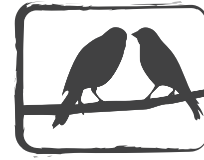

PROVOCATION

Creating Corridors for Nature Protection

Conservation Humanities as an Intervention in Contemporary European Biodiversity Strategies

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Abstract This article seeks to provoke by linking two apparently contradictory perspectives on conservation in Europe. On the one hand, in light of the consistent failures of biodiversity protection measures to live up to the ambition of conservation policy, national parks can be seen as historical relics that are no longer fit for purpose. Conservation urgently requires forms of geographical and political connectivity that do not stop at national borders. On the other hand, national understandings of what nature is and how it should be protected continue to be underapplied. Indeed, the national is a key framework within which ideas about nature are presented and its potential can be put to work. In bringing these two perspectives together, the article makes both literal and metaphorical use of a term that is integral to connectivity-based models of conservation: *the corridor*. Corridors are conduits for the movement of biota in and between ecologically protected areas such as national parks, but are also passages that facilitate the movement of ideas between disciplinary perspectives and between scholarship and policy. Both sets of movements are needed to uphold the new interdisciplinary field of conservation humanities, which can support a more nuanced discussion on the wicked problem of nature conservation.

Keywords Europe, national parks, corridors, biodiversity, conservation humanities

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Introduction

National parks are layered and often contradictory entities. In one sense, they are multiform geographical spaces, containers of particular species and environmental processes, to be understood primarily in ecological terms. In another, they are multifunctional political bodies, institutions that make and impose formal and informal rules, regulations, and other governance processes. And in a third, they are multifaceted cultural entities: ideas, symbols, and artifacts that reflect and affect broader social and cultural processes at work both within the nation and, in many cases, well beyond. These different facets of national parks may complement one another at times, but at others they are in manifest tension. In what follows, we examine some of these tensions by moving between two apparently contradictory arguments. The first is that a nation-state-based approach to national parks, while historically important, is no longer fit for purpose; from a governance perspective, the conservation issues national parks engender must be seen across a variety of different temporal and spatial scales. The second is that understandings of national parks continue to profit from the study of national imaginaries; from this cultural perspective, a seemingly counterintuitive case can be made for national parks not being national enough.

Negotiating between these perspectives can benefit from a conservation humanities approach that brings together the insights of the natural sciences on the ecological features of conservation, and social sciences work on its political and governance elements, with the cultural aspects of conservation. We take conservation humanities to be an emerging field that, broadly defined, involves the theorization and implementation of humanities-based ideas and approaches to a wide range of nature protection and restoration initiatives, while simultaneously positing the complexities of nature conservation and biodiversity loss as matters for concern in the humanities. Conservation humanities is in some ways a subset of the larger, increasingly established field of environmental humanities. However, it is also a field in its own right that addresses itself explicitly to contemporary and historical conservation challenges, including those that surround such large-scale ecological projects as national parks.[1] In linking humanities and natural sciences, the field can facilitate research that brings contradictory ideas about national parks into productive dialogue.

We draw in the following on examples from our collaborative research project, "Corridor Talk: Conservation Humanities and the Future of Europe's National Parks," which focused on three European transboundary national park conglomerates: the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve at Wadden Sea, which strings together protected areas in Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands; Bavarian Forest and Šumava National Parks, which, though products of different histories, belong to the same continuous geographic territory on the German-Czech border; and Pyrenees National Park, which is situated at

1. See Holmes et al., "Mainstreaming the Humanities in Conservation."

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the porous border between France and Spain and is part of the transboundary Pyrénées–Mont Perdu UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. While it may seem obvious that transboundary national parks require different forms of transnational cooperation than their internally situated national counterparts, they are especially well suited to showing both the limitations and the potential of a national approach to conservation. Their very complexity makes them perfect laboratories for the increasingly multiscalar and multidisciplinary approaches that are favored by contemporary European conservation strategies—strategies also echoed at broader international levels by such global bodies as the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the United Nations. While our three case studies have their transboundary location in common, they otherwise reflect a range of different European habitats, from coastal lowlands and tidal flats on the North Sea to mixed woodland and spruce forest in Central Europe and glacial lakes and mountain ranges in the Pyrenees, and they provide a cross section of the issues that dominate European conservation today.

Multiscalar perspectives become ever more critical as Europe transitions to a conservation strategy that recognizes the importance of connectivity and the reality that habitats and species have no knowledge of borders. Recent European-level conservation initiatives such as the EU's Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 build explicitly or implicitly on the insights of connectivity conservation, which emerged a few decades ago as a way of protecting and restoring ecological flows across the fragmented landscapes that exist between protected areas.[2] Conservation based on connectivity may make the most sense ecologically, but getting this approach to work in practice is a different matter. By intersecting at multiple scales, European-level strategies can end up creating friction between the supranational, national, regional, and local levels at which policies are implemented.

Recent efforts to protect habitats and species have also fallen well short of internationally agreed aims and objectives. The EU's midterm review of its Biodiversity Strategy for 2020 found that there had been "no significant progress" toward the headline target of halting biodiversity loss, while more recent evidence suggests that biodiversity loss is accelerating.[3] National parks, along with UNESCO Biosphere Reserves, are considered the cornerstones of the European Protected Area Network, yet their locations do not correspond to those areas of high biodiversity or rarity that need protection, and as such they fail to protect target species for the EU's birds and habitats directives.[4] Instead, their location has been argued to be the result of national bias, and they are more often found in those areas where reservoirs of key species may have persisted as a result of topographical features and low land conversion pressures rather than management effectiveness.[5]

2. Worboys, Francis, and Lockwood, *Connectivity Conservation Management*, 19.

3. European Commission, *Report from the Commission*; Ceballos, Ehrlich, and Raven, "Vertebrates on the Brink."

4. Hoffmann et al., "Uniqueness of Protected Areas for Conservation"; Maiorano et al., "On How Much Biodiversity Is Covered."

5. Joppa and Pfaff, "High and Far."

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One provisional conclusion that can be drawn from this is that national parks and a national governance focus on protected areas are inadequate as a key nature conservation strategy.[6] To put this more forcefully, national parks are no longer fit for purpose in the face of a rapidly changing world. In the hopeful context of ecologically defined protection zones, borderless nature, and expanding corridors that allow species to move frictionlessly across political boundaries, there would seem to be little room for the nationalist conservation that first created the various European national parks, with its overtones of national one-upmanship and clearly demarcated islands of nationally iconic landscapes.

However, such a reading fails to take account of the power of iconic national narratives and landscapes to inspire the people whose support is crucial to their protection. During the COVID-19 pandemic, as international travel was restricted, more people than ever have visited "their" national parks, strengthening the link between themselves and these supposedly "national" landscapes and underlining their importance for the health of the nation.[7] The cultural capital provided by national parks, as mediated through the arts, integrated into educational resources and museums, and experienced directly and indirectly by citizens, remains an important tool in advocating for their continued protection and for measures to mitigate biodiversity loss and improve conservation outcomes. This cultural capital is largely dependent on the regional and national frameworks in which national parks operate—on national and local languages, traditions, and institutions.

Connectivity-based approaches to conservation implicitly acknowledge the need for joined-up thinking by emphasizing transnational mobility and cooperation. Connectivity, however, also implies the bringing together of different, culturally inflected views of and approaches to conservation: a diversity that is necessary for the protection and restoration of biodiversity in the natural world. A key term in both these senses of connectivity is *the corridor*. In the context of connectivity conservation, corridors refer to the access routes through which wildlife can pass from one protected area to another. But corridors, as well as acting as literal conduits for the movement of biota in and between ecologically protected areas, also function as metaphors for the conversations needed to bridge different perspectives on conservation, which often involve multiple stakeholders working at different administrative levels and across different temporal and spatial scales.

Our research aims to open up such corridors, hence the double meaning of "Corridor Talk," which explores the issues of bounded areas and borderless conservation from three different disciplinary entry points; environmental history, visual ethnography, and comparative literature. These disciplines each offer new ways of thinking about

6. Hayes, "Parks, People, and Forest Protection"; Calvache, Prados, and Lourenço, "Assessment of National Parks Affected by Naturbanization"; Selva et al., "Misguided Forest Action."

7. McGinlay et al., "Impact of COVID-19."

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biodiversity in crisis. Environmental history contextualizes current conservation practices in the light of historical trends and shows how past contingencies shape current understandings. Visual ethnography illuminates the movement of people but also nonhuman animals through particular landscapes, revealing patterns of interaction between them as well as different understandings of place. Comparative literature opens up the affective dimension of conservation for analysis, reminding us that understanding cultural values around natural landscapes, the loss of species, and conservation initiatives is vitally important if the drive to protect and restore biodiversity is to succeed.

Our collective view is that it is only by enabling genuinely cross-disciplinary conversations between different approaches—by making space for a bigger and deeper discussion about protecting nature—that we will be able to overcome the uneven patchwork of conservation failures and frustrations that we are currently witnessing in Europe and to open up promising corridors for the conservation challenges of the future. As we show in our research, conservation humanities has the capacity to galvanize nature protection by bringing together insights from different disciplines and places, creating connections across different scales and mobilizing perceptions of protected areas that can contribute to the flourishing of threatened biodiversity. In our conversations across and between these disciplines, we can in turn create corridors of understanding that help us to move toward a greater protection of biodiversity and our natural heritage in an ecologically threatened world.

Knowing History

Engaging with the histories behind the creation of national parks contextualizes changing understandings of what needs to be protected and why.[8] The creation of national parks in the twentieth century most often depended on the successful exploitation of political expediencies. While national parks are part of a wider constellation of protected areas—spaces dedicated primarily to the conservation of nature—we focus on them here because of their high profile in public imaginations and because of their role in the history of conservation movements. From their beginnings in the late nineteenth century, European conservation movements were closely intertwined with nation-building projects.[9] What made nature worth preserving was often its association with national

8. There are several different definitions of what constitutes a "national park." Among these, the one used most often within conservation science comes from the IUCN's protected area categories system, specifically a category II protected area. This defines national parks as "large natural or near natural areas set aside to protect large-scale ecological processes, along with the complement of species and ecosystems technicalities of conservation management goals characteristic of the area, which also provide a foundation for environmentally and culturally compatible spiritual, scientific, educational, recreational and visitor opportunities." In this essay, since our focus is more on history and culture, we are defining national parks as those protected areas which are *called* "national parks," or their linguistic equivalents. This captures the fact that the vast majority of such sites in Europe were created before the IUCN's attempt to standardize definitions, as well as to emphasize their place in national histories and identities, rather than focusing on the technicalities of conservation management goals.

9. Gissibl, Höhler, and Kupper, "Towards a Global History of National Parks," 8–9.

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history or mythology. The first spaces slated for protection were those perceived to be "national" nature: iconic sites and cultural landscapes that were seen by conservationists and politicians as mirroring the character of the nation and as displaying certain kinds of "characteristic" nature through which the nation might be experienced.[10] Such monuments of nationalized nature included the Rütli meadow, the legendary birthplace of the Swiss Confederation; the romantic ruin of the Drachenfels in what was then Prussia; or the mountain lake Morskie Oko in the Tatra, a symbolic site for both the Polish and the Slovak national movements.[11] Not only specific places but also larger areas were subject to this logic. In 1909, the German conservation organization Verein Naturschutzpark was founded with the purpose of protecting landscapes seen as characteristically German. The North German lowlands were to be represented among future protected areas, along with Alpine peaks and low mountain ranges such as the Bavarian Forest.[12] This line of reasoning continued deep into the twentieth century: the 1960s campaign to establish a national park in the Bavarian Forest built on a long tradition of efforts to restore an "original" German nature.[13]

Aligning nature protection with the nation-building cause was not just the result of early European conservationists' nationalist sentiments but also a clever strategy. First and most obviously, the use of the adjective "national" in protected areas' designation tied them to the seminal example of the United States' Yellowstone National Park. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, conservationists across Europe closely followed the American experience in their own quests to establish national parks.[14] More importantly still, as Bernhard Gissibl, Sabine Höhler, and Patrick Kupper note in their essay on the global history of national parks, in an age of rampant nationalism "national" was a useful tag to attach to any cause that hoped to receive governmental and public support. It justified applying for state funding and protection; it made productive use of fears of backwardness by suggesting nature protection was something that only "civilized" nations pursued; and it mobilized patriotic sentiments by connecting the cause of conservation to nation- and state-building.[15] This was especially the case after 1918, when new states like Yugoslavia, Poland, and Czechoslovakia used nature conservation as a means to assert their national self-perception and confirm their status as civilized European nations.[16]

The legacy of conservation's close relationship with nation-building can still be felt today. One of its most conspicuous features is its continuing reliance on clearly

10. Kupper, *Wildnis schaffen*, 34–35.

11. Kupper, *Wildnis schaffen*, 35; Hoenig, *Geteilte Berge*, 49.

12. Kupper, *Wildnis schaffen*, 78; Piňosová, *Inspiration Natur*, 188.

13. Gissibl, "Der erste Transnationalpark Deutschlands, " 48.

14. See Sheail, *Nature's Spectacle*.

15. Gissibl, Höhler, and Kupper, "Towards a Global History of National Parks," 15; Piňosová, *Inspiration Natur*, 195; Kupper, *Wildnis schaffen*, 77.

16. Piňosová, *Inspiration Natur*, 197–98; Wöbse, "Framing the Heritage of Mankind,"144; Roeder, "Slovenia's Triglav National Park," 246.

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defined territories of protection. As Gissibl, Höhler, and Kupper point out, "National parks emerged in an era in which the properties of territory were instrumental for national, imperial and international policies, and in which distinct demarcations and boundaries became the hallmark of the modern nation-state."[17] Similarly, territorializing nature became one of the governing principles of nature protection. The basic unit of nature conservation was and has largely remained the protected area, with clearly defined boundaries separating it from the surrounding landscape. In its crudest incarnations, conservation even helped the nation-state assert its authority over certain territories and control what was happening there; as Wilko Graf von Hardenberg and his coauthors wryly observe, the invocation of public interest in nature preservation in fact often meant restricting the activities of at least some of that same public.[18] Without considering this history, it is hard to understand the system of protected areas existing today, which is defined by territory and boundaries.

Conservation's historical ties to nationalist agendas are an ambiguous legacy. On the one hand, it is important to acknowledge that without the early European conservationists' alliance with the national cause, many protected areas in existence in Europe today would never have been established. Throughout the twentieth century, conservationists used national sentiments to promote the cause of nature protection. They profited from clever usage of the "national" tag and from casting certain landscapes as nationally significant, which helped them drum up popular support for their protection. As Jana Piňosová shows in her study of the early conservation movement in Czech lands, Bohemian German conservationists around 1900 only achieved success when they changed their rhetoric from landscape protection to *Heimat* conservation. In contrast to the vague term *landscape*, *Heimat* emphasized the historical and cultural connections between a certain place or region and the people inhabiting it; it conscripted the emotional ties of a community to its environment for the conservation cause. In both interwar Czechoslovakia and in Germany, *Heimat* became increasingly synonymous with the nation-state, widening this sentimental attachment from a specific region to the whole state territory.[19]

On the other hand, the nature-nation connection is very much a child of its time, and many of its elements are now dated and discredited. Confining nature to isolated patches runs contrary to the principles of modern conservation, which call for structurally connected networks of protection.[20] The nation-nature complex also carries with it a burdensome legacy of instrumentalizing conservation for nationalist causes. The first half of the twentieth century saw numerous cases of unabashed misuse of protected

17. Gissibl, Höhler, and Kupper, "Towards a Global History of National Parks," 2–3.

18. Hardenberg et al., *Nature State*, 6.

19. Piňosová, *Inspiration Natur*, 23–25; Hölzl, "Naturschutz in Bayern zwischen Staat und Zivilgesellschaft, "40.

20. Ward et al., "Just Ten Percent."

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areas to lay claim to disputed territories and assert control over the other. Thus Sweden established some of its first national parks on Sami lands in 1909, fascist Italy founded a national park on formerly Austrian territory in 1935, and Nazi Germany planned a national park in the Bavarian Forest where the Czechoslovak border previously stood.[21] The creation of the national park as both a governance institution and a cultural idea allowed the state to assert its presence in troublesome or remote areas, to gain control of resources, and to assert its own stories of the landscape, to the partial or total exclusion of the people, institutions, ideas, and histories that were previously present.[22] The success of the national nature narrative has sometimes led to the promotion of an essentialist understanding of the special connection between people and landscapes, to the point of excluding purported outsiders.

The idea of nature somehow mirroring nation, however problematic, has proved hard to kill. It still echoes today among both conservationists and popular authors. In his appeal to the American public to "recommit to national parks," printed in 2016 in the *Washington Post*, the then director of the National Park Service Jonathan B. Jarvis sounded this very note when he wrote that US national parks "are a collective expression of who we are as a people" and exhorted his fellow citizens to "come and enjoy them and refresh your memory of what it means to be an American."[23] For his part, the Czech geologist and popular nature writer Václav Cílek insisted in his 2013 book *Krajiny domova* (*Landscapes of Home*) that national landscapes have an almost mystical connection to the character of their inhabitants, going so far as to claim that landscapes directly create the mentality of the people living in them.[24] Although seldom encountered in such an undiluted and unreflective form, the notion of nature having an intimate connection to the nation on whose territory it exists is alive and well, even in the twenty-first century. That may be why some, like the German biologist and ecologist Josef Reichholf, have called for doing away with the taboo on terms like *Heimat* and for a productive use of emotional attachment to nature for conservation goals.[25] The current way the national parks of Šumava and the Bavarian Forest present themselves to the public—each park anniversary in the last decade has been marked by a glossy coffee-table book featuring impossibly beautiful photographs of the park landscapes and stories in which conservationists and well-known public figures share their personal attachment to the nature the parks protect—may thus be more effective than a skeptical observer dismissing them as superficial marketing might want to admit.[26]

21. Kupper, *Wildnis schaffen*, 34; Hölzl, "Naturschutz in Bayern zwischen Staat und Zivilgesellschaft," 51–52; Stuprich, "Wie die Nationalparkidee in den Bayerischen Wald kam," 42–46.

22. Holmes, "What Is a Land Grab?," 547–67. One exception to this might be the national parks in Britain, where national parks were established after decades of land rights protests to give the urban working classes access to the countryside where land ownership was concentrated in a few, often aristocratic, hands.

23. Jarvis, "We Must Recommit to National Parks."

24. Cílek, *Krajiny domova*, 11–12, 21.

25. Reichholf, *Naturschutz*, 143.

26. Dvořák, *25 let příběhů Národního parku Šumava*; Poschinger, *Wilder Wald*.

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Seeing Conflicts

The history of European national parks reminds us of the way in which nature is refracted through emotive questions of national identity. Discourses of national nature rub up against local and regional identities and ideas about the kind of nature that should be protected. The argument that landscapes create the character of the local people that inhabit them has played out recently in the ongoing, high-octane debate around the reintroduction of brown bears in the French Pyrenean mountains. This discourse is framed—and also ratcheted up—by the media in terms of the local versus the nonlocal, which is in turn part of a wider debate in European conservation over who or what gets to be considered local and whose voice counts.[27] In this case, the local is the Pyrenean sheep farmer whose fragile livelihood is threatened by the bear and who is anxious about the constant possibility of attacks on his flock. The nonlocal is often the person from the big city (Bordeaux or Toulouse are the most prominent examples) who knows nothing of life in the mountains and what it means to live with the bears. In this narrative, particular disdain is reserved by locals for the French national government, which organized the bear reintroduction but is buffered from its consequences, sitting as it does at the center of political power a thousand kilometers to the north.

Ongoing research into this particular case study suggests that while there are elements of truth in the binary distinctions proffered by the media, the reality is far more complex.[28] We conducted over thirty interviews using walking methods in the Pyrenees during 2021 and 2022. These revealed far greater nuances in attitudes to wild spaces and wild species than the media would have us believe. There are local sheep farmers who are in favor of the reintroduction and nonlocal visitors who would gladly hunt the bears back to extinction. There are local hunters who describe themselves as "écolo" (environmentalists) and nonlocal farmers visiting the area who talk of the failure of the hunting community to manage wild animal numbers. What was most evident is that defining a single national perspective on the national park and the conservation policies played out within and beyond its borders is simply not possible.[29] Attempts at the national level to define key elements of future conservation practice in the Pyrenees have only served to highlight cultural differences within the French nation.

At the international level, the IUCN promotes the conservation and restoration of bear populations where they are threatened, warning that the drawing of boundaries, even those as simple as fencing off an area of cropland, can in fact exacerbate rather than alleviate conflict.[30] The traditional conservation response to protecting

27. von Essen and Allen, "Taking Prejudice Seriously," 543–61.

28. Piédallu et al., "Spatial Variation in Public Attitudes"; Carruthers-Jones and Holmes, "Immersive Walking Methods."

29. Clarimont, "La patrimonialisation des espaces naturels en débat."

30. "IUCN SSC Position Statement on the Management of Human-Wildlife Conflict," IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC) Human-Wildlife Conflict Task Force, https://www.lcie.org/Publications (accessed November 2, 2023). https://professionnels.ofb.fr/fr/node/871 (accessed November 6, 2023).

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biodiversity has been the exact opposite of this. The small size of national parks, especially in Europe, and the fragmented nature of the landscapes in which they are situated undermine such a static approach to the long-term conservation of threatened species. The situation is further complicated by the differing origins and management of the national parks, divided as they are by national borders. When Pyrenees National Park was created in 1967, it happened in the face of significant resistance from the local population, who saw it as a barrier to economic (specifically, tourism) development in an area where employment opportunities were limited. The creation of a national park at a time when so much human activity was already present proved especially challenging—a challenge replicated in the shape of the park boundaries. The majority of the park consists of a buffer or *zone d'adhésion* where there are few restrictions on activity, leaving the core area as a fragmented margin confined to the higher reaches of the mountain chain and the border with Spain, where economic pursuits are for the most part not feasible in any case.

Adjacent across the border, the Spanish national park Ordesa y Monte Perdido was formed out of a hunting reserve in 1936, an area that was already set aside for nature to thrive even if the wildlife there was to be hunted. This historical background, combined with the much less accessible terrain, means that the Spanish park has remained notably wilder, less developed and with a richer biodiversity. Beyond the topographical constraints, there are also national differences in the way the parks are managed, with the Spanish side taking a more species-oriented focus to conservation compared to the French side, which has traditionally focused on landscape and habitats. This distinction was highlighted at a workshop in Planes de Son in the Spanish Pyrenees in 2013, which brought together conservation practitioners from both parks around the theme of corridors and connectivity.[31] In opposition to the Spanish park, the French park representatives refused to entertain any strategy aimed at boosting large carnivore populations, fearing the unpopularity of such a move and preferring instead to favor a landscape restoration approach. Ultimately these national differences in approaches to protected area governance and conservation strategy were responsible for the failure of the Great Mountain Corridor (GMC) initiative, which had aimed to create an unfragmented area across two hundred thousand square kilometers stretching from Northern Portugal to the Alps. The idea of this initiative had been inspired by the arrival of wolves from northern Italy in the eastern Pyrenees in the late 1990s. The GMC had been meant to support the natural movement of species, allowing the new wolf population to reach resident populations in northern Spain and, in so doing, restoring a lost species to the Pyrenees. In spite of the political failure to restore landscape connectivity across this extensive area, the wolves are continuing their explorations, blissfully unaware of national or protected area boundaries.[32]

31. Salvo et al., *Directrices*.

32. "Loup gris, une espèce en recolonisation," French Office for Biodiversity,

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The most significant recent attempt at the regional scale to address the challenge of cooperation and fragmented protected areas within the Pyrenees was the creation of a transboundary UNESCO World Heritage site in the 1990s. The UNESCO Gavarnie–Mont Perdu site, which operates across the French and Spanish national parks, signaled an attempt to bring them together as a single entity on condition that they develop a joint management plan going forward. While this produced more collaboration, a lack of full cooperation or delivering on their joint commitments meant that the site has recently been threatened with being placed on the UNESCO endangered site list.

Multiple interconnected strands are clearly identifiable in the fabric of these complex landscapes as different species, both human and nonhuman, move within and across the boundaries of the Pyrenees and Ordesa y Monte Perdido national parks. From the nonhuman side, the Pyreneen bear population goes where it will, having no awareness of designated boundaries. The bears' movement decisions are based primarily on the physical geography of the landscape and the suitability of the habitat this offers them. One male bear, recently reintroduced on the Spanish side of the Pyrenees, promptly crossed over to the French side and stayed there.[33] One interviewee who works on bear conservation observed that if we look at a map of bear presence in the French Pyrenees, the bears are most likely to be found outside of the Pyrenees National Park. They speculated that this is a reflection of the limited size of the park as well as the fact that it concentrates human pressure into small areas. This realization only serves to reinforce the friction between the ecological aims of parks and their goal to provide spaces for humans, and it highlights the need for networks of strongly protected areas which would deliver on ecological goals and dilute the degree of human influence.

Another phenomenon clearly at odds with the fixed spatial boundaries of both the French and the Spanish national parks is the historical grazing rights afforded to shepherds. Transhumance, in fact, is one of the few activities that functionally links Ordesa y Monte Perdido National Park in Spain and Pyrenees National Park in France. This seasonal movement of grazing animals, which allows Spanish shepherds to make use of the greener pastures available on the French side at the end of the summer, is a tradition that predates the creation of the modern French state. Traditions of this type often codevelop, emerging out of necessity. They require the kind of situated discussions that include all of the local and nonlocal voices, not just those who shout the loudest on the national stage. This may go a long way to explaining why they persist harmoniously with minimal intervention over long time frames and without the need for policy objectives or conservation management.

Imagining Nature

The different ways in which European national parks have historically been claimed as part of a national identity and remain dogged by simplistic national narratives of localized disputes, are linked by their genesis in and alongside collective imaginaries of place.

33. "Réseau Ours brun."

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Historically, the imagination of national nature has been a key driver in the way that conservation areas have been designated and protected. In current disputes around conservation and land use, shared as well as more openly conflicting ideas about how nature is and should be preserved stoke the flames of discord. Understanding the ways that national parks stake out an imaginative territory is important in advocating for their continued role in international conservation policy. National parks, after all, are more than physical landscapes that allow a limited number of people access as residents, tourists, stakeholders, or conservation workers; they have a broader cultural function in their custodianship of important terrain in collective imaginaries of place. Many people will never visit national parks in the countries where they live, but their sense of local, national, or indeed European identity will nonetheless be informed by prevailing cultural ideas about the nature that surrounds them. Literary works that engage with conservation and protected areas can be an important part of the way these ideas, and the identities they shape, are formed and transformed.[34]

There is a fundamental tension between the aims of nature protection (keeping humans at a distance) and the mediation of national parks as tourist attractions (dependent on human visitors). National park resources aimed at the general public usually take the form of visitor centers, museums, walking tours, picnic sites, and public events; aimed at people coming to visit the physical space of the park, they have a mission to educate them about the importance of the protected area and its ecology. The ongoing coronavirus pandemic and associated restrictions on travel have illustrated the power of the national parks as physical resources. James McGinlay and his coauthors note the ways in which national parks and other protected areas across Europe saw increased visitor numbers during the pandemic as people sought solace in nature and an outdoor (and therefore COVID-safe) travel opportunity, creating problems of overcrowding, antisocial behavior, and increased tension between the aims of nature protection and accessibility. As the authors conclude, "The large influxes of visitors during the periods when lockdown regulations were more relaxed demonstrates the importance of such landscapes to people and their well-being, all the more so during this period of the health crisis."[35] Strategies deployed by the parks themselves, however, tended to revolve around managing the flow of tourists and educating people about how to behave better. They did not consider the ways in which people might engage with national parks without traveling at all.

As Hardenberg and his coauthors point out, writing about the genesis of national parks, "The purported public interest was anchored in benefits that could be material

34. The Lake District in Great Britain, a national park since 1951, is a famous example of interplay between landscape conservation and its literary imagination. The Lake District was a source of inspiration for English Romantics such as William Wordsworth, Dorothy Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who in turn shaped understandings of the English landscape. Its preservation as a protected landscape was in part due to H. B. Heelis, better known as the writer and illustrator Beatrix Potter. See Kelly, "Women Who Saved the English Countryside," 77–84.

35. McGinlay, "Impact of COVID-19," 11.

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or symbolic."[36] If we take as a given the important symbolic role of national parks, then provision must also be made for the role of the symbolic in human attachment to and protection of their ecologies. The mediation of the symbolic nature represented by national parks is currently undertheorized, particularly with respect to what it contributes to conservation discussions. The basic paradox at the heart of national park conservation—that national parks are built on, and depend upon, public interest but simultaneously require protection from human activity—is neatly summarized by literary scholar Bernhard Malkmus in his recent work on the Bavarian Forest National Park:

> Conservation areas such as national parks must be protected from direct human intervention, as far as this is still possible, because the cultural landscape is lacking a network of robust ecosystems. But at the same time, individuals must be afforded emotional access to the web of life, because this is just about the only place where inhabitants of the agro-industrial world can still experience this.[37]

Malkmus emphasizes the importance of national parks in facilitating emotional access to the web of life. However, his insight offers no solution for how national parks can serve as educational places without exposing them to ever greater human activity, even if it is by visiting them that humans acquire the knowledge (and humility) needed to protect them in the future. Marjoleine de Vos advocates for the role of cultural and historical knowledge in understanding a landscape, implying that perhaps this kind of understanding requires cultural artifacts as much as the physical landscape itself.[38] Meanwhile, Adrian Howkins has written compellingly about researching, and deeply understanding, a landscape through both visiting and not visiting, and how that influences our understanding of a particular place. He argues that "experience of an environment can certainly contribute to understanding" but, conversely, not being in the environment in question can heighten the awareness of its connections with other places.[39] While Howkins writes in the context of historical (mostly archival) research, we believe this notion is also applicable to understanding landscape in a cultural sense, and here literature emerges as a resource to accessing landscape as imaginative terrain as well as physical space. We do not propose that national parks should be free from visitors, nor do we want to glorify the idea of a pure, untouched wilderness.[40] Rather, our view is that in cultivating the imaginative resources of a nationally significant landscape, national parks have a further point of access which engages specifically the potential of the park's "web of life" to inspire imaginatively. Our research into national parks not just as physical places but as abstracted sites of exchange for cultural ideas

36. Hardenberg et al., *Nature State*, 6; emphasis ours.

37. Malkmus, "Lernorte des Lebens," 212.

38. de Vos, *Je keek te ver*, 8.

39. Howkins, "'Have You Been There?,'" 516–17.

40. William Cronon's feted essay is clear about the trouble with wilderness: see Cronon, "Trouble with Wilderness," 69–90.

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about nature, natural history, national belonging, and environmental change opens up potential for a mediation of national parks that is not dependent on visitor footfall.[41] The sense of cultural identity invoked by national parks can be local, but it is also often national, refracted through the many tools that uphold nationhood: language, literature, museums, school curricula, art. Research that links conservation agendas with questions of heritage and identity advocates in this way for the value of national landscape imaginaries, without linking them to the exclusive nationalist ideas of yesteryear. It highlights the ways in which they can be harnessed in the service of conservation agendas, even when those agendas—as we have been arguing in this essay—require multiscalar approaches that extend well beyond national, still less nationalist, goals.

Literary studies is one academic discipline that offers insights into the cultural imagination of landscape. This is tied up with linguistic and cultural traditions that are fundamentally national in nature. For example, scholarship on the Wadden Sea coasts in the literary imagination shows how literary works in various national languages reflect and construct ideas about the history and future of the Wadden Sea, which is currently protected in a contiguous set of five national parks belonging to Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands, contained within an overarching UNESCO biosphere reserve.[42] Literary texts that generate, uphold, or question ideas about this collective landscape are inseparable from the national literary traditions to which they belong. They represent an interaction over time between the physical spaces of the environment and the societies and cultures that choose either to protect or exploit. Such texts invite reflection on the function of the national—national literatures, national natures—in ongoing debates about nature, nature conservation, and the symbolic role of national parks in particular. At the same time, in the Wadden Sea context, local language traditions and literature (such as texts written in Frisian dialects) stake a claim for a local cultural identity that is tied to quite a different imaginary to the national one, making use of different borders and markers. Our recent creation of syllabus elements for teaching the Wadden Sea National Park as part of university history and literature courses represents just one way in which national parks can be engaged that does not immediately direct people toward the nearest visitor center but rather draws on a shared imagination of physical place in confronting issues of vulnerability, biodiversity loss, and cultural heritage.[43]

Literary texts that engage with ecological processes, biodiversity loss, and conservation do not just record changing human understandings of national park natures; they

41. We acknowledge that engagement with stories and narratives about national parks may end up also encouraging more people to visit. See Riemersma, "Een aandachtsluwe Waddenzee."

42. Ritson, *Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands*; Ritson and de Smalen, "Imagining the Anthropocene with the Wadden Sea"; Ritson and Dora, "Perspectives on German Ecocriticism."

43. To access the teaching tool, see Literature and the Wadden Sea: A Resource for Creating a Wadden Sea Literature Syllabus, https://waddensealiterature.com (accessed November 5, 2023). For a commentary on the thinking behind this tool and its future development, see also de Smalen and Ritson, "Literature and the Wadden Sea."

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also help to change the way iconic and fragile landscapes are imagined, including by those who are not generally considered to be stakeholders by those involved in conservation policy and implementation. Literary explorations of national park nature redeploy the national-cultural ideas that stood behind the initial creation of national parks, but they enable these to be adjusted and reinvented for our current moment of climate crisis. They thus provide a valuable means of accessing conservation areas that sidestep physical infrastructure, creating imaginative corridors for ideas to move between conservation practice and collective ideas about the kind of nature that requires protection into the future.

Conclusion

In the light of current EU biodiversity strategy, which has lent weight to the creation of ecological corridors that link up larger areas set aside for conservation and thereby encourage the flourishing of species across national and local borders, our work points at the myriad ways in which human perceptions of conservation are unfolding, and shows the tensions in which these are mired. Our research shows the equal need for other, symbolic kinds of corridors: connections that allow ideas about nature to travel and to thrive. The contradictory nature of national parks, as areas for nature protection, sites of national importance, tourist destinations, and (perhaps most importantly) places where humans and nonhumans live and interact, can only be managed effectively through such corridors of understanding. The connections between and across the three disciplinary areas outlined above show the importance of a conservation humanities approach that is attentive to the different scalar registers on which national park conservation operates, and to the different aspects of national parks as geographical, political, and cultural phenomena. In particular, this approach is useful for shedding light on the relationship between these different scales and aspects, and in opening up some of the tensions that these multiple differences raise: between promoting and criticizing national and regional narratives, between acknowledging and overcoming the histories of conflict, between allowing for nonhuman agencies and protecting against them.

We believe that our work in conservation humanities can be part of a broad front that creates the networked spaces needed to mediate between the bounded areas maintained by conservation scientists, academics, and policymakers, and can thus make a valuable contribution to the success of the EU's biodiversity strategy for decades to come.

The relationships we are fostering with each other, with other researchers, with national parks in seven different countries, with the conservation science community, and with a variegated public of students, tourists, local stakeholders, and policymakers all provide a model for conservation humanities work and will continue to bear fruit long after the formal end of our research project. The partnerships and initiatives we are creating are in turn examples for the kinds of connections we envisage. These link up humanities disciplines with each other and with the wider world and allow a diversity of ideas to travel in different directions that transcend national, disciplinary, and

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imaginative boundaries. The EU's Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 ambitiously calls for a step change in understandings of and attitudes toward modern conservation practice. We are convinced that conservation humanities, and the corridors it opens up, can be a driving force behind this change.

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