

Editorial

A Retrospective and Interview with Dr. Kevin Cianfaglione—Editorial Board Member of *Conservation*

Conservation Editorial Office

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1. Introduction

The release of Volume 3 Issue 2 of *Conservation* in June 2023 marked the journal's third year of development. This new and dynamic journal has undergone rapid growth since its inception, with the support of our wonderful Editorial and Topical Advisory Board members, who have offered their valuable time and expertise to ensure a rapid and efficient editorial process and publish quality research meeting rigorous academic and scientific standards.

To date, *Conservation* has published 93 articles by authors from more than 40 countries. Its publications have focused on endangered species and wildlife trade, wildlife biology and conservation, ecosystem ecology, insights into the future of environmental conservation and planning from interdisciplinary perspectives at both local and international scales. It is evident from the variety of themes that *Conservation* covers a wide range of research in this field and is of great interest to people working in associated disciplines.

In line with our goal to provide a global platform for practitioners and scholars, our team works tirelessly to ensure that the editorial process is both rigorous and efficient. All manuscripts are peer reviewed by between two and five experts with the most relevant and current experience in the field, and a first decision is provided to authors approximately 18 days after submission (median values for MDPI journals in 2022).

Science never stands still, and so a journal can never be divorced from its academic field and research community. Keeping up with new trends and the latest findings of the related research communities is vital to achieving long-term publishing success. Over the past few years, *Conservation* has established a partnership with the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA) and contacted several conferences for collaboration.

Alongside cooperation with societies, *Conservation* has collaborated with *Sustainability*, *Land*, *Agriculture*, *Animals*, etc., to help bridge the gap between human society and nature. Six trans-journal Topics are open for submissions, which will help maximize the uptake and impact of research on conservation-related topics.

Led by our Editor-in-Chief, Dr. Antoni Margalida, and our advisory board, Dr. José L. Tella, Dr. Luca Luiselli, and Dr. Shuqing Zhao, *Conservation's* team is expanding; the Editorial Board now comprises over twenty prominent scholars from more than ten countries. We requested a virtual interview with Dr. Kevin Cianfaglione, who joined our Editorial Board in June 2021, to gain an insight into his experience working in the field of conservation. Kevin Cianfaglione is an Associate Professor (Maître de Conférence) at the Université Catholique de Lille, France. His skills are related to ecology, plant biology, landscape, biogeography, ethnobotany, and conservation. His research activity focuses on natural resource management, vegetation, habitat characteristics and potentiality, and ecosystems dynamics (See the short Biography of Kevin Cianfaglione).

The following is a Q&A with Dr. Kevin Cianfaglione, who shared his professional activities with us, as well as his life experience of the research career.



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2. The Interview

2.1. *What Encouraged You to Enter the Field of Conservation?*

I have always admired diversity (both in the environment and in human society), and I have always had empathy for nature, plants, and animals. Since I was just four years old, my parents noticed that I was successfully growing and transplanting plants into my home garden, which I took care of by myself, independently. I was highly fascinated by their rooting, their development, flowering, fruiting, and foliage. This passion for nature, in all its elements (from anthropogenic to natural ecosystems), may have been innate in some way, because of the place where I grew up. I have precious memories of the countryside, local traditions, ancient fruit and vegetable varieties, traditional knowledge, cultivations, livestock, garriga, macchia, cliffs, pastures, forests, wetlands, and wildlife.

My passion was fed by several people, but primarily my maternal grandfather.

The area I come from is characterized by a complex landscape mosaic, from the bottom valley up to the crionival belt, with an important human heritage since prehistoric times, together with very important wild areas. For these reasons, perhaps, I have always been passionate about history, architecture, food, landscapes, and the relationship between humans and nature. Consequently, this pushed me to engage in the analysis of global changes, people's perceptions of environmental issues, conflict management in conservation and land use, and the function of protected areas. Certainly, my passion was promoted by my grandparents—especially, as mentioned, my maternal grandfather, who was able to cultivate and instill in me a curiosity for history, traditions, biodiversity, and understanding of the mechanisms of ecosystems, and an appreciation of them just as they are. Over time, my curiosity for plants led me to develop an interest in trying to understand their functional traits, their habitat, their variability, their uses, their responses to stimuli and disturbances, how they work, and their adaptation strategies, including their composition and chemical traits. This pushed me to try to understand ecosystems, socio-ecosystems, and dynamic tendencies (i.e., biological successions, regression, transgression, degeneration, desertification, invasion). Fortunately, I was able to experience the last moments of the ancient peasant civilization of my zone (from the bottom valley to the mountains activities), with its rites, its routine, its rules, its practices, and its traditional knowledge. I lived it to the point of being able to not have to mythologize it, as can sometimes excessively happen nowadays. I remember the human warmth, the perfumes, the flavors, the colors, the sounds, the times, but also the conflicts and the limits characteristically linked to that context. This marked me to the point of tying me to these details, giving me the sensibility to be curious about human perceptions, uses, and of the traditional knowledge.

A significant factor that certainly shocked me, arousing in me an interest in conservation issues, was the long sequence of disappointments suffered in the destruction of enchanting places that I, until then, had considered to be my favorite spaces (a place of the heart). In short, I witnessed a series of destructions in the name of “development” and “money” or acting in the name of nature conservation or of environment restoration.

I cannot see the traditions, environment, and biodiversity in a disconnected, ideological, utilitarian, nor in any other preconceived way. I cannot see these things as something to be exploited and I am not looking for stakeholders' approbation, nor personal glory.

I try to consider the environment, traditions, and biodiversity as heritage with their own value and dignity, and to always be driven by curiosity. That curiosity should be the sole motivator of both scientific research and consequently, the environmental description exploration approach.

I greatly admire the wild and rewilding, but equally I love the semi-natural and the man-made environments. The same is true of traditions and new developments/applications.

I love biodiversity, but I do not like the excess of constraints and prohibitions to which we are often subjected about natural resource use. However, I understand that sometimes restrictions and rules can be a “necessary evil” to limit bad habits/customs and even to try to educate people to practice more prudent, efficient, and sustainable use.

I think that a beautiful landscape is an environment that favors a better quality of life, that it is pleasant, and that it provides ecosystem services. To benefit from these natural services and goods, it is not necessary to exploit, pick up, or grab them. For example, a forest is very beautiful and useful even if it is not harvested/anthropized.

Sometimes, beautiful landscapes can be shaped by humans, but other times their environments are still determined by natural dynamics. Other times, they are rewilded (i.e., regeneration or secondary succession). Natural dynamics are predominant now, even if these places were significantly modified for uses, in the past.

This led me to consider the environment around us not as an empty box or as a box full of objects to be necessarily used or to be transformed, with the sole purpose of making a profit. On the contrary, it led me to consider the environment as a box full of jewels to be kept for future generations, and to be used with care.

2.2. Which Paper (If Any) Changed Your Outlook on the Field of Conservation?

There was not one paper, but a series of circumstances, and the process lasted several years. My outlook started changing and maturing during my studies (especially during Middle School and University stages). At college, I met two professors, one of sciences and the other of humanities. They stimulated my curiosity and the fascination I already harbored for biodiversity. Subsequently, I received another strong impulse at university, largely as a result of meeting other students with whom I enjoyed discussing society and the environment and exploring our surroundings, looking for what we had studied the day before.

Things further matured when I met some very competent professors in biology, geography, chemistry, geology, humanities, agronomy, forestry, architecture, and in the natural sciences during my studies. With some of them, under their tutelage, I conducted my first scientific work experiences. Then, I met other colleagues of different disciplines, from various parts of the world, gaining international experience with other research teams. All this increasingly refined my point of view and my experience in the analysis of ecosystems, continuously evolving my vision beyond any ideological or utilitarian preconception that may concern the environment, land management, and natural resource uses. At my small scale, I try to carry out my activities with caution, always guided by a deep curiosity, trying to increase the quality of our life.

2.3. Do You Feel You Are an Environmentalist or a Conservationist?

I do not recognize myself in the current dominant logic and in the political ideologies of environmentalism, conservationism, nor of ecologism. I am a scientist who has, among his main research interests, biodiversity, environments, landscapes, and ecosystems, which could be applied to uses, management, conservation, restoration, or preservation strategies, taking care of our natural and cultural heritage, to guarantee the quality of our lives.

The environmental problem cannot be reduced only to the issues of energy transition, sustainability, CO₂, etc. These are very important questions which must not be raised alone, but as part of a broader vision, in synergy, without overwhelming the other environmental problems. Otherwise, we risk many additional problems, as we are already beginning to witness.

I do not align myself with those who now identify electric bikes as ecologism, forgetting ecosystems; or as those who promote, for example, the destruction of trees and forests in the name of the environment, neither with those who promote other types of environmental destruction in the name of saving the planet.

Planting trees is an important thing, but it cannot be considered the solution to every problem, and it must be planned with wisdom and consideration of specific criteria to avoid problems. Two young trees cannot replace an old tree felled without a real need.

Compensation for environmental damage must not generate further impact, urbanization, and anthropization of the territory.

Protected areas are a very important tool, but they cannot be the only tool for protecting the environment. It would be naive to think that to create a protected area is enough to immunize an area from any danger, or to ensure that an area can always be well managed over time, when it all depends on the person and on the circumstances.

Pathogens, invasive species, or wildfires and the possible risks linked to the spread of those problems cannot be used to justify interventions that can limit free evolution, or that can generate an important impact, which may sometimes be even worse. This is even applicable to the possible regeneration that could develop immunity/resistance/resilience to those problems.

I do not conceive conservation purely as a form of gardening, because ecosystems should be considered dynamic systems/spaces and not static systems that need to be frozen in some way by human activities. Conserving semi-natural and other anthropic ecosystems is crucial for our future, but it should not be the only way of thinking. Consequently, we should pay more attention to natural dynamics, primary habitats, and to biological successions. Ecosystems and species distribution areas should not be regarded as something static and immutable; they do not need to be always frozen in their actual state (maintain, contain, drive), and they do not need to be always shaped as we want or as we like.

I cannot put different species, ecosystems, or vegetation in contrast, and I do not think there can be any better/more interesting species or bio-formations than others. On the contrary, everything has a legitimate place and everything must be contextualized.

Species should not be judged based on whether they are alien or native, but the dynamics and causes of problems should be studied, identifying in the alien species not “the problem” but “an index” of a problem (i.e., excess anthropization, excessive human pressure). In ecology, in its wide sense, comprising conservation ecology, we should avoid judging species based on subjective and excessively superficial “likeable or unlikable” traits, as often happens when, for example, we hear about alien, native, invasive, useful, splendid flowering, stinky (etc.) species. Very often, there is a need for more contextualization, less generalization, and a broader, more calm and much more reasonable vision.

I cannot always understand actions driven by the fear or hatred of something. This creates a bias that often leads to problems because it limits our objectivity in reasoning. This could justify some contradictions and other problems in applied ecology, as in ecologism and in conservation.

I do not agree with those who would like habitats to be always actively managed/used, without leaving room for free evolution/unused places as well. At the same time, similarly, I consider it senseless to leave everything untouched or to leave everything to free evolution. Habitats should not always be left to free evolution, because secondary habitats are also important, and we need natural resources to be correctly used. The correct solution should be found in a mosaic between these two visions, without malevolence, ideologies, and prejudgments.

I cannot see alien species in a xenophobic way. I cannot be constantly afraid of them; I cannot hate them. I see them as a phenomenon to be studied and to be contextualized; as a possible resource and never as an “a priori” environmental problem: but instead, as a bio indicator of a problem (human impact).

I do not understand the craze for safety in natural areas; it almost seems as if we think more about safety here than in urban areas where there are more dangers and more risks for man.

I cannot understand when, in Protected Areas, there are restrictions against hunting or collecting plants and mushrooms for familiar traditional use, while in the meantime the same administrations allow (or even promote) vegetation clearing, (re)urbanization, meadow exploitation, and forest logging, even in very extensive/intensive ways, impacting the same species that people could collect, or impacting the areas that are habitats for those species, even in core areas of protected areas. This can easily foster discontent, disorientation, or conflicts with local people.

I do not agree with those who want to ban fireplaces and stoves in mountain or country houses in favor of biomass power plants, and I find such positions really contrasting, especially if the wood fuel comes from agricultural, (peri-)urban areas, or from woodlands used for personal, familiar purposes. In the last case, the wood harvesting should be conducted in a way that does not significantly change the forest structure and the annual natural capital of biomass increases in the forest. This is particularly true if, to obtain the wood fuel, we do not open/reopen/reshape roads or other infrastructures, if the tree harvesting is based on selected (not extensive nor intensive) cuts, if the woodland surfaces are close to inhabited centers or roads, and if they are not immersed in areas that may be worthy of greater protection, or to be left to natural dynamics.

The use of wood for the fireplace in mountains and the countryside has a romantic and a cultural value, as well as traditional utility, and it cannot be forcibly replaced by other means such as biomass power plants.

The flames of home fireplaces turn on only when needed, contrary to flames of biomass power plants that eat much more continuously the wood per year.

Home fireplaces not only warm the skin, but they also warm the "Heart", and allow us to cook at home at the same time, unlike electric radiators and district heating from biomass plants. Home fireplaces have romantic value and they allow social interaction around them. All this has made fireplaces the symbol of the Home, of the Family, and of intimacy.

I do not understand how it is possible to impose the expropriation, or the forced harvesting, or the imposition of costs for the forced logging of forests to their owners that do not wish to harvest their own forests. The same is true when meadow owners have the same problem, etc.

Similarly, I fail to understand why people who have planted a forest, or who have favored the natural reforestation of their land, should be at risk of being deprived of the possession of their land because they can be considered to have abandoned it.

I cannot understand why people should be forced to exploit/harvest their properties (i.e., buildings, fields, forests, meadows) to avoid expropriation or why they should be forced by law to use their land, which ultimately encourages the economic activities of third parties often supported by politicians or public administrations.

I do not understand why, in order to carry out public works, un-built land is considered an "empty" space and therefore the most suitable place to be occupied by public works/urbanization purposes.

I do not agree with the stipulation that the owners of building land cannot choose to renounce the building rights and related duties on their land.

I do not understand why it is possible to opt for conservation only by imposing restrictions or duties on private properties. Instead, public administrations should invest in serious restrictions on state-owned land which, being a property of everyone, should be able to be enjoyed equally, but which is too easily privatized, managed by one or few private subjects who can take greater advantage of it than others. Public administrations should invest in buying the surfaces to be protected (left to natural dynamics). Public administrations should better invest to favor the management of secondary habitats together with owners and exploiters in a more participatory and interactive way, through feedback and not just through incentives, forced compliance, or prohibition policies.

For the environment, economic facilitations (i.e., incentives, financing, tax benefit, international projects, funding, etc.) can become a problem if they make it too convenient to do something. Thus, they risk generating distortions, aberrations or pro-forma activities that end up being excessively focused (or exclusively focused) on obtaining those facilitations, without generating any real social or environmental utility, doping the market dynamics (i.e., increasing the prices of natural resources, disrupting their availability, undermining others' access to these resources), misleading the principle of the public utility of these actions, transforming them in bad examples, into malfeasance, organized crime, or even in eco-mafias. The consequence is wasting public money to generate environmental

and social problems. An example is virgin biomasses for power purposes, in which we can assist with potential food/fodder biomass that is removed from the alimentations chains to supply power plants. Alternatively, we can assist with the harvesting of trees and forests, only to use them as fuel to be burnt in biomass power plants. The use of virgin biomasses harvested specifically to be used as fuel is the cause of some environmental, social, and ethical problems, and it leads to economic problems that ultimately diminish the resource availability on the market, with a consequent increase in costs for fodder, for food, or for the timber needed for other (more noble) purposes.

To limit these kinds of problems and use aberrations, incentives and facilitations should be transformed into rewards for controlled, balanced, planned, and cooperative management between private and public subjects, inside and outside of protected areas. Additional options might include buying/renting land for conservation, preferring to buy the land in case of integral conservation (rewilding and primary habitat conservation), and to buy or rent the land in case of active conservation (secondary environments to be maintained) when conservation is compatible with controlled exploitation activities on long-life projects, through synergies, and positive feedbacks in the management of semi-natural surfaces. All this could easily minimize the conflict with the local population and with the landowners—perhaps even generating an economy from abandoned land or from land that is no longer convenient to exploit.

Regarding more anthropic environments, such as agro-ecosystems and urban ecosystems, there is increasing talk of sustainability, but trees continue to be eliminated. Important secondary ecosystems, from meadows to woodlands, are cleared/ploughed to be cultivated (even to exploit public funds), and land is more and more urbanized. Consequently, the important elements typical of the landscape are often eliminated or damaged, together with the agro-biological ecosystem items, the fossil landscape elements, and even archaeological remains, simplifying, homogenizing, and degrading the territory.

Trees are too often removed with little excuse, or they are managed badly, out of superficiality, out of an excess of fear, due to laws that are sometimes incorrect or misapplied. We experience a sense of wrongness when we observe trees removed to create pedestrian or cycle paths, even if these infrastructures are conceived specifically to improve quality of life, sustainability, and to attract tourism in the countryside and in the city. The same problem and contradiction can be observed during buildings or urban décor renovation works.

Another contradiction is when we act as if we consider trees untouchable in the city or in the countryside (with protests, demonstrations, and indignation) when the same energies are not deployed in favor of trees living in most natural environments.

This is a contradiction because if, in natural environments, a tree that falls is a part of nature, if this happens in the city or in the countryside, it always creates problems and dangers. Contrary to natural environments, in more anthropic situations, we cannot think that trees should be untouchable when they can become dangerous or problematic. The absence of a correct “urban green” planning and management policy is to blame. In an urban context, it would be necessary to plan a turn-over of the trees that should become problematic to avoid acting too drastically, too late, or at the last moment, or when there is no need to do so.

Bewilderment should be reserved for administrators who accept rash ideas and for professionals and technicians who justify tree felling when it is not really necessary. Bemusement should be reserved for those technicians who act without due deontology, damaging trees.

Each urban abandoned/degraded area should not be considered “to be valorised” by building something inside it or clearing its vegetation. A real sustainable countryside or city should prioritize slowing down overbuilding, stopping land/soil consumption, and limiting the human footprint.

Correct policies, a correct awareness of the residents, and a more ethical and competent approach by politicians, managers, and professionals, would greatly reduce the risk of conflicts.

Actions should also be encouraged to involve local people (directly or through local non-profit associations) in the management of the territory, especially for public lands. This might involve allowing the locals to intervene to remove fallen trees and broken branches along roads, or participating in the management of semi-natural areas on public surfaces (example: agro-systems, pastures, semi-natural forests, and active plantations). This is also useful in terms of providing a valid alternative to companies (or other for-profit) recourse. This has both social and ethical advantages: The public area belongs to everyone and should not be placed under management (privatized) to the advantage of a few people over others, and this would increase the social function of these surfaces and the social interaction with the environment, empowering and calling local people to be more responsible for the territory. It would also save public money that could then be used for more important social functions by creating public utility at 360 degrees.

I do not agree with science or with environmentalism as a pretext to favor a person's own interests or his categorical interests. Science and environmentalism should be applied only to broad public interest. I find it worrying that scientists, politicians, administrators, academicians, and environmentalists often seem that they have not enough real arguments to justify their choices because they prefer to escape the debate by trying to discredit their interlocutors. This proceeding ends up being a way to escape a substantive discussion based on pertinent arguments, solid data, and logic.

It is, therefore, no coincidence that many of these experts often claim to be conservationists, or to be environmentalists, to always take care of the environment, to always act to preserve the environment, or are uniquely in favor of the biodiversity; but then those experts use the words environmentalist, conservationist, and ecologist against those who have different positions, trying to discredit them.

When they have no reasons to discuss, another classical and disconcerting example used to discredit others' interlocutors points of view is the argument "you are not from my clan", for example: "you cannot understand because you came not from here", "you cannot understand because you belong from another professional category", "you are coming from the city", or "that it's too easy to speak while sitting comfortably beyond a desk", etc.

If you are sufficiently qualified, if you are part of the same "clan", but you are not aligned, the same issue occurs because you risk being considered silly, uninformed, not up to date, stupid, gullible, or too ideological, too theoretical, extremist, etc.

For the same reason, I do not share the idea that there are some "clans" better than others. In each clan, we can find potentially good and bad people, and the bad ones are often hidden behind the good ones. That is why we should consider only people, case by case.

This is true even considering the clan of the local inhabitants. I think that they do not always have more authority "a priori" and that they should be always an example to follow up with regarding the use of natural resources. Native peoples must certainly be prioritized (and taken as example) when they are still linked to their traditional uses of the territory when these uses are non-intensive, non-extensive, and not connected to rough economic interests, nor to the actual dominant commercial practices. When the local inhabitants are using the territory like the others or worsen (i.e., guided by economic, commercial, profit, and productive interests, or when they are driven by excessively anthropocentric ideas, or when they are increasing their environmental footprint), in this case, then, they should be considered as always better than the others? They should be considered as an example for which reason?. For example, if a forest, a pasture, or an agricultural area is badly used, or it is overexploited, what is the difference if these actions are carried out by local people? Why the social and environmental consequences should be so different?

We cannot think that there are categories of stakeholders or lobbies that are better than others, who could have more authority, or who can be prioritized, or that can be always taken as an example as indispensable heroes for the environment. It will not be the farmers who will save the planet, nor the shepherds, nor the woodcutters, not hunters. Protected areas, scientists, naturalists, and conservationists will not save the planet either.

It all depends on the people and on the context. Not categories, but only good people in the right place can make the difference.

Surely, we need to consider that there is not a single way to see the environment and biodiversity. Consequently, there is not a single way to be a conservationist. It all depends on the different circumstances, experiences, different interests, and different sensitivities of each of us.

More and More people tend to define themselves as a “nature lover”, “conscious of the environmental issues” or even “protectionist”, especially when they act in the opposite way. This is positive on the one hand, but on the other hand it causes a sort of “inflation”, since too often, action (and inaction) is justified in the name of the environment, nature conservation, etc. This causes a loss of meaning of concepts and principles. False, unclear, and ambiguous positions, worsening the situation, and greenwashing take advantage of all this confusion.

It is, therefore, no coincidence that, although there are global tendencies to implement more laws in favor of the environment, more and more protected areas, and more and more talk of environmental problems, we still have many environmental issues (i.e., endangered species are in danger, natural areas are reducing, urbanization is increasing, deforestation is increasing, as is the global human impact and the consequences of the disasters caused by human impact). Something is definitely not right, and it does not work as it should. The mainstream way of seeing the environment and the society appears inadequate to face the challenges of the future and the possible global/local changes. I believe that it is increasingly superfluous to define someone as an environmentalist, or protectionist, because too many things ended up losing their original meaning.

We need to work facing the swarm of bad ideas and bad practices that are multiplying with regard to conservation, land management, and ecosystem restoration. It is time to stop looking at the world around us through a “keyhole”. It is time to widen our point of view. We need of a more comprehensive and dynamic way to consider ecosystems, and we need to have a more objective vision of the biodiversity surrounding us.

2.4. What Advice Would You Give to Young Researchers/Scientists Looking to Begin Their Career in Conservation?

Be guided by curiosity. Do not prioritize your personal interests (meaning one favorite species, or one community, or a landscape) in nature conservation; otherwise, you risk doing damage elsewhere, in some way. Always try to have an objective, critical, broad, and multidisciplinary open vision as much as possible. Be cooperative and inclusive of other colleagues, paying attention to others’ points of view and to others’ disciplines. Try to involve local people as much as possible, especially the general public rather than their political representatives or those who could represent the interests of organized groups and stakeholders.

Try to be independent and do not submit to politicians or to the interests of other groups.

Do not pit one environment or one species against another, in competition; try not to think in too materialistic a way and avoid preconceptions (even if they are part of mainstream ideas). Try not to focus your research on pandering to trends or stakeholders’ interests, or to make it easier to find funds. Let yourself be guided by curiosity and, in some cases, by what others do differently than you would.

For example, the environmental problem cannot be reduced to CO₂ and global warming, or to habitat restoration, nor to the energy transition and the sustainability of economic development. It cannot be reduced to a hatred of alien species or of conifer species or favoring one species or community over another. Alien plant species may only be an indicator of a problem (for example, the excess of land anthropization), but they should never be considered the problem. Biodiversity values cannot be reduced to the number of species per square meter. The importance of forests cannot be reduced to plants, wood, and forestry chains, or to CO₂, or veteran trees. The importance of a grassland cannot be reduced to the presence of flowering orchids. In short, conservation policies and measures cannot be

reduced to productive issues, to restricted personal interests/feelings, to gardening and farming, or to rewilding everything.

Conservation cannot be reduced to “a desire to be the owner of the garden” or to “want to play the role of God” in deciding, for example, what is good, what is not good, and how biodiversity should be expressed in the “right way”.

We should not consider ecosystems, community assemblages, and species distribution areas as something static and immovable, being afraid of possible changes; we should think of these things as dynamic and time-changing subjects.

Concerns and related possible solutions should not create dangers greater than the problem.

Try to let things occur by themselves and try to observe and study the dynamics. Always abide by the principle of caution, and do not always feel compelled to necessarily manipulate the environment.

The new challenge for conservation, in my opinion, is to overcome the current static vision of landscapes, ecosystem management, and species distribution. We should better consider the potential vegetation and past vegetation history, trying to understand what the primary ecologic conditions are and how to restore primary habitats for endangered species, providing more chances for autoregulated processes to occur. At the same time, this does not deny the opportunity to accompany oriented conservation actions for secondary (or anthropogenic) formations.

2.5. What Is a Challenge That You Experienced in Your Research or Field Work? How Did You Solve It?

The first challenge is still ongoing because it concerns the contradictions of the system (we have already discussed some examples). I try to highlight the contradiction with the aim of improving a more objective reasoning and a more balanced debate on management, biodiversity, landscape, ecology, and conservation issues. I also emphasize provocative examples and reasoning. There is a lot to do about this and we are very far from the finish line. Nevertheless, I am not giving up. I think that the truth often lies in the middle positions and therefore it could be very far from biases or stakeholders’ (even if they consolidated) positions. Cooperation, even within different disciplines and professions, is very important to evolve the science of conservation, the landscape, and the management of natural resources.

Another important open challenge is to bring out novelties and logical arguments to foster the scientific debate, linking them to new visions. For example, there are still many species and plant formations that are underestimated compared to others that are often overestimated in some ways.

An example is that of demonstrating how the formations of *Salix atrocinerea* are (potentially) very interesting and beautiful forests, and not only generic poor or ruderal bushlands without any vegetational sense, and without any ecological value, as was often previously believed, favoring more open formations, fighting against secondary successions. Therefore, it is not a question of ruderal formations, but of potential forests that can assume a very high natural value, if given time and leeway. So typical forests that they can be considered as local symbolic plant formations. I intuited this when I saw forest formations of this willow species during my doctorate. Sometimes they were very charming, especially when they were mature (aged) formations, with their original (naturally polycormic and twisted) tree architecture, well developed, up to at least 22 m in height in inland areas, while dwarf forests formed in most coastal areas due to environmental constraints such as strong winds, salt sprays, etc.

Mature forests always showed a very varied structure and an undergrowth populated by very beautiful, rare, or important species, also typical of the corresponding secondary formations.

This discovery is not to be attributed to a special personal merit, nor to a demerit of the colleagues who preceded me. It must be attributed simply to the fact that communities can

finally evolve even after centuries of strong human pressure, when it decreases, showing new things.

Nature is mutable and for that reason, we cannot continue to consider it statically, freezing habitats and the plant formations as they are, nor gardening them, as we want.

The *Salix atrocinerea* formations were difficult to observe in the past because they were mostly made of sparse species, creating ruderal and not well-structured formations of a scarce ecological interest, because they insisted on very anthropized surfaces. Following the decrease in anthropogenic pressure, many of them have begun to structure themselves better and to sufficiently expand themselves to be studied.

I have carried out a lot of fieldwork (during my PhD studies and after) studying vegetation, ecological gradients, and dynamics. Between the results of my work, I could propose innovative ideas and new applications to land management, some of which are still under development. I immediately won the support of various colleagues. Some of them resisted initially, while others immediately agreed with me, in some cases claiming to have hypothesized the same thing that I had observed.

This also makes it clear that fieldwork remains crucial to plant sciences, ecology, and conservation, and that we cannot work only on data recorded in the past and in the literature, since nature is not static, but it tends to continuously rearrange itself over time, following the different contexts.

Moreover, let us not forget that even the real segetal, nitrophilous and ruderal vegetation, even weeds, can be very fascinating, important, and even very useful, especially when we are talking about actively used man-made spaces.

2.6. Are There Any Important/Trending Research Areas/Topics You Suggest Scholars Study Further?

Natural habitats are increasingly deteriorating due to multiple environmental stressors, and wild species are threatened, even if many local, national, and international policies have been developed to pay more attention to the environment in urban and spatial planning.

To face the conservation problem, at the first stage, we paid attention to species protection, but soon it was clear that this was insufficient, and we focused on species habitats. Now we can say that this is not always sufficient, and that we should think about dynamics and dynamic tendencies, seeking more efficient and durable conservation/management strategies.

The success of environment management and in land governance can be improved by habitat, dynamics, and biodiversity description, by experiments and by model development: by an interdisciplinary multitask synergy between humanities and life sciences, since man is an ecological non-negligible variant, and since management and conservation issues reflect on human society and wellness. This also includes citizen science, the communication of scientific results and scientific problems, as well as civic and environmental education.

This interdisciplinary approach is especially necessary for territories influenced by a long-established human presence where species distributions are more affected by anthropogenic factors linked to the history of human presence. In those cases, the difference between what is considered native or introduced, or what was facilitated or underprivileged, could be difficult to assess.

On the other hand, some areas are so influenced by man that no natural flaps have been preserved, or no primary vegetation is shown, and in these cases it is difficult to even imagine what the potential vegetation could be. These areas deserve, above all, great scientific attention, also regarding secondary succession and rewilding, without fear, and without preconceptions.

There is also a need for more recognition of the importance of conserving the last natural areas together with further consideration of the natural dynamics, even in areas modified by man. Often, there is too much bias and a lack of knowledge (i.e., areas

where there are no clear signs of potential vegetation) and this makes it more difficult or jeopardizes scientific studies and the management/actions from a conservation perspective.

Ecosystems cannot be understood only as conservation as such (with their naturalistic or environmental values), nor only following monetary value or their economic development potential for society. Ecosystems have many dimensions and services, including, for example, social, aesthetical, cultural, public health, art, and spirituality.

Finally, I see many people who (while working in favour of the environment or calling themselves conservationists) base their ideas and activities on hatred or too much on fear.

For example, there are those who hate shrubs, those who hate secondary successions, those who hate other human social categories, those who hate unmanaged forests, those who hate conifers, those who hate forest understory and dead wood, or those who hate alien species.

Too much fear is often reserved for trees, for conifers, for pine reforestations, for alien plant species, for abandoned soil uses, for vegetation and dead wood in rivers, for natural erosion phenomena. . . .

Too much fear cannot bring about anything constructive, and nothing good can be built based on hatred. This is an approach that must be drastically changed in favour of a broader, open mind, and mature, more balanced, contextualized, and more objective reasoning: in short, we need a more scientific and more serene approach to avoid further errors carrying out “nature that rebels against man-made abuses” phenomena.

Instead of fear, it is necessary to give greater and greater value to ethics, professional deontology, scientific curiosity, and empathy. Instead of an excess of fear, we should give more space to the precautionary principle.

Unfortunately, the debate on the environment and climate has ended up focusing excessively only on CO₂ and the atmosphere, to the detriment of ecosystems (if not for the fact that they are sources or sinks of CO₂), forgetting many other equally important aspects. This weak point has ended up leaving too much room for erroneous reasoning, which is excessively superficial or, in any case, too partial and too easy to exploit to the point of being able to think of making laws and financially supporting the exploiters of natural resources. With the economic crisis and following the current energy crisis, this problem will be increasingly amplified unless there are changes in environmental and economic policies.

An example is when in the mainstream, we think of forests only as a source of wood, and managing the forests as akin to managing potato fields, but to harvest wood. Biomasses were born with a good proposal, that of recovering and exploiting waste that otherwise would have created an economic and environmental cost for people and enterprises; but for financial reasons they have become a food, forestry, and economic problem, having been one of the main factors that caused the price increase and the scarce availability of food and timber resources on the market. Both these resources are now preferred to be burned in the name of the environment, sustainability, development, and economy. Regarding these issues, it is necessary to offer more reasoning, more discussions, and better independent works that could explore also other issues (biodiversity, evapotranspiration, naturalness, etc.) without trying to mix natural phenomena with artificial phenomena. For example, CO₂ emissions from ecosystems and organisms cannot be considered the same as emissions from human activities. Natural erosion phenomena cannot be considered as hydrogeological instability caused by human impact. The volatile organic compounds emitted during the metabolism of living species cannot be considered in the same way as the volatile organic compounds emitted by artificial combustion from human activities, etc.

We need more truly independent research from people who are not involved with any type of stakeholder. Nowadays, in ecosystems management, we strongly need more balance; that is to say, more publications and research from other points of view: for example, from those who are not involved with exploitation stakeholders, nor with research groups, administrations, and institutions that declare themselves in favor of soil uses

and of virgin biomass exploitation (i.e., forest/meadow productive chains; big biomass powerplants, or a proliferation of small biomass powerplants).

Making conservation solely political is wrong because the environment is everyone's issue. For the same reason, making it a simple question of economic interest or of personal interest cannot be constructive.

The attitude of certain professionals, research categories, and of certain research groups who self-indicate themselves as the only competent ones in managing forests, the landscape, and the environment, should be avoided. At the same time, we should stigmatize the attitude of other colleagues who would like to be the only ones entitled to express personal opinions and the only ones to be able to operate in the field, denigrating those who do not conform to their vision. This expropriates the rest of the scientific community of their role and expropriates the rest of the community of something that belongs to them too, since the environment is everyone's interest.

Hiding political and economic interests behind conservation is one of the problems underlying the crisis of environmental associations due to their position and actions perceived as more and more weak or ambiguous; and underling the crisis of protected areas, as they are increasingly considered as economic areas that must be exploited as much as possible: a sort of industrial, agricultural, real estate areas, or as a sort of tourism, spare-time, gastronomic, and recreational areas.

2.7. In Your Opinion, What Are Some Common Mistakes Authors Make When Working and When Seeking Publication in Conservation Issues?

Conservation must be mainly seen objectively (scientifically) and not from the viewpoint of ideological or personal convenience/beliefs. Science is made by men, and for that reason it is not infallible, but science is capable of improving itself and correcting itself, and this is the advantage of the scientific method. Thus, it is important to discuss issues and to acknowledge the mistakes made in the past, as well as research, implementation, and innovation. Sometimes there are errors or questionable procedures to which scientists should pay more attention, in my opinion, such as being more careful about using more adequate terminology and not being slaves to indices and mathematical algorithms (in journal publication choice and in data elaboration) which, although useful, remain questionable and are not discussed effectively enough.

It therefore seems as if we have passed from an excess (where everything could be published in hard-to-find journals that seldom circulated outside a small circle, with editorial committees and scientific revision almost seeming fictitious) to another opposite excess; that is, it can be very difficult to publish multidisciplinary works, and there is too little space for works of a more descriptive type, as well as those which are more narrative or based on logical constructions, theorems or scientific philosophy.

A strange thing is that it often it seems to me as if the scientific community has too much appreciation for journals that reject a large number of articles, even if this contradicts the spirit of scientific development.

Regarding mistakes in land and natural resources management, I often hear that in Europe, the forest devours the fields that were cultivated in the past and are now abandoned. It sounds like strange thinking to me, since this means that the forest returns to its place, where it was, recovering its past surfaces. Consequently, it should not be said that the forest surface is expanding in Europe, but that the forest is returning home. We had our "Amazonian or Borneo" deforestation in the past. Moreover, for some reason, it is still ongoing.

It is the concreting-over and the urbanization that advances, devouring the remaining green areas together with the best agricultural surfaces.

In addition, even if the forests are often coming back in Europe, we still observe deforestation, consisting not only of strong forest harvesting, but with the spread of intensive crops to the detriment of forests, traditional rural landscapes, and even of prairies. This should be considered a concern which is detrimental to the landscape mosaic and tradi-

tional agricultural systems. Additionally, this problem can often be favored by European (and local) policies.

Land Management and Conservation Science should not be a reason for personal convenience, nor a substitute for religion, but a means to describe and study the things (i.e., biodiversity, ecosystems, phenomena, dynamics) that surround us, and trying to improve our knowledge and to make innovations as possible. All this, in order to be useful for the progress of humanity. Despite this takes many efforts, a lot of time, a lot of concentration, large reasoning, and it has many costs: I can consider myself as a privileged, because fortunately, what I study, my work, is also my passion..

Some terms such as resilience, biodiversity, conservation, eco-friendly, green, indigenous, sustainable, native, alien species, are overused words. They should be used well and more sparingly.

In particular, the word resilience is now so fashionable but so misused that it has ended up devouring the word resistance. You often hear these words mentioned in relation to the conflict in Ukraine, when the Ukrainians partisans and defenders are called “Resilient” instead of “Resistant”. An example that I often give during my lessons is that if, during the Second World War, the partisans had been resilient instead of resistant, the World would have experienced a completely different history.

Even the word native, or autochthonous, has become very fashionable but misused to the point of engulfing the word “typical”. “Typical” and “Native” words should not be confused because they are different concepts. Typical should be used to refer to both “alien” or “native” taxa that are linked to a territory, a tradition, an use, or to a culture.

Yet, the too casual and incorrect use of terms does not happen only at a scientific level, but has now spread widely throughout the rest of society, showing a weakness and a lack of appropriate words.

Being an environmentalist cannot be simply reduced to a political, ideological or convenience problem. Today, being environmentalist could mean everything, but also nothing. This is because everyone has their own vision of the environment, land management, and conservation, based on different interests or personal sensitivities. Attention must also be paid to green washing. In fact, now everything is carried out in the name of the environment and many subjects define themselves as environmentalists, even if they accuse those who think differently from them of environmentalism.

Everything seems to be green, environmentally friendly, sustainable, and a form of conservation, even mere destruction. Things, actions and concepts end up entering the cauldron of conservation that end up being very far from biodiversity and its environmental values.

Forests, trees, mushrooms, and animals have their own value and dignity, and each system has its own dignity and should not be considered or put in competition with another. This must be the most important basic consideration.

2.8. What are, in Your Opinion, Outlooks to Evolve Conservation Science?

In my opinion, we should rediscover a higher scientific culture, a greater opportunity to leave room for intellectual reasoning and for culture (human heritage values) in the “hard sciences” vision of conservation.

From this perspective, therefore, it could be also desirable to rediscover scientific multilingualism, even if within a common language such as English (i.e., journals capable of accepting manuscripts in multiple languages, or journals that provide summaries in various languages; multi-language conferences, etc.), at least in the most widely spoken languages, or in the five or six most spoken classic languages). Additionally, a rediscovery of the importance of “Classical Languages” would avoid errors in interpretations, definitions, and scientific terminology.

The study and training of scientists should have a more multidisciplinary and wider background in order to favor more connections, exchanges and discussions with similar disciplines, and with other disciplines, in order to make science and society grow.

Another problem that has arisen in Natural Sciences since ancient times is the rush to publish new species, new plant associations; or changing and re-changing names in a compulsory way, which sometimes ends up seeming an almost vain habit, as if one aspires to see his name next to a scientific name.

Another important problem to avoid is the lack of precautionary principle respect and the rush to publish manuscripts only to be able to impose ideological conclusions, or to write just to please and to make a career.

We need to think more rationally. For example, even hunting, if carried out in a very ethical, precautionary and well-planned way, with solid scientific basis, can be something very useful for agricultural and urban areas in order to control or ward off wildlife populations and to promote a local supply of meat products, making less use of farming, less livestock dedicated crops, diminishing water uses and reducing pollution, thus increasing environment sustainability and decreasing the occupation of the soil.

We cannot consider that trees can never be touched or that forests can never be harvested nor managed, but it is equally wrong, on the other hand, to think that the forest must always be managed or harvested.

The abandonment of land use and mountain or countryside habitats is often referred to as a serious environmental and social problem, but at the same time it can also be seen as a new opportunity for man and nature. For people, this can become a new development opportunity, a new economy, especially for local residents. The advantages for nature are linked with the most anthropofuge species and the most natural environments that have mainly suffered from human presence.

This does not create conflict with active conservation or with the conservation of semi-natural or anthropic environments, but rather ends up enhancing the importance of these actions in the framework of a landscape mosaic and in the framework of the conservation of the residues of semi-natural spaces and of the cultural heritage. Among these spaces, we should also consider conifer reforestation formations (i.e., abandoned wood plantations or plantations carried out not to be used, but as a form of environmental restoration). These conifer formations are too often among the most threatened by arson, and by interventions aimed at their disappearance.

In this regard, a greater regard and less fear should be given to the formations of non-native plant species growing in less natural areas (roads, railroads, agricultural, industrial, urban, or peri-urban surfaces) as they could be used to save more natural species formation and more natural surfaces.

There is a need to block the consumption of soil, thus avoiding further concreting over (i.e., soil impermeabilization, river canalization, overbuilding, soil impermeabilization, water bodies channeling), the woods becoming pastures or agricultural crops, and the pastures becoming agricultural land or anything less natural.

The crisis of the environment, conservation, and the environmentalist world which is increasingly perceived as weak, or as contradictory, or ambiguous, or increasingly inclined towards the logic of opportunism of their leaders, or towards the logic of the market, of exploitation, and governmental, can only end up generating apathy, discouragement, disappoint, and removing those “who wants to be an environmentalist”. It may also radicalize the environmentalist and animalist positions of others, along with other problems, contradictions, and other possible problems worthy of numerous other questions and discussions. The use of biomasses for energetic purposes can be a very useful tool for people who produce biological waste, because they can use them by transforming them from waste (and cost) into resources (and money savings). However, this cannot be a green and sustainable alternative in any case if it is used on a large scale, such as for local communities or for industrial power plants that consume virgin resources that need to be cultivated ad hoc in dedicated fields, or that need to be harvested in the forests specifically. This is being understood more and more. The environmental movement is also beginning to recognize this problem more and more. Even the major European institutions are realizing

it, but still nothing concretely effective is being done to recover from this huge mistake made in the name of the environment and sustainability.

3. Conclusions

At *Conservation*, we share Cianfaglione's passion for diversity and nature. We recognize that the natural world is experienced differently by everyone and only through conversation can you truly learn from the knowledge and experience of others. Therefore, we have taken the opportunity to get to know our valued Editorial Board Members, and by sharing their experiences, we hope to inspire the next generation of scientists working in conservation research.

Education and curiosity are key to making progress in conservation issues, and our mission is to provide a premium forum for international scholars at the forefront of conservation research, which is freely available to everyone. Through open access, we hope to develop knowledge and accelerate meaningful change, as findings that are spread beyond the walls of the scientific community help to enrich the dialogue between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.

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Short Biography



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