“Compassionate Conservation” is Neither Compassionate nor Conservation

It’s a cult founded on ecological illiteracy

TED WILLIAMS
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Red-footed boobies returning to Palmyra National Wildlife Refuge after rat eradication, Pl courtesy of Island Conservation.

by Ted Williams

“Compassionate conservation” -- decades old, but named in 2013 -- is an increasing popular mindset (advocates prefer “new approach to conservation biology”). It focu on individual animals at the expense of species and native ecosystems. Practitioner imagine and proclaim that conservation goals can be achieved without lethal contr of invasive (usually alien) species.

One of the high priests of compassionate conservation is Mark Davis who, while nc proselytizing, teaches biology at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. In his book *Invasion Biology* and elsewhere he promotes and celebrates alien, invasive spec as beneficial.

"We've declared war on invasive species," laments Davis. "And usually when the U. declares war on something, the only thing that's guaranteed is spending a lot of money."

Davis is the lead coauthor among 19 in a missive entitled “Don't judge species on t origins” published in the journal *Nature*: “Increasingly,” they write, “the practical v of the native-versus-alien species dichotomy in conservation is declining, and even becoming *counterproductive* [my emphasis]. Yet many conservationists still consider distinction a core guiding principle… Over the past few decades, 'non-native' specie have been vilified for driving beloved 'native' species to extinction and generally polluting 'natural' environments.”

Tamarisk is an alien, invasive shrub that dries up streams, erodes soil, increases frequency and severity of wildfires, and crowds out native vegetation thereby depri wildlife of food, cover and breeding habitat. But Davis *et al* portray it as beneficial because willow flycatchers, deprived by tamarisk of natural nesting habitat, nest instead in tamarisk.

Honeysuckle is an alien, invasive climbing shrub that crowds out and shades out native vegetation, compacts soil, robs soil of nutrients, destroys wildlife habitat,

increases frequency and severity of wildfires, disrupts water flow and provides habi for disease-bearing ticks.

But Davis *et al* portray honeysuckle as beneficial, proclaiming that: "In Pennsylvani more non-native honeysuckles mean more native bird species. Also, the seed disper of native berry-producing plants is higher in places where non-native honeysuckles most abundant."

No alien species superimposed on a native ecosystem ever "benefitted" it. Native ecosystems are priceless resources unto themselves, and they're flickering out beca humans pollute them with aliens. Even in those rare cases in which the aliens do lit damage, the ecosystems cease to be native and are therefore lost.

The ruminations of Davis *et al* in *Nature* appalled 141 eminent wildlife scientists wh in their rebuttal, rebuked the authors for "assail[ing] strawmen" and "downplay[ing] the severe impact of non-native species that may not manifest for decades after the introduction -- as occurred with the Brazilian pepper shrub (*Schinus terebinthifolius*) Florida."

"Also," they continued, "some species may have only a subtle immediate impact but affect entire ecosystems, for example through their effect on soils. Pronouncing a newly introduced species as harmless can lead to bad decisions about its manageme A species added to a plant community that has no evolutionary experience of that organism should be carefully watched. For some introductions, eradication is possi For example, 27 invasive species have been eradicated from the Galapagos Islands, mitigating severe adverse effects on endemic species. Harmful invasive species hav been successfully kept in check by biological, chemical and mechanical means."

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Conservationists who are truly compassionate, such as staffers of Island Conservati eradicate alien, invasive rodents on islands with the anti-coagulant rodenticide

brodifacoum, thereby saving and restoring millions of imperiled seabirds.

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Before the 1975 introduction of brodifacoum, killing all rodents on almost any island, let al one like South Georgia, was inconceivable.

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Such salvation is anathema to promoters and practitioners of compassionate conservation who assert that alien invasives like mice and rats are endowed with "personhood" and are "sentient beings" that should not be killed for any reason.

Here are just a few of the comments I've received from compassionate conservationists after reporting on the spectacularly successful projects (many led b Island Conservation) which have restored native ecosystems to at least 1,000 islands around the world:

"There has to be a better way." "The non-native species didn't ask to be put there." "Other [nontarget] wildlife will die." "Killing one species in favor of another is wron "Poisoning animals is cruel." "Island Conservation is playing God."

There is no "better way"; in fact, there is no *other* way. That "non-native species did ask to be put there" is no reason to allow them to remain and thereby usher native species into oblivion.

"Other wildlife" may indeed "die." Never has this nontarget by-kill had a significant lasting effect on a native population. What's more, as recovery strategies evolve, nontarget by-kill diminishes.

"One species" has *never* been killed "in favor of another"; *individuals* of alien species have been killed to save entire native ecosystems.

"Poisoning [alien] animals" is nowhere near as cruel as allowing native wildlife to starve, have their eggs, broods or litters consumed, or be slowly gnawed to death.

Finally, correcting our past mistakes (instead of sitting on our hands and watching native ecosystems get trashed as a result of those mistakes) is not "playing God."

A Team Rat technician fills a bait bucket on South Georgia Island. Photo by Tony Martin

For a quarter century the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service vainly attempted eradicatio of alien, invasive house mice on the Farallon Islands National Wildlife Refuge 30 m seaward of San Francisco. The project would have saved the ashy storm-petrel from possible extinction and restored original productivity to the largest seabird colony i the contiguous states.

But in 2024 Farallon mouse eradication was abandoned because of opposition from compassionate conservationists who objected to possible minor by-kill of superabundant California gulls and fretted about “cruelty” to house mice. As it is, about 95 percent of the mice starve to death every winter, then proliferate every spr swarming over the islands until the ground undulates.

Among the shrillest opponents of Farallon mouse eradication were the Ocean Foundation, Animal Legal Defense Fund, Wildcare and former Wildcare employee Maggie Sergio who started a global petition against the project. As of February 14, 2025 she had 40,191 signatures from people who don’t read or think beyond the wor “poison.”

If compassionate conservationists had their way, the most spectacular seabird recov project ever accomplished would not have happened. In May 2018 the UK's subantarctic South Georgia Island -- strewn with glaciers, ravines and jagged, ice-bound peaks, many over 6,500 feet high -- was declared rat-free. It had been infested with alien, invasive brown rats that disembarked from whaling ships. They'd been eating seabird eggs and chicks since the 1800s.

A brown rat on South Georgia Island before brodifacoum treatments. Photo by Paul Sulliva

Team Rat, consisting of Island Conservation, the South Georgia Heritage Trust and organizations and biologists from around the world, used helicopters to drop 300 metric tons of brodifacoum-laced grain bait (unpalatable to almost all birds) across island's 1,450 square miles. The project, eight times the size of the second largest successful rodent eradication, took a decade and cost $13.5 million.

Before the 1975 introduction of brodifacoum, killing all rodents on almost any islan let alone one like South Georgia, was inconceivable.

The rats had eliminated 90 percent of South Georgia's birdlife. Even the wandering albatross, with a wingspan longer than any other bird on earth, was unable to defen its eggs and chicks.

Prior to rat infestation, the island sustained 33 bird species and had been the planet richest seabird nesting habitat. Now it's close to regaining that status.

Before brodifacoum treatments, the South Georgia pipit (the only songbird in the Antarctic) had been virtually extirpated. Today there are so many South Georgia pip that their vocalizing drowns out the roaring and grunting of elephant seals.

In 2011, Island Conservation, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and The Nature Conservancy partnered to eradicate brown rats that had destroyed the entire native ecosystem including the forest of Palmyra Atoll National Wildlife Refuge, 1,000 mil west of Hawaii.

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Compassionate conservation proselytizer Animal Aid is fine with the fact that alien, invasi house mice on Gough are pushing Tristan albatrosses toward extinction by slowly gnawing them to death.

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The project has been a stunning success. The refuge reports a new forest, hundreds recovered native species and "population explosions" of dragonflies and crickets as well as thousands of sooty tern fledglings during each breeding season, compared v a couple of hundred during rat years. Guam kingfishers had been extinct in the wilc since 1988. But in September 2024 four females and five males were released on the refuge. If compassionate conservationists had their way, Palmyra would still be a brown rat sanctuary.

This from compassionate conservationist proselytizer Animal Aid, based in the UK "We are shocked that this well-respected organization [the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds] would resort to such unthinkably cruel tactics. Mice have been Gough Island for more than a century and this sudden urgency to eradicate them us such cruel methods seems disproportionate."

Animal Aid is fine with the fact that alien, invasive house mice on Gough are pushi Tristan albatrosses toward extinction by slowly gnawing them to death.

A Tristan albatross chicks being eaten alive by alien, invasive house mice on Gough Island. Photo © MJones

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Another high priest of compassionate conservation is Arian Wallach of the Centre f Compassionate Conservation, University of Technology Sydney, Australia. In a polemic for the journal *Conservation Biology* entitled "Recognizing animal personho in compassionate conservation" Wallach and 23 coauthors submit that alien invasiv should never be killed because, not only are they "sentient beings," they're "persons

"Compassionate conservation," write Wallach *et al*, "in contrast [to cruel agencies a organizations that kill alien invasives] recognizes that the interests and agency of al sentient beings should be protected in conservation practice. In other words, sentie beings are persons."

The piece horrified trained wildlife professionals. Responding with a rebuttal entitl "The Fatal Flaws of Compassionate Conservation" were Meera Anna Oommen of India's Dakshin Foundation and 11 coauthors who wrote: "Compassion need not

preclude humanely killing an animal if that reduces the animal's suffering, enhance the survival of the species or its habitat, or safeguards human life or other more threatened species. But Wallach *et al* argue that to be compassionate, one should nc kill animals for any reason."

After brown rat eradication, thousands of sooty terns are again breeding on Palmyra Natio Wildlife Refuge. Photo © Susan White/USFWS

House cats and other alien invasives have caused the extinction of 142 vertebrate species worldwide. In Australia, feral and free-ranging house cats kill about 15 billi native animals per year.

At least as much house-cat-caused carnage happens in the U.S. The bird kill alone r be as high as 4 billion annually, according to a Smithsonian study.

The Aussies are succeeding with control of house cats because they deploy fast-acti poison in boxes accessible only to house cats. Americans, blighted with the compassionate-conservation mindset, refuse to do this, so they fail.

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I am (at least until this piece makes the rounds) a member of a group called Wildlife All. When I shared my piece "The Scourge of Feral Cats" on our listserve I was curs from hell to breakfast for my title. Few members read beyond it.

One woman wrote: "Your use of the word 'scourge' for feral domestic cats implies t cats are to blame for being cats." When I asked her how she could possibly have hatched such a notion she declined to answer.

Another woman wrote: "I think there's a way to communicate this important messa without demonizing feral cats."

One woman who did read beyond my title (though without comprehension) whippe up listserve hysteria by falsely claiming I had voiced "support" for poisoning cats. " support of poisoning animals," she wrote, "is repulsive and should not be tolerated condoned, especially by a group claiming to advocate for wildlife."

Her post elicited this response from yet another woman: "Please remove me from tl group as I do not want to be associated with anyone who calls cats a 'scourge' or approves of poisoning cats."

Nothing in my piece "approved of" or "supported" poisoning cats. Nothing in my piece "demonized feral cats." I expressed no opinion. The piece was not an editorial was a feature in which I reported documented facts.

One of those facts, proven by America, is that feral cats can't be controlled without selective poisoning. This is a fact that the compassionate conservationists I heard f don't want to know. I wish it were not a fact just as I wish that birds didn't die from bird flu or from flying into buildings. But facts about wildlife need to be reported, e (maybe especially) if they're "depressing" and "bad news."

A Wildlife for All moderator upbraided me as follows: “Ted, you have continued to escalate these tensions, and it is not productive or acceptable.”

I “escalated” nothing. I posted only responses, none of which were uncivil or inaccurate.

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Zebra mussels are also a scourge, but compassionate conservationists have never scolded m any other writer for identifying them as such. That’s because zebra mussels are cold, furless, tailless, legless and eyeless.

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How many more North American birds do feral cats need to kill before qualifying a “scourge” for Wildlife-for-All compassionate conservationists? There must be a poi where the definition kicks in. Would it be 8 billion, 16 billion, 32 billion, 64 billion? More?

Zebra mussels are also a scourge, but compassionate conservationists have never scolded me or any other writer for identifying them as such. That’s because zebra mussels are cold, furless, tailless, legless and eyeless.

In an attempt to be patient and polite, I engaged in a week-long email exchange wit the woman who imagined I had “blamed cats for being cats” and who CCed her voluminous complaints about the title of my feral-cat piece to members, including moderators.

Finally, I attempted to end our unproductive correspondence with this: “You’ve stat that you find the facts I report ‘depressing’ and define them as ‘bad news.’ If, as you say, you ‘pick and choose’ what you read, why don’t you pick and choose good news about fish and wildlife? Granted, there’s not much of it these days, but I’m sure you could find some in less time than you spend reading and vetting my copy, then writ

long grievances about it which are mostly incomprehensible to me and, I'll venture, the people you CC them to. Think of the time you waste when you could just delete link and scroll down."

But she got the last word, correcting my statement that she had read and vetted my feral cat piece. She hadn't actually *read* it, she explained. She'd just somehow divine what was in it. Such is compassionate conservation in action.

***"If compassionate conservation is adopted, culling invasive species would cease, leading to rapid extinction of more vulnerable native species." -- Stephen Khan, editor of the Australia journal* The Conversation.**

As I write (February 14, 2025) members of Wildlife for All are perusing (and I expect rhapsodizing about) a "study" posted on our listserve four days ago entitled "Compassionate conservation in practice: A values-driven, interdisciplinary, pluralistic, and deliberative community."

The text is rife with similar technobabble, but central points are discernable in this passage: "The sentience of individual animals is a strong motivation for aligning values and actions in conservation. Overall, this is to protect the interests of indivic animals as well as to counteract the *over-emphasis* [my emphasis] in collectives (e.g., populations, species, ecosystems)."

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Most Aussies are having none of it. In a piece published by the Australian journal *T Conversation* and entitled "'Compassionate conservation': just because we love invas animals, doesn't mean we should protect them," editor Stephen Khan writes: "The federal government recently announced it will commit to a new ten-year threatenec

species strategy, focused on eradicating feral pests such as [alien, invasive] foxes an [alien, invasive house] cats. This approach goes against the principles underpinning compassionate conservation… Well, invasive animals -- those either intentionally or accidentally moved to a new location -- are one of the biggest threats to global biodiversity.

"If compassionate conservation is adopted, culling invasive species would cease, leading to the rapid extinction of more vulnerable native species… There is public backlash over the culling of brumbies [feral horses], yet there is no such response to the removal of feral pigs, despite both species having similarly negative impacts on protected habitats."

In the U.S. feral horses are sacrosanct, protected as if they were native wildlife. Cul them Aussie-style is unthinkable and illegal. The Bureau of Land Management (BL reports that there may be as many as 85,249 feral horses and feral burros on public lands, at least three times what it claims is the "sustainable level." On all lands ther are about 400,000.

Unmanaged feral horse populations increase by 20 percent annually. And what the feds call "wild horse management" is nothing of the sort. That's thanks to the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971, sold to Congress by "Wild Horse Anni It mandates the BLM to manage feral horses so as "to achieve and maintain a thrivi natural ecological balance." That task is impossible. Despite compassionate conservation fantasies, alien invasives cannot thrive or even exist in "natural ecological balance."

Somehow there has never been a "Wild Hog Annie," though we routinely cull feral hogs.

So America spends something like $200 million annually rounding up roughly 20,0 feral horses and placing them on perpetual welfare. Such is compassionate conservation in action.

Horses and burros are the only ungulates extant in the North American wild with s hooves and meshing upper and lower teeth. Most native vegetation can't deal with that.

In some "wild horse management areas" BLM goals call for only 15 or 20 feral horse when its own science tells it that 100 is the threshold for genetic viability. These marginal herds aren't being zeroed out because of our compassionate-conservation mindset.

This from Dave Pulliam, former Nevada Department of Wildlife habitat chief: "Hor will stand over a spring and run off other animals. In desert country, seeps and spri are the most important habitats for a whole myriad of species --sagebrush-obligate birds, mule deer, bighorns, pronghorns, everything. And feral horses absolutely bea springs into mud holes. But our wildlife constituents don't get as vociferous as the horse lovers."

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Somehow there has never been a "Wild Hog Annie," though we routinely cull feral hogs.

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There are no "wild horses" in North America, only escaped and abandoned livestoc and their descendants. But invariably, every published celebration of "wild horses" makes three erroneous assertions: 1. that all claims of ecological damage done by "v horses" issue from the cattle industry which lusts for more grassland (most feral ho infest range that can't support cattle); 2. that "wild horses" are beneficial to native ecosystems because they aerate the earth; and 3. that "wild horses" are "native wildlife" deserving protection under the Endangered Species Act.

The main source of this last fantasy is compassionate conservation guru Jay Kirkpatrick who bases the assertion on the fact that a much smaller and very differe equid inhabited North America before going extinct with the rest of the ice-age

megafauna. Assigning native status to feral domestic horses because an extinct equ was native to North America 12,000 years ago makes as much sense as assigning na status to Indian elephants because North America once sustained mastodons.

Compassionate conservation is all the rage on social media. One of the more offens and recycled memes is entitled "Wild horses and burrows [*sic*] are digging wells, giv water to parched wildlife."

Does the American public really believe that feral horses and feral burros are good what ails the earth because the odd native critter sometimes drinks rainwater from their gougings in otherwise intact wildlife habitat? Yes, as evidenced by the enthusiastic effusions from Facebook commentators.

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Eastern bluebirds, once imperiled, are surging back because DDT was banned and because people have been putting up bluebird nesting boxes. Inch-and-a-half-diam entrance holes exclude alien, invasive European starlings and, with a few exception cowbirds (native to the West but alien and invasive in the East). The holes do not exclude alien, invasive English sparrows.

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I don't believe that English sparrows are "persons" or that they should not be killed for any reason or that by humanely euthanizing them I am being

"counterproductive" and placing "over-emphasis" on the eastern bluebird species.

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In my field I have a dozen bluebird nest boxes, and I tend 70 more on a nearby community farm, town conservation land and an island in southern New Hampshir English sparrows break the bluebird eggs and peck bluebird hatchlings to death.

I don't believe that English sparrows are "persons" or that they should not be killed any reason or that by humanely euthanizing them I am being "counterproductive" a placing "over-emphasis" on the eastern bluebird species.

I do agree that English sparrows "didn't ask to be here." But they are here, and if I d not euthanize adults and hatchlings, the bluebird loss would be many times greater than it is. Moreover, English sparrows would imprint to the bluebird boxes, multiplying like a virus.

Herewith, I invite practitioners and advocates of compassionate conservation to accompany me on my rounds -- inspecting bluebird eggs broken by English sparrov and inspecting remains of bluebird nestlings mangled by English sparrows.

And after our tour, I invite them to tell me how and why I lack compassion for "sentient animals."

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Ted Williams writes rare books as well as articles for low-paying publications.

Discussion about this post

Comments Restacks

Write a comment...

Erik Molvar Feb 16

You make some excellent points in the piece, Ted. Your horse argument need a little work, howev
Your "much smaller and very different equid" inhabiting North America during the late Pleistocer
actually the same species as the modern horse. The Pleistocene North American progenitor knov
from the Bluefish Caves is Equus lambei, the Yukon horse. Barron-Ortiz et al. (2017) state, "The ca
equid species appears to be conspecific with E. ferus Boddaert, 1785, and this is the name we prc
should be assigned to this [Equus lambei] material." You might be right about the Yukon horse b
smaller, although Cirilli et al. (2022) correctly point out that the mammoth steppe ecosystems frc
which it is best known are low-productivity compared to Holocene grasslands, so this smaller siz
have been a diet-driven phenotype.

You point out that this equid was "native 12,000 years ago," which is true, but it is also true that i
been documented here as recently as 5,900 years ago (Murchie et al. 2021), almost 5,000 years ir
Holocene epoch with its modern suite of ecosystems. This indicates a degree of co-evolution wit
North American flora and fauna that makes horses quite different from the European invasive sp
that occupy the majority of your article.

Finally, your article commits a significant omission by mentioning domestic cattle only in passing
domestic sheep not at all. These are the most ecologically damaging invasive mammals in North
America, also evolved in Europe amid much different ecosystems, and her on this continent are
overwhelmingly most responsible for the scourge of cheatgrass and other non-native weeds, as
depleted forage, depauperate native herbivore assemblages, and human-driven extirpations of n
carnivores. Curious to spend so much ink and energy on invasive rodents that are clearly wiping
avifauna on an island-by-island basis without tackling the main cause of endangerment and
extirpations on the mainland -- domestic livestock.

I'm committed to maintaining and restoring healthy native ecosystems worldwide, so I take no is
with the need to eliminate invading species that are responsible for ecological problems. The arg
that wild horses are one of these species just isn't strong enough to make the cut, and loses out
more convincing argument that horses are a harmless part of a North American herbivore assem

that co-evolved with them for millennia in North America, indeed 99.991% of the time that equic existed on the planet.

LIKE (1) REPLY

1 reply

William Kerrigan Feb 16

Interesting piece. I agree that anyone who takes the position that humans should NEVER manage species in order to protect another is a hard position to defend. Nevertheless, I find the term "inv species" to be one that sheds more light than heat, and that traditional ways of thinking about th are problematic. It's a term, like "illegal alien" that is intended to provoke emotional responses, s doesn't get us closer to better solutions, but in fact does the opposite. European Sparrows and European Starlings have been in North America for a long time, and they thrive because humans ideal habitats for them. in her book Slow Birding, Joan Strassman wrote "to hate English Sparrow hate ourselves." Her point wasn't to advocate never pursuing population control on the species w seems necessary and has some chance of being effective. But it was to recognize that just giving an incendiary label doesn't really get us anywhere. To understand the negative impacts (and poss neutral and even positive impacts) of various introduced species, the starting point has to be dep dispassionate language to describe them so that their impacts can be evaluated more objectively the fact is that we will never eradicate either Starlings or House Sparrows from North America. I d think that most of the emerging critics of the old thinking on "invasive species" are denying that arrivals can have unwanted consequences. I think they just recognize how the traditional languag surrounding these species is counterproductive.

LIKE REPLY

2 more comments...