

Demilitarizing Conservation

Elizabeth Lunstrum,^a Francis Massé,^b Ivan Mugenzi Ashaba,^c Anwasha Dutta,^d Esther Marijnen,^e Tafadzwa Mushonga,^f and Frank Matose^g

^aDepartment of Environmental Studies and Global Studies, Boise State University, USA; ^bDepartment of Geography and Environmental Science, Northumbria University, UK; ^cInstitute of Development Policy, University of Antwerp, Belgium; ^dChr Michelsen Institute, Norway; ^eSociology of Development and Change, Wageningen University and Research, The Netherlands; ^fCentre for the Advancement of Scholarship, University of Pretoria, South Africa; ^gDepartment of Sociology, University of Cape Town, South Africa


Many national parks and other protected areas (PAs) are experiencing an intensification of military actors, logics, and partnerships across the globe. This amounts to one of the most consequential conservation trends of this century, one that violates human rights and threatens conservation's long-term viability. These dynamics have been chronicled in the burgeoning literature on green militarization. Set against dire predictions of biodiversity loss and the importance of both PAs and local communities in slowing this decline, this intervention makes the argument for demilitarizing conservation and sets out an initial framework for what this entails conceptually and in practice. We show how *demilitarizing* conservation must be based on an ethics and politics of care and nonviolence. Although PAs are already landscapes of care for nonhuman nature, we argue for a more robustly care-full conservation that, perhaps uncomfortably, requires care to be extended to those who harm wildlife and nature more broadly. We illustrate how demilitarization requires infusing care into conservation at two related moments: the actual encounter between conservation's transgressors and law enforcement and the larger structures that produce the encounter and military buildup as a response. The latter includes how green militarization is driven by economic logics, global patterns of economic inequality, and colonial structures that continue to shape conservation. This intervention also opens space for considering how the need for demilitarization allies with other movements like Indigenous-led and convivial conservation working to radically reshape conservation theory and practice and makes a case for explicitly including demilitarization within these efforts. *Key Words:* biodiversity conservation, green militarization, Indigenous-led conservation/convivial conservation, militarization of conservation, national parks, protected areas, 30 × 30 Global Biodiversity Framework.

The December 2022 Convention on Biological Diversity Conference of the Parties (COP15) laid out an unprecedented commitment to halting the biodiversity crisis. Embodied in the Global Biodiversity Framework, which is the global biodiversity treaty with near unanimous global support, a key component of the initiative aims to conserve 30 percent of land and aquatic areas by 2030. Known as 30 × 30, this would entail a significant expansion of protected areas (PAs). The deliberations were also notable given the commitment to a rights-based approach to conservation that protects

the land and broader interests of Indigenous peoples and local communities and guarantees equitable representation and participation (United Nations Environment Program 2022). Scholars and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), however, urge caution in uncritical support of 30 × 30 given conservation's historic and ongoing tendency to dispossess or otherwise harm local and Indigenous communities, which could only grow with more land set aside for protection (Survival International 2022; Sandbrook et al. 2023; see also Bersaglio and Enns 2024). Central to this concern is the trend of *green*

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CORRESPONDING AUTHOR Anwasha Dutta  anwasha.dutta@cmi.no

Francis Massé is now with the Department of Geography, Durham University, UK.

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militarization, or how conservation theory, practice, and space—especially PAs—have in many instances become militarized.

The insights of the green militarization debates are becoming more urgent under 30 × 30, but they emerged a decade ago. Although the militarization of conservation and PAs is as old as and even predates the first national parks (MacKenzie 1997; Jacoby 2001), recent debates speak to its resurgence, intensification, and increasing technological sophistication in response to the biodiversity crisis (Duffy 2022; Holterman 2022; Ritts, Simlai, and Gabrys 2024). Whether green militarization remains a permanent fixture of conservation's toolbox—under 30 × 30 or otherwise—has profound implications for nature's protection, human rights, (in)security, and in turn the legitimacy of PAs in the eyes of local and Indigenous peoples and conservation circles alike. Scholarly debate has charted the rise of green militarization, its historical roots, its logics, how it plays out, and its impacts. We have less of an understanding, however, of how to dial back or reverse conservation's militarization and propose viable alternatives, and doing so while taking seriously the reality of biodiversity decline.

We write as a collective of seven scholars with expertise in green militarization in Africa and Asia. We argue there is an urgent need to demilitarize conservation theory, practice, and PAs, a project we see deeply shaped by an ethics and politics of care. Whereas PAs are already landscapes of care for (some) nature, this proves to be the opposite for many local and Indigenous communities harmed by PAs in general and even more so under militarized conservation approaches. We argue for demilitarizing and applying a care-full approach at two key moments: the encounter between conservation's transgressors and conservation law enforcement and the larger structures that lead to the encounter and military buildup as a response. The latter includes how green militarization is driven by economic logics, global patterns of economic inequality, and how contemporary conservation continues to be shaped by colonial power logics and structures. Addressing these is key to building a more care-full conservation that, perhaps uncomfortably, requires that we extend care to those who harm more-than-human nature. We present this intervention not as a definitive theory of conservation demilitarization or comprehensive blueprint of what it must entail, but rather as

an invitation to consider the need for demilitarization and the different paths this can and should take. This also opens space for considering how our call for demilitarization allies with—and indeed how demilitarization should play a more prominent role within—movements like Indigenous-led and convivial conservation working to radically reshape conservation theory and practice.

Green Militarization: A Review

Now a decade ago, scholars began to question what they saw as a disturbing trend in PA management. Lunstrum (2014) labeled this green militarization, or “the use of military and paramilitary personnel, training, technologies, and partnerships in the pursuit of conservation efforts” (817), with Duffy (2014) capturing this in her work on “militarized conservation.” The practices that constitute green militarization are wide-ranging. They include the paramilitary training of rangers, deploying militaries and mercenary units to patrol PAs, hiring (retired) military leaders to head these efforts, using counter-insurgency techniques, engaging in partnerships with military corporations, blurring the protection of nation and nature, responding to perceived transgressors with increasingly violent force, and militarizing the language of nature protection (e.g., Lunstrum 2014; Duffy et al. 2019; Holterman 2022; de Jong and Butt 2023; Nowak et al. 2024; Ashaba and Marijnen 2025; see also earlier foundational work by Neumann 2004).

This latest wave of green militarization emerged in the early 2010s primarily as a response to the illegal wildlife trade (IWT), a multibillion-dollar industry devastating to wildlife and driven by global criminal syndicates (Lunstrum 2014; Duffy 2022). Citing organized crime and the ecological crisis, states and conservation organizations began framing IWT and related threats to biodiversity as security threats, which then authorize militarized responses (Massé and Margulies 2020). Subsequent work shows how conservation practice is also being militarized and securitized in conflict zones and border disputes (Verweijen and Marijnen 2018; Chowdhury, Aziz, and Al Mamun 2024; Lenggenhager and Mogende 2024) and alongside the war on drugs (Ybarra 2017; Corredor-Garcia and Vega 2024). Our own contributions chronicle the unfolding and applications of green militarization spanning the illicit rhino horn

trade within Southern Africa's Kruger and Limpopo National Parks (e.g., Lunstrum 2014; Lunstrum et al. 2021; Massé, Givá, and Lunstrum 2021), conservation in the context of war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo's Virunga National Park (e.g., Marijnen and Verweijen 2016; Marijnen 2022), collaboration between conservation and defense actors in Uganda's Murchison Falls National Park (e.g., Ashaba 2021; Ashaba and Marijnen 2025), and militarization of forest conservation in Zimbabwe's Sikumi Forest Reserve (Mushonga and Matose 2020; Mushonga 2021) and reserve forests in India (Dutta 2020a, 2020b). We have also analyzed the militarization of conservation policy and funding within Global North government and conservation circles (Massé and Margulies 2020).¹ This is joined by the work of other scholars who examine green militarization and nature's securitization elsewhere in Africa (Lombard 2016; Day, Moreto, and Ravary 2023), Asia (Barbora 2017; Chowdhury, Aziz, and Al Mamun 2024; Fanari 2024), Latin America (Ojeda 2012; Ybarra 2017; Corredor-Garcia and Vega 2024), and emerging militarized practices in Europe (Vasile and Iordăchescu 2022). Green militarization is hence a global phenomenon, although its logics, practices, and intensity vary across regions.

Together, these contributions underscore why we need to reject militarized approaches and find demilitarized alternatives. This latest manifestation of green militarization has generated serious human rights violations, including the alleged extrajudicial killing and torture of suspected environmental transgressors, and forced displacement of entire communities suspected of producing or harboring "poachers" and environmental transgressors (Lunstrum and Ybarra 2018; Duffy et al. 2019; LaRocco and Mogende 2024). Often more hidden, green militarization can also distance communities from the natural resources managed by PAs as well as labor migration routes, employment, and tourism dollars (Witter 2021). Militarized practices equally create antagonistic relationships between communities and conservation enforcement, including rangers, endangering both (Hübschle 2017; Mushonga 2021). Green militarized approaches are also counterproductive for conservation itself: They alienate the very communities PAs need for their long-term success and can unravel decades of relationship-building between PAs and communities, hamper building these relationships, and further inflame feelings of

alienation and dispossession (Lunstrum 2014; Annecke and Masubelele 2016; Hübschle 2017; Duffy et al. 2019). There is also evidence that communities, once alienated, are more likely to engage in the unsustainable use or destruction of natural resources (Mariki, Svarstad, and Benjaminsen 2015; Witter 2021; Akampurira and Marijnen 2024). Related, green militarization has emerged as a powerful tool for states and their partners to consolidate control over territory and resources at the expense of local communities (Weldemichel 2020; Chowdhury, Aziz, and Al Mamun 2024; Corredor-Garcia and Vega 2024). Beyond this, green militarization has channeled resources away from mundane forms of ecological management needed for effective conservation (Annecke and Masubelele 2016). If green militarization is unsustainable socially, it is equally unsustainable ecologically, and the two are intertwined. These militarized interventions, moreover, fit into a much broader history of violence deployed in the name of conservation (Murdock 2021).

Several critiques have been directed at the green militarization literature by scholars and conservation practitioners. These include claims the literature does not adequately acknowledge IWT's severity (Jooste, cited in Hübschle and Jooste 2017), overlooks the political and institutional complexities that lead to militarized conservation and shape the conditions under which park rangers operate (Shaw and Rademeyer 2016; Day, Moreto, and Ravary 2023), and privileges spectacular and direct violence at the expense of slower and more hidden violence (Witter and Satterfield 2019). An additional criticism heard more in conservation circles is that the literature frustratingly tends to stop at critique. Although each of these criticisms will be important in shaping the next decade of research on the topic, we attend to the latter to argue for a demilitarized conservation, that is, precisely what needs to come after critique.

Care-Full Conservation: Demilitarizing Protected Areas and Conservation through an Ethics of Care and Nonviolence

In considering how to move away from green militarization while still taking seriously the severity of biodiversity decline, we reflect on Ramutsindela,

Matose, and Mushonga's (2022) observation that nonviolent conservation amounts to more than merely stopping violence: It requires "laying the foundation for various ways of caring for and living with nonhuman nature" (xiv). This prompted us to consider the importance of both an ethics and politics of care in forming the foundation of a demilitarized approach to conservation.

Writing on care is instructive in helping envision what this might look like. Debates on care emerged largely out of feminist scholarship, activism, and praxis to highlight how human well-being is dependent on our relationships, responsibilities, and interconnectedness to others (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). Care here is "a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web" (Fisher and Tronto 1990, 40). Geographers have captured the spatial dynamics of these relationships with the concept of landscapes of care, or the "social, embodied, and organizational spatialities that emerge from and through relationships of care" (Milligan and Wiles 2010, 736). Care is therefore about relations, spaces, and practices of human, but also more-than-human, interdependence and reciprocity (Lawson 2007; Milligan and Wiles 2010). Care debates equally foreground how care is not innocent: It can be manipulated in ways that reinforce unequal power relations and requires not just an ethics but also a politics of care that exposes and upends unequal structures (McEwan and Goodman 2010). This more transformative approach to care requires both critique, namely exposing how unequal power relations shape social relations, and a commitment to building new institutions and relations that support interconnectedness and well-being (Lawson 2007). These are reflected in Milligan and Wiles's (2010) call for care-full geographies.

Although perhaps less explicit, notions of care are deployed in conservation itself. We see conservation practice and the field of conservation biology focused at their very core on caring for flora and fauna. This is motivated by caring for more-than-human nature for its own sake and our human dependence on nature's continued health embodied in "nature's contributions to people." Yet care within conservation is far from straightforward.

Human-environment geographers, for example, highlight the multiple and contradictory biopolitics—or politics of life and death—that shape conservation and how these lead to an "entanglement of harm and care" (Srinivasan 2017, 1461) seen in practices like captive breeding, reintroduction, culling, and hunting (Biermann and Anderson 2017). Debates within the emerging field of compassionate conservation also speak to complexities of care including how conservation privileges protection at the level of the species or ecosystem often over the welfare of individual animals. Compassionate conservation advocates argue that compassion—or what we might call care—should be extended to all wild animals, including individuals, in part because animals, like humans, are sentient beings (Ramp and Bekoff 2015; Wallach et al. 2020).

We draw from these insights to argue for *care-full, demilitarized conservation*. This begins with recognizing that care within conservation is not innocent and can be mobilized in harmful ways. Here, Sène (2024) shows how notions of care for wildlife that underpin Western conservation are ultimately harmful to people, mainly local and Indigenous people. The green militarization debates add that such care for wildlife can be outright deadly for people (see earlier). Embracing compassionate conservation's call to expand the realm of who and what conservation should care for, we argue that a demilitarized conservation must extend care to encompass wildlife *and people*, including those who harm nature, recognizing this can be a difficult ask. This requires not only an ethics but also a politics of care, one designed to uncover and intervene into the structural power relations that drive green militarization and its violent outcomes. Over the long run, caring for people and reducing these drivers—including the illicit practices it aims to address and unequal power relations on which it is authorized—will create a more just environment for people and safer environment for wildlife.² We are hence advocating for a particular mobilization of care: one that cares for wildlife and people and intervenes into both specific encounters and underlying structures that place people and nature in harm's way. A focus on these structures, moreover, offers an important point of contact with broader scholarly and practitioner efforts to radically transform conservation.

Demilitarizing Green Militarization's Two Key Moments

This care-full approach to demilitarization requires infusing care into conservation at the two moments of green militarization: (1) reining in and de-escalating militarized responses to conservation conflicts when they happen, or what we call *the encounter*, and (2) addressing the *structural drivers*, which are a series of much longer moments, that lead to the encounter. Although we recognize these are intricately related—including that addressing structural drivers would hopefully prevent the encounter from happening—we pull them apart for analytic clarity.

The Encounter

An important debate surrounding green militarization is how we frame its relation to violence. It is both situated in a broader context of conservation or “green violence” (Büscher and Ramutsindela 2015) and ranges from slow, soft, and banal violence (Witter and Satterfield 2019; Dutta 2020b) to direct physical violence (Mushonga and Matose 2020; Verweijen, et al. 2020; Ramutsindela, Matose, and Mushonga 2022). Encompassed most explicitly in the latter is what we call *the encounter*, or the point at which potential environmental transgressors encounter PA security, including rangers, police, or soldiers, and when physical violence can unfold. The encounter itself must be demilitarized, which amounts first to de-escalation.

A care-full approach to de-escalation requires unframing suspected environmental transgressors as “the enemy” or other dehumanized adversaries, a trend deeply embedded in militarized conservation practice (Neumann 2004; Ramutsindela, Matose, and Mushonga 2022; de Jong and Butt 2023). We see this in conservation messaging where, for example, generic poachers are presented as dark figures lurking in the bush waiting for their next kill, and in ranger training where rangers are taught how to “neutralize the enemy” (Ashaba and Marijnen 2025). These processes are deeply racialized and directed predominantly at Black and Indigenous peoples and marginalized tribes and castes (Hitchcock 2019; Ramutsindela, Matose, and Mushonga 2022). This racialized dehumanization produces subjects deemed unworthy of care or mourning when their lives are lost, which opens doors to violent responses

(Ramutsindela, Matose, and Mushonga 2022; Akampurira and Marijnen 2024). De-escalation requires reestablishing the dignity and humanity of this perceived enemy, with a goal of rendering their lives valuable or grievable (Butler 2020), that is, worthy of care. The logic is that if “the enemy” is humanized—made grievable—a violent outcome is less likely and less acceptable in political and public spheres. In the language of care ethics, recognizing life as valuable and grievable reestablishes a recognition of mutuality (Lawson 2007). This would require recognition among the law enforcer and transgressor that both are worthy of life. This mutuality does not foreclose holding the latter accountable, but it does foreclose more violent responses. This also requires being skeptical of self-defense arguments in support of green militarization even while recognizing that transgressors can be armed and backed by criminal syndicates (e.g., Simpson and Pellegrini 2023). Within a logic of self-defense, only certain lives are seen as worthy of defending, and “the claim of self-defense on the part of those who wield power is too often a defense of power, of its prerogatives, and of the inequalities it presupposes and produces” (Butler 2020, 12). A care-full conservation confronts these inequalities, aiming to break the cycle of violence.

Our argument for demilitarizing the encounter is decidedly not that conservation law enforcement should be dissolved or even that rangers should be unarmed. In fact, care-full conservation requires better conservation law enforcement buttressed by stronger conservation legislation and policy as these are vital to de-escalation and improved conservation outcomes (Massé 2022). This includes law enforcement that is not mired in corruption, that is held accountable, that does not celebrate killing suspects, that rewards de-escalation, and that ultimately sees local people as worthy of care (Dutta 2020a; Verweijen et al. 2020). An ethics of care also needs to extend to conservation law enforcers, including rangers. Scholars and conservation and ranger organizations have documented how green militarization's provocation of antagonistic encounters between law enforcement and communities negatively affects rangers' physical security, safety, mental well-being, and social relations within the communities where they live or work (Mushonga 2021; Day, Moreto, and Ravary 2023). This is an important complement to demands for increased welfare and labor standards for rangers if 30 × 30 and broader conservation

objectives are to be met (Appleton et al. 2022). Hence, demilitarizing requires care on both sides of the encounter.

Structural Drivers

Developing a demilitarized ethics of care around conservation requires calling out and addressing how the encounter originates from uneven power dynamics including underlying inequalities and vulnerabilities (Lawson 2007). Verweijen et al. (2020), captures this in her work on the “kill chain” of green militarization, or “the dispersed apparatus that configures subjects and their conduct in such a way that they engage in killing” (2–3). The act of killing and other forms of direct violence might be the end point of the kill chain, but structural factors pave the way for its emergence and authorization. We suggest three general structural changes that must form the core of a demilitarizing strategy. We note these are open to revision and elaboration, especially in terms of the more concrete forms these changes will take and the need to expand our focus to other structures.

Exposing the Economic Drivers of Green Militarization. Although we agree biodiversity protection is a global good, critiques of neoliberal conservation have shown that conservation practice and PAs in particular are deeply shaped by logics of profit accumulation that create perverse incentives and exclusionary social practices (Holmes and Cavanagh 2016). Conservation’s militarization fits this pattern. Militarized practices are routinely justified because they protect natural resources as economic resources vital to the ecotourism economy (Massé and Lunstrum 2016; Holterman 2022). Conservation challenges are additionally strategically packaged as dire conservation-security issues to generate tourism and aid dollars (Marijnen and Verweijen 2016; Marijnen 2022). In fact, conservation NGOs have successfully sold IWT as a security threat to the U.S. government, opening up substantial lines of funding that support militarized approaches (Massé and Margulies 2020).

We have also seen the rise of partnerships between conservation organizations and military and even mercenary corporations in the fight against IWT. The former gain access to military personnel and surveillance and pursuit technologies, whereas the latter expand their markets into conservation

and can perform their corporate social responsibility as defenders of wildlife and nation (Lunstrum 2018; Duffy 2022). These partnerships additionally enable corporate greenwashing, diverting our attention toward nature’s protection and away from the expansive socioenvironmental destruction these firms leave in their wake from sites of weapons testing to battlefields (Lunstrum 2018; Duffy 2022; see also Belcher et al. 2020).

Care ethics points to the fact that profitability and markets are often incompatible with care relations of interdependence and mutuality (Lawson 2007). Demilitarizing conservation therefore demands exposing who is promoting militarization, for what ends, who profits, and who is harmed—that is, the economic drivers of how care unravels. More specifically, demilitarization demands new logics and flows of funding, including diverting some level of funding away from enforcement, which currently receives the lion’s share (Massé and Margulies 2020; Duffy 2022), and toward communities who support or are asked to pay the price for conservation; adequately funding conservation without needing to spin this as a security issue; and rejecting conservation’s ties with military corporations.

Addressing the Drivers of Nature’s Overexploitation: Tackling Global Inequality. A substantial multidisciplinary literature examines the supply-side drivers of nature’s overexploitation (e.g., Muth and Bowe 1998), with economic drivers at their core. This includes how poor ground-level actors earn money to care for families, buy consumer goods, maintain consumptive lifestyles, and avoid the poverty of their parents (Lunstrum and Givá 2020). More than mere poverty, however, it is *economic inequality* that drives unsustainable and illicit resource use (Duffy et al. 2016; Lunstrum and Givá 2020). This includes the relative and absolute poverty of ground-level actors juxtaposed against the immense wealth of consumers driving nature’s overexploitation. Added to this is the fact that conservation and specifically militarized conservation could exacerbate these inequalities and vulnerabilities (Friedman et al. 2018; Duffy et al. 2019; Massé, Givá, and Lunstrum 2021), which can boomerang back to harm conservation.

Focusing on the structural production of vulnerabilities and inequalities, a care ethics requires attending “to the ways in which historical and institutional relationships produce the need for care”

(Lawson 2007, 8). Demilitarizing conservation in this context requires caring about inequality and what this provokes—for instance, illicit or dangerous resource exploitation—and caring for those whose lives are limited by inequality even and especially if they harm nature. This requires broad-scale measures to reduce demand for threatened resources.

Admittedly more difficult to tackle, it also requires addressing the roots of inequality on a scale conservation by itself cannot tackle and is largely not responsible for (Lunstrum et al. 2021). We see this approach beginning to emerge in efforts like the KHETA project in Southern Africa funded by the World Wildlife Fund and U.S. Agency for International Development. KHETA is designed to reduce illegal hunting and its negative impacts on communities by supporting comanagement and equitable resource access, with an explicit goal of addressing poverty as a core driver of IWT (World Wildlife Fund 2025). What is more, a care-full demilitarized conservation must ensure conservation does not exacerbate, create new, or deepen existing inequalities or vulnerabilities.

Not to undermine our insistence that a politics of care must be directed at addressing inequality, this focus also shows how care can raise thorny ethical questions. For instance, as a means to stem local complicity in wildlife trafficking, care can translate into programs to rehabilitate “poachers,” often providing training and opportunities to direct their bush skills toward wildlife law enforcement (e.g., Roe 2015). These programs can importantly provide needed economic alternatives, safer and less environmentally harmful employment, and a sense of purpose. They nonetheless require scrutiny given how they ostensibly create new environmental subjects that can be asked to protect wildlife largely for the benefit not of local people but rather the external interests of investors, NGOs, states, and tourists, reminding us of the complexity of applying care.

Decolonizing Conservation. Green militarization fits within a longer history of exclusionary and unjust conservation, amounting to an *intensification* of colonial practices written deeply into the fabric of mainstream global conservation (Ashaba 2021; Murdock 2021). A care-full demilitarized conservation requires infusing care into some of these colonial structures with the goal of upending them.

Most centrally, colonial models of conservation separate people from nature physically and ontologically and do so both subtly and with violence and force (Neumann 1998; Brockington 2002; Büscher and Fletcher 2020; Bersaglio and Enns 2024; Sène 2024; Thakholi, Koot, and Büscher 2024). Green militarization—which targets transgressors, poachers, and others who “don’t belong” in PAs—is a natural extension of this logic. Hence, and in common with care-based approaches to conservation (Jackson and Palmer 2015; Sène 2024), both decolonizing and demilitarizing conservation require addressing this separation of people and nature. This begins with revaluing Indigenous and local peoples not as *prima facie* racialized threats to biodiversity, but as life-sustaining forces integrated into these relational webs of living and well-being. In fact, many Indigenous territories and environmental governance frameworks often show equal if not greater ecological success as Western PAs (Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services 2019; Schuster et al. 2019).

This model of *living with* the more-than-human world is found across Indigenous-led approaches to conservation and seen more concretely in genuine forms of comanagement and *Indigenous* protected areas and practices (e.g., Indigenous Circle of Experts 2018; Zanjani et al. 2023; Stevens et al. 2025). Drawing from these approaches can help push back against colonial conservation models premised on the separation of people precisely because they help ensure that local communities themselves, their governance systems, tenure rights, and relationships with more-than-human nature are respected and valued. They also offer substantively different models of “conservation” based on more-than-human responsibility, relationality, reciprocity, and care (e.g., Iheka 2018; Mabele, Krauss, and Kiwango 2022; Kimmerer 2024). Put simply, it becomes difficult to justify and unleash militarized interventions within these frameworks. More instrumentally, these approaches would create more buy-in for communities so they do not feel they need to resist (alienating and harmful) protection efforts, which can then incite militarized responses.

Demilitarized conservation also demands more specific anticolonial practices and commitments. A good example is a commitment to data justice. Scholars and activists show how new data and technologies raise questions of who owns, controls,

interprets, and profits from conservation data, questions whose answers are shaped by ongoing colonial power imbalances (Pritchard et al. 2022). Critics of green militarization are similarly concerned here with how new conservation surveillance technologies can target and surveil local communities, both within and outside of illicit economies, often while generating corporate profits (Lunstrum 2018; Bersaglio et al. 2023; Millner et al. 2024). A careful demilitarized, decolonial approach to conservation must honor and protect community data, knowledge, and sovereignty; support the use of these technologies in protecting Indigenous territories (while not expanding markets for military firms); and prioritize community safety and well-being in the face of new forms of surveillance and data gathering (Lunstrum 2018; Pritchard et al. 2022; Bersaglio et al. 2023; Millner et al. 2024). In short, a careful demilitarized approach requires confronting and upending colonial structures that continue to haunt contemporary conservation.

Demilitarization as a Needed Element of Radically Rebuilding Conservation

Our call to bring care into conservation to disrupt the structures driving green militarization provides an important opportunity to connect with broader scholarly, activist, and practitioner efforts to radically rethink conservation. These include a long tradition of Indigenous-led thought and practice—across a broad literature on Indigenous knowledge, sovereignty, comanagement, environmental personhood, Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs, ICCAs), and Territories of Life (e.g., Mansuy et al. 2023; Zanjani et al. 2023; Kimmerer 2024; Sène 2024; Stevens et al. 2025). These contributions seek to upend the ontological and physical separation of people and replace it with an understanding of “conservation” and “living with” where people and our more-than-human counterparts and relations mutually thrive. These are complemented by contributions on convivial conservation, which similarly seeks to build more inclusive models of conservation that explicitly reject logics of economic exploitation and profitability (Büscher and Fletcher 2020; Mabele, Krauss, and Kiwango 2022). These debates on Indigenous-led and convivial conservation, moreover, attend to each of green

militarization’s structural drivers from above—its economic logics, global inequality, and colonial structures—as key concerns and points of needed intervention.

Our contribution explicitly adds that demilitarizing conservation is a necessary element of building this more just and inclusive conservation, a point largely overlooked in these broader contributions. In other words, a more genuinely inclusive conservation cannot be achieved through militarized logics and means. There is also much more to say about bringing the understanding of care developed here—a care that jointly embraces people, nature, and our mutual dependence and that targets both violent encounters and structures—into a reinvented conservation. We see Indigenous-led and convivial conservation models as having profound capacity to deepen these insights with their focus on reciprocity, relationality, nonexploitation, and shared recognition. Although we have only scratched the proverbial surface, there is great potential for a rich and much needed dialogue across the green militarization debates and these important interventions.

Conclusion

PAs are already landscapes of care, albeit imperfectly and for certain types of nature and human–environment relations. Yet many are increasingly characterized by an approach that is militarized and violent, one that erodes care. Green militarization is care-less from a human rights perspective as it enacts violence on poor, racialized people and further distances them from PAs and the benefits they provide. It is also care-less from an ecological perspective as it diverts resources away from needed conservation priorities like ecological monitoring for species not within the remit of conservation “war” and alienates the very communities who are vital to conservation’s long-term success. We must respond to the ecological crisis, including taking seriously the ways in which people living in and near PAs can play a role in this. What is needed, though, is a demilitarized approach based on an ethics and politics of care that breaks the chain and logic of violence that has long haunted PAs.

As the global community seeks to further expand land under conservation, most notably through the 30 × 30 Global Biodiversity Framework, there is an urgent need to demilitarize conservation. Without

this, 30 × 30 is likely to exacerbate nature's militarization as more land is placed under ecological protection and hence fail in its promises to local and Indigenous communities. Without the support and guidance of these communities, 30 × 30 might also fail in fulfilling its mandate to stem the biodiversity crisis. Demilitarization and the infusion of a more robust sense of care into conservation is needed both at the moment of the encounter between environmental harm and law enforcement and at deeper structural levels, here tied to economic gain, inequality, and colonial logics of separation and control, that give rise to the encounter and authorize a militarized response. Conservation's demilitarization establishes and is predicated on a conservation ethics and politics of care that is nonviolent, relational, and ultimately inclusive of nature and people, including conservation law enforcement, and—perhaps uncomfortably but necessarily—those who harm nature, especially ground-level actors caught in the crosshairs of militarized responses. Conservation's demilitarization is also a needed addition to broader scholarly, activist, and practitioner efforts to radically and inclusively reimagine conservation. It is by attending to these dynamics of biodiversity loss, militarization, violence, and importantly care that we can build and support a demilitarized and more robust, just, and ultimately sustainable conservation.

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this contribution can repay them by providing an avenue for exploring alternatives to militarized violence.

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Notes

1. Methods for these projects include policy analysis, ethnographic observation, and hundreds of interviews with government, conservation, security, NGO, and community actors. For more on our individual contributions, including case studies and methods, please consult our publications.
2. This approach to care is attentive to multispecies justice, which sees justice for humans and our more-than-human counterparts as reinforcing and interconnected (Celermajer et al. 2021).

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ELIZABETH LUNSTRUM is a Professor in Environmental Studies and Global Studies at Boise State University, Boise, ID 83725. E-mail: libbylunstrum@boisestate.edu. A geographer and political ecologist, her research examines the human dimensions of biodiversity conservation and ecological restoration, including green militarization, the illicit wildlife trade, and efforts to make conservation more inclusive of local and Indigenous communities. She has been conducting research in the Mozambican–South African borderlands since 2003 and working collaboratively with Blackfoot partners in Blackfoot Territory across the U.S.–Canada border since 2014 as part of the ILER project (iler-project.com).

FRANCIS MASSÉ is Assistant Professor in Human Geography at Durham University, Durham DH1 3LE, UK. E-mail: francis.d.masse@durham.ac.uk. His research bridges political ecology and political geography to examine how states respond to security, development, and infectious disease concerns related to conservation and legal and illegal wildlife trades, and with what implications for conservation space, practice, policy, and broader human–wildlife relations. His research has primarily been based in Mozambique and South Africa, and more recently he has been conducting collaborative research in Zambia. He is a collaborator on the Wildlife Trade Futures project that examines connections between zoonotic disease and wildlife trades (<https://wildlifetradefutures.com/>).

IVAN MUGYENZI ASHABA holds unpaid post-doctoral status at the Institute of Development Policy, University of Antwerp, 200 Antwerp, Belgium. E-mail: Ivan.Ashaba@uantwerpen.be. His research interests include the politics of conservation, the role of military actors in conservation, and conservation law enforcement technologies. He has been conducting research in the larger Murchison Falls Conservation Area since 2019. He is at the initial stages of a book project that reconstructs the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA's) institutional development from the inception of the Game Department to the present.

ANWESHA DUTTA is a Senior Researcher at the Chr. Michelsen Institute, 5006 Bergen, Norway. E-mail: anwasha.dutta@cmi.no. As a political ecologist, she works at the intersections of biodiversity conservation, natural resource governance, and violent conflict. She is currently involved as participant and leader in several European Union and Norwegian Research Council funded projects focused on labor, displacement, and ecological justice in forestry and conservation with a geographic focus on South Asia and Eastern Africa.

ESTHER MARIJNEN is an Associate Professor at the Sociology of Development and Change Chair Group at Wageningen University and Research, 6708 Wageningen, The Netherlands. E-mail: esther.marijnen@wur.nl. She works on the intersection of critical conflict studies and political ecology, focusing on nature–society relations in areas of armed conflict, militarized ecologies, and nature conservation. She has been conducting research in Central Africa since 2012, mostly analyzing the on-the-ground effects of European-funded conservation and security interventions.

TAFADZWA MUSHONGA is a Research Fellow and lead of the Environmental Humanities Project at the Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship, University of Pretoria, Pretoria 0002, South Africa. E-mail: tafadzwa.mushonga@up.ac.za. Her work is grounded in political ecology and explores the complex relationships between people, the state, and conservation. She focuses particularly on how state power and governance shape violent conflict in and around protected areas. She is the author of *The Conservation of Violence: Statecraft, Forests, and Coloniality* (Routledge, 2025), which critically examines the state's role in the reproduction of violence.

FRANK MATOSE is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Cape Town, Cape Town 7700, South Africa. E-mail: frank.matose@uct.ac.za. His research focuses on the political ecology of people, rights, and resources in Africa. He serves on the editorial board of the *International Journal of the Commons*. He is the author of *Forests and the Power of Marginalised People in Southern Africa: Politics of Chronic Liminality* (James Currey, 2025) and editor of *Reclaiming African Environmentalism: Ecological Struggles for Wellbeing and Habitability* (HSRC Press, 2025).