humanities

MDPI

Editorial

What Are Conservation Humanities? Preliminary Reflections on an Emerging Paradigm

Graham Huggan [1,*] and George Holmes [2]

[1] School of English, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK
[2] School of Earth and Environment, Faculty of Environment, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK; g.holmes@leeds.ac.uk
* Correspondence: g.d.m.huggan@leeds.ac.uk

It is increasingly acknowledged that one of the primary tasks of the humanities today is to engage with environmental issues: all the more so in light of the Anthropocene, which underlines significant—indeed transformative—human influence on the planet, even as it reiterates that humans are themselves shaped by ecological processes, at least some of which are beyond their control (N. Clark 2010; T. Clark 2015). Perhaps more to the point, the humanities have a key role to play in addressing a global environmental crisis that is increasingly being recognized in social, cultural, and political as well as scientific terms (Heise 2016, p. 25). As historian of science Sverker Sörlin suggests, scientists of different stripes have long since accepted that science alone is insufficient to solve environmental problems; rather, the very idea of "environmentally relevant knowledge must change" (Sörlin 2012, p. 788). This has led to a shift from environmental crises being seen primarily or even exclusively as scientific problems to them being seen as *behavioural* and *conceptual* problems, some of them seemingly intractable, and all of them requiring detailed attention to their "political, social, cultural, affective, and rhetorical forms" (Heise 2016, p. 24).

This has led, in turn, to the emergence of new cross-disciplinary paradigms within humanities scholarship, most notably *environmental humanities*, which Ursula Heise, among others, sees as having been catalyzed by a further crisis, this time an epistemological one, which requires the challenging of "conventional ways of framing environmental questions and institutionalizing academic research on them", with implications for recalibrating the relationship between sciences and humanities themselves (Heise 2016, p. 24; see also Bird Rose et al. 2012; Emmett and Nye 2017; Holm et al. 2015). Heise, accordingly, sees environmental humanities not so much as a particular method or approach but rather as a broad conceptual frame for looking at certain questions and problems bound up in historical as well as contemporary human relations to the planet: mounting environmental degradation, mass species extinction, accelerated climate change. This underlines the importance of studying the different *narratives* within which these relations are currently being and have previously been framed; it also implies that one of the urgent tasks of environmental humanities is to "enrich environmental research with a more extensive conceptual vocabulary", which might allow it to engage more fully with "fundamental questions of meaning, value, responsibility and purpose [at] a time of rapid, and escalating, change" (Bird Rose et al. 2012, p. 1).[1]

The inherent catholicity of environmental humanities—the field's more-or-less stated refusal to pin itself down to any single philosophical standpoint or methodological approach—may be enabling in some ways, but it comes at the cost of definitional precision. As practitioners within the field freely confess, there is something "as yet rather nebulous" about environmental humanities (DeLoughrey et al. 2015, p. 3), even if there is

check for updates

Received: 19 February 2025
Accepted: 3 March 2025
Published: 22 April 2025

Citation: Huggan, Graham, and George Holmes. 2025. What Are Conservation Humanities? Preliminary Reflections on an Emerging Paradigm. *Humanities* 14: 94. https://doi.org/10.3390/h14050094

general agreement that its main role is to produce critical and philosophical work around "human agency, social and cultural formation, social change, and the entangled relations between human and non-human worlds" (Bird Rose et al. 2012, p. 2). The same might be said for a similarly mixed-discipline, mixed-method field that is congruent with if not entirely subsumed by environmental humanities: *conservation humanities*. Environmental humanities is traceable back to the emergence, in Britain and North America but also other parts of the English-speaking world, of a cluster of post-1990s paradigms defined by interdisciplinary research and designed to train a humanities lens on some of the major social and environmental problems of our times (Heise 2016, p. 21). Conservation humanities is of still more recent vintage. Yet to acquire the still-tentative (if increasingly secure) institutional footing of environmental humanities, it is something significantly more than a figment of the academic imagination, but something significantly less than a recognized sub-field in its own right. In one of the few direct contributions so far to the articulation of the new paradigm, Nathan Bennett and his associates draw attention to what they call "the transformative potential of conservation through the social sciences, arts and humanities" (Bennett and Roth 2019, p. A6; see also Bennett et al. 2017; Carruthers-Jones et al. 2024). The humanities, Bennett et al. argue, *can* play a key role in conceiving "a more socially just, culturally appropriate and, indeed, beautiful way of achieving conservation", but little if any evidence is given that they *have* been playing this role, or that they supply a genuine working alternative to the kind of instrumental, solutions-driven research that, however creatively imagined, can often end up consolidating the conservationist status quo (Bennett and Roth 2019, p. A8). As with certain types of defence of environmental humanities—as is often the case with emerging constellations of this kind, the short manifesto is a dominant genre—Bennett et al.'s welcome appreciation of the value of the humanities in attracting attention to the cultural, political, and ethical ramifications of conservation is not necessarily matched by a consideration of the practical implications these might have *for* conservation; following Chris Sandbrook et al.'s similarly broad-brushstroke distinction between social science research "on" conservation and social science research "for" conservation (Sandbrook et al. 2013), there is significantly more evidence of the former than of the latter, although the two are inevitably entwined.

Equally problematic is the tendency in work of this kind to pigeonhole "science" and/or "scientific experts" as being obsessively concerned with measurement to the detriment of other, qualitative forms of interpretation and analysis. A case in point is Sörlin's aforementioned piece, in which he contends that "we cannot dream of sustainability unless we start to pay attention to the human agents of the planetary pressure that environmental experts are masters are measuring but that they seem unable to prevent" (Sörlin 2012, p. 789). Or consider Holm et al.'s (2015) manifesto "Humanities for the Environment", which at one level calls for greater dialogue between arts and sciences as well as between academics and "the stakeholders of global change" (978), but at another risks driving a wedge between arts and sciences by making the kinds of sweeping claims that few scientists would want to endorse, and that some of them might not be prepared to countenance: "Science offers empirical 'certainties' whereas the humanities are better equipped to consider decisions and options based on social uncertainties and contingencies" (990); "Science stops short of investigating the main driver of planetary change—the human factor" (979); "While the sciences may observe and analyze change, they are not organized or structured to create social policy and influence humans to change values and opinions" (981). Advocacy vehicles of this sort, especially if polemical in intent, are licensed to exaggerate for the purposes of making their claims, but even so, the need to combine insights from sciences and arts that is integral to most visions of both environmental and conservation humanities

is not best served by deploying the kind of rhetoric that sifts and separates them—a point to which we will need to return.

Perhaps the greatest challenge, though, in working towards some kind of provisional definition of conservation humanities revolves around the inherent difficulty of defining both conservation *and* the humanities. Let us offer some preliminary reflections on conservation first before going on to consider the role that the humanities might play in conservationist thought and action, as well as what meanings are embedded in the humanities themselves. A landmark text in defining modern conservation is Michael Soulé's (1985) essay "What Is Conservation Biology?", which emerged in the same year as other key developments in establishing conservation as a formal discipline, such as the coining of the term "biodiversity" and the establishment of the Society for Conservation Biology as a global body for conservation professionals (Holmes et al. 2017). Soulé sees conservation biology as a crisis discipline which, in aiming to supply principles and tools for preserving biological diversity, combines pure and applied knowledge. Conservation, for Soulé, is thus inherently interdisciplinary, building on different natural sciences, but also some social sciences, in order to tackle the variety and complexity of conservation challenges. He then goes on to propose a series of functional postulates about how the natural world works, as well as normative postulates about the ecological goals of conservation. From this point in the mid-1980s, we see a rise in the stature and profile of conservation, with notable increases in the number, size, and power of international conservation NGOs: a significant development within an international conservation order that emerged at the turn of the twentieth century (Adams 2003).

While Soulé's attempt to define conservation has been influential, it has several limitations. For one thing, it is remarkably unreflective about the context in which it emerged, presenting conservation as the logical conclusion of both scientific developments and rapacious human destruction of the natural world. Its distinctly Malthusian tone, positivist view of science, and utilitarian view of social science mark it as emerging from a late twentieth-century North American perspective. (His ideas of interdisciplinarity were also much more conservative than those of others, such as Bennett et al. (2017).) It obviously speaks from a position of privilege and power within universities, learned societies, and influential NGOs, yet this remains largely unacknowledged. Conservation needs to be seen, instead, as having a long and culturally differentiated history that significantly pre-dates the emergence of conservation biology as its current lead discipline, and it is bound up with entrenched systems of power and privilege that are not always readily owned up to or systematically understood.

For another, even the so-called mainstream represented by western academia, government, and large, well-connected NGOs is far from homogeneous, and the views associated with it do not always correspond to Soulé's archetype. Conservation may be principally about "setting the terms of the engagement between people and nature" (Adams 2003, p. 209), but these terms are not particularly likely to be agreed upon by all parties, and they may involve disagreements that lay bare the social as well as ecological injustices that conservation ostensibly makes it its business to address. Thus, while conservation has achieved some measure of success in, for example, saving high-profile species or creating national parks and other protected areas, it is has demonstrably "failed to keep pace with the very destruction that [originally] fuelled its growth" (Adams 2003, p. xiii).[2] This has led to various attempts at critical redefinition. One notable attempt is Kareiva and Marvier's (2012) proposal to update Soulé's original postulates in order to enable greater emphasis on human modified environments rather than supposedly pristine nature, greater consideration for human development and poverty alleviation, and greater critical engagement with capitalism and corporations.

This and other similar manifestos for the "new conservation" sparked an ongoing series of at times antagonistic exchanges in the pages of conservation journals over what conservation should be, and how it should be done, albeit authored largely by white, male western conservationists based in elite universities (Holmes et al. 2017). Disagreements have often revolved around the relative merits of conservation measures that focus on nature for its own sake versus their anthropocentric counterparts, which tend to conserve for human well-being, and on the increased use of market-based mechanisms such as payments for ecosystem services. There continues to be a wide range of views among conservationists on these issues, though there is also considerable consensus on key topics (see, for example, Sandbrook et al. 2019), as mainstream conservation engages in more or less constant soul-searching over what it is, what it is trying to accomplish, and how. These debates also show the importance of the humanities to conservation insofar as they reveal both explicit and tacit assumptions about the meaning of "nature" and the social and cultural values ascribed to it (see below).

Further diversity exists outside of this self-authorizing mainstream. Some of this can be found in critical NGOs or in academia, for example Bram Büscher and Stephen Fletcher's energetic 2020 manifesto (Büscher and Fletcher 2020), which uses Marxism-inspired critiques of human-nature dualism, the colonial legacy of conservation, and the neoliberal financialization of nature to make the case for an alternative form of "convivial conservation": one that fosters positive ways of living with nature and aims to reduce reliance on market forces. Jamie Lorimer's *Wildlife in the Anthropocene: Conservation after Nature* (2015) similarly sees mainstream conservation as predominantly reactive, "seek[ing] to preserve a fixed Nature from modern, urban, and industrial society by enclosing it in National Parks" (Lorimer 2015, p. 5). Lorimer's is a more nuanced view of the "new conservation" than Büscher and Fletcher's, seeking a more creative, experimental approach to conservation than he sees as having been hitherto the case. For Lorimer, "post-natural" conservation recognizes the entanglement of the human and the nonhuman, embraces multiple natures, and appreciates the ubiquity and affective power of wildlife. This kind of conservation is human-centred to the extent that it involves a complex "set of embodied [. . .] processes of 'learning to be affected' by the environment", but it is also posthuman (or, perhaps better, posthuman*ist*) in the sense that it supports the view that the lives of human beings are enmeshed with those of other living creatures, and that such human/nonhuman assemblages, in involving agencies other than the human, also potentially question the very nature and exceptionality of the category "human" itself (Lorimer 2015, pp. 5, 189–90; see also Bird Rose et al. 2012).

Finally, other views of conservation come from myriad cultures around the world, particularly those of Indigenous peoples, with distinct ontologies of nature and culturally specific ethics of care. Mainstream conservation increasingly values such approaches, for example, in its official recognition of Indigenous reserves and sacred sites as protected areas, alongside more traditional national parks (UNEP-WCMC and IUCN 2021). Still, there is work to be done in accommodating the different ontologies of nature involved, and significant tensions remain between conservation projects and the territorial, cultural, and livelihood goals of Indigenous peoples, at least some of which are the residue of insufficiently worked-through legacies of conservation in the past.

Broadly speaking, conservation can be seen as a set of ideas, practices, and institutions that work to slow or reverse the decline of biodiversity. Much of this decline is human-caused, seemingly opening the door to humanities approaches. But as Ursula Heise wryly remarks, "the new environmentalist interest in the human [has hit] the humanities at a moment when humanist interest has shifted, at least partly, to the posthuman" (Heise 2016, p. 27). It is also surely not coincidental that the increasing recognition of a global

environmental crisis that has led to the emergence of new paradigms such as environmental and, more recently, conservation humanities has been concurrent with continuing debates around a *crisis of the humanities*, though such debates have long since come to acquire a familiar ring to them, and some of the positions taken up (or attributed as being taken up) in them are as overdrawn as those outlined in Büscher and Fletcher's melodramatically described "great conservation debate". These debates do not require extensive discussion here, but generally speaking, they centre on international attempts to defend the public value of the humanities against a background of declining student numbers—though not in all humanities subjects alike—and a global neoliberal knowledge economy in which "applied" knowledge is favored over "pure" or curiosity-driven knowledge, and the humanities—misleadingly lumped together as a single entity—are increasingly assailed (see, for example, Bate 2011; Nussbaum 2010; Perloff 2013; for a useful overview, see also Keen 2014).

Some of the most prominent examples have come from the US, though there are other instances worldwide, especially in the UK, where—to cite just one of several possible examples of the genre—the humanities have been scrutinized against a "background of intense public debate about successive British governments' incremental retreat from the idea that the state should bear most of the economic cost of higher education"—in other words, within a fraught national context in which the role and perceived affordability of university humanities study comes to stand in metonymically for the embattled university itself (Small [2013] 2016, p. 2; see also Collini 2012). In the work from which we have just been quoting, Helen Small's ([2013] 2016) study *The Value of the Humanities* (originally published in 2013), the humanities are first *defended* in terms of their general contribution to the knowledge economy; in terms of their specific contribution to the good workings of democracy; and in terms of being inherently valuable, as mattering for their own sake (Small [2013] 2016, pp. 4–6; see also Nussbaum 2010). They are then *defined* as the study of "the meaning-making practices of human culture, past and present, [with a particular focus] on interpretation and critical evaluation, primarily in terms of the individual response" (Small [2013] 2016, p. 29).

These characteristics seem, at first glance, to be largely unexceptionable, but they also beg several questions. What do the humanities have to say to the nonhuman world, both the world we humans shape, but also the world that shapes us? What uses are to be made of interpretation and evaluation? To what extent can the humanities adapt to an increasingly collaborative research agenda? What disciplines are included within the humanities, and how might they contribute to transdisciplinary synthesis and cross-disciplinary exchange? Similarly, if the humanities, as Small sees them, tend to place "greater faith in interpretative than in positivistic thinking, [paying] attention to the perceiver in ascertaining even the most philosophically secure of knowledge claims" (Small [2013] 2016, p. 29), then one must ask whether this subjective influence is true as well, at least to some degree, of the social and natural sciences, and whether this is particularly true of such crossover disciplines as geography and anthropology, which operate on the fuzzy boundary between humanities and social sciences, and which generally look to maintain a balance between text-based (interpretative) and experience-based (empirical) work. Lastly, one must question whether the humanities, if their perceived exceptionalism rests in large part on their capacity to promote and develop critical thought, are alone or superior in that regard; whether critique is the most useful tool at their disposal; and whether critique, like other methodologies, has its own limits—not least in terms of laying the foundations for practical conservation work.

This last issue is worth looking at more closely. Critique has itself been subject to critical scrutiny over the past few years, with its practitioners being routinely accused of hubris and hyper-rationalism; of "chronic negativity [and] a pervasive pessimism of

thought" (Anker and Felski 2017, p. 11; see also Felski 2015). Many of these critiques of critique are indebted to Bruno Latour's earlier, by-now-infamous 2004 article "Why has critique run out of steam?" which argued that critique had become entrenched, particularly in humanities and social science disciplines, and that as a result it had lost the capacity to account in a full and useful manner for the objects it sought to describe (Latour 2004; see also Latour 2007). Redford (2011) makes a similar point about the way the social sciences and associated humanities disciplines have engaged with conservation). Critique's principal methods—the dismantling of assumptions and suppositions made in relation to particular objects (especially literary and other cultural texts); the exposure of hidden meanings and biases within them; the revelation of a broader "political unconscious" at work—have, Latour later suggests, become self-fulfilling objectives, leading to a predictable string of familiar commentaries on equally familiar topics (racism, sexism, colonialism, and so on) and demonstrating an obstinate "woodenness" in their prescribed "definition of what sorts of agencies populate the world" (Latour 2007, p. 55).

One need not agree with Latour to see the limits of critique or to note its paradoxical tendency to obstruct the very forms of social intervention that it imagines itself as making possible. Humanities-based approaches to environmental issues may still benefit from critique—for example, of the abiding entanglements of conservation with capitalism and colonialism—but as Ursula Heise archly remarks, "if environmental humanists want to make good on their claims that their scholarship is relevant to environmental science and activism and to the public sphere at large, critique alone will be about as solid a foundation as Arctic sea ice is to polar bears" (Heise 2016, p. 28). Similarly, humanities-based work on conservation needs to go beyond those kinds of critique which are "as likely to stymie activity as to kindle it" (Heise 2016, p. 28). What is needed, in other words, is creative work that supports conservation initiatives worldwide without necessarily being directly involved in them, or mistaking advocacy for activism; while likewise needed is a more engaged approach on the part of humanities scholars to working together with scientists—especially natural scientists—in pursuit of common conservation goals. Collaborative work of other kinds is also called for, not least with the general public. Here, conservation humanities potentially has several important roles to play, i.e., in the imaginative construction of alternative, counterfactual scenarios, and other possible worlds (Holm et al. 2015, p. 983); in the effective communication of sound scientific knowledge; and in advancing understandings of how and why people are emotionally, as well as intellectually, invested in the things they are. As Holm et al. suggest, language and culture, narrative and imagination—the foundation stones of humanities research—are also the basis for human action, while value and ethics, the specialist domains of many humanities scholars, act as guides to the choices we make, including those we make on behalf of others' lives (Holm et al. 2015, p. 981). This is not to suggest that these domains "belong" to the humanities and to humanities scholars alone, any more than it is to suggest (with due apologies to Pope) that the proper subject of conservation humanities is mankind. In fact, as we have already implied, conservation humanities can be seen, at least in part, through a posthumanist lens in which human beings are understood as part of a *shared* world: as members of "multispecies communities", with significant responsibilities towards species—the distinguishing term "species" is itself anything but transparent—other than themselves (Bird Rose et al. 2012, p. 3; see also Lorimer 2015, pp. 67–71).[3]

To sum up so far: conservation humanities is an emerging paradigm that exists within the larger multi- and interdisciplinary field of environmental humanities, and which aims at using humanities-based methods—textual and discourse analysis, philosophical and historical enquiry, ethnographic fieldwork—to shed light on contemporary conservation issues and problems, paramount among them today's alarmingly intensifying levels of

biodiversity loss. Defining conservation humanities as a *paradigm* rather than a *field* is not just a reflection on the fact that its academic status has yet to be fully established. It also suggests that its main value, at least at this preliminary stage, lies in *conceptualizing* conservation problems rather than in seeking the kinds of direct evidence that might help to *solve* them, and indeed, it shares environmental humanities' general suspicion towards top-down, solution-driven approaches that fail to "address local ecological knowledge [or to] confront unequal distributions of wealth" (DeLoughrey et al. 2015, p. 16).

These suspicions are also shared of course by many working conservationists, and it arguably does not require humanities scholars (or social scientists) to point out that "the apparently neutral and science-based vision of conservation is a culturally embedded one", or that conservation professionals are "power actors in the international system", whether they like it or not (Duffy 2010, p. 8). Nor does it take humanities scholars (or social scientists) to ask tricky questions about some of the key concepts that inform current conservationist philosophies. Is "biodiversity" synonymous with cultural diversity, and is "diversity" a good thing in and for itself? Do we all benefit equally, or in the same way, from "ecosystems services"? Is "sustainability" a necessary brake on runaway economic development, or rather a convenient crutch for continued economic growth? There is a further danger here, shared by conservation and environmental humanities alike, that humanities scholars may find themselves drawn into conversations with natural science without necessarily understanding what it is that natural scientists do, and without necessarily consulting them on their actions. As has been pointed out often enough, institutional barriers still exist that prevent or at least significantly hinder the kinds of cross-disciplinary dialogues that are needed to address major environmental challenges; and when such encounters do happen, mutual misunderstandings and residual prejudices can easily turn them into dialogues of the deaf (Adams 2007; Agrawal and Ostrom 2006; Pooley 2014; Redford 2011). It is also true that humanities scholars, by and large, could do much more to improve their basic standards of scientific literacy, and that grand pronouncements about "science" are not necessarily matched by a willingness to engage with scientists themselves.

That said, conservation science—which is itself a cross-disciplinary field—stands to benefit from the kind of humanities work that sheds light on culturally shaped human attitudes and behaviours towards nonhuman animals and the natural world, that offers insight into the shifting meanings of these relationships, and that reflects on the socially and culturally differentiated regimes of value within which they are inscribed. Such work draws on some of the classical aims of humanities research, which are usefully summarized by Jonathan Bate as follows: (1) to establish the historical grounding for contemporary debates; (2) to demonstrate their educational benefits; (3) to exhibit "a healthy scepticism toward easy solutions"; and (4) to reinforce the value of "long life and what ethical obligations we might have to future generations, to other species, or indeed to the planet itself" (Bate 2011, pp. 2–3). However, as should be clear by now, conservation humanities is as much a challenge to conventional understandings of both conservation and the humanities as an attempt to draw them together. Early evidence indicates that conservation humanities may have most to offer the type of "new conservation" which, in Jamie Lorimer's words, proceeds "without recourse to a lost Nature or a universal Human" (Lorimer 2015, p. 191), and may have more in common with posthumanist understandings of human/nonhuman consubstantiality than with humanist conceptions of a hierarchically ordered world (for further reflections on the posthuman and/or posthumanism, see Braidotti 2013; Ferrando 2019; Wolfe 2009).[4] This suggests, in turn, that conservation humanities looks set to follow environmental humanities' lead in "unsettling" traditional approaches to the humanities, though it could be argued against this that the humanities (along with the Enlightenment humanism that inspires them) have never been settled,

while ethical responsibility toward the other—one of humanism's few historical constants—is a founding premise, perhaps *the* founding premise, of the environmental humanities knowledge domain (Bird Rose et al. 2012, p. 3).

Similarly uncertain is the question whether these "new humanities" research clusters have the potential to effect meaningful change, or whether the understandings and knowledge they derive can be turned into practical action. It is difficult to disagree with Holm et al. that the "human sciences—the mixed bag of academic disciplines in the humanities—are a fertile resource of insight into human motivation, creativity, and agency" (Holm et al. 2015, p. 981), or with Adams that the success of conservation initiatives worldwide depends on the capacity of such insights to change the way people perceive and act upon the natural world; that conservation, at its most basic level, is about the working through of everyday choices in human lives (Adams 2003, p. 209). However, while the operationalization of conservation humanities research may be a legitimate goal, to date it remains a largely aspirational one. This is not to say that conservation humanities is condemned to play a subsidiary role in confronting conservation problems, still less to suggest that these problems be ceded to the more "practically oriented" science disciplines; indeed, it is the humanities' very commitment to complexity—their awareness of the inherent slipperiness of language; their attentiveness to the multiple subjectivities, both human and nonhuman, involved in conservationist decision-making—that makes them such useful partners in contemporary conservation debates.

The special issue that follows consists of seven, loosely connected pieces written at different times over a three-year period from early 2022 to late 2024. All of the essays engage, to a greater or lesser extent, with conservation humanities, though not all of them agree on what the term means or even whether it is viable. Indeed, as the issue's guest editors we have made the deliberate choice to feature a lead-off piece, by the distinguished US-based literary scholar Ursula Heise, which sharply questions (a) whether conservation humanities is a field (or paradigm) at all, and (b) whether, even if it is, it is an emerging one. As Heise reminds us, humanities researchers have been interested in conservation issues for a very long time, but many of them, especially in the past few decades, have taken issue with "conservation"—along with the sometimes destructive practices it fosters—as a deeply problematic term. Heise proposes "multispecies justice" instead as a much better lens through which to imagine how an interconnected, more-than-human world might be seen in terms of "cultures and communities of justice"—cultures and communities that are historically situated, but also reach out across the geopolitical boundaries within which they are artificially constrained.

A broadly "multispecies" approach is also taken by the leading Australian-based philosopher Thom van Dooren in the essay that follows, though van Dooren is perhaps more willing to accept than Heise is that conservation can successfully be mobilized in the interests of justice for the different ecological actors concerned. Van Dooren's chosen focus is on conservation behaviour, a relatively new research field in which, in his words, "the sciences of animal behaviour are being put to work to achieve conservation outcomes". For van Dooren, as for Heise, humanities perspectives are useful insofar as they help shed light on the ideas, understandings, and meanings that underpin human/animal relations and their overlapping existences. He recognizes, at the same time, that there is an urgent need to interrogate not just which particular conservation practices and outcomes are the most effective, but what it is that we (whoever "we" may be in any given instance) are trying to conserve.

This last point is also emphasized in the following collaborative essay by Sarah Raymond, Sarah Perkins, and Greg Garrard, which its co-authors frame as an attempt to combine 'qualitative' humanities and "quantitative" social/natural sciences research as

well as to reflect critically on the problems associated with ascertaining conservation status: that which is considered to be worthy of conserving, by whom, and why. Raymond et al. select two relatively recent pieces of North American conservation legislation, Canada's Species at Risk Act (SARA) and the US Endangered Species Act (ESA), to illustrate the complexities at work in classifying endangered species—complexities merely intensified in transboundary regions where different sets of national principles and procedures apply. Conservation efforts are hampered, they suggest, by conspicuous discontinuities, both within and across national borders, in conservation policy, as well as by a continuing lack of transboundary cooperation in ascertaining the conservation status of species either known or thought to be at risk. An interdisciplinary approach, they contend, works best in shedding light on these problems: one that benefits from both the kinds of statistical analysis favoured by biologists/ecologists and environmental humanities' more text-based, interpretative work. For them, as for both Heise and van Dooren, conservation is as much a cultural as a technical/managerial issue, and a humanities approach can help in revealing the cultural biases hidden in supposedly objective scientific accounts.

Culture is similarly to the fore of the Australian-based ethnographer/filmmaker Natasha Fijn's moving account of her ongoing work for the Plumwood collective, a grass-roots conservation and heritage organization dedicated to carrying on the work of one of Australia's conservationist icons, the late Val Plumwood, who changed her name so as to "merge" with Plumwood Mountain, ancestral grounds of the Walbunja people as well as her own New South Wales forest home. Fijn's is a consciously subjective approach, based on her recent experiences of working for the organization, and using these experiences to reflect on conservation humanities as both a theory of ecological stewardship and a day-to-day practice of environmental care. For Fijn, as for her mentor Plumwood, conservation humanities may act as a source of conceptual critique, but it must go beyond critique—a view also echoed in Raymond et al.'s work. Above all, she argues, conservation humanities' task should be to adopt a holistic (non-dualistic) approach that combines theory and practice, and which sheds light on the multiple connections that link culture to the so-called natural world.

For Fijn, Plumwood Mountain is an idyll of a kind, but also a real-world place that requires careful maintenance. A different kind of idyll, fastidiously debunked in Kenneth Toah Nsah's piece, consists of the hyper-romanticized view of the African continent as the "last Eden on Earth". For Nsah, this view has historically been used to plunder African resources. In more recent times, this has been happening under the rubric of "sustainable development", which he sees as often little more than a pretext for co-opting African nature into neoliberal capitalism. Nsah sees "conservation" as a similarly Janus-faced term—one not necessarily malign in its variegated practitioners' intentions, but one all too easily manipulated to suit the interests of (*inter alia*) transnational corporations, many of them operating in cahoots with the state. For Nsah, as for Heise, literature is a particularly useful tool in revealing the type of conservation work that acts as a cover for profit. Literature and literary criticism, he convincingly suggests, have the "capacity to critique, to engage with complexity, and to point to new or different possibilities and futures"—all of which turns out to be the case in his analysis of four recent Congolese literary works. These works, and the conservationists/conservation agencies they feature, all claim to have "green" credentials, but as Nsah discloses, these credentials frequently operate as masks for continuing western incursions into Africa—even as their bearers set out their case for why African nature needs to be "saved". Although Nsah's essay only glancingly refers to conservation humanities, it implies that one of that field's principal aims should be to draw attention to marginalized perspectives that potentially enrich conservation debates.

Climate change hovers around the edges of much of the work contained in this issue, from Heise's contribution to Fijn's to Nsah's. In the Swedish-based historian Tirza Meyer's essay, it is brought front and centre in the shape of a climate-induced "invader", a species of deep-sea jellyfish that arrived in the Norwegian fjords around 1980 and has been multiplying ever since. Meyer is interested in the extent to which the jellyfish incursions constitute a conservation problem or not, and if so, what to do about it. In analysing the history of these incursions since the 1980s, she draws attention to various attempts to "fix" the problem, from culling the jellyfish to turning them into a sustainable food resource. However, following Nsah, Meyer is sceptical of what the term "sustainability" might mean in such contexts; while, following van Dooren, she is critically minded to ask in whose particular interests "conservation" serves. Some conservation efforts, she suggests (following both of them), may merely add to the suffering that humans continue to inflict upon each other as well as upon animals, while "techno-fix" approaches—especially those harnessed to sustainability—look primarily to benefit those interested in short-term economic growth. Meyer criticizes this ideological short-termism and the solutions-based rhetoric that frequently accompanies it. One of the main goals of conservation humanities, she concludes, should be to complicate this rhetoric and the technologies attached to it; while another should be to recognize—as, in their different ways, do all of the essays in this special issue—that responsibility for addressing conservation and other environmental problems does not rest with scientists alone.

The issue's final essay, by Jonathan Carruthers-Jones, George Holmes, and Roger Norum, returns to a theme that cuts across most if not all of the essays contained within it: even if it can be agreed upon what conservation humanities is and what its main objectives are, what are the practical applications of its researchers' work? Like Meyer, Carruthers-Jones et al. recognize that conservation problems do not always require defined solutions, but also like her (and, one would imagine, like all of the contributors to this issue), they see conservation as posing urgent challenges that require practical action of different kinds. Academics can clearly help with this, but they are still largely trapped in their disciplinary silos, while humanities research in particular is still often marginalized, seen—not least by some social/natural science researchers—as lacking impact in the so-called real world. Carruthers-Jones at al.'s piece argues to the contrary by highlighting its co-authors' empirical work in data-driven acoustic monitoring: an integrated set of humanities and social/natural science methods which seeks to account for often fragile ecologies (in their case, those attached to the sub-Arctic and high-mountain landscapes of Finnish Lapland and the French Pyrenees, respectively) and the human values embedded within them.

Carruthers-Jones et al.'s work echoes Raymond et al.'s in calling for a mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches, and in making the case for interdisciplinary research across both arts and sciences as the basis for practical conservation work. As in Raymond et al.'s essay, especially, but also in the other essays that feature in this issue, the question is raised of what *counts* as humanities research. The question might be better rephrased: does it matter what counts as humanities research? If conservation humanities is to develop further into a *bona fide* academic field, it will clearly require (a) an extended understanding of the humanities in more-than-human contexts, and (b) a radical questioning of what separates so-called arts from so-called science disciplines, and of what constitutes academic disciplinarity itself. Finally, it will involve (c) a renewed commitment to joining theory and practice for the purposes of addressing conservation issues and problems that require empirical as well as text-based approaches without necessarily favouring the one set of approaches over the other. Conservation humanities, seen in all of the above ways, can do much more than just defensively seek to justify its own existence; it can help debunk the

still-powerful myth that humanities scholars are ivory-tower theorists, and that there are few if any practical applications of their work.

Author Contributions: G.H. (Graham Huggan) and G.H. (George Holmes) contributed equally to this essay. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 See, for example, the lead-off essay in the first issue of the leading journal in the field, *Environmental Humanities*. The essay doubles as a mission statement for both the journal and the field, rejecting the idea of the humanities as an appendage to the sciences or a set of communication tools for communicating scientific findings to the general public, and seeing the primary task of environmental humanities instead as being to develop a conceptual vocabulary for addressing such urgent environmental issues as air and water pollution, extinction, and accelerated climate change. Since then (2012), the journal has been true to its task, and one of its features is a living lexicon designed to provide up-to-the-minute commentaries on key terms. While this is a salutary move, and the journal generally has maintained high standards, it is noticeable that the conceptual language it uses is distinctive rather than lexically diverse. To call it jargon would be too harsh, but certain words and terms loom large in many of its featured essays: "multispecies", "ontology", "entanglement", "naturecultures", "response-ability", etc. At least some of these terms owe to key figures in the field, notably Donna Haraway, whose use of neologism is a feature of her work, as well as to the cluster of theoretical developments that shelter under the umbrella of the new materialism (see, for example, Bennett 2010; also Coole and Frost 2010). It is thus typical of the field that Bird Rose et al.'s early appeal to enlarge the conceptual vocabulary of environmental research is punctuated by terms that have since become all too familiar: "How are human identities and responsibilities to be articulated when we understand ourselves to be members of multispecies communities that emerge through the entanglements of agential beings?" (Bird Rose et al. 2012, p. 3).

2 The view that conservation has largely failed is a widespread one, spawning polemics such as Rosaleen Duffy's and Alexander Wilson's as well as more measured assessments such as that of Bill Adams, who argues that the global conservation movement has become "entrenched in its thinking", and that it needs to "think again about the things that make conservation important, and what this 'nature' is that we fight so hard to sustain" (Adams 2003, p. 170; see also Duffy 2010; Wilson 1991).

3 The idea that we live in a "multispecies" world has become a critical orthodoxy in environmental/ conservation humanities as well as the cognate field of human–animal studies. The term "multispecies" (usually unhyphenated) refers to a shared method as much as to a shared world, in which theorists and practitioners attempt systematically to break down what Val Plumwood (2002) calls the "hyperseparations" that have historically regulated human–animal relations, reinforcing the boundary between them and consolidating ideas and illusions of human mastery over the natural world. Multispecies assemblages of different kinds have also been integral to new materialist thought. For some reflections on possible meanings and uses of the term, see Kirksey (2014); also Van Dooren et al. (2016). For further reflections on the insufficiencies of the singularizing term "species", see also Lorimer (2015).

4 It is difficult to know what *counts* as evidence insofar as (a) conservation humanities is so new and (b) much of the work that might potentially be allocated to it is claimed by environmental humanities, which is the more established field. Two possible contenders are Lorimer's aforementioned *Wildlife in the Anthropocene* (Lorimer 2015) and Thom van Dooren's *Flight Ways* (Van Dooren 2014), the latter a philosopher's narrative account of how some endangered species are drawn inexorably into extinction events. Probably the most prominent examples, though, are the works of Donna Haraway, if only because they have been so influential in the fields of environmental humanities and human–animal studies and because the vocabulary they use has been richly mined by others (see Note 1 above).

References

Adams, William Mark. 2003. *Future Nature: A Vision for Conservation*. London: Routledge.

Adams, William Mark. 2007. Thinking like a human: Social science and the two cultures problem. *Oryx* 41: 275–76. [CrossRef]

Agrawal, Arun, and Elinor Ostrom. 2006. Political science and conservation biology: A dialog of the deaf. *Conservation Biology* 20: 681–82. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Anker, Elizabeth S., and Rita Felski, eds. 2017. *Critique and Postcritique*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Bate, Jonathan, ed. 2011. *The Public Value of the Humanities*. London: Bloomsbury.

Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Bennett, Nathan, and Robin Roth. 2019. Realizing the transformative potential of conservation through the social sciences, arts and humanities. *Biological Conservation* 229: A6–A8. [CrossRef]

Bennett, Nathan, Robin Roth, Sarah C. Klain, Kai Chan, Patrick Christie, Douglas A. Clark, Georgina Cullman, Deborah Curran, Trevor J. Durbin, Graham Epstein, and et al. 2017. Conservation social science: Understanding and integrating human dimensions to improve conservation. *Biological Conservation* 205: 97–108. [CrossRef]

Bird Rose, Deborah, Matthew Chrulew, Stuart Cooke, Matthew Kearnes, Emily O'Gorman, and Thom Van Dooren. 2012. Thinking through the Environment, Unsettling the Humanities. *Environmental Humanities* 1: 1–5. [CrossRef]

Braidotti, Rosi. 2013. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Büscher, Bram, and Robert Fletcher. 2020. *The Conservation Revolution: Radical Ideas for Saving Nature Beyond the Anthropocene*. London: Verso.

Carruthers-Jones, Jonathan, Eveline DeSmalen, George Holmes, Graham Huggan, Katie Ritson, and Pavla Šimková. 2024. Creating corridors for nature protection: Conservation humanities as an intervention in contemporary European biodiversity strategies. *Environmental Humanities* 16: 183–200.

Clark, Nigel. 2010. *Inhuman Nature: Sociable Life on a Volatile Planet*. London: Sage.

Clark, Timothy. 2015. *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*. London: Bloomsbury.

Collini, Stefan. 2012. *What Are Universities for?* London: Penguin.

Coole, Diana, and Samantha Frost, eds. 2010. *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press.

DeLoughrey, Elizabeth, Jill Didur, and Antony Carrigan, eds. 2015. *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities: Postcolonial Approaches*. London: Routledge.

Duffy, Rosaleen. 2010. *Nature Crime: How We're Getting Conservation Wrong*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Emmett, Robert S., and David E. Nye, eds. 2017. *The Environmental Humanities: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Felski, Rita. 2015. *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ferrando, Francesca. 2019. *Philosophical Posthumanism*. London: Bloomsbury.

Heise, Ursula. 2016. The Environmental Humanities and the Futures of the Human. *New German Critique* 128: 21–31. [CrossRef]

Holm, Poul, Joni Adamson, Hsinya Huang, Lars Kirdan, Sally Kitch, Iain McCalman, James Ogude, Marisa Ronan, Dominic Scott, Kirill Ole Thompson, and et al. 2015. Humanities for the Environment: A Manifesto for Research and Action. *Humanities* 4: 977–92. [CrossRef]

Holmes, George, Chris Sandbrook, and Janet A. Fisher. 2017. Understanding conservationists' perspectives on the new-conservation debate. *Conservation Biology* 32: 353–63. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Kareiva, Peter, and Michelle Marvier. 2012. What is conservation science? *BioScience* 62: 962–69. [CrossRef]

Keen, Paul. 2014. "Imagining what we know": The humanities in a utilitarian age. *Humanities* 3: 73–87. [CrossRef]

Kirksey, Eben, ed. 2014. *The Multispecies Salon*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Latour, Bruno. 2004. Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern. *Critical Inquiry* 30: 2. [CrossRef]

Latour, Bruno. 2007. *Reassembling the Social*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lorimer, Jamie. 2015. *Wildlife in the Anthropocene: Conservation After Nature*. Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press.

Nussbaum, Martha. 2010. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Perloff, Marjorie. 2013. Crisis in the Humanities. Available online: https://www.writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/perloff/articles/crisis.html (accessed on 2 October 2023).

Plumwood, Val. 2002. *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. London: Routledge.

Pooley, Simon. 2014. Historians are from Venus, biologists are from Mars. *Conservation Biology* 27: 1481.

Redford, Kent H. 2011. Misreading the conservation landscape. *Oryx* 45: 324–30. [CrossRef]

Sandbrook, Chris, Janet A. Fisher, George Holmes, Rogelio Luque-Lora, and Aidan Keane. 2019. The global conservation movement is diverse but not divided. *Nature Sustainability* 2: 316–23. [CrossRef]

Sandbrook, Chris, William M. Adams, Bram Büscher, and Bhaskar Vira. 2013. Social science and biodiversity conservation. *Conservation Biology* 27: 1–4. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Small, Helen. 2016. *The Value of the Humanities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. First published 2013.

Soulé, Michael. 1985. What is conservation biology? A new synthetic disciplines addresses the dynamics and problems of perturbed species, communities, and ecosystems. *BioScience* 35: 727–34.

Sörlin, Sverker. 2012. Environmental Humanities: Why should biologists interested in the environment take the humanities seriously? *BioScience* 62: 788–89.

Van Dooren, Thom. 2014. *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Van Dooren, Thom, Eben Kirksey, and Ursula Münster. 2016. Multispecies studies: Cultivating arts of attentiveness. *Environmental Humanities* 8: 1–23. [CrossRef]

Wilson, Alexander. 1991. *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscapes from Disney to the Exxon Valdez*. New York: Wiley Blackwell.
Wolfe, Cary. 2009. *What Is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.