archival research, multiple field surveys, and in-depth interviews with commons representatives. In addition to this research spread over many years and projects, I conducted three interviews with representatives from Crăciunel commons in January 2021, the case which informs the vignette in Section 4. The short research in the Transylvanian village was part of a larger ongoing project documenting emblematic ICCAs across Europe under the ICCA Consortium's auspices (ICCA Consortium 2021).

REVISITING CONVIVIAL CONSERVATION

This section will discuss the central tenets of the convivial conservation vision as advanced by Büscher and Fletcher (2019) and will situate its emergence as a response to the recent shift towards strict protection in global conservation debates. Despite vast scholarship evidencing the vital role of community-led governance of PAs, indigenous peoples have been acknowledged as important actors in the global conservation relatively recently, with firm support emerging after the 2008 IUCN Congress (Kothari et al. 2013). Mainstream conservation has been for a long time reluctant to admit that local people have the knowledge, skills, and capacity to care for the environment, despite the significant overlap between biodiversity hotspots and the territories managed by indigenous peoples (RRI 2015). This super-imposition of state or private conservation over lands owned or managed by indigenous and local communities left these groups cornered by PAs, remaking their customary governance and limiting their access to vital resources (Tauli-Corpuz et al. 2020). Since the publication of the *IPBES Global Assessment Report* in 2019, the international conservation community has been compelled to acknowledge that locally adapted governance practices are associated with high biodiversity rates and healthy ecosystems (IPBES 2019), but the progress towards full recognition and respect is still very slow. Furthermore, the rising popularity of strict protection embodied in visions such as 30x30 or Half-Earth hints that we are heading back to neo-protectionism (Wilson 2016). As a neo-liberal project, neo-protectionism has morphed into numerous reiterations within the Global South (Brockington 2002; Igoe and Brockington 2007; Heynen et al. 2007). Proposing that biodiversity protection succeeds only in isolation from any human influence, this model has been tested repeatedly across multiple geographies and is still alive and dynamic (Büscher et al. 2012).

More recently, European conservation has brought the model back home in an attempt to find a remedy for multiple environmental crises by putting under strict protection large areas and charismatic habitats (i.e., old-growth forests). A private project heralded as a model for the future of conservation in the region is already taking shape in eastern Europe, advertised as the European Yellowstone and supported by global green philanthropists (Iordăchescu 2018, 2021). Mandatory targets for strict protection will inevitably clash with centuries-old traditional land uses. Enclosing commons under the pretext of biodiversity protection, be it by public or private actors, has international ramifications and is considered by many to be a global phenomenon (Peluso and Lund 2011; White et al. 2012; Corson and MacDonald 2012). Many scholars have approached these enclosures as green grabbing and have shown how it supposedly takes the nature out from the market and reserves it for ecotourism and the development of green businesses (Fairhead et al. 2012; Ojeda 2012).

However, this strict protection momentum has not yet become hegemonic in creating PAs. More inclusive models have emerged in some European countries following democratic decision-making processes and centred around the sustainability of traditional livelihoods (e.g., Barronies Provençales Regional Parc created in 2014 in France). In particular cases, even if the creation of PAs emerges as a bottom-up process, public distrust in neoliberal conservation leads to the rejection of parks, as the recent case of the Parc Adula in Switzerland illustrates (Michel and Bruggmann 2019).

As it builds upon many transformative movements and radical initiatives, the convivial conservation vision comes with a generous set of propositions to move beyond pursuing economic growth and reinforced nature–culture dichotomies (Büscher and Fletcher 2020a). These include a move to celebrated or promoted areas, long-term visitation, everyday environmentalism, democratic engagement, and wealth-sharing for the wellbeing of humans and nonhumans alike (Büscher and Fletcher 2019). This repertoire is flexible enough to inspire conservation across scales while nurturing local governance systems which favour sharing and commoning over top-down imposed conservation. Since this paper aims to illustrate how commons and community governance can boost convivial conservation in Europe, it is essential to reaffirm the importance of egalitarian decision-making and fair resource allocation doubled by proper recognition and respect (Kothari 2014).

The convivial conservation proposal can address some of neo-protectionism's shortcomings by putting local people at the centre of decision-making processes, thus turning them from intervention targets to active actors in charge of fashioning conservation according to their own values (Büscher and Fletcher 2019). In Europe, this decentring can be read as an attempt to decolonise nascent conservation policies which show a complete disregard for local bio-cultural systems and landscapes. Considering the history of one-size-fits-all approaches, it is vital that the convivial conservation vision remains open to building upon the teachings, successes, and struggles of local communities who devised efficient institutions to maintain their wellbeing while being stewards of forests, pastures, or wetlands.

WILDERNESS IN THE EU—REASSERTING FORTRESS CONSERVATION

This section will revisit the crucial political moments which marked the emergence of wilderness protection in the nature conservation frameworks of the EU, and will show how this strict protection comes at odds with the convivial conservation vision. From a relatively marginal approach among conservationists, the strict protection of 'untouched nature', generally identified as 'wilderness', has been propelled over the last decade among the most intensely discussed environmental topics by scientists, politicians, and civil society (Wild Europe 2019). From the extensive mapping of remaining wilderness to important signs of progress in the EU legislation, proposals for the strict protection of supposedly undisturbed natural areas have set the ground for many continent-wide alliances permeating national and institutional boundaries (Bastmeijer 2016). Although merely a decade old, such conservation approaches previously unpopular in Europe already trigger important changes in socio-environmental relations. The EU Biodiversity Strategy is the most recent example of a legal document which reinforces this ontological dualism between undisturbed nature and the human realm (European Commission 2020). In parallel, prominent environmental NGOs work towards identifying the last areas of 'unspoiled' nature, demanding their strict protection as part of domestic legislation (Wild Europe 2019). Additionally, important efforts are directed towards finding mechanisms to turn wilderness conservation into a profitable business through its commodification within ecotourism operations and as part of climate-change-mitigation strategies (Wild Europe 2018). The promoters of the convivial conservation vision identify this pro-market orientation as one of the most significant shortcomings of neo-protectionism (Büscher and Fletcher 2020a). Moreover, a revaluation of old-growth forests has made the region a prime focus for new financial mechanisms for carbon sequestration and new green-growth opportunities (European Commission 2020; Iordăchescu 2021).

Intensely lobbied for by a coalition of environmental NGOs, scientists, and philanthropists, wilderness debuted on the EU political scene with the European Parliament's adoption in 2009 (European Parliament 2009). The resolution called on the European Commission to define wilderness by addressing ecosystem services, conservation value, climate change, and sustainable use as the main elements (European Parliament 2009: Art 1). Lastly, the Parliament requested that wilderness be given a central role in the Natura 2000 network (Art 20), proposing a radical change from the official approach to conservation which stressed the role of traditional land uses in protecting biodiversity.

The next significant EU political moment for wilderness protection was the European Commission's release of the Guidelines for Wilderness in Natura 2000 in 2013. If previously the Habitats and the Birds Directives strongly advocated for a continuation of traditional land uses (Neumann 2014), including marginal agriculture and other historical or customary practices essential for maintaining European landscapes, now it clearly stated that a strict separation of an allegedly wild nature could be more effective for biodiversity conservation. These guidelines were not binding but constituted an essential precedent for opening the path towards mandatory targets for the strict protection of nature.

In 2020, the time was ripe for a new EU Biodiversity Strategy, which in an attempt to put nature at the centre of Europeans' wellbeing, proposed a radical increase of EU's PAs to 30% of the landmass and seas, including 10% of the territory under strict protection. Seen as an attempt to give "nature the space it needs" (European Commission 2020: 1), the Strategy did not offer any details on the socio-economic impact of such a proposal, but suggested nevertheless that "there should be a specific focus on areas of very high biodiversity value or potential" (Idem: 5). Coupled with the proposal to set mandatory targets for ecosystem restoration and enact the complete protection of all remaining old-growth forests, but without offering adequate financial or legal mechanisms, the Strategy risks to set the ground for increased restrictions to affect traditional land uses and marginal agriculture in areas which are rich in biodiversity, but affected by poverty and economic inequalities (Iordăchescu 2021). The practical aspects of translating these targets into domestic legislation fall on Member States' shoulders, potentially widening the biodiversity protection gaps across Europe's biogeographic regions.

As a new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and a European Green New Deal are implemented, conservationists have suggested that a growing interest in strictly conserving 'untouched' nature will mark a new era in intergovernmental cooperation and will conclude with the introduction of 'wilderness' values in sectors such as agriculture, energy, and infrastructural developments (Wild Europe 2019). In various peripheral regions of the EU or its close vicinity, notable wilderness-related initiatives are already drawing critical financial resources, from the establishment of Cabo de Gata-Nijar National Park in the south of Spain (Cortéz Vásquez 2012) to the emerging 'European Yellowstone' in the Romanian Carpathians and beyond (Iordăchescu 2021). Although very heterogeneous, these projects share a few standard features: they come as a response to degradation narratives or land abandonment and propose wilderness conservation as a fix; they advocate for a strict protection approach as opposed to an allegedly failing marginal agriculture; they legitimise interventions by appealing to western scientific knowledge; and lastly, they glorify past ecological riches which western Europe has lost, thus augmenting the urgency to act. The problematic separation of humans and nature advanced by these initiatives is echoed by the European Commission's latest proposal around strict protection targets, which leave unquestioned the costs of promoting a neo-protectionist approach.

In this context, challenging the new dawn of fortress conservation in Europe is necessary, and the turn towards more convivial approaches is timely. The present wilderness

political momentum can potentially open the region to green grabbing and further socio-environmental injustices.

ICCAS IN EUROPE

Many of the challenges posed by the current wilderness momentum could be addressed by scrutinising alternative approaches to conservation centred on equity and justice, a task this section aims to achieve. Across Europe, there is an intimate relationship between historical forms of land stewardship and the culturally rich and biodiverse landscapes (Samojlik et al. 2013; Neumann 2014; Drenthen 2018). In areas such as the Carpathian Mountains, freeholders' associations which function as commons have governed natural resources for many centuries (Vasile 2009, 2015, 2018; Dorondel 2016). The current high levels of biodiversity result from their affective labour and care for the environment (Crumley 2017; Singh 2018). Similar governance regimes exist in many other European regions, from the 'comunales' in northwest Spain to the Sami 'territories of life' beyond the Arctic Circle or the 'beni communali' in northern Italy. Research on various European forms of commoning is currently witnessing a resurgence as concurrent planetary crises have triggered increased interest in learning from more inclusive forms of governance. The Alpine collective-management institutions (Landolt 2019) and the various commons around the Mediterranean (Daici 2021; Guerrini 2021) are given as examples of resilience and adaptation and models of bottom-up institution building (Lätsch 2019). Yet, while neo-institutional approaches to such rich commoning traditions prevail (Haller 2019), more research is needed to understand how commons can contribute to current debates about the future of nature conservation.

Considered the most exciting conservation development of this century (Kothari et al. 2012), the recognition and support of community-conserved areas and territories are already becoming a global phenomenon. ICCAs have been recognised by the parties to the CBD since 2004 and several IUCN resolutions and recommendations over the last decade (Kothari and Neumann 2014). Although ICCAs sometimes function as other effective area-based conservation measures (OECM), in many countries, their territories are overlapped by public or private PAs which superimpose governance or management systems which are detrimental to the livelihoods and culture of the guardian communities (Stevens et al. 2016). In the European context, the OECM umbrella term represents a valuable opportunity to recognise ICCAs as these do not necessarily have the conservation of biodiversity at the core of their functioning, and OECMs are widely recognised by the CBD under Aichi Target 11 and by the IUCN (IUCN-WCPA 2019).

The ICCA Consortium is a platform and an organisation whose members work intensely to bring together and make visible the conservation efforts of hundreds of ICCAs from very different geographical regions, which are on the frontlines of the struggle to defend and protect their territories (ICCA Consortium 2021). As these lands are considered the heart of their identity, culture, and livelihoods, they are collectively defended against attempts of enclosures by governments, companies, and commercial enterprises (Borrini-Feyerabend and Hill 2015). For such an area to be qualified and registered as an ICCA, there should be a strong link between the territory and the livelihoods of the community; the community should have some sort of governance mechanism in place; and the primary outcome of this governance should be conservation through sustainable use (Stevens et al. 2016)—all these elements are central to the development of the convivial conservation vision as discussed above.

The process of recognising and registering potential ICCAs in Europe has started recently, and it can be rightfully claimed that some of the commons which still exist in the Western Balkans, in some Mediterranean areas but also in the Carpathians, satisfy all criteria to be considered as ICCAs (Vasile 2019). The struggles of ICCAs in Europe are manifold, from collision and the lack of recognition by states to green or military grabbing (Domínguez 2020). ICCAs are very effective as PAs and continuously invest in conservation because the stewardship of resources directly impacts their livelihoods (Borrini-Feyerabend and Hill 2015). External sources of funding do not condition this stewardship, and it happens even in countries where public funds are scarce, although ICCAs have no appropriate legal standing in most jurisdictions (Tauli-Corpuz et al. 2020). The recently published *Territories of Life 2021 Report* shows that currently one of the biggest opportunities to boost transformative change from the local to the global level is by recognising the ICCAs worldwide (ICCA Consortium 2021).

While arguing for the recognition of ICCAs as OECMs, it is important to remember that they are also institutions for voicing political dissent and mobilisation against social and environmental injustice. Far from embracing a strict separation between their livelihoods and autonomous nature, their conservation work involves mobilising financial resources, affective labour, and a plethora of regional alliances (Tran et al. 2020). Since it is currently crystallising as a revolutionary conservation approach, the convivial conservation proposal has plenty to learn from the struggles and successes of ICCAs. During this cross-fertilisation process, the convivial conservation proposal can assess the suitability of many of its theoretical tenets: switching from PAs to promoted areas, experimenting with various governance models, and bridging the human–nature divide. Similarly, the recognised or potential ICCAs can find new inspiration to experiment with conservation basic income (CBI) and foster new alliances beyond for-profit conservation schemes.

ROMANIAN COMMONS—POTENTIAL PATHS TO CONVIVIALITY

In this section, the rich experiences of governing commons in Romania will be highlighted to illustrate how local historical institutions increased their conservation efforts to meet the

challenges posed by top-down conservation. The case of Crăciunel commons will be used as an example of a possible path towards conviviality.

Historical forest and pasture commons have been recently re-established in Romania, becoming efficient examples of decentralised governance of local resources to satisfy the needs of their members (Vasile 2009, 2018). Most of them could be considered veritable conservation actors similar to other institutions united under the ICCA umbrella term. Locally named 'obști' or 'composesorate', most of these commons satisfy the three features of ICCAs: a transparent democratic governance system, a strong bond with the environment, and having conservation and sustainable use of resources as a primary goal. Commoners' affinity to their territory expressed through sharing and caring for the land points to a convivial future for conservation within the European continent.

Crăciunel

Crăciunel village (Karácsonyfalva in Hungarian) is located in the heart of the Székely Land, an ethnocultural region of Transylvania and a rural area rich in deciduous forests and woody pastures which have shaped locals' livelihoods over centuries of continuous use. During the post-socialist land reforms, the community successfully claimed the collective ownership of 1,100 hectares of forestlands and pastures and re-established the historical governance regime (közbirtokosság) which communist authorities had previously dissolved in 1948. As with other commons in the country, the community maintains a robust bond with the territory and uses both tradition and official documents to attest to their customary governance. Although their collective ownership had been formalised by the end of the nineteenth century and recognised by the Austro-Hungarian and Romanian governments (Vasile 2019), post-WWII nationalisation restricted their capacity to manage and care for the environment according to their historical bylaws. In 2000, at the moment of its re-establishment, the commoners faced a series of obstacles from the local and regional authorities related to recognising their rights. As the country was undergoing serious agrarian transformations, which quickly escalated in misappropriation of lands and decimation of forests (Dorondel 2016), the commoners of Crăciunel swiftly moved towards securing their rights and strengthening the management of their resources according to sustainable-use principles. They were the first commons in the region to approve a forest management plan, which guaranteed their forest conservation acording to scientific forestry prescriptions. More recently, the commons' elected body of representatives managed to file for the increased protection of 120 hectares of old-growth forest, a voluntary measure which will restrict this area's use and contribute to the permanence of a rich resource for future generations. Besides, another area of 60 hectares is already strictly protected as it constitutes a sessile oak seed reserve.

After Romania acceded to the EU, the CAP offered the community the opportunity to adopt voluntary measures for the sustainable management of their grazing lands. Under these provisions, the use and maintenance of pastures were clearly regulated to prevent overexploitation and maintain high biodiversity. Concomitantly, the commoners received direct payments as a recognition for their care. The woody pastures are remarkable examples of silvopastoral systems, once spread everywhere in central Europe, but currently declining owing to intensive agriculture, the abandonment of traditional animal husbandry, and rural depopulation (Hartel et al. 2013). They are considered an important biodiversity hotspot and are valuable cultural landscapes (Hartel, Plieninger, and Varga 2015). Woody pastures are veritable examples of shared landscapes and attest to local patterns of conviviality.

Crăciunel közbirtokosság stands out from other neighbouring commons for its efforts to conserve the rich bio-cultural values of the territory. After their re-establishment as a juridical institution, the commons council collaborated with local environmental NGOs and pieced together documents and environmental assessments to declare a couple of PAs of local importance. The first one is an ancient sweet chestnut orchard which has been a central cultural element of the community for generations, while the second, a complex of healing water springs located in a biodiversity hotspot, is not only of spiritual value but also a place to reaffirm the commoners' communitarian values during festivals and religious gatherings. The two PAs, of a size smaller than two hectares each, were declared despite opposition from the local municipality, as the commoners wished to prevent the areas from being subjected to future infrastructure developments. It has been often said that community-led conservation is often guided by instrumental and cultural values rather than exclusive care for biodiversity in itself (Stevens et al. 2016). While being conserved for their cultural relevance, these two PAs host a range of endangered and endemic species and habitats while providing the community with essential services. In the process of gaining traction in Europe, convivial conservation should play a crucial role in recognising the commons' role in conservation. Those who implement convivial conservation can build upon multiple valuation systems which underline custodians' skills, knowledge, and practices.

The governance of közbirtokosság in Crăciunel follows bylaws which have legal value, being registered by courts. Currently, the community comprises 347 commoners who are entitled to fixed quantities of timber and access to pastures for grazing cattle according to a transparent system of rights distribution. These clear rules of access and use function as a guarantee that grazelands are not overstocked and forests are not overexploited. Over the last decade, since compensation and direct payments constitute a critical revenue to the commons' budget, the annual quota of harvested wood has dropped, while commercial felling has almost disappeared. This shows how critical financial mechanisms are for the fair recognition of the community's conservation work. Aside from securing commons' institutional functioning, revenues are used to sponsor the local school, annual public festivities, renovation of historical buildings, and continued investment in the development of a

public baths complex around the mineral springs. The commons is thus instrumental to both maintaining and enriching the biodiversity and promoting a harmonious relationship between the collective and the natural values (Enikő Benedek, commoner, 2021) in ways similar to those advanced by the proponents of the convivial conservation vision.

Since Crăciunel közbirtokosság turned to conserve the bio-cultural values of the territory, a significant return of wildlife has been observed by locals and biologists studying the area (Varga and Molnár 2014). Beavers (*Castor fiber*) have repopulated the stream of Homorod, the black stork (*Ciconia nigra*) has nestled in the commons' forest, and the local game guards have spotted the elusive lynx (*Lynx lynx*). The commoners celebrate the return of wildlife and take pride in the ever-increasing number of storks (*Ciconia ciconia*), said to be a blessing for the village. Still, there are also cases when conflicts with wildlife bring feelings of frustration and powerlessness. In particular, the presence of brown bears (*Ursus arctos*) within the village constitutes a nuisance, as the central authorities rarely compensate locals for the damaged fields. Many farmers have abandoned distant fields and concentrated their subsistence agriculture around the households to reduce such conflicts, leaving thus more habitat to the bears. A Natura 2000 PA overlaps the entire territory, but for which no management plan has been approved by the government so far. The local commoners' sustained efforts make this land a hotspot of biodiversity (Csaba Orbán, commons representative, 2021). As in other country regions, locals were not consulted when the PA was declared in the late 2000s. Nevertheless, the community welcomes its existence and has put together a vision to expand the village's economic activity by developing it as an eco-touristic destination. Conviviality plays a significant role in this vision as sharing ecological knowledge with future tourists and engaged visitation are its central elements.

Commons like Crăciunel are spread across the Carpathians and function as safety nets for the less privileged community members; they invest part of their income in public infrastructures such as roads and power grids, and support the local school's functioning, churches, and even hospitals. Even if their governance model varies from one region to another, decisions are taken by democratic vote in general assemblies. A first step in building a more inclusive conservation for these mountains and expanding the convivial proposal would be to recognise commons' role across centuries in shaping and enriching the landscape. Proper recognition, support, and the promotion of forest commons in the Carpathians as socially and environmentally just conservation examples should be high on the convivial conservation agenda in this region. In the next section, we will discuss specific elements which can guide the development of convivial conservation in Europe.

DISCUSSION—LESSONS TOWARDS CONVIVIALITY

The current political turn towards strict protection pushes us to re-assert the role of alternative conservation models centred around social and environmental justice. In this context, how can the Romanian commons contribute to reimagining conservation governance within the convivial vision? In what ways could these institutions advance our understanding of resilient livelihoods? And lastly, how can the commons advance a conservation vision which emerges from the bottom-up and breaks free from market logic?

Self-governance

Exploring different governing conservation mechanisms is one of the biggest challenges set by the convivial conservation proposal (Büscher and Fletcher 2019: 191). The great variety of governance models featured by these commons can offer important lessons to future convivial conservation reiterations in Europe. Under Romanian law, commons are recognised as associations of owners. They are part of the national historical heritage, governing themselves independently from the state according to their bylaws and decision-making institutions (Vasile and Mantescu 2009). The law grants the ownership of the communal lands to the community of rights holders. All commoners assemble at least once annually to vote changes to bylaws, decide on grazing rights, and share monetary proceeds. The commons are represented by a president and a council of representatives holding office for four years and are elected democratically by the general assembly. Both the president and the council are supervised by a committee of auditors appointed by the assembly. In some regions, the communities of freeholders take pride in their common ancestry which often is associated with past struggles against enclosures which shaped their shared identity. Pride in a place is a powerful resource in conservation (Tran et al. 2020); therefore, commoners' care for the environment is rooted in local tradition and culture. The commons' bylaws contain precise details regarding membership, decision-making processes, and rules of access to the natural resources governed collectively.

Although the unequal distribution of rights promoted by this governance model might not be very appealing for the convivial conservation proposal, the Romanian commons can help convivial conservation proponents experiment with various democratic governance patterns. Imposing caps of resource use, voting on the sustainable allocation of pastures or timber, and the decision-making associated with the distribution of financial resources according to the community's needs have all been experienced by commons over generations and can yield important lessons for future reiterations of the convivial proposal. The flexibility shown by these commons in their democratic decision-making process has the potential to make convivial conservation a robust and realistic proposal in Europe. Simultaneously, their great variety can ensure that the proposal will not come at odds with local peculiarities across geographic, political, and cultural divides on the continent.

Livelihoods and resilience

Aside from being a source of pride and self-identification, commons are primarily perceived as providing the commoners with access to timber, grazing, and monetary proceeds. All commons work together with state or private forestry districts responsible for guarding and administering the forest. More extensive commons, as well as those which are part of commons unions, have managed to establish their own independent forestry districts. Every ten years, a detailed management plan is submitted for approval, and timber exploitation is organised according to yearly quotas which allow for the regeneration and general health of the forest. Being the most important resource owned by the collective, the forests are perceived as productive, with the lumber being used for heating or building. Larger commons engage in commercial forestry, with the revenues being used to support the community or redistributed according to the rights system. In most villages, the functioning of schools and churches is financially supported by commons. Still, there are many cases where funds are directed to rural hospitals, fire brigades, cultural activities, or festivals. In the region of Vrancea, young families receive the timber to build their first home from the commons, and essential sums are allocated for supporting school children or the costs of funerals. Among more powerful commons, there is a recent tendency to develop other economic activities and to rely less on forest exploitation. Guesthouses, farms specialising in ancient cattle breeds, tree nurseries, and manufacturers for the processing of mushrooms and forest berries are examples of such enterprises (Opincaru 2020). By turning away from timber extraction activities to other income-generating opportunities, the commons show resilience and a great adaptation capacity coupled with care for future generations and the environment.

Commons' resilience is a well-researched topic, with a rich scholarship showing how property transformation (Vasile and Mantescu 2009), economic restructuring, or green investments (Achiba 2019) challenged commons to adapt, transform, and reinvent across time and geographies. In the Romanian context, these institutions survived repeated historical waves of enclosure (Stahl 1998), readjusted processes of internal governance and control, and accommodated increasing legal requirements from the state (Vasile 2018) while remaining central elements of local identity and pride and acting as platforms to voice political demands. Such great flexibility doubled by institutional robustness should be a central argument in raising support for their recognition as conservation actors and paths towards conviviality.

These commons show that funding local investments do not necessarily need to rely on market expansion, a point often raised by the proponents of the convivial conservation proposal. As shown above, the primary source of financial income is the proceeds from sustainable logging, grazing, direct payments, and other allocations through various EU schemes. Büscher and Fletcher have started a discussion around offering a CBI to communities living inside or in the proximity of conservation-critical areas (2020a: 187). They suggest that this redistribution logic should be unconditional, combine the socio-economic benefits of cash transfer programs, focus on environmental protection (2020b: 5), and apply to all residents. The commons discussed above already receive significant amounts of public money for adopting various land uses which enrich their landscapes, and this resource has contributed to the adoption of even further measures towards conservation, as shown in the case of Crăciunel. Nevertheless, the CAP direct payments and other agro-pastoral financial incentives received by commons are both conditional, and to a great extent, market-based, as they incentivise certain agricultural practices or function as compensations for unrealised profit from low-intensity use, thus departing from the CBI proposal. Yet, the positive conservation outcome of direct payments for commons is incontestable, contributes to members' wellbeing, and is a step towards recognising these institutions as conservation actors. Even if this falls short of the ideal CBI project, it forwards the acknowledgement of commons' contribution at broader scales than just "conservation-critical areas" (Büscher and Fletcher 2020b: 5). With this mechanism already in place and in most cases functional, the convivial conservation proposal has all the tools necessary to push for further unconditional redistribution and Europe-wide CBI.

Conservation

PAs extend over 25% of Romania's territory and feature a diverse array of national and nature parks, scientific reserves, and natural monuments, with many of them being part of the EU Natura 2000 network (UNEP-WCMC and IUCN 2016). The most significant proportion of national parks and the entire network of Natura 2000 PAs were gazetted in Romania right before or immediately after the country acceded to the EU within a top-down process (Ioja et al. 2010). More than a decade after these PAs have been created, the government remains unable to ensure their proper functioning and financing so that the largest proportion of Natura 2000 PAs still have no approved management plans. Throughout the country, most rural communities living around or within PAs consider that the set of restrictions which came with the new protection regime are highly ineffective and a source of multiple conflicts—related to depredation by wildlife, access and property relations, violation of ownership rights, or even poaching and illegal logging (Knorn et al. 2012).

As most large PAs have been established over the last two decades, predominantly in the mountains where biodiversity is higher and habitats are less fragmented, it inevitably overlapped territories owned and managed by forest commons (Vasile 2019). The targets set by the new EU Biodiversity Strategy will put even more pressure on the communities living in or near these biodiversity-rich areas (European Commission 2020). Because the re-establishment of commons and the creation of most PAs happened simultaneously after 2000, clashes between commoners and PAs' administrators manifested almost instantly. In some regions, commons had to navigate complicated bureaucracy related to animal husbandry

and pasturing rights, provisions concerning forestry, and pressures to expand commercial logging (Vasile 2019).

The distrust in conservation remains high and is sometimes accentuated by increased restrictions and the lack of fair or inconsistent compensation of economic losses associated with the strict protection of forests in the core areas of national parks (Aastrup 2020). Although commons are obliged to renew forest management plans every ten years to comply with the provision of sustainable forest management, to pay for the guarding of their forests, and to govern according to bylaws which set explicit use quotas for natural resources, they are never recognised as community-led conservation initiatives. As the ICCA denomination is currently unknown to national lawmakers and conservation practitioners, these commons are not regarded as other effective area-based conservation measures under the CBD's recommendation (IUCN-WCPA 2019), nor are there any registered ICCAs in the country. The contribution of the Romanian commons to biodiversity conservation as intentional or as a byproduct of their governance is unquestionable and should represent a strong argument for recognising them as OECMs. While doing so, it is essential to remember that these commons have across history been more than self-governing institutions; they are essential instruments for securing political rights and reaffirming shared values and pride.

While laying the foundations of convivial conservation across the continent, its proponents should state clearly that the conservation done by commons must be understood as instrumental and relational. Commons livelihoods are not necessarily centred on conservation, but they are organised and function according to sustainable management principles sanctioned by internal bylaws, with exceptional care for future generations. The switch from protected (from humans) towards promoted areas, envisaged by the convivial proposal (Büscher and Fletcher 2020a: 163), must incorporate this reality and turn it into an instrument for making the proposal appealing to communities which struggled under top-down imposed conservation regime.

Commons and other ICCAs across Europe are large enough to turn conservation from focusing on charismatic species to more landscape-centred approaches, where vast swathes of land are promoted for their bio-cultural values rather than for their spectacular features or charisma. This departure not only will counter the EU's green colonialism but will also translate convivial conservation into concrete pathways for governing nature (Büscher and Fletcher 2020a: 191) beyond the commodification brought by nature-based tourism.

Lastly, the commons' long history and their ever-evolving relation with their territories hint at a change in the perception of temporality. The commons' functioning shows that conservation is a process marked by continuous democratic negotiations and enmeshed within valuation practices which might seem unrelated to species protection per se, rather than a time-bound project as most conservation practitioners and NGOs fashion it. The convivial proposal has already advanced the idea of long-term engagement (Büscher and Fletcher 2019), and therefore, a close examination of the history of commoning could boost its transformative potential in Europe.

CONCLUSION

The current political momentum towards strict biodiversity protection in Europe shows that the translation of the convivial conservation vision into concrete pathways is timely. While plans to increase the size and number of PAs on the continent are gaining traction, it is essential to scrutinise the potential of such proposals to cast unjust restrictions or bring new challenges to the livelihoods of those living in or near PAs. The paper discussed how potential ICCAs could offer valuable lessons for future convivial conservation reiterations, and it examined particular trajectories departing from the Romanian forest and pasture commons.

Although the commons' prevailing conception of nature is utilitarian, they have demonstrated remarkable resilience and flexibility for generations while committing to forest and pastures' stewardship. The care for both human and nonhuman wellbeing, the innovative conservation measures adopted for nurturing rich bio-cultural systems, and the opportunity to bring integrated landscape approaches to biodiversity conservation are all elements which resonate with the theoretical tenets of convivial conservation and can advance the proposal across Europe. Even if several elements within the commons' functioning differ from the convivial vision (mechanisms of exclusion, small-scale impacts, etc.), these institutions' diversity of commoning practices can contribute to the feasibility of convivial conservation vision in Europe.

In sum, even though there is strong backing for the strict protection of nature in Europe, important alternatives emerge which can lead to more just and democratic conservation models. These could be strengthened by learning from the efforts of various forms of commoning present across the continent. While taking the present moment as a window of opportunity to build more socially equitable conservation approaches, it is important to remember that the first step towards conviviality starts with increasing the support offered to commons and ICCAs and recognising their contribution to biodiversity conservation.

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The author declares no competing interests in the conduct of this research.

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Research ethics approval

The research undertaken as part of the Associative Environmentality project was done with respect to the principles of personal autonomy, benevolence, and risk mitigation. Although the Institute of Sociology at the Romanian Academy does not have a formal Ethics Review process, the team's prior international research experience guided the ethics of data collection: the participants were adequately informed about the research purposes and the results were disclosed to them upon request; privacy was given high priority and the respondents could choose to remain anonymous or to stop participating in the research at any moment without further explanation; and, as the majority of participants were local representatives or public figures, conflictual issues were not addressed by the research in order to mitigate potential risks. For the research done in January 2021 in Crăciunel commons, a standard free, prior, and informed consent was obtained from the participants to the interviews. A summary of the research results was sent to the commons' representative for consultation and further comments.

Data availability

The data collected within the Associative Environmentality project are publicly available on the project's website https://romaniacommons.wixsite.com/project. Additional data such as photo archives and survey questionnaires are not accessible owing to privacy matters.

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