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Protecting nature, freeing beings

Commentary on [Baker & Winkler](#) on *Elephant Rewilding*

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Abstract: Large-scale protection of nature is needed to address the ecological crisis. Big animals are connected with this mandate: They are threatened worldwide; they play important ecological roles; and the vast areas they require support a host of lifeforms. But visionary conservation is not only a pragmatic necessity. It is an ethical imperative, for comprehensive nature protection and restoration that supports the good life for all. The story of Asian elephants is part of this bigger story. We must find compassionate ways to free captive elephants and restore a world in which they, and countless others, may live free and flourish.

[Eileen Crist](#)'s work focuses on the extinction crisis and loss of wild places, pathways to halt these trends, and inquiries surrounding humanity's relationship with the planet. Her most recent book is titled *Abundant Earth: Toward an Ecological Civilization*. [Website](#)



The UN General Assembly has declared 2021-2030 the decade of ecosystem restoration in order to prevent, halt, and reverse the degradation of ecosystems worldwide. A climate-resilient future in which we succeed in averting the sixth extinction requires large-scale protection of the natural world, with visionary thinking in conservation and society (Noss et al. 2012; Dinerstein et al. 2019). We need to protect, restore, and reconnect ecosystems, preserving species diversity, reinstating wild population abundances, and reviving ecological complexity and full-blown evolutionary surging.

Megafauna, including carnivores and herbivores, are critical in this large-scale conservation imperative (Estes et al. 2011; Ripple et al. 2019). First, most big wild animals are endangered by habitat destruction, constriction of their ranges, hunting and poaching, habitat fragmentation, and other factors. Second, big animals play crucial roles in their ecological niches — for example, carnivores control herbivore and mesopredator populations while herbivores disperse plant seeds and fertilize soils. Third, restoring the large-bodied animals — who have expansive habitat requirements and benefit from landscape and seascape connectivity — is automatically a benediction for countless other beings who live under their protective umbrella. For all these reasons, the big wild ones deserve special attention, protection and restoration.

Large-scale conservation of nature — including the rehabilitation and flourishing of big animals who are contained within large habitats and also shape them — is not simply about achieving certain biophysical effects through restoring health, lushness, diversity, wildness, and resilience to Earth's places. It is also a matter of *multispecies justice*: Large-scale conservation serves the good of all life on Earth (Kopnina & Washington 2020; Crist 2020; Celermajer 2020). Protecting and restoring nature is critical for redefining humanity's relationship with the rest of

the world, freeing living beings to express their natural inclinations, co-exist and thrive (Kopnina 2016; Treves et al. 2019; Chapron et al. 2019). Protecting nature is not about instituting a network of protected areas within a human-run and human-dominated world (see Birch 1990). Humanity needs to downsize economically and demographically to fit in a diverse world in which all beings can have sovereignty and live out their individual and species destinies (Rees 2020).

The current moment is a historical turning point for the understanding of interconnection. We know about biophysical connections such as how a virus can spread through a human or nonhuman population, or how a species can go extinct if another species on which it depends is driven to extinction. Ecological protection and restoration of the natural world to support the good life for all — including ourselves and future generations — means that humanity must scale down and pull back, becoming a modest member of the Earth community (Crist 2019). The connection between biophysics and ethics shows that Earth’s predicament is the outcome not only of millennia of human physical occupation but of our ceaseless destruction of nonhuman lives and homes. Nonhuman autonomy and integrity have been violated not only in our actions but erased from our thought. We have made cruelty, suffering, and extinction invisible.

Baker & Winkler (2020) describe how Asian elephants (like African elephants and countless known and unknown animals) *have been wronged* (see Kopnina 2020). Their habitats have been destroyed and their ranges constricted; they have been killed for their body-parts or for being “inconvenient” animals; they have been captured (and bred) to labor in warfare and logging operations; they have been psychologically broken and physically abused in training regimens; they continue to be poached; and recently they have been repurposed, in a debased form of “ecotourism,” for people to ogle at or otherwise objectify. We call elephants “animals” — a term that Jacques Derrida struggled to deconstruct toward the end of his career as connoting a separate category-caste below the “human” (Derrida 2008; see also Chapman & Huffman 2018). We cannot delete the word “animal” from the world’s dictionaries, but we *can* redefine the words “people” and “person.”

Elephants are people. Every elephant is a person. Elephants have ways of life, kinship structures, cultures, friendships, points of view, likes and dislikes, joys and pains, and deep inclinations (including the desire to stay alive) that they want to express (Safina 2016). Just like human people. Therefore, an elephant in captivity doing work for humans — whatever that work may have been or is — is a slave. It is always better to treat a slave well than to treat a slave badly, but treating a slave relatively well does not redeem slavery.

Like all wild animals in captivity, Asian elephants should be freed. This ethical principle does not reveal how to do it: nor does it demonize all people connected with captive animals (trainers, owners, ecotourists, zoo visitors, etc.). We must gradually and safely end animals’ state of captivity while also working to abolish the institution of making animals captives. Baker & Winkler propose strategies to achieve this for captive Asian elephants with sensitivity toward both the elephants and the human people whose lives depend on them.

The entanglement of the biophysical and the ethical does not stop at the intersection of conservation and setting wild nonhuman captives free. It is also reflected in the plight of domestic farm animals, and our response to their plight. Captive elephants are not domesticated, though many may have become codependent in their state of captivity and thus require ingenious and careful steps to be set free (see McGrew 2020). But cows, pigs, sheep, goats, chickens, and turkeys are domesticated. Their genetic profiles have been substantially altered from their original wild

counterparts. For these creatures, freedom means something different: It means releasing them into a good life where they can enjoy their natural behaviors, lifecycles, and lifespans. Industrial animal agriculture is slavery, and among the basest that humans have ever invented.

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