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Review

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Review

Revisiting Eden: Rethinking the Eden Narrative in Conservation Scholarship

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Abstract

For decades, conservation scholarship has problematised the 'Edenic' narrative invoked within early British discourses of nature and practices of conservation. Specifically, scholars have suggested that colonial conceptions of 'wilderness' as a veritable 'Garden of Eden', especially in places such as Eastern and Southern Africa, helped to legitimize the ideological and physical separation of nature and people, in part leading to the creation of the first conservation areas and subsequent socio-political impacts. This article does not contest that assertion. However, this article does seek to make three contributions. First, we suggest that while colonial conceptions of Christianity are integral to the formation of early conservation mechanisms, the use of Edenic language by both British colonists, and subsequently in the critical conservation-related literature, is problematic. Second, despite the abundance of conservation-related literature engaging with the concept of Eden, a theological analysis is lacking. Thus, we seek to provide an interpretation of Eden based on an exegesis of chapters one and two of the Book of Genesis in dialogue with other relevant Biblical passages. Third, based on this exegesis, we suggest how our interpretation of Eden can inform the future of conservation theory and practice by positing some characteristics of an Edenic conservation.

Keywords: Christianity; conservation; Eden; Africa; Genesis; Edenic conservation

1. Introduction

> "Africa's conservation history is littered with examples of expulsions and other human tragedies under conservation interventions that have sought to reconstruct local realities according to 'garden of Eden' images of 'unspoilt' wilderness." —Büscher (2010, p. 260)

Despite the generally areligious nature of biodiversity conservation practice and scholarship, one need not look too hard to find references to religious ideas and imagery. For example, Gosler et al. (2013) draw out linkages between the concept of 'mission' in conservation policy and practice and that of Christian mission, or the Great Commission, as rooted in chapter 28 of Matthew's account of the Gospel (see also Nelson 2003). Another articulation of this phenomenon, and the subject of this article, is the longstanding tendency of referencing "Eden" in the conservation-related scholarship. Indeed for decades, this literature has prodded and problematised the "Eden complex" common within colonial discourses of nature (Neumann 2002, p. 22). In the context of this article, "Eden" is used to refer to the Biblical Garden of Eden story found in the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Christian Bible.

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As the thinking goes, colonial, and particularly British, conceptualizations of regions such as Eastern and Southern Africa as a "lost Eden" were instrumental in the original impetus for modern conservation and the form it took (Neumann 1996, p. 80). Exemplifying this logic is the well-trodden notion that this Edenic vision helped to legitimate the ideological and physical separation of nature and people. In this vein, Neumann (1996) suggests that this Edenic narrative was "a major motivation behind the conservation laws and national parks" established in the early and mid-20th century across Eastern and Southern Africa that were marked, in part, by the eviction and exclusion of Africans (1996, p. 80; see also Brockington and Igoe 2006). We do not contest this assertion. Decades of work focusing on the history of conservation has revealed this critique to have serious merit (Anderson and Grove 1987; Grove 1989). We do believe, however, that there is more to Eden than has been conveyed in this body of literature. Thus, in this article we revisit Eden in order to make three contributions.

First, we suggest that while colonial conceptions of Christianity and Eden were certainly integral in the formation of early conservation mechanisms, the use of Edenic language by both British colonists and subsequently in the critical conservation-related literature, is problematic. By drawing on a range of conservation-related scholarship, we highlight that interpretations of both where—and what—Eden is, vary widely. Second, with different takes on Eden in mind, we provide a theological analysis of the Garden of Eden story. While various views on Eden and its place in conservation abound, the conservation-related literature largely neglects a theological reading of the story in Biblical context. Third, drawing inspiration from our analysis of the Eden story, we suggest how it can inform the future of conservation.

2. Eden in Conservation Scholarship

2.1. Where Is Eden?

When you think of Eden, *where* does your mind go? Do you imagine the savannas of East Africa? An urban garden in London? Ancient Mesopotamia? Here, we highlight the geographic variation of Eden to demonstrate the diverse applications of Eden across the conservation-related literature. We carried out a literature review using Google Scholar and Scopus to find articles in the conservation-related literature discussing Eden. Specifically, we searched using various combinations of the following terms: Christianity, conservation, Eden, Edenic, Eden complex, Edenic nature, Edenic wilderness, preservation, unspoilt Eden, wild Eden, and wilderness Eden. Given the specificity of the 'Eden complex' thematic (Neumann 2002, p. 22), potentially analogous terms for 'Eden' such as 'paradise' were not used. Only results published in English were considered, which we recognize as a limitation to our work. A further search was conducted by reviewing relevant references of each item found for further sources. Lastly, all sources found were manually reviewed to ensure that direct engagement with the theme of Eden was made. For example, Geisler's (2003) 'A new kind of trouble: evictions in Eden', while intriguing in title, provides no substantive engagement with the theme. In total, our search yielded 77 sources (50 journal articles, 11 books, six book chapters, six PhD theses, three MSc theses, and one white paper).

Discussions of Eden in the conservation-related literature have an expansive geography. Ranging from Australia (Harris 2012), to South Asia (Grove 1996), to Europe (Gruppuso 2018), and to the Americas (Slater 1996), Eden is seemingly everywhere. Without doubt, however, the most common location for the application and critique of Eden is Eastern and Southern Africa (Anderson and Grove 1987; Grove 1989; Adams and McShane 1996; Neumann 1995; Morris 2001; Neumann 2002; Nelson 2003; Nelson et al. 2007; Büscher 2010; Akama et al. 2011; Büscher 2011; Witter 2013; Pennaz et al. 2018; Munro 2021). Particularly influential works from Anderson and Grove (1987), Grove (1989), Neumann (1995,

1996, 2002) and Neumann (2003) have cemented Eden's place in the conservation-related literature by expounding the linkages between colonial discourses of nature, Edenic visions of Africa, and early conservation interventions. Anderson and Grove (1987) write that much of the British emotional investment during Africa's colonial era "manifested itself in a wish to protect the natural environment as a special kind of Eden" (1987, p. 4). Grove (1989) discusses at length the role of Scottish missionaries and evangelical thinking in the creation of "forest reserve Edens" in the Cape Colony in the mid to late 19th century (1989, p. 186). Expounding on the post-war conservation boom in British East Africa, Neumann (2002) traces the origins of national parks to ideas of Africa as a "symbolic Eden" (2002, p. 22). Despite the term's relatively widespread employment in the conservation-related literature, what exactly Eden is remains unclear.

2.2. Eden: Wilderness or the 'Antipode of Wilderness'?

Perhaps the most common conception of Eden in the conservation-related literature is one of Eden—as-wilderness. Indeed, one need not look too hard before coming across terminology such as "Edenic wilderness" (Nelson 2003, p. 70; Rai 2019, p. 5), "wild Eden" (Anderson and Grove 1987, p. 7; Büscher 2011, p. 84; Witter 2013, p. 407; Nattrass 2021, p. 99), or "unspoilt Eden" (Anderson and Grove 1987, p. 4; Morris 2001, p. 364; Adams and Hutton 2007, p. 155). Below, we outline several impactful works that represent the Eden-as-wilderness discourse most clearly.

One of the most widely cited articles employing the Eden-as-wilderness discourse is Anderson and Grove's (1987) introduction to *Conservation in Africa: People, policies and practice*. Expounding on the origins of colonial conservation in (mainly Eastern) Africa, Anderson and Grove note that throughout the process of colonization, the British were able to "impose their image of Africa upon the reality of the African landscape" (1987, p. 4). However, rather than imagining a "complex and changing environment in which people have to actually live", British (and largely at least nominally Christian) colonists imagined the natural environment they encountered to be a "special kind of Eden" that offered "the opportunity to experience a wild and natural environment which was no longer available in. . .Europe" (ibid). Going further, the authors suggest that "the symbol of Africa as a yet unspoilt Eden continues to stimulate conservation initiatives throughout the region" (ibid), an especially salient insight when considering the colonial continuities that inhabit many post-independence conservation areas and mechanisms.

Writing on transfrontier conservation in Southern Africa, Büscher (2010) reiterates the long history of failed conservation projects in the region (2010, p. 260), contending that these interventions failed, in part, due to their ambition to "reconstruct local realities according to 'garden of Eden' images of 'unspoilt' wilderness" (ibid). Büscher notes that the work of conservationists, driven "by the familiar myths of a 'wild Africa' that must be maintained in its 'original wilderness' condition", underlies the decades of failed conservation initiatives (ibid). Similarly, Witter (2013) problematizes early conservation initiatives in Africa for being consumed by "visions of a wild Eden. . ." that portrayed "Africans as intruders on paradise", rather than places that were "inhabited, claimed, and managed" (2013, p. 407).

Importantly, Edenic visions that characterized many early colonial conservation efforts in Africa can be directly linked to the enclosure of vast amounts of land and the eviction of Africans over whom protected areas were prioritized (ibid). A clear example of this comes from British Tanganyika and the creation of Serengeti National Park (for other examples, see Grove 1989; Munro 2021). As detailed by Neumann (2003), the creation of Serengeti National Park was spearheaded by organizations like the London-based Society for the Preservation of the Fauna of the Empire (SPFE), who sought to preserve "Eden", or the vision of "Africa as primeval wilderness". Following decades of lobbying from the

SPFE, colonial administrators in London moved to establish a park in which "humans and nature" were to be "spatially separated" (2003, p. 250). Thus, in 1959, the British colonial administration in Tanganyika forcibly relocated thousands of Maasai pastoralists to the newly created Ngorongoro Conservation Area for the purposes of establishing Serengeti National Park as an emblem of Edenic wilderness.

In contrast to colonial visions of a "wild Eden" (Witter 2013, p. 407), Nash (1967) provides an exposition of Eden which stands in stark contrast to those above by demonstrating the impact of the Judeo-Christian tradition on "the attitude toward wilderness of the Europeans who discovered and colonized the New World" (Nash 1967, p. 13). After expounding several instances of wilderness in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible, Nash posits that, in his interpretation, wilderness was viewed as an "environment of evil, a kind of hell" (1967, p. 15). Standing in opposition to wilderness, Nash contends, is Eden. Indeed, Nash suggests that "from what little we are told about the Garden of Eden it appears to have been, in the tradition of other paradises, the antipode of wilderness" (ibid). Adams and McShane (1996), in their popular work *The Myth of Wild Africa*, pick up on this point some 30 years later and similarly contest the interchangeability of Eden and wilderness. The authors contend that while "the two seem interchangeable, sometimes even colliding and forming the phrase 'wild Eden'", they "mean quite different things" (1996, pp. 5–6).

In questioning where and what Eden is, we have demonstrated the diverse employment of the concept within the conservation-related literature. However, despite the abundance of work engaging with Eden, a theological perspective has been largely neglected. Thus, we seek to provide an exegesis of the Biblical Garden of Eden story with the aim of contributing to current debates about the future of conservation.

3. Revisiting Eden: Thinking Theologically

The place of the Garden of Eden in Biblical theology is far removed from the connotations that Eden has within western conservation thinking. The main references to Eden, found in the creation accounts of Genesis chapters 1 and 2, have spurred a range of views regarding their theological significance (Clifford 1985; Walton 2003). Some Christians take a 'creationist' standpoint and see these chapters as a literal (historically accurate) description of a six-day process of creation. Others, including the authors of this paper, understand Genesis 1 and 2 as rich accounts providing key theological insights regarding the value and place of the natural world and of humanity within it. They are, in our interpretation, Ancient Near Eastern 'creation myths' in the technical sense of a highly structured poetic literary form containing essential truths about the origins and purpose of human and other life (Anderson 2005, p. 240; see also Batto 2015). In Biblical theology, the truths in the two creation accounts (Genesis 1:1–2:3 and 2:4–25) include that God is the source and origin of all life on earth, that creation is divinely ordered and structured, and that all creation is declared "very good" by God. Another key set of truths conveyed concern the relationship between humanity and the rest of nature. In Genesis 1:26–28 humans are made "in the image of God" in order to "rule over" the fish, birds and wild animals.

Given the diversity of views on Genesis 1 and 2 among Christians, together with the consistent confusion with which the Eden narrative has been employed in the academic literature, we provide an analysis of the Genesis accounts in an effort to inform the future of conservation, beginning with Genesis 1:26–28.

> [26] Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." [27] So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he

> created them. [28] God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (Genesis 1:26–28, Holy Bible, New International Version)

The three key terms in this passage that need to be considered are "image" and "rule over" in verse 26, and "subdue" in verse 28. In Genesis 1:26, God moves directly from creating humankind into giving them a specific role within creation. Thus, the image of God is not only a title that God bestows to humans, it is a job description that humanity is to fulfil (Middleton 2005). Theologically, these verses have the function of answering the question 'What are humans for?' The answer is, we are to 'image God' in ruling over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the livestock, the earth and its creatures. An 'image' is a likeness, imitation, or reflection of something. In Ancient Near Eastern religions, a statue is an image of a ruler or god. We are to reflect God's image in the way that we 'rule over' the earth and its creatures. However, if we are to 'image God' in ruling over creation, just how should we 'rule over' and 'subdue' the earth and its creatures?

Some Christians have claimed that we are permitted to dominate the natural environment and exploit it for our own benefit, without regard to its welfare (Vantassel 2009, pp. 36, 39, 163). Certainly, the Hebrew word for 'rule over' (radah) suggests an order of relationships based on power. Old Testament uses of the word include the head of a household (Leviticus 25:43) and the authority of a King's officers over conscripted labourers (1 Kings 5:16). Radah in Genesis 1:26–28 is thus about human leadership within the natural environment. God has chosen human beings from among creation and given them a special responsibility in leadership. Yet, the passage says little about how we exert that rule, except the implication that 'imaging' God means reflecting God's objectives for creation. Those are summarized in the repeated refrain "God saw that it was good" and the final statement that all that is created is "very good". The implication is that humanity's role as the image of God should be to maintain the goodness of creation. Anything that falls short of this fails to reflect God's image.

The word 'subdue' (kabas), in verse 28 often has violent overtones, of military conquest (Numbers 32:22, p. 29), of a king enslaving people (Jeremiah 34:11, p. 16), and even of rape (Esther 7:8). This would appear to justify the criticism that God permits humanity to trample creation (White 1967; see also Spencer 2019). However, three key points mitigate against this interpretation. Firstly, we must put this passage into its biblical, historical, and cultural context. As Middleton (2005) points out, where kabas is used "in texts having to do with subduing land/earth . . . there is no implication of a violent or adversarial relationship" (2005, p. 52). Rather, Adam and Eve were charged with cultivating a garden, and gardens require active management. Ruling over and subduing the earth are things that any farmer or gardener knows about. They are the endless tasks of keeping down the weeds, battling against advancing deserts, or preventing wild animals from destroying crops. There is a sense in which humanity needs to exercise 'dominion' in a world of desertification and disease, albeit through ways and livelihoods that are life-affirming and support the vitality of all biodiversity, recognizing that all of creation has been declared as good.

Secondly, Genesis 1:27–28, is about ruling and subduing in order to reflect the image of God. In other words, God's character (revealed, according to Christian theology, in nature, scripture, and supremely, in Christ) is to be reflected in our dealings with birds, fish, animals and the earth itself. In God's kingship over both nature and people, we find that power and authority are held in balance by love and mercy. The theological model for 'dominion' over the natural environment is ultimately Jesus, the 'Servant King', who, according to the New Testament, came not to be served but to serve (Matthew 20:28; Philippians 2:7). In Genesis, God declares the whole of creation "very good" (1:31), suggesting humanity's

task is to enhance its flourishing, not exploit it selfishly. The Bible repeatedly emphasizes that God cares for and sustains all creation—providing food, drink, and shelter for farm animals and wildlife (Psalm 104), even in places where no human being has ever been (Job 38:22–27). Reflecting God's image means that human dominion is always on God's behalf. We are God's deputies as creation's guardians.

Thirdly, Genesis 1 needs to be read with Genesis 2. These are twin accounts of how God made the world, giving different perspectives on the same truths. Both accounts see humanity as both part of creation and set apart within creation. In Genesis 1, mankind is made on the sixth day along with all other land animals—we do not get a day to ourselves. In Genesis 2, humanity is made from the dust of the earth, emphasizing our relationship with all other creatures and indeed the earth itself. Later, in Genesis 2:15, Adam is ordered to "tend" and "keep" the Garden of Eden, for which the Hebrew text has words meaning "serve" and "preserve", terms which are both priestly and royal. They imply that we lead not from above, but from within and on behalf of the rest of creation. Genesis 2:19–20 also includes God inviting Adam to name all the animals and birds, an activity about relationship more than control: we name what we know and care for. Overall, in Genesis 1 and 2, we are leaders within our own family—the community of creation.

Moreover, the terms "serve" and "preserve" in Genesis 2:15 balance the commands of Genesis 1:26–28, to "rule over" and "subdue". Leadership in its very nature rules and subdues (keeps order), but we are to do this in a serving and caring way. The word "serve" or "tend" is about active, careful management for the greater good of all creation. It is the work of pruning a fruit tree to make it more fruitful, digging an irrigation channel to protect crops from drought, or chasing wild animals off a field about to be harvested. The word "preserve" or "keep" tells us that nature conservation is a Christian vocation. We are to protect and preserve the biodiversity that God has created.

4. Eden and the Future of Conservation: Towards an Edenic Conservation

With regard to the significance of 'Eden' and its use in western conservation thinking, the Genesis accounts are not a practical conservation handbook, but a guide to understanding the relationships between God, nature, and humanity. References to the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2 describe God planting a "garden in the east, in Eden", where the first humans are placed. It therefore appears that Eden is a specific cultivated area within the vastness of wild nature. Contrary to the assumption of much of the conservation-related literature, Eden is not a wilderness, but a place to be worked and cared for by humans (Genesis 2:15). This is explicit not only in Genesis 2 but also in later Biblical references (Isaiah 51:3, Ezekiel 36:35, Joel 2:3) where Eden is contrasted with wilderness, desert, and desolation. The Biblical accounts are clear that human involvement is integral to Eden: gardens, unlike wilderness, require human engagement with nature. Beale (2015) argues convincingly that the Biblical language related to human activity in Eden implies a priestly and royal role in extending God's good purposes from this limited 'garden' throughout the earth.

The two key Hebrew terms in Genesis 2:15, 'abad' and 'shamar', were translated in the King James Bible (which influenced most of the European 'Age of Discovery') as "to dress and to keep", perhaps reflecting early-modern ideals of a manicured, walled garden. Modern scholarship and Hebrew lexicography, however, recognise that 'abad' and 'shamar' have a wide semantic range. The context is therefore critical and here the sense of harmonious relationships between God, humans and the rest of nature suggest a better translation might be 'to serve and to preserve'. Bouma-Prediger (2001) goes as far as to state that "we are to serve and protect the garden that is creation—literally be a slave to the earth for its own good, as well as for our benefit" (2001, p. 74). The human task in Eden is

neither to leave entirely alone, nor to exploit unsustainably, but to enable fruitfulness and flourishing for the good of all creation.

This relates to the debate begun by Mace's (2014) article, 'Whose conservation?', in which she outlined four distinctive approaches in the history of conservation: "nature for itself", "nature despite people", "nature for people", and "people and nature" (2014, p. 1559—see Figure 1 below).

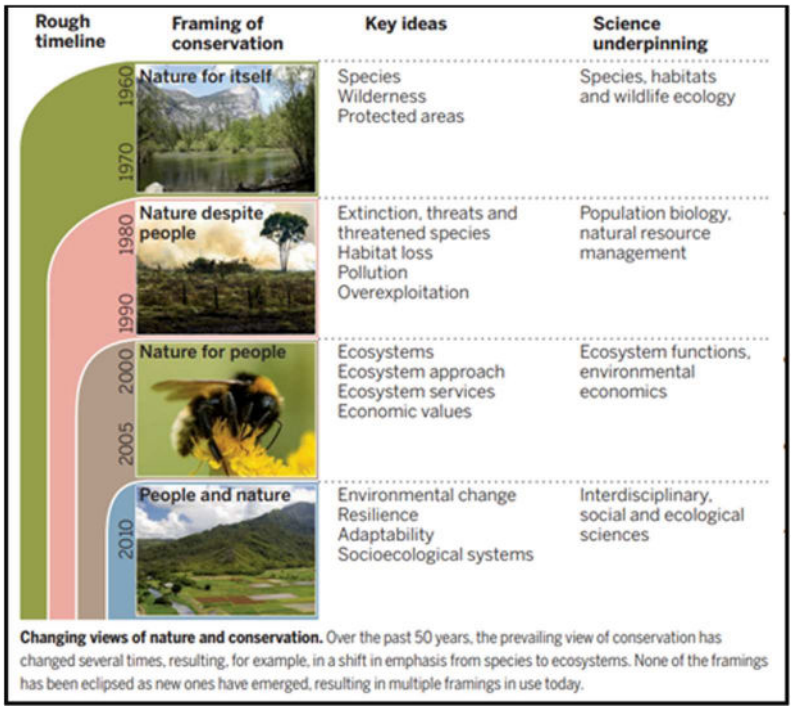


Figure 1. Four framings of nature conservation over the past half century. Adapted from Mace (2014, p. 1559).

As demonstrated above, the popular understanding of 'Eden' in the conservation-related literature is of "nature for itself"—a wilderness where humanity is absent or living in hunter-gatherer simplicity alongside other creatures. Indeed, this view of Eden was common in the environmentally focused writings of many colonial administrators and explorers, as well as missionaries and explorers during the 18th–20th centuries, especially in Eastern and Southern Africa (Grove 1989). This is also the vision of initial 'fortress conservation' expressions of the 30 × 30 conservation initiative, although more recent iterations emphasize inclusive and equitable conservation (WWF and IUCN WCPA 2023). Yet, as outlined above, this is not the Eden of Genesis 2. The second categorization, "Nature despite people", is a reaction to our current planetary emergency and the anthropogenic depletion of biodiversity. The ejection of Adam and Eve from Eden in Genesis 3, after they rebel against God's good plans, could potentially be seen as an example of this, but it was clearly not God's original plan—and as we will see it is not a Biblical solution to the crisis of biodiversity loss either. Again, some modern conservation movements, such as Half Earth (E.O. Wilson Biodiversity Foundation 2024), fit into this second categorisation. In contrast, "Nature for people", is also at the heart of contemporary conservation's accommodation to the realities of political and economic priorities. Language such as 'ecosystem services' and 'natural capital' plays into an anthropocentric idea that nature can only be protected when it pays its way for people (Chee 2004; Silvertown 2015; Spash 2011). Yet, Genesis 1 and 2 do not advocate "nature for people" but rather "nature for God". Humanity's place is to reflect the image of God in serving and preserving the garden of creation, not to exploit nature selfishly.

That brings us to the final categorization, "people and nature", which Mace herself commends. This comes closest to what Genesis 1 and 2 depict. Humans are described alongside other creatures, made from the earth, and yet are given a special responsibility within the garden of creation. However, "people and nature" is still problematic. It maintains a dualism, as if humanity is somehow distinct from nature. Reflecting on the insights provided by Genesis 1 and 2, and on humanity's place as both "image of God" and created "from dust", it is perhaps most helpful to use the language of "people within creation". By moving from 'nature' to 'creation', we are suggesting that the non-human world in which humans exist is the creative outworking of a creative God, and therefore imbued with value (Wirzba 2015). This reframing serves to emphasise humanity's distinct identity and interdependence with the rest of the created world (Bookless 2019, 2022).

As recent years have witnessed what Foggin et al. (2021, p. 2) call a "widening space for critical debates about how to best envision and develop nature conservation solutions", here we highlight three characteristics of an Edenic conservation ethic drawn from the Biblical exegesis provided above. Due to the theocentric nature of this conservation paradigm, we do not envision widespread acceptance amongst non-Christian academics, policy makers, or practitioners. However, we do write what follows with three fervent hopes. First, we hope to decentre the "Eden as wilderness" narrative that has marked the intersection of Christianity and conservation in the conservation-related literature. Second, we hope to show that the Christian worldview can accommodate, and in fact provides a very strong case for, a robust nature conservation ethic. Third, we hope that our work will encourage academics, policy makers, and practitioners alike to revisit the notion of Eden in both the Biblical narrative and the conservation-related literature, and the place of religion and other worldviews and belief systems in conservation more broadly, with fresh eyes. Recent work such as Borde et al. (2022) represents a major step in enabling this process as it documents with clarity the ways in which a variety of religions, worldviews, and belief systems are shaping conservation practice.

To summarise the exegesis above, *a Edenic conservation ethic is directed primarily by humans, leading not from above, but from within, and as part of, the community of creation.* Genesis 2 makes clear that Eden was not an untamed wilderness, but an actively managed landscape, or in contemporary language, an integrated social–ecological system (Berkes and Folke 1998). While Genesis 1 sets humans apart from the rest of creation, Genesis 2 describes humanity as created from dust. Taken together, the twin accounts emphasize both our unique role and embeddedness within the community of creation. This duality is important to note as, though we are living in a "post-Eden" world, we still contend that humans are responsible for caring for God's creation. This responsibility is not to be for humanity's selfish gain. Nor should it be for the protection of nature above human livelihoods and cultures (Niringiye 2010).

Rather, *an Edenic conservation ethic works to enable the flourishing of both human and non-human life*. According to Genesis 2, the Garden of Eden is filled with a sustainable abundance of trees, rivers, and a diversity of animal life. Similarly, Eden was a place where Adam and Eve existed in perfect harmony with God, each other, and the non-human creation, having all their needs met. As Christians, this is our vision of how the world should be. However, it does not take one long to notice that, in today's world, creation does not exist in perfect harmony. As noted above, conservation interventions across the world have been marked by the scars of colonization and conflict. Yet, the Biblical narrative into which Eden is embedded is not silent about this. Indeed, the Christian faith provides a robust moral foundation for relational principles of justice and equity that is at times lacking in the critical social sciences (Keane 2007, p. 309; Olson and Sayer 2009). Even when it comes to the scar of colonization and the current movement to decolonize conservation,

Christianity is not silent. Though the close association of Christianity with colonization in, for example, Eastern and Southern Africa, is well documented, distinctly African-initiated Christian movements are also playing an active role in the contemporary decolonization of conservation and sustainable development across the region as documented by Öhlmann et al. (2020).

Lastly, *an Edenic conservation ethic is unambiguously theocentric*. According to Genesis, God created everything in the world, including the Garden of Eden, and it was declared "good". Further, when Adam and Eve were charged with dressing and keeping (serving and preserving) the Garden, they did so in perfect relationship with the Creator of creation. The Eden story demonstrates that caring for creation is an endeavour that honours and brings glory to God the Creator, and that we are to do so because God has called us to do so. While this may be alienating to some in the minority world (Global North), with a third of the world claiming a Christian faith, half the world claiming an Abrahamic faith, and approximately 85% of people on earth claiming a religious allegiance (Pew Research Center 2017), the vast majority of whom live in the Global South, this notion may not be so unsettling to many in the majority world.

5. Conclusions

This article has 'revisited Eden' in an effort to rethink the relationship between Christianity and conservation. To do so, we have done three things. First, by reviewing the relevant literature, we demonstrated that not only does Eden have a diverse geography, but a diverse interpretation as well. Specifically, we showed that while the majority of the conservation-related literature conceives of Eden as an unspoilt wilderness, others see it as a managed environment, with some going as far as to describe Eden as the "antipode of wilderness" (Nash 1967, p. 15). Second, we provided a theological exegesis of the Biblical creation and Eden narratives in Genesis 1 and 2, a perspective largely ignored in the conservation-related literature. By thinking theologically through Genesis 1:26–28, we demonstrated that, in the context of the Judeo-Christian worldview, humans are called to rule over creation in a manner that reflects God's image. Additionally, in reading the Eden narrative in Genesis 2 contextually with Genesis 1, we made clear that the charge of humans to rule over creation in Genesis 1 is balanced by the charge to serve and preserve the Garden of Eden. Third, we put the Garden of Eden in conversation with contemporary conservation movements by using Mace's (2014) timeline. Through this, we showed that while Eden comes close to Mace's "people and nature" categorisation, we suggested the terminology "people within creation" would more accurately reflect what is found in Genesis 1 and 2. Based on this, as well as the earlier exegesis of Genesis 1 and 2, we then outlined three characteristics of an Edenic conservation ethic.

On a broader level, we have shown that taking the ancient vision of Eden seriously in its Biblical context can lead to fresh insights for contemporary conservation thinking. As the number of faith-based organisations engaging in conservation increases (Borde et al. 2022; Yale 2023), it will become increasingly important to engage critically and thoughtfully with religions and other worldviews and belief systems whilst avoiding over-simplified religious tropes. Certainly, Christianity, as with other religions, is not monolithic. With this in mind, there is a pressing need for future scholarship at the intersection of religion and conservation to engage in contextualised research highlighting the plurality of practical faith-based conservation action. As conservation as a scholarly discipline and practice continues to decolonize, there is a growing need for more conservation scholarship that meaningfully engages with religious discourses and communities. Further, just as religion is important to many where "conservation" actually happens (Bhagwat et al. 2010), the decolonization

of conservation also points towards the desecularisation of conservation and the potential for a broader engagement with a wider community of conservation practitioners.

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