



Conservation in turbulent times

Holding the line

HEADLINES

The world is experiencing a number of serious and potentially escalating wars, a resurgence of the far right and in some places a backlash against environmental controls. There are some critical decision points over the next few months. Issues of climate change, environmental breakdown and biodiversity decline can easily be overwhelmed when other urgent crises emerge, but we don't have time to set aside these concerns until a theoretical future when things are easier. What can we do if governments lose interest in these issues? The following briefing sketches some options.

IN A TIME OF CRISIS, THE ENVIRONMENT IS LIKELY TO GET SIDELINED.

AS POLITICAL PRESSURES MOUNT, WARS ESCALATE AND THE HARD RIGHT MAKES A RESURGENCE WE NEED TO BE PLANNING NOW FOR HOW THE CONSERVATION MOVEMENT RESPONDS.

The following briefing sketches some options – places where *extra* emphasis may be needed in the next few years:

- *Build a coalition of the willing.*
- *Bring along the uncommitted.*
- *Mobilize the underutilised.*
- *Step pressure on companies and large consumers.*
- *Use the economic arguments.*
- *Challenge post-truth politics.*

Some of the implications are summarised below.

INTRODUCTION

There's a joke circulating that a porn star saved America. If only. Donald Trump could well get another presidential term, unsettling Ukraine, weakening the Palestinians and shredding environmental controls. The far right already runs several European states and support is growing in others. The EU Green New Deal is weakened by farmer backlash, particularly related to pesticide and fertilizer controls. China's economy is tottering. Amongst issues in Russia, India, the exploding Middle East and a dozen other vicious wars. For many people the crisis has already been here for some time.



AN ENVIRONMENTAL BACKLASH COULD SEE AN ESCALATION IN PROTECTED AREAS DOWNGRADING, DOWNSIZING AND DEGAZETEMENT (PADD).

Conspiracy theories flourish and politicians have learned the value of big lies.¹ Simply relying on a presentation of facts is no longer enough when a good proportion of the electorate are locked into a belief in conspiracy theories and disinformation.

The next decade is going to be difficult, possibly very difficult. Conservation will almost certainly be under increasing attack. Protected areas could become less secure, with populist leaders enacting PADD (Protected Area Downgrading, Downsizing and Degazetement)² on a large scale. Problems in the broader environment, particularly agricultural pollution, land use change and climate change, have mounting impacts, including within protected area boundaries.



Figure 1: Agreements like the ambitious Global Biodiversity Framework, signed by world leaders in late 2022, could be sidelined as a series of political crises spiral out of control.

Rather than hand-wringing, we need to think about our response as conservation professionals and activists. This briefing has been prepared to make some suggestions for actions that require *added* emphasis in the next few years.

SEVEN STEPS: WHAT WE CAN STILL DO WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

1. **Build a coalition of the willing:** strengthen and where necessary repair links with Indigenous peoples, other local communities, sympathetic industry members, sub-national governments; any group that can help deliver positive change when there may be little support from a national government.
2. **Bring along the uncommitted:** rather than worrying about people who will probably never change their minds, focus the bulk of engagement and lobbying effort on those who are sympathetic, or at least not opposed. We are likely to see some unexpected coalitions developing.



3. **Mobilize the underutilized:** create meaningful ways for currently inactive sympathisers to develop ownership and pride in protecting, restoring and growing a balanced environment, bringing urban dwellers and younger people more closely into the action.
4. **Focus on the sweet spots:** failure to reform energy and agribusiness means huge areas will stay degraded, making sanctuaries ever more vital. Not just protected and conserved areas, but a portfolio including pesticide free zones, restoration or rewilding areas, zero extraction zones, connectivity areas and more. Creating and defending these remains a priority, with precedence given to retaining the most intact ecosystems, carefully selected through systematic planning.
5. **Step up pressure on companies and large consumers:** especially those with opaque operations (food retailers buying from multiple sources, secretive finance companies), using strategic pressure on producers, retailers and civil society to build momentum for positive change.
6. **Use the economic arguments:** particularly those that save money for governments and others, like nature-based solutions and the circular economy, or highlight wasted money including a much stronger public attack on perverse incentives.
7. **Challenge post-truth politics:** we've done a poor job at skewering some of the lies, under-estimating the professionalism with which disinformation is being pushed. Better, sharper and more innovative strategies are urgently needed. Leaders of ideological resistance to conservation are often motivated by immediate financial self-interest, and corruption must be exposed.

A FOCUS ON THE SEVEN STEPS DOESN'T MEAN ABANDONING OTHER ACTION, LIKE POLITICAL LOBBYING AND LONG-TERM FIELD PROJECTS. BUT RATHER TO PINPOINT THINGS THAT ARE POSSIBLE EVEN IF GOVERNMENTS ARE DISTRACTED, UNINTERESTED OR OPPOSED TO CONSERVATION.

It's easy to make a list. All seven points need strategies, dedicated people, funding and support. Rethinking approaches is hard at a time of crisis, the earlier we start the better it will be.



Figure 2: The 12th World Wilderness Congress was co-hosted by the WILD Foundation and the Lakota people in Rapid City, South Dakota in September 2024, the first time that a major global environmental meeting has been hosted by Indigenous peoples.





Figure 4: Iconic sites like the Blue Mountains National Park in Australia, one of the oldest protected areas in the world, serve both to conserve biodiversity and to focus attention on the *need* for conservation.

There are plenty of reasons for hope. Though understandable, fear and despair are demotivating and will not sustain us through the fights ahead. Successes need to be celebrated, no matter how small they seem at the time. Renewable energy was resisted, mocked and derided by governments and industry, but it has boomed.³ Colleagues in Ukraine are defending their protected area network.⁴ Nature is very resilient;⁵ restoration is often working better than predicted and crisis can often bring out the best in individuals and communities.⁶ We need to hold our nerve.

This briefing was written by Nigel Dudley, Brent Mitchell, Sue Stolton, Hannah L. Timmins and James E.M. Watson. Reproduction is encouraged but only for non-profit purposes, with full acknowledgements. [Comments and ideas are welcome](#). Any mistakes are our own responsibility. Photos by Nigel Dudley and Sue Stolton.

Citation: Dudley, N., Mitchell, B., Stolton, S., Timmins, H.L. and Watson, J.E.M. (2024) Conservation in Turbulent Times: Holding the Line. Briefing. Equilibrium Research, Bristol, UK

Equilibrium Research. More information: www.equilibriumresearch.com.
Contact: nigel@equilibriumresearch.com

REFERENCES

-
- ¹ McIntyre, L. 2018. *Post Truth*. The MIT Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts.
 - ² Golden Kroner, R.E., Qin, S., Cook, C.N., Krithivasan, R., Pack, S.M., Bonilla, O.D. ... Mascia, M.B. 2019. The uncertain future of protected lands and waters. *Science* **364**: 881-886.
 - ³ Hassan, Q., Viktor, P., Al-Musawi, T.J., Mahmood Ali, B., Algburi, S. ... Jaszczur, M. 2024. The renewable energy role in the global energy transformations. *Renewable Energy Focus* **48**: 100545.
 - ⁴ Timmins, H.L., Petrovych, O., Drapaliuk, A., Polianska, K., Vasyliuk, O., ... Vishnevsky, D. 2023. The state of Ukraine's protected areas: An interim update on damages from the full-scale invasion. *PARKS* **29** (2): 52-63.
 - ⁵ Watson, M.J. and Watson, D.M. 2019. Post-Anthropocene Conservation. *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* **35** (1): 1-3.
 - ⁶ Solnit, R. 2009. *A Paradise Built in Hell: The extraordinary communities that arise in disaster*. Penguin Books

