Planetary Political Ecology

Robert Fletcher[1]

Wageningen University and Research, the Netherlands

Abstract

A growing body of literature has recently adopted and advanced a newfound planetary perspective to explore its implications for understanding and influencing environmental and developmental politics and planning. It asserts that the focus on *globalization* that has dominated discussions of the international world order for the past several decades is increasingly being overtaken by contemporary dynamics that signal the need for a new conceptual frame. Central to this discussion is the assertion that the capitalist system is itself undergoing a shift from a global to a planetary regime, thereby also transforming broader processes and perceptions in ways that demand a new reckoning. Yet despite its importance as an interdisciplinary field examining many of the topics analyzed within this new planetary literature, political ecology has yet to contribute significantly to this discussion. To understand the planetary context within which political ecologists are working, and indeed can and will help shape, this article therefore endeavors to define and outline a *planetary political ecology*. I focus in particular on how a planetary perspective can help illuminate three interrelated issues of importance to political ecologists: development, conservation and tourism. If the rise of planetary thinking can indeed be understood in part as a response to the recent development of the capitalist system into an unprecedented planetary form, then confronting this shift may require a similarly planetary scale politics transcending current strategies that tend to focus on international, national, or local level action, respectively. In the conclusion, I explore what such a novel planetary environmental politics might look like to outline ways that political ecologists can productively engage with the various issues showcased in the article.

Keywords: planetary, globalization, development, conservation, tourism, capitalism

Résumé

Une nouvelle perspective planétaire affirme que la mondialisation, qui a dominé les discussions sur l'ordre international au cours des dernières décennies, est en train d'être supplantée par un nouveau cadre conceptuel montrant que le capitalisme passe d'un régime mondial à un régime planétaire, transformant également les politiques et la planification en matière d'environnement et de développement. L'écologie politique n'a pas encore apporté de contribution significative à ce débat, malgré son importance en tant que domaine interdisciplinaire qui examine nombre des thèmes analysés dans cette nouvelle littérature planétaire. Le présent article s'efforce donc de définir et d'esquisser une écologie politique planétaire afin de comprendre le contexte planétaire dans lequel travaillent les écologistes politiques, et qu'ils peuvent et vont contribuer à façonner. Je m'intéresse en particulier à la manière dont une perspective planétaire peut aider à éclairer trois questions interdépendantes qui revêtent une importance particulière pour les écologistes politiques : le développement, la conservation et le tourisme. Si l'essor de la pensée planétaire peut en effet être compris en partie comme une réponse au développement récent du système capitaliste sous une forme

---

[1] Prof. Robert Fletcher, Sociology of Development and Change Group, Wageningen University and Research, Wageningen NL. Email: robert.fletcher@wur.nl. Some passages in this article were developed in collaboration with Bram Büscher. Grateful acknowledgments for letting me publish it here. Thanks also to the two anonymous referees whose insightful feedback strengthened the article considerably.

planétaire sans précédent, alors faire face à ce changement peut nécessiter une politique à l'échelle planétaire similaire, transcendant les stratégies actuelles qui ont tendance à se concentrer respectivement sur l'action au niveau international, national ou local. Dans la conclusion, j'explore à quoi pourrait ressembler une telle politique environnementale planétaire novatrice et j'esquisse les moyens par lesquels les écologistes politiques peuvent s'engager de manière productive dans les différentes questions présentées dans cet article.
Mots clés: planétaire, mondialisation, développement, conservation, tourisme, capitalisme

Resumen
Un creciente corpus literario ha adoptado y promovido recientemente una nueva perspectiva planetaria para explorar sus implicaciones en la comprensión e influencia de las políticas y la planificación ambiental y del desarrollo. Esta literatura afirma que el enfoque en la globalización, que ha dominado los debates sobre el orden mundial internacional durante las últimas décadas, está siendo cada vez más superado por dinámicas contemporáneas que señalan la necesidad de un nuevo marco conceptual capaz de captarlas adecuadamente. Un aspecto central de este debate es la afirmación de que el propio sistema capitalista está experimentando una transición de un régimen global a uno planetario, transformando así procesos y percepciones más amplios de maneras que exigen una nueva reflexión. Sin embargo, a pesar de su importancia como campo interdisciplinario que examina muchos de los temas analizados en esta nueva literatura planetaria, la ecología política aún no ha contribuido significativamente a este debate. Para comprender el contexto planetario en el que trabajan los ecólogos políticos, y que de hecho pueden y contribuirán a configurar, este artículo se propone definir y esbozar una ecología política planetaria. Me centro en particular en cómo una perspectiva planetaria puede ayudar a esclarecer tres cuestiones interrelacionadas de importancia para los ecólogos políticos: el desarrollo, la conservación y el turismo. Si el auge del pensamiento planetario puede entenderse, en parte, como una respuesta al reciente desarrollo del sistema capitalista hacia una forma planetaria sin precedentes, afrontar este cambio podría requerir una política de escala planetaria similar que trascienda las estrategias actuales que tienden a centrarse en la acción a nivel internacional, nacional o local, respectivamente. En la conclusión, por lo tanto, exploro cómo podría ser una novedosa política ambiental planetaria para esbozar maneras en que los ecólogos políticos puedan abordar productivamente las diversas cuestiones planteadas.
Palabras clave: planetario, globalización, desarrollo, conservación, turismo, capitalismo

1. Introduction

This article suggests that the politics and policymaking of sustainable development are becoming increasingly *planetary* in scale, scope and potential, in ways that political ecologists (and others) have yet to systematically acknowledge and investigate. In this article, therefore, I build on a growing body of literature adopting and advancing a novel *planetary perspective* to explore its implications for understanding and influencing various environmental and developmental issues with which political ecologists are concerned. The main thesis of this literature is that the focus on *globalization* that has dominated discussions of the international world order within a variety of fields for the past several decades is increasingly being overtaken by contemporary dynamics that signal the need for a new conceptual frame able to adequately capture them. Much, though certainly not all, of this new focus on 'the planetary' takes as a key point of departure the assertion that the capitalist system is itself undergoing a shift from a global to a planetary regime, thereby also transforming broader processes and perceptions in ways that demand a new reckoning.

Yet despite its importance as an interdisciplinary field examining many of the topics analyzed within this new planetary literature, political ecologists – notwithstanding a few noteworthy

exceptions highlighted below – have not yet been significant contributors to this discussion. To understand the planetary context within which political ecologists are now working, and indeed can and will help to shape, this article aims to chart the potential contours of a novel *planetary political ecology*.

To develop this discussion, I begin by outlining current research exploring the emerging concept of the planetary. Within this literature, I focus on several recent texts that have developed aspects of the most pertinent approach for the analysis developed here. These center, respectively, on how the idea of the planetary relates to global governance and scientific knowledge (Blake & Gilman, 2024), its implications for political engagement (Marsili, 2021), and how the evolution of the capitalist economy is understood within this lens (Arboleda, 2020). I then explain how this planetary perspective can be applied to develop novel insights concerning several domains with which political ecologists are centrally concerned, namely, development, conservation and tourism. Following this, I highlight the implications of this novel planetary lens for progressive politics aiming to respond to contemporary challenges. If the rise of planetary thinking can indeed be understood in part as a response to the recent transformation of the capitalist system into an unprecedented planetary form, then confronting this development may require a similarly planetary scale politics (Marsili, 2021) transcending current strategies that tend to focus on international, national, or local level action, respectively. In the conclusion, I explore what such novel planetary environmental politics might look like to outline ways that political ecologists can productively engage with the various issues I analyze here.

2. Beyond globalization? Conceptualizing the "planetary"

As noted, the planetary perspective is most fundamentally an assertion that the longstanding discourse of globalization is failing to adequately account for several important dynamics in the contemporary world, and hence that a new conceptual apparatus is needed to guide future research and praxis. The discussion departs from Spivak's provocation to "propose the planet to overwrite the globe" (2003: 73) in developing a "planetary literature." From this perspective, Spivak enjoins us to "imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities" (2003: 73). The characteristic ambiguity of this prescription has allowed subsequent analysts to develop a planetary perspective in a variety of ways. Yet Arboleda (2020: 15) contends that most "share the assumption that the world depicted by major theories of globalization has been rendered unrecognizable by interconnected crises of liberal cosmopolitanism, of global warming, and of encroaching concentration of wealth." As a consequence of such challenges, Arboleda explains:

> The very idea of the "global" as the proverbial blue marble demarcated and measured through grids and coordinates is being gradually superseded by that of the "planetary", in which the earth reemerges as an unfamiliar place riddled with eerie, destructive, and menacing forces. As opposed to the "spaces of flows" and "liquid modernities" that populated earlier visions of globalization, the notion of the planetary designates a convoluted terrain where fences, walls, and militarized borders coexist with sprawling supply chains and complex infrastructures of connectivity. (2020: 15-16)

In developing this planetary perspective, researchers frequently use as a springboard the notion of the Anthropocene, which signals a newfound understanding of humans as an unprecedented "geological force" as well as the limit of humans' ability to fully control how the Earth responds to the processes they set in motion – a limit signaled most centrally by the growing specter of

anthropogenic climate change (Chakrabarty, 2021; Clark & Szerszynski, 2021). This, Chakrabarty (2021: 67) asserts, has precipitated a "divergence in our consciousness between the global—a singularly human story—and the planetary, a perspective to which humans are incidental."

In *Children of a Modest Star*, Blake & Gilman (2024) offer what is perhaps the most elaborate exploration of a planetary perspective to date. Building on the foundational work previously outlined, the authors explain that "[a]t the heart of the idea of the Planetary is a holistic vision of the planet as consisting of an almost infinitely complex interlaced and nested array of dynamically interacting biological, chemical, energetic, and geological systems." They assert that "[t]his concept, in turn, is informed by new knowledge of the place and role of human beings within this vast system" (Blake and Gilman, 2024: 6). This they, following Bratton (2021), call a novel form of "planetary thinking" or "sapience": "a technologically enabled self-understanding of the planet and its deeply systemic interconnectedness" (2024: 6-7). Such "planetary thinking is a conceptual response both to the rapid acceleration of anthropogenic effects upon ecosystems and to technological developments that revealed and made comprehensible these effects" (2024: 91). Central to development of this planetary sapience, consequently, has been the popular notion that human impact on the Earth is approaching a number of "planetary boundaries" beyond which our influence on biophysical processes may start to precipitate changes to the planet, rendering it increasingly uninhabitable by humans (Rockström *et al*., 2009).

This newfound planetary thinking entails several significant consequences. First is the assertion that it requires from humans a different relationship with the rest of the planet. As Blake and Gilman (2024: 8) phrase it, "To achieve planetary sapience is to realize that humans can no longer treat the planet as an endless font of resources or a bottomless sink for waste." And this, in turn, is seen to underpin a newfound "*condition of planetarity*, the inescapability of our embeddedness in an Earth-spanning biogeochemical system…Appreciating the condition of planetarity entails an unflinching embrace of the fact that humans cannot thrive unless the ecosystems we inhabit are themselves thriving" (Blake & Gilman, 2024: 8, emphasis added).

Others caution that care must be taken in also attending to the differential ways in which this condition of planetarity plays out (Sidaway *et al*., 2014). As has also been pointed out in relation to the idea of the Anthropocene, after all, the causes and impacts of the planetary condition are unequally distributed across space as well as time (Moore, 2019). Thus, Kashwan and colleagues (2020: 1) assert that the imperative to recognize that "planetary stewardship requires planetary justice", an approach that puts "the needs of the poor first in analyzing and advocating for effective governance responses to planetary ecological crises and earth system transformations." If the planetary is indeed to transcend anthropocentrism, moreover, such planetary justice must include a multispecies dimension, incorporating the needs and interests of nonhumans as well as those of disadvantaged people (Chao & Celermajer, 2023). Clark and Szerszynski (2020: 1) further emphasize the need to address intergenerational inequality in planetary impacts, contending that "[a]lthough earlier generations have confronted planet-scaled threats", today's youth "is arguably the first global cohort to come to a clear understanding that, no matter what, the world they are inheriting will be significantly less hospitable to human and nonhuman life than that of their parents."

Second, this new planetary condition is seen to necessitate a novel conceptual perspective that does not place humans at the center, as the modern Western worldview has done (Chakrabarty, 2021; Clark & Szerszynski, 2021). Thus, Blake and Gilman again contend that the concept of globalization was limited by its assumption that:

> …what mattered most were human intentions, beliefs, power, and agency. . .the global of globalization, as the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has pointed out, is not the same as the global of global climate change. The global of globalization is a conceptual category that frames the Earth in human terms. . .The global of global climate change, by contrast, frames Earth without specific reference to humans. (2024: 72-73)

Third, the significance of planetary thinking is seen to lie in the fact that:

> [u]nlike previous terms—like globalization, or before that, modernization—the Planetary does not refer to a *process*, a transition from one state to another. Rather, it refers to a *condition*: our ineluctable embeddedness in the Earth system, a system we either steward to our benefit or not, but that in either case is indifferent to us even as we depend on it. (Blake & Gilman, 2024: 100, emphasis added).

Fourth, all of this is considered to necessitate a new *planetary politics* (Marsili, 2021) able to respond to the unprecedented scale of Anthropocene challenges (see also Connolly, 2017; Wainwright & Mann, 2018). Thus, Blake and Gilman explain,

> The present global system of governance was developed during the twentieth century to facilitate the integration and interaction of national states, especially around economic cooperation and international peace and security. It was and is designed, therefore, to represent the interests of its member national states in international forums. It is fundamentally not geared toward addressing planetary challenges like pandemics…none of our current international institutions that are charged with addressing planetary challenges answer to the imperatives of the planet as such; rather, they answer to the member states that they represent. (2024: 4, 9)

This imperative to develop a new planetary politics transcending the international order is conditioned by the failure of this order itself:

> Indeed, what gives the concept of the Planetary urgency today are the conceptual and practical failures of globalization. For all the wealth it has created for some, extraction-based globalization has also unleashed a planetary destabilization. . .it is the abject failures of globalization to contain these harmful flows that have propelled the concept into the limelight today. (Blake & Gilman, 2024: 93-94)

Others have developed a planetary perspective in different ways. The most elaborate operationalization of a planetary lens to date has been analysis of "planetary urbanization" by Neil Brenner and collaborators (e.g., Brenner, 2014; Brenner & Schmidt, 2015). From this planetary vantage point, urbanization processes are understood as not limited to cities but extend to places that have often been considered their opposite, including less densely populated rural areas, even "wilderness" spaces.[2] In this frame, Brenner (2014: 17) explains, "the development, intensification

[2] Despite its popularity, this perspective has also been widely critiqued as overly totalizing (see e.g. Loftus, 2018).

and worldwide expansion of capitalism produces a vast, variegated terrain of urban(ized) conditions that include yet progressively extend beyond the zones of agglomeration that have long monopolized the attention of urban researchers." Borrowing from Lefebvre (2003[1970]), Brenner (2014: 17) describes the different "moments" of this process as a series of "implosions-explosions" to "illuminate the mutually recursive links between capitalist forms of agglomeration and broader transformations of territory, landscape and environment." In this way, "[a]s cities are extended outwards into their surrounding territories and are woven together via thickening long-distance logistics networks, these erstwhile non-city zones are more tightly integrated into large-scale spatial divisions of labor" (2014: 17).

3. Planetary capitalism

As is clear from the above, for Brenner and others (see also e.g., Lees *et al*., 2016), a central significance of the planetary lens is to signal acknowledgment that capitalism as a political-economic system has now become, "for the first time, truly planetary. Although, in the *Grundrisse*, Marx points out that the tendency to create the world market is intrinsic to the very concept of capital, this potentiality was not fully actualized until very recently" (Arboleda, 2020: 8). This argument resonates with the assertion that the Anthropocene should really be understood as the Capitalocene – that it is not humanity as a whole but a particular political-economic system that is most responsible for the dramatic anthropogenic changes made to the Earth system over the last several centuries (Haraway, 2016; Moore, 2016). Thus, Moore (2019: 53) explains, "…the Capitalocene thesis says that to understand planetary crisis today, we need to look at capitalism as a world-ecology of power, production, and reproduction." From this perspective, Moore (2019: 54) insists that planetary justice demands also confronting how capitalism functions as both "a form of political economy" and a mechanism of "cultural domination that revolves around imperial hegemony, racism and sexism."

A framing in terms of planetary capitalism can be viewed as something of a third stage in the critical analysis of the capitalist system as the latter pursues the continual expansion critics consider necessary for it to overcome inherent contradictions that might otherwise cripple it (O'Connor, 1988; Harvey, 2014). Analysis from the perspective of *world-system theory* first explored capitalism as an integrated global entity progressively expanding to incorporate larger portions of the globe over the last five hundred years (Wallerstein, 1974; Arrighi, 2009). Building on but transcending this, analysis of a *global* capitalism then sought to explain how the era of globalization following the Second World War, and particularly the rise of neoliberalism beginning in the 1970s, resulted in progressive consolidation of the capitalist system and its dominance by a transnational capitalist class that increasingly connected above and across national and regional boundaries (Sklair, 2001; Robinson, 2014). Now, conceptualization of a planetary capitalism seeks to move beyond this global lens as well in understanding the contemporary era as one in a state of simultaneous totalization and disarray as capitalism pursues the dramatically uneven and increasingly violent outcomes documented by Arboleda (2020) and others.

Within this brave new world, Robinson (2014) asserts, inequality becomes progressively more *social* than geographic. Thus, Marsili similarly observes, in the era of planetary capitalism one finds:

> …centre and periphery more and more within each community and less and less in the relationship between national spaces. This is the basis of the apparent paradox – which often informs many empty polemics between defenders and critics of neoliberalism – of a decrease in inequalities between countries and their increase within each state. We are witnessing a zoning of the world, with bands of privilege and exclusion living side by side. (2020: 48)

All of this, in turn, signals a significant shift in the dominant ideology by which the capitalist system is governed. Especially since the consolidation of the so-called Washington Consensus in the 1990s, globalization can be seen to have been dominated by a particular variant of neoliberalism that Fraser (2017) calls "progressive neoliberalism." As Fraser explains,

> Progressive neoliberalism is an alliance of mainstream currents of new social movements (feminism, anti-racism, multiculturalism, and LGBTQ rights), on the one side, and high-end 'symbolic' and service-based business sectors (Wall Street, Silicon Valley, and Hollywood), on the other. In this alliance, progressive forces are effectively joined with the forces of cognitive capitalism, especially financialization. (2017: 131)

In this way, Fraser (2017: 132) describes progressive neoliberalism "mixed together truncated ideals of emancipation and lethal forms of financialization." The so-called Third Way politics pursued by Bliar, Clinton, and Obama among others can be seen as paradigmatic of this approach

In the current planetary era, by contrast, this progressive neoliberalism seems to be giving way to an alternative, more authoritarian form. This authoritarian neoliberalism is seen to depart from more conventional authoritarianism in that while the latter tended to exercise exclusively top-down state-centric governance (e.g. nationalization of extractive industries), the former entails a novel "intertwinement of authoritarian statisms and neoliberal reforms" (Bruff & Tansel, 2019: 233; see also Marsili, 2020; Arsel *et al*., 2021). Among many others, the rise of contemporary political leaders like Trump in the United States, Putin in Russia, Xi in China, Marcos Jr. in the Philippines, Erdoğan in Turkey, Modi in India, and Orbán in Hungary exemplify this shift. As McCarthy describes,

> Although the specific trajectories and genealogies of these political formations are always unique at some level, they also share many general features: nationalism articulated and justified in the name of frighteningly exclusive and often racialized iterations of "the people"; the demonization of alleged enemies internal and external; support for and selection of authoritarian leaders who rise to power by exciting such fears and promising simple, direct, often brutal action to protect and strengthen the nation; and contempt for and direct assaults on democratic norms and institutions. (2019: 302)

At the same time, however, "many contemporary authoritarian regimes are pursuing and deepening long-standing neoliberal goals with respect to the environment, removing restrictions on capitalist production by withdrawing from constraining international agreements and standards, rolling back domestic environmental protections, and appointing heads of polluting corporations to head the very agencies that are supposed to regulate those corporations" (McCarthy, 2019: 306). In this way, authoritarian neoliberal regimes exemplify Arboleda's (2020) observation that planetary

capitalism paradoxically combines new forms of global interconnection with novel barriers placed in the way of transnational flows in a convoluted mix.

In sum, for different commentators, a planetary perspective is seen to contrast with the globalization analytic in each of the ways depicted in Table 1. Notwithstanding this productive proliferation of a planetary perspective into the wide variety of different domains outlined above, and despite initial thrusts in this direction (e.g., Goldstein, 2018; Arboleda, 2020; Wainwright & Mann, 2020) thus far it has not been introduced as a general new frame of analysis within the interdisciplinary field of political ecology. It is clear, however, that many of the issues and concepts on which planetary thinking focuses are also of central interest to political ecologists. In this article, I therefore contribute both to political ecology by exploring how a planetary lens might help further illuminate several themes central to the field, and to planetary studies by exploring how a political ecology lens can help broaden its analysis.

Global	**Planetary**
Nation-centric	Planet-centric
Process	Condition
Anthropocentric	Ecocentric
Global village	Extreme unevenness
Geographic inequality	Social inequality
Progressive neoliberalism	Authoritarian neoliberalism

Table 1: Global vs. Planetary. (author's own elaboration)

4. Towards a planetary political ecology

Planetary development

Among its various manifestations, the planetary perspective can be seen to signal a qualitative shift in the scale and scope of economic development initiatives. Arboleda finds this shift reflected, for instance, in his "planetary mine", which he describes as "not a discrete sociotechnical object but a dense network of territorial infrastructures and spatial technologies vastly dispersed across space" (2020: 5). This planetary development model is thus "one that vastly transcends the territoriality of extraction and wholly blends into the circulatory system of capital, which now transverses the entire geography of the earth" (2020: 5). In the Atacama Desert of Northern Chile, the site of Arboleda's empirical research (2020), a vast infrastructure employing cutting-edge technologies has arisen to facilitate fully-automated round-the-clock extraction of copper and other minerals needed for production of the electronic components on which our increasingly digitally-mediated lives rely. These minerals are then transported to far-flung destinations, among them China, where they are processed into a multitude of different products, some of which become the technology shipped back again to Chile to automate and intensify the same mining operations that extracted them in the first place.

As a result of the perpetual quest for new sources of critical minerals to fuel the planetary mine, the frontiers of resource extraction are always on the move. Arboleda (2020) describes current efforts to develop robotized extractive machines of enormous size that would be able to work in the extreme

heights of the Andes where rich stores of valued resources remain, but where climactic conditions are too harsh for human workers to survive. In addition to the peaks of the highest mountains, the planetary mine is also propelling extractive frontiers continually deeper into the subsurface as well into the deepest oceans via undersea mining (Tang & Werner, 2023). In this way, industrial development becomes truly planetary in a way never before experienced.

Meanwhile, Goldstein (2018: 2) identifies, within the promotion of so-called Cleantech, a perspective that he calls "planetary improvement": a "new green spirit of capitalism" embodying "a powerful imaginary about how the world could or should work, about how innovation, technology and economic growth could and should help us right all of our societal wrongs" that "infuses a sense of purpose, meaning, and thus legitimacy to an otherwise mundane and profit-motivated world of industry and work." Both conventional extractive industries, as well as attempts to redress the negative impacts of these through more "sustainable" mechanisms and ends, can thus be seen as twin manifestations of planetary capitalist development.

At the institutional level, the most concrete contemporary manifestation of planetary development is likely China's well-known Belt and Roads Initiative (BRI). Initiated in 2013, the plan encompasses "multiple infrastructure projects to connect Eurasian markets with China by rail and sea, linking at least 71 countries around the world and predicted to involve over 1 trillion US dollars of investment by 2027" (Li *et al*., 2022: 902). A key component of the larger BRI initiative is the so-called Digital Silk Road, which entails investment in "BRI host countries' telecommunications networks, artificial intelligence capabilities, cloud computing, e-commerce and mobile payment systems, smart cities, and other high-tech" initiatives (Li *et al*., 2022: 902). As an integrated transnational program rooted in infrastructural connectivities that transcend some borders while reinforcing others, as Arboleda (2020) describes, BRI therefore exemplifies a planetary scale of development beyond anything conceived in the past.

While there are of course serious questions concerning how much of this grand vision will ever actually be realized, its ambition and potential implications for the global power balance forces other actors to also scale up their own development visions and ambitions to similar planetary scale. For instance, a direct response to the BRI can be found in the so-called Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, which brings together "Japan, the United States, Australia, India, South Korea, key European nations, and the European Union" in an economic alliance directly intended to counter and contain China's own expansion.[3] How this battle for planetary development dominance plays out will be an important focus of future research.

This planetary shift in the scale of development can also be seen reflected in the rise of novel conceptual frameworks attempting to come to terms with it. Consider, for instance, Kate Raworth's (2017) popular recent "doughnut economics" model. As its name implies, *international* development has long been fundamentally concerned with understanding and assessing development in national terms. National level data are collected and then compared to assess relative development levels in different parts of the world, resulting in maps like those produced by UNDP each year depicting Human Development Index levels around the world (see Figure 1). Even critical perspectives on international development, such as world-system theory, which claims to transcend such methodological nationalism, still tend to replicate this focus on nation-states, which remain central to the division that world-system theorists make among core, periphery and semi-periphery categories within the overarching capitalist world-economy.

[3] See Weinstein & Chou (2024). https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/rise-free-open-indo-pacific-challenge-deterrence-kenneth-weinstein-william-chou. Accessed 11 Feb 2026.

In Raworth's (2017) model, by contrast, the scale of analysis is fundamentally different. Building on longstanding analysis of planetary boundaries, Raworth proposes the addition of a focus on a social floor of basic development needed for all humans to still flourish while remaining within these boundaries. The result is a "doughnut" depicting the space between the social floor and biophysical boundaries within which equitable and sustainable development can occur for all the world's (human) inhabitants (Figure 2). I find this an entirely different way of conceptualizing development from than all previous models, the adoption of a truly planetary perspective that no longer places national "billiard balls" at its core.

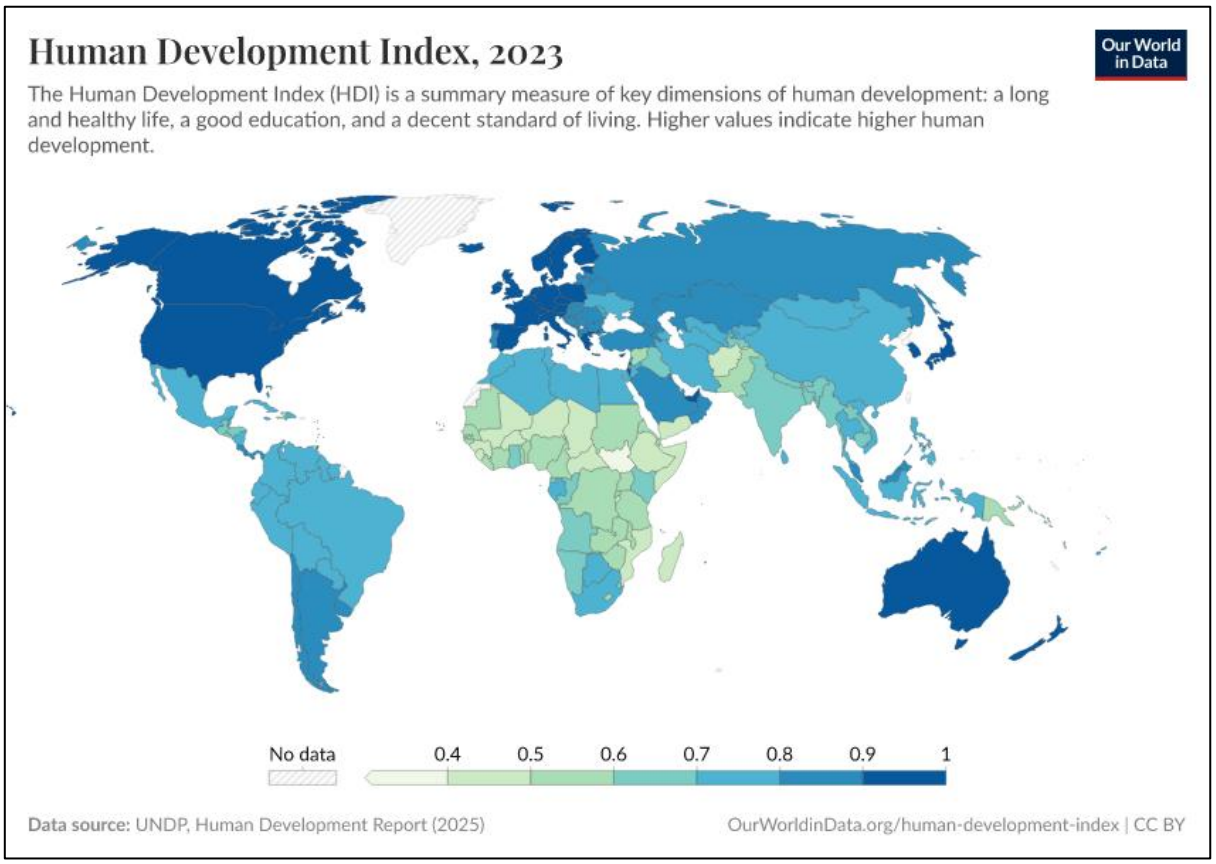

Figure 1: Human Development Index. (source: UNDP 2025)

Despite its innovation in this respect, the approach retains certain significant limitations from a more expansive planetary perspective. First and foremost, it does not include any recognition that capitalism as the political-economic system on which the doughnut model depends requires continual growth that will inevitably threaten the planetary boundaries encasing the doughnut, and hence needs to be confronted directly, rather than merely managed in pursuit of some illusory sustainability (Fletcher, 2023a). Second, it remains a human-centered approach, focused on the well-being implications for people of both social development and environmental limits rather than the multispecies integration planetary thinking endorses.

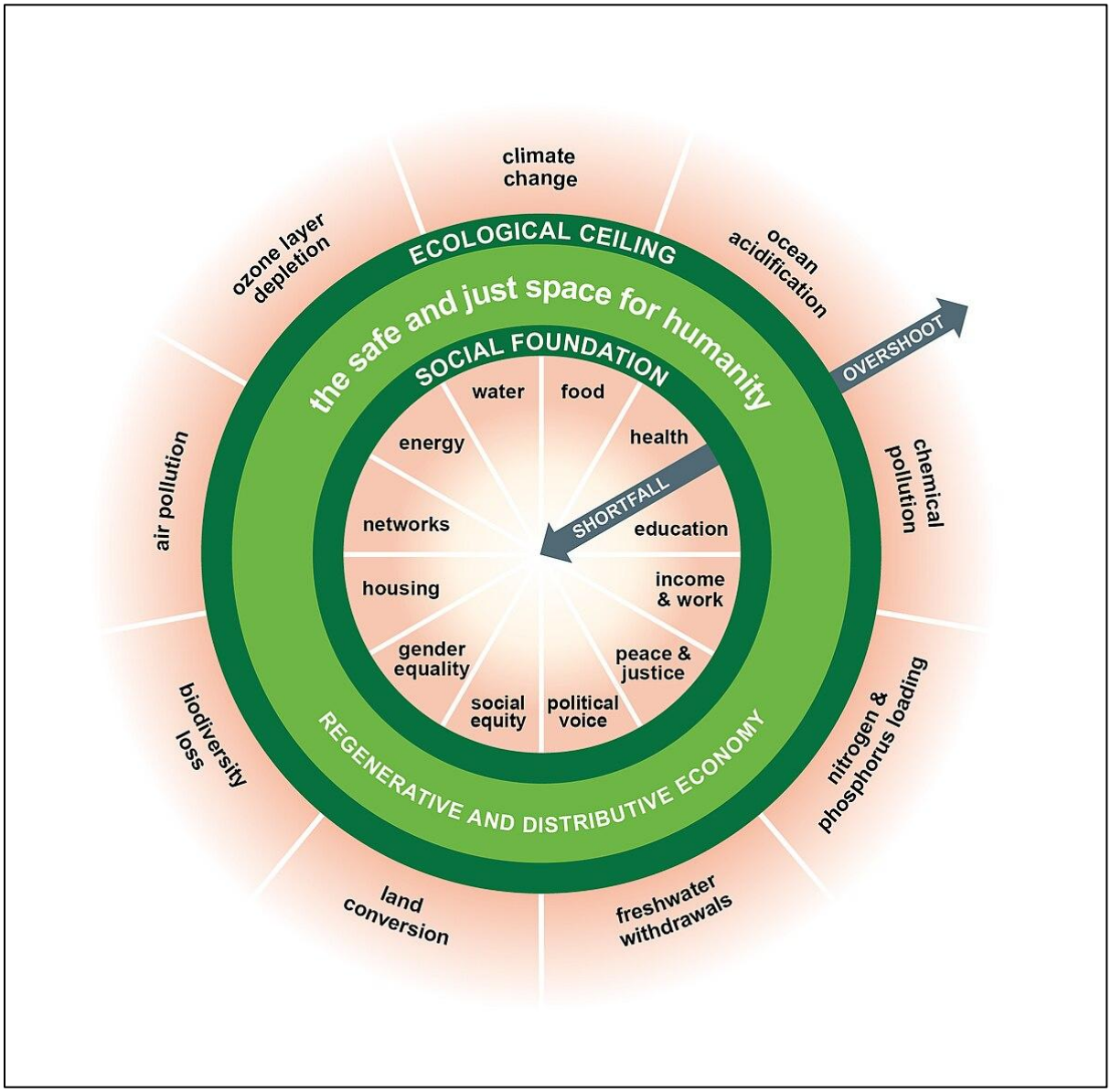

Figure 2: Doughnut Economics (source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doughnut_%28economic_model%29)

Planetary conservation

Biodiversity conservation is commonly framed by proponents as one of the main bulwarks against the every-expanding industrial development described in the previous section (Wuerthner *et al*., 2015). While conservationists have long understood their activities as part of a global campaign, it is only recently that they have begun to conceptualize this in more explicitly planetary terms. From this perspective, we can understand the history of conservation policy as a progressive scaling up of the level of appropriate attention and action from local to planetary levels. As various efforts to

document this history describe, the modern conservation movement began with a campaign to designate particular spaces as fortress-style protected areas (PAs) that would be depopulated (often through violent displacement of former inhabitants) and subsequently reserved for scientific research and leisure recreation (e.g., Igoe, 2004). This campaign originated within the United States but quickly became global through its extension first into Western Europe and then throughout the rest of the world via the creation of new PAs in colonies established by these European powers.

It quickly became apparent, however, that PAs created in this way would not be enough to sustain the biodiversity they targeted, due to the widespread presence of impoverished people living adjacent to them (many of whom had been displaced from these PAs from which their livelihoods were previously derived) and also these areas' status as "forest islands" whose long-term viability was threatened by their lack of ability to exchange genetic material with other areas. Consequently, the focus of conservation areas shifted from maintaining discrete PAs to developing them into integrated-conservation-and-development projects (ICDPs) by encompassing them within creating mixed-use "buffer zones" in which people could pursue conservation-friendly livelihoods and also connecting them through biological corridors that would allow biodiversity to migrate between them (Borgerhoff Mulder & Copollilo, 2005). Subsequently, the dominant focus of conservation efforts shifted yet again to pull back from a focus on ICDPS and biological corridors to encompass a total "landscape" or "ecosystem" approach within which conservation would be pursued through cultivating a mosaic of different practices within spaces both occupied by people and reserved for nonhumans to cultivate the maximum biodiversity possible throughout the total area (see e.g., Sayer, 2009; Bluwstein, 2021).

Currently, however, the conservation movement seems to be in the process of reorienting yet again around promotion of conservation on an unprecedented planetary scale. The most prominent and obvious examples of this new approach are the so-called Half Earth and Nature Needs Half campaigns (see esp. Wuerthner *et al*., 2015; Wilson, 2016). Promoted by a collection of conservation biologists who have long been influential in shaping policy internationally, advocates of this approach argue that global biodiversity can only be sustained by setting aside a substantial portion – for many, at least 50% – of the Earth's total surface as PAs. This promotion is grounded in assertions that previous approaches to integrate conservation and development in mixed use areas have not generally worked, and hence that "[o]nly within parks and protected areas will many large animals critical to ecological processes persist" (Miller *et al*., 2014: 4). Consequently, proponents argue that "[t]he global strategy must be to expand the number and size of protected areas, interconnect them, and rewild them" (Terborgh, 2015: xvii) in pursuit of an overall conservation "estate" encompassing as much of the planet's surface as possible (see Figure 3).

There is a profound shift of perspective in this approach that may be overlooked if it is not specifically highlighted. While in the past conservation was also a global campaign, this worked predominantly from the ground up, starting with concrete spaces deemed important for conservation then working outwards to connect these with others and aggregate all of them together to develop targets for protection of total conservation space for both individual nations and the world as a whole (see Figure 4). As with international development, then, the core building block of this strategy remained the nation-state. And even when the campaign also worked to some sense top down, in terms of seeking to first identify the most important global "hotspots" then developing concerted campaigns to work to protect them simultaneously in different spaces, these were still usually understood as discrete spaces harboring different forms of life that could be aggregated to collectively preserve more biodiversity as a whole.

Figure 3: Nature Needs Half. (source: https://postcardhistory.net/2021/07/collecting-on-a-shoestring-in-the-25%C2%A2-boxes)

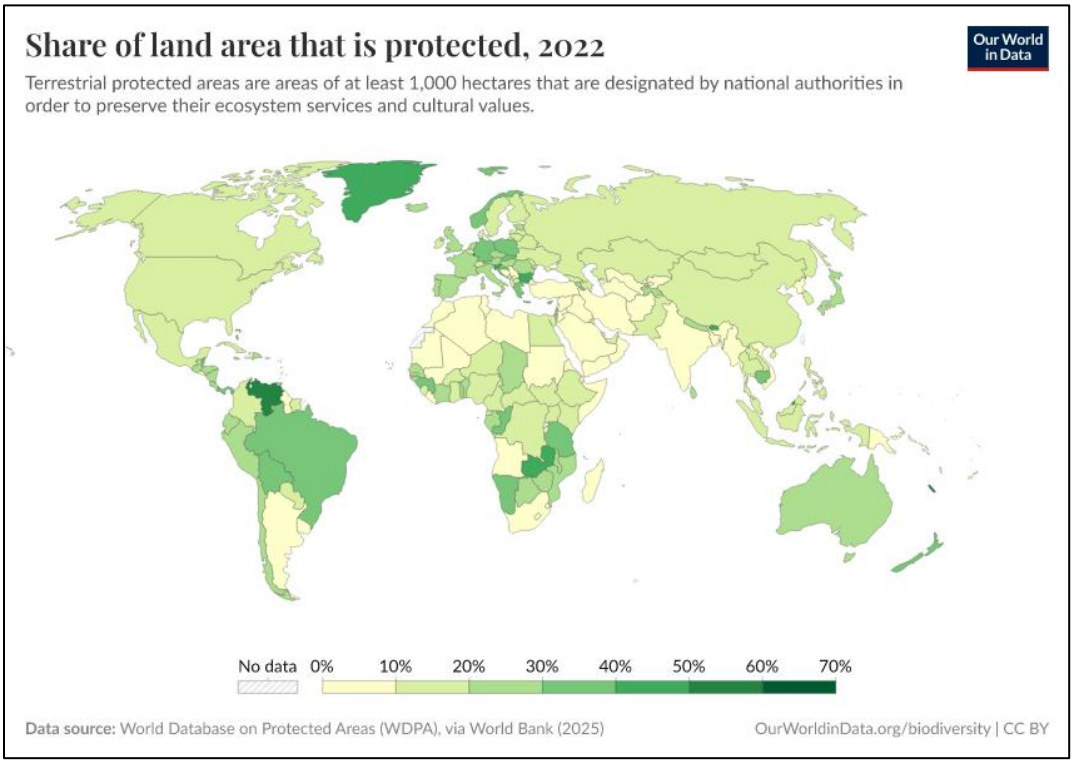

Figure 4: Total conservation area by country. (source: IUCN 2025)

Contemporary *planetary* conservation seems to work quite differently. It instead works from the outside in, starting with global maps of the "key biodiversity areas" that would need to be preserved to conserve a certain percentage of the Earth's total biodiversity, then endeavoring to develop campaigns around this global-level action (see Figure 5). Wilson's Half Earth project, for instance, justifies its pursuit of a patchwork of protected areas encompassing 50% of the planet by arguing that this is needed to preserve "about 85 percent" of remaining biodiversity, a percentage that can "be increased by including within the one-half Earth "hot spots", where the largest numbers of endangered species exist" (2016: 186). Rather than starting with hotspots and then working to aggregate them into a global conservation "estate", as in the past, this approach starts with a total percentage of global biodiversity to be preserved and the total area required to achieve this, then works down from there to the Earth itself to ascertain where the spaces needed to realize this goal should most optimally be located. The end results of such efforts would be a world in which all of humanity is tightly concentrated within one half of the Earth's surface while the other half is reserved for wildlife to freely roam throughout the open expanse. This is a fully planetary vision of conservation unlike any advanced in the past.

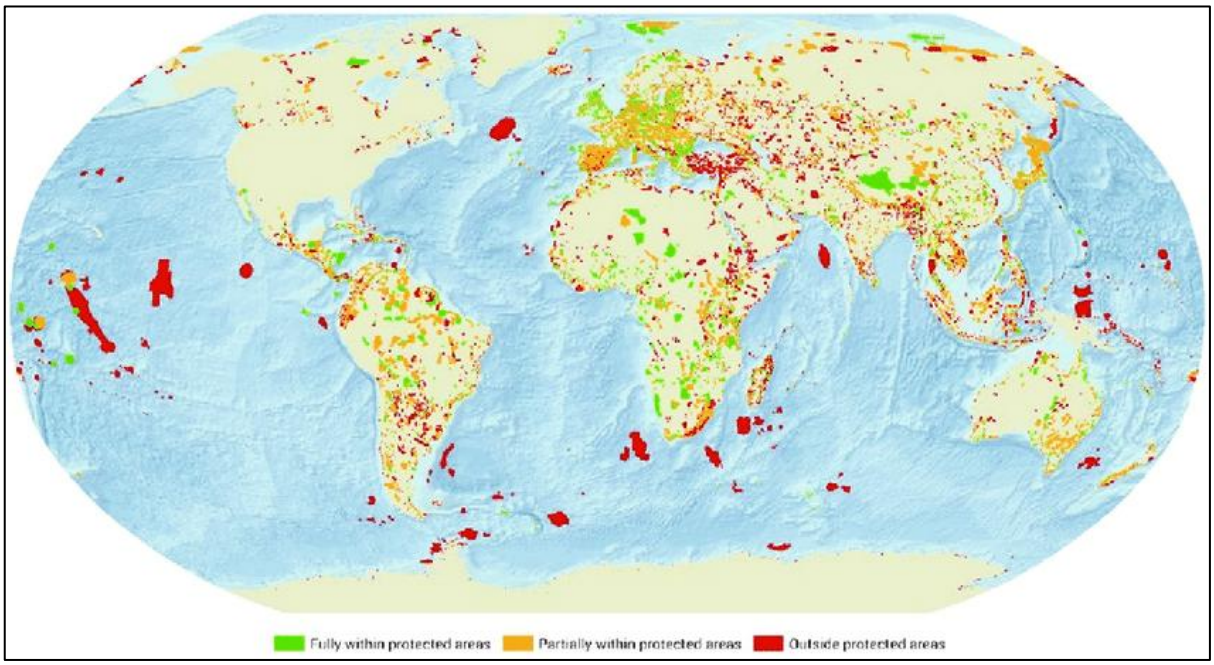

Figure 5: Key Biodiversity Areas. (source: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330106546_Protected_Planet_Report_2018/figures?lo=1)

A similarly planetary vision is pursued in a quite different direction by advocates of the use of natural capital accounting and ecosystem valuation for biodiversity conservation (Fletcher, 2023a). Rather than calling for much of the Earth to be separated from human occupancy and processes to the extent possible, as Wilson and associated do, natural capitalists advocate that conservation instead be integrated into mainstream capitalist economics to the greatest possible extent, through working to develop a full account of the value produced by ecosystems throughout the world as the basis for

making decisions concerning how to best preserve this (Fletcher, 2023a). Dieter Helm's (2015) *Natural Capital: Valuing our Planet* is perhaps most illustrative of this alternate planetary approach. As the basis of decision-making concerning the use of natural resources, Helm advocates systematic valuation of the total value of such natural capital throughout the world, with decision-making then following what he calls the "aggregate natural capital rule", whereby resources are managed such that the total value of natural capital worldwide is sustained or even increased over time. This, then, is a similarly planetary vision as the Half Earth project, albeit a dramatically different one, in which all of the world's natural capital is systematically valued by a concerted global effort, which can then be used to decide which of the Earth's resources can be best preserved in specific spaces so as to achieve Helm's aggregate natural capital rule on a planetary scale. In this way, proponents maintain, natural capital valuation can allow biodiversity to be fully integrated into capitalist markets such that, as the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) President Peter Bakker explains, business leaders can "manage for natural capital just as you would manage your financial capital" (in Fletcher, 2014: 335).

Yet if these are unprecedented planetary conservation visions, they remain disturbingly problematic ones, as a planetary perspective on the proposals indeed helps to illuminate. If one limits one's focus to what is happening within each of the halves of Wilson's proposed Half Earth division, for instance, one might be seduced by the vision. But as soon as the view is expanded to consider the connections between these halves, as a planetary perspective demands, the proposal's limitations become clear. Consider, for instance, the resources needed to sustain the population concentrated in the human side of a Half Earth planet. As both Brenner (2014) and Arboleda (2020) demonstrate, the contemporary global economy is sustained by ever more intensive and extensive forms of raw resource extraction far removed from the places in which such resources are actually processed or consumed. In Arboleda's analysis, this continual expansion is driven less by the decisions of specific extractive firms or even their shareholders, but rather by the basic logic of capital, which indeed becomes something of an active force in his discussion in creating an imperative for constant accumulation transcending the interests of particular actors or organizations.

The implications of this discussion are twofold. First, it demonstrates that focusing on cultivating conservation in only one half of the Earth is futile and self-defeating, as support for human life in the other half within the current capitalist economy will inevitably require increasing encroachment on this conserved space and the resources it harbors (something that, in fact, is happening in many conservation areas around the world already – see Le Billon, 2021). Second, it demonstrates that, even if the human side of the planet is taken into account, conservation goals cannot be met without confronting and dramatically transforming the capitalist economy that would continue to dominate within this space. This helps to counter proposals like that of the ecomodernist Breakthrough Institute asserting that Half Earth conservation can be achieved by promoting technological innovation to make economic activity more efficient within the human half of the planet and hence reduce the ecological impact of this activity in the other (Blomqvist *et al*., 2015). Unless the way the very nature of capital as a quasi-personal force driven by its own internal logic is also confronted, such "decoupling" via technology cannot stop the continual expansion of the resource frontiers that are, paradoxically, needed for this very technology.

Likewise, natural capital accounting that aims to ascribe sufficient exchange value to conserved resources to outcompete commodity extraction remains hampered by its essential aim to work within the capitalist system at a scale commensurate with the latter's planetary ascendency. As I have documented extensively elsewhere (Fletcher, 2023a), it has proven extremely difficult if not impossible for conservationists to generate sufficient revenue to successfully counter lucrative extractive activities on a substantial scale. I argue this is due not merely to a need to work harder to

eventually "get the market right", but to the fact that the way capitalist markets work means that extraction will always, on aggregate, be more profitable than conservation if assessed in purely market terms. Consequently, the natural capitalists' ambition to fight fire with fire by working within planetary capitalism can only end up fueling the biodiversity loss they endeavor to combat.

Planetary touristification

Tourism is an activity commonly promoted in the service of both development and conservation, and particularly in their attempted integration via ICDPs. Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, a growing focus of discussion within tourism studies had been the occurrence of so-called "overtourism" and the discontent it was causing within popular destinations around the world, but particularly within European cities (see esp. UNWTO, 2018; Milano *et al*., 2019a; 2019b). All of this changed over several days as virtually the entire globe went into simultaneous lockdown, resulting in stringent travel restrictions to nearly every tourism destination worldwide. Consequently, preoccupation with overtourism was quickly replaced by complaints about "undertourism", previously a marginal focus of discussion, as destinations now struggled to deal with the economic consequences of the sudden loss of tourism revenue on which they had come to depend. This led some to suggest that overtourism was now no longer a concern, and even to deride those who had previously critiqued and resisted it for "getting what they wished for" and then suffering the consequences of this outcome (Hall *et al*., 2020).

Rather than viewing overtourism and undertourism as distinct and separate phenomena, however, a more expansive perspective might understand them as two sides of the same coin of tourism development, understood as a particular manifestation of the capitalist economy and the uneven geography that the latter characteristically produces (Harvey, 1989; Smith, 2010). Milano and Koens (2022: 225-226), indeed, suggest exactly this in asserting that "both overtourism and undertourism, including the current COVID-19 pandemic, are the result of underlying issues of the current tourism political economy, which increasingly results in paradoxical tourism extremes of too much or too little tourism." While drawing on previous research framing the tourism industry generally as an expression of capitalist political economy to make this claim, however, the authors do not explain how this framing produces oscillation between these extremes in particular places and times (beyond the stated reference to the COVID-19 pandemic).

A longstanding discussion in tourism studies, meanwhile, describes a "tourism area life cycle" (TALC) in which a given destination is seen undergo a process of growth and development on its way to maximum carrying capacity, after which it can fall into several different trajectories from revitalization to decline and collapse (e.g. Butler, 1980; Zhong *et al*., 2008). Yet TALC research commonly neglects to place different destinations in relation to one another and explain how their particular trajectories cohere within an overarching understanding of tourism development regionally as well as globally. From another perspective, however, tourism development has been extensively analyzed as a particular form of capitalist production and exchange (e.g. Britton, 1992; Bianchi, 2009; Fletcher, 2011; Murray, 2015). Within this discussion, given its status as one of the world's largest industries, tourism's significant role in facilitating global capitalist expansion more broadly through a particular series of time-space fixes has also been explored (Fletcher, 2011). Thus far, however, this tourism-as-capitalism discussion has not engaged directly with exploration of the TALC, neither in particular locations nor in their interconnection across contexts.

I therefore build on Milano and Koens' (2022) assertion as well as previous research concerning tourism's political economy here to describe the current era as one of *planetary tourististification*. Like Brenner's planetary urbanization, this framing promises to produce "a new understanding of"

tourism development "that explicitly theorizes the evolving, mutually recursive relations between agglomeration processes and their operational landscapes, including the forms of land-use intensification, logistical coordination, core-periphery polarization and sociopolitical struggle that accompany the latter at all spatial scales" (Brenner, 2014: 21). Within this theoretical framework, the presence of undertourism and overtourism in different places and times can be understood as interrelated expressions of Lefebvre's (2003[1971]) *implosion-explosion* dynamic, that is, as twin "'moments' in the dialectical sense of the term—mutually interdependent yet intensely conflictual dimensions of an historically constituted, discontinuously evolving totality" (Brenner 2014: 21).

Planetary touristification can be seen as the latest stage of the tourism's industry's global advance that began in earnest in the immediate post-WWII period (although there were of course important antecedents in the pre-war period too; see Cocks, 2013). As a result of this global expansion and integration over the past half century, one could, paraphrasing Wallerstein (1974), reasonably argue that today there is only one tourism world-system encircling the globe. This is the contemporary condition that I refer to as planetary touristification. Its advent was signaled most dramatically, perhaps, by the famous photograph published on 22 May 2019 by Nirmal Purja, a mountaineer and former British soldier, depicting his view from the rear of a long line of climbers snaking towards the summit of Mt. Everest (see Figure 6). In the era of planetary touristification, even the highest point on Earth has become the site of long tourist queues.

Figure 6: Queuing for Everest Summit, May 2019. (source: Nirmal Purja. https://www.outsideonline.com/outdoor-adventure/climbing/everest-summit-traffic-jam)

Of course, this planetary touristification has hardly proceeded evenly, but rather has produced uneven outcomes in different places, as theorists of uneven geographical development (UGD) would

expect (Harvey, 1989; Smith, 2010). Some places have become ever more popular tourism destinations throughout the post-war period. By contrast, other places have been bypassed completely by tourism development throughout this period. Still others were for a time popular destinations, progressing upward on the TALC trajectory, only to subsequently lose tourists' and developers' attention and fall into decline, while others initially bypassed by the industry have since become thriving tourist centers.

This differentiated pattern is entirely consistent with what UGD would predict. As Smith (2010: 240) explains, "With everything it can muster, this is what capital strives to do: it strives to move from developed to underdeveloped space, then back to developed space which, because of its interim deprivation of capital, is now underdeveloped, and so on." In this way, "the geographical contradiction between development and underdevelopment where the over-accumulation of capital at one pole is matched by the over-accumulation of labor at the other" (Smith, 2010: 239).

This uneven development, Smith claims, is fundamentally driven by capital's quest to maximize its rate of return:

> If the accumulation of capital entails geographical development and if the direction of this development is guided by the rate of profit, then we can think of the world as a "profit surface" produced by capital itself, at three separate scales. Capital moves to where the rate of profit is highest (or at least high), and these moves are synchronized with the rhythm of accumulation and crisis. The mobility of capital brings about the development of areas with a high rate of profit and the underdevelopment of those areas where a low rate of profit pertains. But the process of development itself leads to the diminution of this higher rate of profit. (Smith, 2010: 237-238)

In this way, capital seesaws between different locations over time in search of maximum return, leaving uneven patterns of growth and decline in its wake. This back-and-forth movement is in part driven by a second, complementary tension between imperatives of production and consumption:

> In the expanding search for relative surplus value, capital is driven to convert these external, relatively undeveloped spaces into places of production and accumulation. On the other hand, driven by the constant threat of over-accumulation, capital attempts to convert these places into markets for its goods, places of consumption. But it cannot do both, because it can convert these undeveloped societies into places of consumption only by developing them and by raising wages to facilitate consumption. There is a contradiction between the means of accumulation and the conditions necessary for accumulation to proceed, and it has a trenchant geographical shape. (Smith, 2010: 226)

Applied to tourism development, this perspective can help to explain why certain places become dominant tourist attractions, leading to their critique as sites of "overtourism", while some others remain undertouristifed from the perspective of both local economic interests and global capital flows. The initial development of tourism in certain places makes them attractive for investment of further capital, thus spurring the TALC "development" phase. As the local market becomes saturated and resources and labor become scarce, thus raising costs of production and reducing rates of profit, capital is then motivated to search elsewhere for greater returns, reversing development in one place while simultaneously stimulating it in others. In many areas experiencing undertourism, at the same time, local elites aim to actively attract this capital by promoting tourism

with the pretext of creating jobs and retaining people in their home places rather than being forced to migrate in search of work.

From the perspective of UGD, there is a particular reason why concerns about overtourism have tended to concentrate around prominent global cities that are also prime sites of other forms of capital accumulation. Rather than merely being sites of accumulation, Smith (2010: 219) asserts, cities can be understood as the *product* of such accumulation, explaining that "the urban scale as such is the necessary expression of the centralization of productive capital." In this way, the concentration of accumulated capital in the form of infrastructure facilitating tourists' mobility as well as the built environment forming the object of their visit become the center of gravity attracting new investment in tourism development that eventually expands sufficiently to threaten its own continued profitability.

Meanwhile, a much more direct relationship between sites of overtourism and undertourism also often pertains. As the perspective of planetary urbanization suggests, popular tourist destinations could not exist without support from other places experiencing little or no tourism as sources of natural resources and human labor as well as sites of waste disposal. Indeed, places experiencing little tourist interest are often in this position precisely because they have been sites of intensive production (in the form of resource extraction, agricultural monocropping, industrialization, etc) that have rendered them aesthetically unattractive to potential tourists. In this way, sites of supportive production and direct touristic consumption are linked within an encompassing perspective of planetary touristification.

5. Towards a planetary environmental politics

This article has suggested that political ecologists may need to more fully embrace and reckon with the implications of the planetary as a novel scale and frame of analysis. Such a reckoning should also include the planetary's implications for a progressive environmental politics going forward. As Arboleda (2020: 16) observes, in addition to all of its unavoidably negative consequences, "Crucially, the shift from the global to the planetary is also understood as a steppingstone toward novel formations of collective consciousness and of collective agency." In order to realize this potential, Marcili (2021: 84) asserts, "we must put aside the mourning and imagine a new way of governing and influencing the extraordinary planetary interdependence we have achieved."

In also addressing this need for an innovative planetary politics, Blake and Gilman (2024: 95) point out that "what planetary issues have in common is that they are yet to be effectively governed because existing governance institutions are national and global. Planetary issues…require institutions that are as unbound by national territories as the issues themselves." Rather than the planetary leviathan that Wainwright and Mann (2020) fear may arise to govern global climate change in an authoritarian top-down manner, however, they propose instead the idea of *planetary subsidiarity* as a potentially more effective form of governance for the planetary condition. This idea of course builds on the longstanding promotion of subsidiarity as a principle holding that all decision-making should be concentrated at the lowest possible effective level, with higher-level institutions and processes only being brought to bear for issues that cannot be adequately addressed on a smaller scale. The main aim of such a system, Blake and Gilman (2024: 9) explain, is to "maximize local control within an overarching governance framework that retains the capacity to manage shared problems." In transposing subsidiarity to the planetary, the authors envision a nested approach comprising "three scales of institutions: the planetary (which is to govern and guarantee habitability and multispecies flourishing), the national (which is to govern and guarantee development and redistribution), and the local (which is to ensure that the aforementioned principles are implemented in accordance with local

conditions and preferences)" (Blake & Gilman, 2024: 9). "The basic idea is a system of robust, well-resourced, high-capacity institutions at all scales, from the planetary to the local, that can manage governance challenges at all scales, from the planetary to the local" (2024: 107).

While the model calls for better articulation between already existing local and national level decision-making structures within a nested hierarchy, key to this model is also the development of new "planetary institutions", which are understood as "the minimum viable organization for the direct management of planetary challenges" (Blake & Gilman, 2024: 107; see also Marsili, 2020). Blake and Gilman explain that:

> …whereas global governance institutions are generally multilateral associations of sovereign national states, representing the interests of those states, planetary institutions of the sorts we…propose…will directly address planetary challenges, answering to planetary stakeholders as a whole, rather than representing the sectional interests of national states and national elites. (2024: 107)

Rockström and colleagues (2024) propose something similar in their discussion of the potential to develop an approach to Earth system governance for what they call the *planetary commons*. These are spaces that are essential for sustenance of all life on the planet but not conducive to national- or international-level governance, either because they exceed national boundaries (e.g., the Earth's climate) or are within national boundaries but of global importance (e.g., the Amazon rainforest). To effectively govern such planetary commons, Rockström and colleagues (2024: 6) also call for a "polycentric governance approach that connects scales and integrates sectors and jurisdictions, providing an innovative Earth system–focused framework for governing complex, interlinked, multiscalar governance challenges arising from a changing Earth." This, the authors argue, will necessitate:

> …creation of additional governance arrangements for those planetary commons that are not yet adequately governed. A challenge for such regimes is to duly adapt and adjust notions of state sovereignty and self-determination, and to define obligations and reciprocal support and compensation schemes to ensure protection of the Earth system, while including comprehensive stewardship obligations and mandates aimed at protecting Earth-regulating systems in a just and inclusive way. (2024: 2)

Rather than having to choose between a focus on everyday, situated practices and birds eye view abstractions, as Loftus (2018) worries that the planetary frame compels, a subsidiarity approach allows for the articulation of both. To fully embody a planetary perspective, however, this politics would also need to transcend the anthropocentrism of the global era and the institutions it spawned, to find ways to actively include non-humans within the political process as well. This resonates with growing calls from political ecologists and others to also restructure decision-making processes to include "ecojustice" (Washington *et al*., 2018) or the "Rights of Nature" (Boyd, 2017; Chapron, 2019). Variants of this proposal go under a variety of labels, including "ecodemocracy" (Cullinan, 2003) and "Earth jurisprudence" (Burdon, 2011). The central idea is that processes of decision-making and conflict resolution should be expanded to include nonhuman entities – to encompass, in other words, "justice for nonhuman nature" (Washington et al., 2018: 370).

To accomplish this, most advocate appointing human "trustees" to represent nonhuman perspectives and needs within political fora. Cochrane, for instance, proposes a "sentientist

cosmopolitan democracy" envisioned as "a global political system made up of overlapping local, national, regional and global communities comprised of human and non-human members." He insists that this system should be "participative, deliberative and representative" and "include *dedicated representatives of non-human animals* whose job should be to translate the interests of animals into deliberations over what is in the public good for their communities."[4] As Treves *et al*. (2019: 138) explain in their own proposal for "just preservation," appointment of such representatives would depend on "their ability to understand ecology, ethics, and the manifold, complex, dynamic interactions of humans and non-humans." Examples of efforts to operationalize such an approach include recent efforts to have "rights of nature" recognized within existing political processes, such as Ecuador's inclusion of rights of nature – Pachamama – generally within a revamped 2008 constitution (Rival, 2010) and New Zealand's designation of a particular river – Whanganui – as a legal person (Chapron *et al*., 2019).

Combining planetary subsidiarity with sentientist cosmopolitan democracy thus presents one potential response to the challenge of planetary politics. But a political ecology emphasis on the importance of attendance to capitalism as a key driving force in (environmental) politics proposes another important addition to this equation. Without reducing everything to historical materialism, what this article's analysis suggests is that the planetary condition generally, and its manifestation within the specific domains – development, conservation, and tourism – dissected here, can be understood as in substantial part as a response, even if sometimes a largely implicit one, to the capitalist system's own recent ascendence to a planetary scale. The rise of authoritarian neoliberalism can indeed be interpreted as a desperate effort to continue to sustain this planetary capitalism in the face of its mounting social and environmental contradictions (Fletcher, 2023a), whereby "contempt for democratic rules and nativist delirium become the new tools through which to keep the privileges of the few intact" (Marsili, 2020: 57-58).

If this is the case, then to be effective, progressive politics must be able to confront these reactionary forces on this same planetary scale, as Moore (2019) advises. Combined with planetary subsidiarity, this acknowledgment points to the need to bring together local-level actions confronting capitalist development in particular places with planetary-level organization of an unprecedented nature – to develop planetary institutions, in other words, built from the bottom up. As Marsili (2020: 90) explains, this "is not about federating nations or sitting national elites in joint summits to reach inter-national decisions, but rather organizing citizens themselves and empowering them to act at the scale of the problem itself – without delegation via their nations." This will not be easy, of course. Marsili (2020: 82) cautions that "the central tenant of neoliberal globalization is precisely the construction of a homogeneous planetary economic space deprived of any matching political power. Blocking the emergence of a new 'supranational sovereignty' was always one of the precepts of neoliberal thought."

Global networks like Via Campesina that articulate the interests of local communities around the world (Borras, 2008) can be seen as important steps in this direction – an organic response, in a sense, to the planetary scale of the issues to be addressed. More explicitly and formally, Marsili (2020) proposes organization of a *planetary political party* finally able to fulfill Marx and Engel's (1848) aspiration to unite the workers of the world beyond national boundaries:

[4] https://global.oup.com/academic/product/sentientist-politics-9780198789802?cc=nl&lang=en&#; emphasis in original.

> Imagine, for example, a party that did not limit its membership on the basis of nationality, but actively sought participation from anywhere in the planet, including other organised political forces, trade unions, civil society platforms and social movements wishing to engage in an innovative experiment in global coordination. Imagine a transnational party running for government in a national context but accepting the contribution of people from other countries in its programme, so as to bring the excluded into the national parliament and subvert the limits of that institution. (2020: 94-95).

6. Conclusion

This discussion suggests that a key challenge for the future for political ecological research and praxis may be to help nurture and support novel forms of subsidiarity-based planetary environmental political organization that are simultaneously anti-capitalist and multispecies in orientation. As an example of what such a politics might look like, let's revisit the discussion of planetary conservation. Over the past several years, global policy discussions concerning the future of conservation policy and practice have become dominated by the two main approaches previously highlighted: the Half Earth campaign, on the one hand, and natural capital valuation, on the other. An important part of the reason that these (previously opposed but now increasingly converging) positions so dominate the current debate is that they are backed and promoted by powerful coalitions of actors and organizations central to conservation politics both in global governance arenas and in diverse local spaces throughout the world.

Meanwhile, in the shadows of these giants, a diverse range of actors and organizations have more quietly advanced a quite different approach to enacting conservation, centered on the rights and actions of Indigenous Peoples and other local community members living in or near conservation-critical areas. Variants of this alternative approach have been outlined by myriad groups ringing together various coalitions of these diverse actors using a number of different labels, including among others "Indigenous and community conservation areas" and "territories of life" (Shaw, 2001), "rights-based conservation" (RRI, 2019), "inclusive and regenerative conservation" (Kashwan *et al*., 2021), "convivial conservation" (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020), the pursuit of "radical ecological democracy" (Kothari, 2014), and, in some interpretations at least, "other effective area-based conservation measures" (Jonas *et al*., 2017).

While the specifics of these (and numerous other overlapping) approaches vary, they seem to be united by their common advocacy of a core set of principles that, they assert, should be the basis of conservation policy and programming. I have outlined these principles elsewhere (Fletcher 2023b); suffice it to note here that they exemplify key features of the progressive planetary environmental politics described above: a challenge to mainstream economics and forms of governance, one the one hand, and a focus on integrating human and nonhuman spaces and processes, on the other. Yet while these core principles seem to be generally shared among a wide variety of different conservation proposals and practices emerging from numerous communities and organizations the world over, rarely are they given central consideration in global discussions concerning the future of conservation efforts.

One of the main reasons for this, I suspect, is that, unlike the Half Earth and natural capital agendas to which it stands in contrast, there is no coherent transnational coalition highlighting this "whole earth" conservation approach (Fletcher 2023b) and promoting its shared principles under a single common heading. This is where a planetary political program could prove useful, bringing these diverse groups together within a subsidiarity framework to form a new planetary institution able

to represent and promote their shared interests and agenda within global policy arenas. This might enable them to become a political force capable of countering the power of the substantial coalitions united around the Half Earth and natural capital programs. Political ecologists could help contribute to such an effort by serving as bridges between different groups as well as between local groups and actors occupying transnational policy spaces.

Likewise, the mainstream planetary development initiatives previously described might be met by a planetary-level organization of local groups from around the world engaged in various forms of what has been termed "post-development" (Escobar, 1995; Kothari, *et al.* 2019). While grounded in context-specific perspectives and modes of action, diverse forms of post-development seem to be united by a set of common values and principles that might also provide the foundation for an alternative planetary political program to champion and amplify its members' interests. Political ecologists could also contribute to research and advocacy concerning what such a planetary post-development (Dunlap 2025) might look like.

References

Arboleda, M. (2020). *Planetary mine: Territories of extraction under late capitalism*. Verso.

Arsel, M., Adaman, F. & Saad-Filho, A. (eds.) (2021). Special issue on "Authoritarian Developmentalism." *Geoforum 124*. https://www.sciencedirect.com/special-issue/10B304633HH

Arrighi, G. (2009). *The long Twentieth Century* (2nd ed.). Verso.

Bianchi, R. (2009). The 'critical turn' in tourism studies: A radical critique. *Tourism Geographies, 11*(4), 484–504. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616680903262653

Blake, J. S., & Gilman, N. (2024). *Children of a modest star: Planetary thinking for an age of crises*. Stanford University Press.

Borgerhoff Mulder, M. & Coppolillo, P. (2005). *Conservation*. Princeton University Press.

Blomqvist, L., Nordhaus, T., & Shellenberger, M. (2015). *Nature unbound: Decoupling for conservation*. Breakthrough Institute. https://thebreakthrough.org/articles/nature-unbound

Bluwstein, J. (2021). Colonizing landscapes/landscaping colonies: From a global history of landscapism to the contemporary landscape approach in nature conservation. *Journal of Political Ecology*, *28*(1), 904-927. https://doi.org/10.2458/jpe.2850

Borras Jr, S. M. (2008). La Vía Campesina and its global campaign for agrarian reform. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, *8*(2-3), 258-289. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0366.2008.00170.x

Boyd, D. R. (2017) *The rights of nature: A legal revolution that could save the world*. New York: ECW Press.

Bratton, B. (2021) Planetary sapience. *Noema magazine*, June 17. https://www.noemamag.com/planetary-sapience/.

Brenner, N. (2014). Introduction: Urban theory without an outside. In Brenner, N. (ed.). *Implosions/explosions: Towards a study of planetary urbanization*. Jovis Verlag. https://www.jovis.de/en/book/9783868598933

Brenner, N., & Schmid, C. (2015). Towards a new epistemology of the urban? *City*, *19*(2-3), 151-182. https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2015.1014712

Britton, S. (1991) Tourism, capital, and place: Towards a critical geography of tourism. *Environment and Planning D, 9*, 451–78. https://doi.org/10.1068/d090451

Bruff, I., & Tansel, C. B. (2019). Authoritarian neoliberalism: Trajectories of knowledge production and praxis. *Globalizations*, *16*(3), 233-244. https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2018.1502497

Burdon, P. (ed.). (2011). *Exploring wild law: The philosophy of earth jurisprudence*. Wakefield Press.

Buscher, B., & Fletcher, R. (2020). *The conservation revolution: Radical ideas for saving nature beyond the Anthropocene*. Verso.

Butler, R. W. (1980). The concept of a tourist area cycle of evolution: Implications for management of resources. *Canadian Geographer, 24*(1), 5-12. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0064.1980.tb00970.x

Chao, S., & Celermajer, D. (2023). Introduction: multispecies justice. *Cultural Politics*, *19*(1), 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1215/17432197-10232431

Chapron, G., Epstein, Y., & López-Bao, J. V. (2019) A rights revolution for nature. *Science 363*(6434), 1392–1393. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aav5601

Connolly, W. (2017). *Facing the planetary: Entangled humanism and the politics of swarming*. Duke University Press.

Chakrabarty, D. (2021). *The climate of history in a planetary age*. University of Chicago Press.

Clark, N., & Szerszynski, B. (2020). *Planetary social thought: The Anthropocene challenge to the social sciences*. Wiley

Cocks, C. (2013). *Tropical whites: The rise of the tourist south in the Americas*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Cullinan, C. (2003). *Wild law: A manifesto for earth justice*. Green Books.

Dunlap, A. (2025). Planetary post-development now! Seminar presentation, Wageningen University, Wageningen NL, December 12.

Escobar, A. (1995). *Encountering development: The making and unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton University Press.

Fletcher, R. (2011). Sustaining tourism, sustaining capitalism? The tourism industry's role in global capitalist expansion. *Tourism Geographies*, *13*(3), 443-461. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2011.570372

Fletcher, R. (2014). Orchestrating Consent: Post-politics and Intensification of Nature: TM: Inc. at the 2012 World Conservation Congress. *Conservation & Society*, *12*(3), 329-342. http://doi.org/0.4103/0972-4923.145167

Fletcher, R. (2023a). *Failing forward: The rise and fall of neoliberal conservation*. University of California Press.

Fletcher, R. (2023b). Towards a collective 'whole earth' vision for the future of conservation? In A. Dawson & F. Longo (eds.). *Decolonize conservation: Global voices for indigenous self-determination, land, and a world in common*. Common Notions.

Foucault, M. (1984). On the genealogy of ethics. In *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon.

Fraser, N. (2017). The end of progressive neoliberalism. *Dissent 2*(1). https://dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/progressive-neoliberalism-reactionary-populism-nancy-fraser/

Goldstein, J. (2018). *Planetary improvement: Cleantech entrepreneurship and the contradictions of green capitalism*. MIT Press. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11478.001.0001

Hall, C.M., D. Scott & S. Gössling (2020). Pandemics, transformations and tourism: be careful what you wish for. *Tourism Geographies, 22*(3), 577-598. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1759131

Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.

Harvey, D. (1989). *The condition of postmodernity*. Blackwell.

Harvey, D. (2014). *Seventeen contradictions and the end of capitalism*. Oxford University Press.

Helm, D. (2015). *Natural capital: Valuing our planet*. Yale University Press.

Igoe, J. (2004). *Conservation and globalization: A study of Indigenous communities and national parks from East Africa to South Dakota*. Wadsworth/ Thompson.

Jonas, H. D., Lee, E., Jonas, H. C., Matallana-Tobon, C., Wright, K. S., Nelson, F., & Enns, E. (2017). Will "other effective area-based conservation measures" increase recognition and support for ICCAs. *Parks*, *23*(2), 63-78. https://www.iccaconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/PARKS-23.2-Jonas-et-al-10.2305IUCN.CH_.2017.PARKS-23-2HDJ.en_-2.pdf

Kashwan, P., Biermann, F., Gupta, A., & Okereke, C. (2020). Planetary justice: Prioritizing the poor in earth system governance. *Earth System Governance*, *6*, 100075. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esg.2020.100075

Kashwan, P., Duffy, R., Massé, F., Asiyanbi, A. P., & Marijnen, E. (2021). From racialized neocolonial global conservation to an inclusive and regenerative conservation. *Environment: Science and policy for sustainable development*, *63*(4), 4-19. https://doi.org/10.1080/00139157.2021.1924574

Kothari, A. (2014). Radical ecological democracy: A path forward for India and beyond. *Development*, *57*(1), 36-45. https://doi.org/10.1057/dev.2014.43

Kothari, A., Salleh, A., Escobar, A., Demaria, F., & Acosta, A. (2019). *Pluriverse: A post-development dictionary*. Tulika Books.

Le Billon, P. (2021). Crisis conservation and green extraction: biodiversity offsets as spaces of double exception. *Journal of Political Ecology*, *28*(1), 854-888. https://doi.org/10.2458/jpe.2991

Lefebvre, H. (2003a [1970]) *The urban revolution*. Translated by R. Bononno. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Lees, L., Shin, H.B., & Lopez-Morales, E. (2016). *Planetary gentrification*. Wiley.

Li, J., Van Assche, A., Li, L., & Qian, G. (2022). Foreign direct investment along the Belt and Road: A political economy perspective. *Journal of International Business Studies*, *53*(5), 902-919. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41267-021-00435-0

Loftus, A. (2018). Planetary concerns. *City* *22*(1), 88-95. https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2018.1434304

Marsili, L. (2021). *Planetary politics*. Polity.

Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1848). *The communist manifesto*. International Publishers. https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf

McCarthy, J. (2019). Authoritarianism, populism, and the environment: Comparative experiences, insights, and perspectives. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, *109*(2), 301-313. https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2018.1554393

Milano, C., Cheer, J. M., & Novelli, M. (Eds.) (2019a). *Overtourism: Excesses, discontents and measures in travel and tourism*. CABI.

Milano, C., Novelli, M., & Cheer, J.M. (2019b). Overtourism and tourismphobia: A journey through four decades of tourism development, planning and local concerns. *Tourism Planning and Development*, *16*(4), 353–357. https://doi.org/10.1080/21568316.2019.1599604

Milano, C., & Koens, K. (2022). The paradox of tourism extremes: Excesses and restraints in times of COVID-19. *Current Issues in Tourism*, *25*(2), 219-231. https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2021.1908967

Miller, B., Soulé, M. E., & Terborgh, J. (2014). 'New conservation' or surrender to development? *Animal Conservation*, *17*(6), 509-515. https://doi.org/10.1111/acv.12127

Moore, J. W. (2019). The Capitalocene and planetary justice. *Maize*, *6*(1), 49-54.

Moore, J. W. (Ed.). (2016). *Anthropocene or capitalocene? Nature, history, and the crisis of capitalism*. PM press.

Murray, I. (2015). *Capitalismo y turismo en España: Del "milagro económico" a la "gran crisis."* Alba Sud Editorial. https://www.albasud.org/publ/docs/68.pdf

O'Connor, J. (1988). Capitalism, nature, and socialism: A theoretical introduction. *Capitalism Nature Socialism 1*, 11–38. https://doi.org/10.1080/10455758809358356

Raworth, K. (2017). *Doughnut economics*. Random House.

Sidaway, J. D., Woon, C. Y., & Jacobs, J. M. (2014). Planetary postcolonialism. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, *35*(1), 4-21. https://doi.org/10.1111/sjtg.12049

Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI). (2019). *Secure Indigenous peoples and community land rights as a nature-based solution to climate change*. RRI. https://wedocs.unep.org/handle/20.500.11822/28942

Rival, L. (2010). Ecuador's Yasuní-ITT Initiative: The old and new values of petroleum. *Ecological Economics*, *70*(2), 358-365. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2010.09.007

Rivera Cusicanqui, S. (2018). *Un mundo ch'ixi es posible: Ensayos desde un presente en crisis*. Tinta Limón Editores.

Robinson, W. I. (2014). *Global capitalism and the crisis of humanity*. Cambridge University Press.

Rockström, J., Kotzé, L., Milutinović, S., Biermann, F., Brovkin, V., Donges, J., Ebbesson, J., French, D., Gupta, J., Kim, R. & Lenton, T., (2024). The planetary commons: A new paradigm for safeguarding Earth-regulating systems in the Anthropocene. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *121*(5), p.e2301531121. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2301531121

Rockström, J., Steffen, W., Noone, K., Persson, Å., Chapin III, F. S., Lambin, E., ... & Foley, J. (2009). Planetary boundaries: Exploring the safe operating space for humanity. *Ecology and Society*, *14*(2). https://doi.org/10.5751/es-03180-140232

Sayer, J. (2009). Reconciling conservation and development: Are landscapes the answer? *Biotropica*, *41*(6), 649-652. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-7429.2009.00575.x

Shaw, C. (2021). Defending territories of life through Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCAs). In Menton, M. & LeBillon, P. (eds.). *Environmental defenders*: *Deadly struggles for life and territory*. Routledge.

Sklair, L. (2001). *The transnational capitalist class*. Blackwell.

Smith, N. (2010 [1984, 1990]). *Uneven development: Nature, capital, and the production of space*. University of Georgia Press.

Spivak, G. C. (2003). *Death of a discipline*. Columbia University Press.

Tang, L., & Werner, T. T. (2023). Global mining footprint mapped from high-resolution satellite imagery. *Communications Earth & Environment*, *4*(1), 134. https://doi.org/10.1038/s43247-023-00805-6

Terborgh, J. (2015). Foreword. In G. Wuerthner, E. Crist & T. Butler (eds.). *Protecting the Wild: Parks and wilderness, the foundation for conservation*. Island Press.

Treves, A., Santiago-Ávila, F. J., & Lynn, W. S. (2019). Just preservation. *Biological Conservation*, *229*, 134-141. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2018.11.018

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2025). *United Nations human development report 2025*. UNDP. https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-2025

United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2018). *'Overtourism'? Understanding and managing urban tourism growth beyond perceptions*. UNWTO. https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/book/10.18111/9789284420070

Wainwright, J., & Mann, G. (2018). *Climate Leviathan: A political theory of our planetary future*. Verso.

Wallerstein, I. (1974). The rise and future demise of the world capitalist system: Concepts for comparative analysis. *Comparative Studies in Society and History 16*(4), 387-415.

Washington H, Chapron G, Kopnina H, *et al*. (2018) Foregrounding ecojustice in conservation. *Biological Conservation 228*, 367–374. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2018.09.011

Wilson, E.O. (2016). *Half-Earth: Our planet's fight for life*. WW Norton & Company.

International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). (2025) *World database on protected areas*. IUCN. https://www.protectedplanet.net/en

Weinstein, K. R. & Chou, W. (2024). The rise of the free and open Indo-Pacific and the challenge of deterrence. Hudson Institute. https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/rise-free-open-indo-pacific-challenge-deterrence-kenneth-weinstein-william-chou

Wuerthner, G., Crist, E., & Butler, T. (eds.). (2015). *Protecting the Wild: Parks and wilderness, the foundation for conservation*. Island Press.

Zhong, L., Deng, J., & Xiang, B. (2008). Tourism development and the tourism area life-cycle model: A case study of Zhangjiajie National Forest Park, China. *Tourism Management*, *29*(5), 841-856. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2007.10.002