Abstract

This paper proposes a paradigm shift in conservation, moving from technocratic and colonial frameworks toward an ethic of interspecies communion. Drawing on Juno Salazar Parreñas' critique of biopolitical care, Mara Goldman's analysis of Maasai narrative epistemologies, Barrett et al.'s model of intuitive interspecies communication, and philosophical reflections from Edgar Morin, William Desmond, and the emerging field of Ecocene fire practices, the paper articulates a vision of both conservation and understandings and uses of fire rooted in reciprocity, complexity, and ontological humility. It argues that communion, not control, must ground conservation in the age of ecological disruption.

The Colonial Logic of Conservation and the Myth of Care

To begin reimagining conservation as communion, we must first confront the inherited frameworks that reduce it to control, especially when cloaked in the language of care. This colonial logic is not limited to wildlife management. Still, it extends into fire suppression and land governance, where the suppression of natural processes like fire mirrors the suspended autonomy described by Parreñas in orangutan rehabilitation (Parreñas 2018). Both reflect a deeper refusal to let beings and ecologies flourish on their own terms.

In *Decolonizing Extinction*, Parreñas critiques biopolitical management through the lens of "arrested autonomy," showing how animals are held in indefinite dependency. Similarly, modern fire regimes impose human-centered control over flame, resulting in ecological imbalance, fuel accumulation, and catastrophic wildfires. In both cases, Western conservation

treats agency, whether of animals or fire, as a risk to be managed. The temporality of care becomes a temporality of suspension, where "nature[1]" is never fully trusted to regenerate or care for "it"self.

By seeing ecologies, including fire, through an Ecocene lens, as a collaborator rather than a threat, we begin to dissolve the anthropocentric boundaries that separate care from communion. The restoration of cultural fire practices by Indigenous communities challenges the very epistemologies Parreñas critiques: instead of indefinite rehabilitation, fire becomes a cycle of regeneration, an ecological teacher that offers rhythms of return, not delay.

Contrary to common perceptions of the European Middle Ages as a period of environmental exploitation, evidence suggests that medieval societies did practice conscious resource management. Dolly Jørgensen's research on Anglo-Norman England and Normandy (1066–1135) reveals that "medieval landholders in their kingdom practised conscious forestry management to balance demands on woodland resources" (Jørgensen, 2010, 333).

The king, nobility, and clergy employed foresters to "delicately balance requirements for timber, pastureland, and hunting, in order to accommodate the needs of everyday life as well as noble entertainment" (Jørgensen, 2010, 334). This multi-use forest management approach is similar to modern forestry practices, challenging the notion that conservation consciousness is exclusively modern.

[1] As we'll see throughout this paper and thoroughly discussed in contemporary works, the concept of *nature* as an object itself is misguided at best. However, for the sake of references, it is important to include this term in the conversation around conservation as communion if we are to understand the framework of modern Western systems and colloquial understandings.

Legal documents from this period, for example, show restrictions on fisheries, specifically prohibiting the blocking of fish passage in waterways, indicating an awareness of ecosystem damage. While these conservation efforts were "not aimed at environmental preservation because of altruistic motivations, but rather to preserve needed resources for economic and political ends" (Jørgensen, 2010, 335), they represent an early form of sustainable resource management.

However, compared with past consciousness-minded efforts, we must also posit the potential motives behind such drives and how they relate to our modern contexts. In this case, the ruling elite (Kings, nobility, clergy) put these ecological legalities in place with a clear subject-object understanding of non-humans as something to be collected, amassed, or otherwise stewarded. No doubt that the admonition in Genesis 1 at the end of the creative act by God enabled such actions;

> God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.' 29 God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. 30And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food[2].' And it was so.

[2] In an ironic sense regarding a discussion of the Ecocene, the biblical notion of Creation as laid out here in Genesis 1 (which most biblical scholars agree was written after the older and "stranger" version found directly afterwards

Likewise, the Roman writer Lucretius, in his epic poem *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of Things), described early humans living in harmony with nature, taking only what the earth naturally provided and finding contentment in its provisions (Lucretius, Book V). Cicero emphasized moderation and the beauty of the natural world. In *De Natura Deorum*, he wrote: "The beauty of the world, and the orderly arrangement of everything celestial, the revolution of the seasons, the alternation of day and night, the regularity of the courses of the stars, the arrangement of all things pertaining to the earth, the sea, and the sky, make it manifest that there is some excellent and eternal power" (Cicero, II.97). Pliny the Elder expressed concern for environmental, and I would argue ecological, degradation in his *Naturalis Historia*, lamenting: "We are spoiling the last vestiges of the earth; a few more generations, it is feared, and there will be nothing left worthy of the world's admiration" (Pliny, Book XVIII). He advocated for a stewardship approach, stating, "The Earth we have received as a sacred trust from our forefathers, and we should pass it on, increased and more beautiful, to our descendants" (Pliny, Book XVIII).

Fire, as an object, is often the subject of these ancient thinkers. Of course, this thread extends throughout human history back to our formative period as a species when fire offered safety, community, food processing, and (perhaps most importantly) the ability to directly interact with local ecologies to benefit humans and non-humans alike. Another Roman writer, Pliny the Younger, tells us

> There are also the fires made by men, those which are innate in certain kinds of stones, those produced by the friction of wood, and those in the clouds, which

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into Genesis 2) instructs the first humans to be vegetarian in the modern sense. Humans in these "Priestly writings" of the Torah don't become consumers of animals until after the Flood.

> give rise to lightning. It really exceeds all other wonders, that one single day should pass in which everything is not consumed, especially when we reflect, that concave mirrors placed opposite to the sun's rays produce flame more readily than any other kind of fire; and that numerous small but natural fires abound everywhere. In so many places, and with so many fires, does nature burn the earth! (Pliny the Elder 1855, bk. II, chap. 111 (107))

These seminal texts of the biblical, Greek, and Roman writers would have enormous, if not all-encompassing, influence on the consciousness of the West and be repeated throughout the baronies of the Middle Ages through the periods of the Renaissance and Enlightenment into the modern period where we still hear their echoes today from pulpits, political pundits, and casual conversations about conservation in the United States (with its whitewashed Roman-inspired architectures found in every seat of federal, state, and local government still). This is especially true for Western conceptions of fire in ecological contexts as an object that *must* be controlled and ultimately commodified to avert peril or destruction, losing the notion of both ancient and Indigenous wisdom(s).

It is no wonder, then, how the hegemonic concept of conservation has come to its current form in the consciousness of those who have inherited Western tradition as a consciousness-defining framework in what we commonly have determined to be the Anthropocene. However, this framework is reaching its ultimate stress points as we pass the quarter point of the 21st century and are faced with challenges from government funding towards conservation programs and departments, the rising awareness of climate change's risks and very real effects ("wildfires" that have traumatized and challenged communities across North America, for example), and realizations that Indigenous voices who were previously removed from their ancestral lands and

ecologies, placed onto reservations and ignored, offer a way through, must be taken into account if we are to continue, let alone survive, as a society.

Long before modern conservation, Indigenous peoples worldwide, including Native Americans and Aboriginal Australians, used fire intentionally to shape landscapes, enhance biodiversity, and sustain cultural practices (Roos, 2021, 241; Greenwood et al., 2024). In North America, tribes such as the Miwok, Karuk, and Yurok practiced "cultural burning" to promote food plants, improve hunting grounds, reduce pests, and maintain open, resilient forests (NPS, 2024). Evidence from Yosemite Valley and other sites shows increased ash deposits and ecological diversity following millennia of Indigenous burning (Roos, 2021, 245).

Similarly, Aboriginal Australians have used mosaic burning for tens of thousands of years to create "pyrodiversity," supporting a rich array of plant and animal life (Greenwood et al., 2024). These practices, rooted in traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), fostered ecosystem health and resilience across continents (Hoffman et al., 2021, 1).

Embodied Knowledge and Relational Epistemologies: The Maasai Model

Mara Goldman's work with the Maasai offers a radically different vision of conservation grounded in narrative, embodiment, and attunement to place. For the Maasai, ecological knowledge emerges from movement on the land, oral tradition, and reciprocal observation of animals. This relational epistemology extends naturally into how ecological elements, such as fire, are understood in many Indigenous communities as not a force to be suppressed but as a presence to be lived with and guided through practice.

Goldman writes that "knowledge about nature is not stored in texts but in bodies moving through landscapes" (Goldman, 44). Similarly, fire stewardship knowledge, such as that of the

Karuk, Yurok, or Aboriginal Australians, is transmitted not through manuals but through burns, ceremonies, and seasonal cycles. Cultural burns are a form of embodied narratives, telling the story of ecological relationships through practice.

In an interview with a Maasai Senior Elder, Goldman records:

> "We, Maasai, we have always used burning and grazing to manage the pastures, and this is especially important for certain grasses. For instance, "if there are two places with olkereyan [*Sporobolus pyramidalis*] and oloyeti engusero [*Sporobolus rangei pilger*] grasses, and one was grazed and the other not touched, the place that was grazed by cattle will be better than the place left ungrazed, which will become pori." It is the same with **fire**. A place that has been burned will be better than a place left unburned. So, for instance, with alalili (our reserve pastures for calves and sick cows), we burn it every two years so that good, healthy grass grows back."

Goldman's emphasis on "situated conservation" resonates with fire's role in many Indigenous traditions, where the decision to burn is contextual, responsive, and rooted in intergenerational memory. Like Maasai herders who read lion tracks and rainfall patterns, Indigenous fire practitioners read wind, humidity, and plant behavior, engaging in a dialogical process that enacts ecological intentionality.

Listening Across Species and Elements: Communication as Relational Justice

Barrett et al.'s theory of intuitive interspecies communication (IIC) expands the moral field of conservation to include affective and energetic exchanges. While often marginalized by scientific

orthodoxy, IIC offers a framework for understanding how beings and I would argue non-beings as well, including elements like fire, communicate their presence, needs, and rhythms. Listening, in this expanded field, includes recognizing fire's cycles, signals, and silences.

> "IIC challenges deeply inscribed Cartesian dualisms by disestablishing absolutist understandings of the dichotomies of body/mind and nature/culture. Effective application of IIC calls for interspecies humility; it is a conversation between equals. It requires defamiliarization with and disidentification from (Muñoz, 1999) hierarchical systems that facilitate aggression among humans and across species, based on claims to the exceptional importance of prevailing economic, military or, indeed, academic systems." (Barrett et al. 2021, 152).

For example, cultural burning practices are deeply attuned to these cues. Fire is never simply applied; it is consulted. Firekeepers listen for the time to ignite and the time to wait. This form of elemental communication parallels the IIC model of "being with" another consciousness, allowing space for nonverbal negotiation. Barrett et al. urge us to reconsider justice not as control, but as co-presence and response-ability. Fire, too, demands this posture.

When Indigenous practitioners speak of "cool burns," they describe both technique and relationship. These burns require emotional presence, ancestral guidance, and environmental sensitivity. Just as IIC proposes intuitive listening between humans and animals, Ecocene fire practices propose intuitive collaboration between humans and flame.

Toward an Ecocene Ethic: Complexity, Communion, and Cosmology

The Ecocene proposes a shift in geologic epochs and metaphysical commitments. Edgar Morin's complexity thinking challenges the fragmentation of knowledge, calling us to "reliance" or to reconnect what modernity has separated (Morin 2001). In this frame, fire is not a threat to control but a node in a complex system of renewal, decay, and adaptation.

Cultural burning exemplifies this complexity. It is not linear or standardized but recursive, polyphonic, and adaptive to the seasons, the local ecology, and to the long-term mutual benefit of human and non-human outside of the typical subject-object relationship that existed, for instance, in Medieval resource farms protected for nobility. As fire ecologists now argue, *pyrodiversity begets biodiversity* (Hoffman et al. 2021). This insight aligns with the Ecocene vision of conservation: not as monoculture management with the short-term goal of producing a specific yield of crop in one location for one season, but as polyrelational tending that exists in much longer time frames. Soil is tended for, groves are wisely managed for long-term health and disease resistance, and future generations of humans are encouraged to follow these practices. Ecological intentionality becomes a way of living into this complexity with care, humility, and trust.

Panikkar's ecosophy deepens this vision, offering a spiritual cosmology where humans, fire, and soil belong to a shared sacred household (Panikkar 2022). Fire becomes part of the "cosmotheandric" communion as a mediator of divine, human, and earthly presences.

The Ethos of the Between: Desmond, Porosity, and the Metaphysics of Flame

William Desmond's metaphysical vision of the "between" names a space of openness, mystery, and co-becoming. Fire embodies this ethos in a particularly vivid way. It cannot be possessed or fixed. It flickers at the edge of being, refusing totalization yet consummated in the experience of humans from worship to mythology to practical food production and community creation. When we practice these communions with fire (and our ecologies), we enter into this porous metaphysical terrain, one where agency, transformation, and death coexist. However, this terrain is porous and therefore also has the ability to exist in the tactile praxis of *being*.

> "The in-between is not a neutral medium but a space of communication and community, of passage and porous relation… Being itself is porous; it communicates, gives, and exceeds" (Desmond 2008, 24).

Desmond's language of "porosity" provides a framework for interpreting cultural fire practices' spiritual and ethical dimensions. These are not merely ecological acts of conservation based on actuarial tables or legislation passed by committees of people in suits and ties seated in air-conditioned white Roman-revival buildings closed off from the "wilderness," but rituals of humility and hospitality. They enact Desmond's call to dwell in vulnerability, not mastery.

To burn with fire, rather than against it, then is to live *metaxologically*, or to accept that life thrives not in domination but in the *in-between*: between flame and seed, between memory and regeneration.

Fire as Rethinking Conservation Communion: Ecocene Stewardship and Kinship with Flame

Fire, often seen as a destructive force, becomes a sacred teacher in the Ecocene. Across Indigenous traditions, fire is more than chemistry. It is spirit. It sings in the soil, dances through the underbrush, and clears paths for new growth. In the Carolinas, where loblolly pines depend on fire to release seeds and where settler suppression has led to ecosystem degradation, learning to burn again is an act of memory and communion.

The practical applications of Ecocene fire stewardship, such as Integrated Fire Management (IFM), cultural burning, and ecological fuel breaks, are rooted in ancient practices that foreground the relationship. They reveal that climate resilience is not a matter of data alone, but of presence, protocol, and listening.

IFM merges Indigenous knowledge, ecological science, and adaptive governance to work with fire rather than against it (Moritz et al., 2025, 221). Key strategies include:

- Cultural Burning: Low-intensity burns, like those practiced by Aboriginal Australians, reduce wildfire risk by 40–60% while enhancing soil carbon and plant diversity (Greenwood et al., 2024).
- Biochar Production: Converting woody debris into biochar preserves carbon for millennia, improves soil fertility, and reduces emissions from traditional pile burning (FUSEE, 2021).
- Fuel Breaks with Ecological Sensitivity: Linear fuel breaks are designed to mimic natural firebreaks (e.g., rock outcroppings), avoiding fragmentation of habitats (Moritz et al., 2025, 224).
- The UN's REDD+ framework now recognizes Indigenous fire stewardship as a carbon sequestration strategy, with projects in Brazil and Indonesia avoiding 1.2 gigatons of CO_2 emissions annually (Hoffman et al., 2021, 3).
- California's 2023 Wildfire Resilience Plan allocates $500 million to tribal-led burns and biochar initiatives, aiming to treat 1 million acres by 2030 (CalFire, 2023).

As Greenwood et al. (2024) show, traditional Aboriginal burns reduce fire severity and support up to 40% higher biodiversity. These are not accidents or correlations without causations, as the ancients and contemporary Indigenous voices have repeatedly demonstrated. These long-held wisdoms are ecological outcomes of relational ecological intentionality. When fire is used to regenerate oak groves and restore salmon habitats, as the Yurok Tribe demonstrates, it becomes a ceremony of ecological repair (Norgaard 2019).

Native American traditions emphasize reciprocity with nature, rejecting the subject-object dichotomy (Kimmerer, 2013, 9–10). The Swinomish Tribe, for example, revitalized coastal ecosystems through clam gardens and salmon habitat restoration, blending traditional knowledge with modern science (Deur et al., 2015, 19–21).

Plains Tribes (Assiniboine, Sioux, Gros Ventre) lead bison and black-footed ferret recovery, restoring ecological balance to grasslands (Frey, 2019, 112–114). The Menominee Tribe pioneered sustainable forestry in Wisconsin, mandating sustained-yield logging decades before federal policies (Dockry et al., 2016, 6–7).

Likewise, post-1970s court rulings recognized tribal sovereignty in conservation. The Klamath Tribes secured co-management of Oregon's Fremont-Winema National Forest, integrating traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) with federal policy (Lake et al., 2018, 21–22).

Sacred site protections have also advanced. At Badger-Two Medicine (Blackfeet Nation), after 40 years of advocacy, oil and gas leases were revoked in 2023, preserving 130,000 acres of sacred land (Indian Country Today, 2023). Around Chaco Canyon, a 20-year drilling ban followed Pueblo and Diné-led campaigns (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2023).

David Treuer argues for transferring national park administration to tribes, citing precedents in Australia and New Zealand (Treuer, 2021). This approach acknowledges Indigenous land care, such as Yurok and Karuk fire management practices that reduce wildfire risks (Norgaard, 2019, 69–70).

The 1990 National Indian Forest Resources Management Act requires federal-tribal coordination, while the 2021 America the Beautiful Initiative prioritizes Indigenous-led conservation (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2021).

Indigenous voices tend to redefine conservation as kincentric reciprocity-a departure from anthropocentric resource management-centering ecological interdependence over human dominance (Kimmerer, 2013, 214–215).

Meanwhile, traditional Western conservation voices in the United States, rooted in anthropocentrism, typically frames environmental protection in terms of human benefits, resources for future human generations, recreational opportunities, or ecosystem services with economic value. This approach is evident in the “multiple use” philosophy that has guided U.S. forestry and public land management policies (Pinchot, 1910, 51), especially regarding the understanding and applications of fire.

The World Economic Forum acknowledges that “Anthropocentrism results in the treatment of other species and nature as objects and resources for human ends. This assumption still underlies the way many people approach conservation” (WEF, 2022). Even recent scientific frameworks like the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) remain fundamentally anthropocentric, valuing non-human species “only instrumentally, in terms of what they can provide for us” (IPBES, 2019).

This section, now central to the paper, argues that communion with fire is not metaphorical but ecological and ontological. To light a fire is to enter a covenant: to steward, attend, and be changed. As Panikkar reminds us, sustainability requires a transformation of consciousness. With its flickering wisdom, fire may be the elder we most need to learn from.

Conclusion: Communion and the Future of Conservation

The threads traced through this paper from ancient wisdoms to Parreñas' critique of conservation-as-care, Goldman's account of Maasai ecological epistemologies, Barrett et al.'s call for interspecies communication, Morin's vision of planetary complexity, Desmond's metaphysics of the between, and the elemental wisdom of fire in Ecocene practice, converge in a shared refusal of control as the foundation for ecological ethics. Instead, they gesture toward a new (or ancient) possibility: conservation not as management or rehabilitation, but as **communion**, a lived practice of reciprocity, listening, and co-becoming with the more-than-human world.

These perspectives remind us that even well-intentioned care can entrap life in suspended autonomy when colonial and biopolitical frameworks shape it. They offer relational alternatives: knowledge grounded in story, participation, and sacred encounter. They expand conservation into the realm of the affective, the spiritual, and the transformative. They name fire not as a threat but as an initiator of ecological humility.

Together, these voices invite a radical reimagining of conservation: not as the protection of nature from people, but as **participation in the sacred entanglement of all life**. This ethic resonates with what I've come to understand in my own ecological practice, whether sitting with a black walnut tree, tending to fire, or reflecting theologically on how to "be with" creation rather than act upon it. What I've called *ecological intentionality* finds echoes in all six lenses here, especially in their insistence that real conservation requires a shift in consciousness, and a risky willingness to be transformed by the beings and elements we seek to care for rather than trust that care to those seated in chairs in a conference room in the seat of an otherwise supposed

elected government seeking the best for all interests (though that goal is rarely achieved in our capitalistic society that relies on the ultimate arbiter of money).

As climate collapse and extinction accelerate, the temptation to respond with stronger enclosures, more data, or intensified management will remain strong. However, these authors, traditions, and practices remind us that **relational healing cannot emerge from structures of control.** If there is hope for the future of conservation, it lies not in the tools of empire repurposed, but in the slow, quiet, sacred work of **learning to listen, burn gently, speak with, and belong again.**

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