

The mismeasure of conservation: how do we assess the real contribution of our decisions to the protection of nature?

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Conservation is the means by which society seeks to preserve natural assets and safeguard biodiversity against threats to its persistence. Conservation reserves are the cornerstones of the global conservation strategy, but reserves in Australia and around the world have a serious failing. Their effectiveness is limited by their concentration in areas that are remote and have little value for subsistence or commercial uses. Therefore, they tend to occur where threats to biodiversity are low while losses of biodiversity continue unabated elsewhere. Importantly, this failing is hidden by common measures of conservation progress which emphasize the number and extent of reserves rather than how much loss of biodiversity their establishment has avoided. This mismeasure of conservation stems from a concerted, pervasive focus on reserves as tools for conservation rather than avoided loss as the ultimate conservation objective. Means and ends have been confused. This presentation is mainly about the immense risks that ensue. The presentation begins with some examples of residual reserve systems – systems that are extensive and beautiful but nonetheless fail to live up to their promise of protecting nature. The main reasons for this situation are discussed. Attention then moves to key characteristics of conservation measures that are needed to focus our attention on avoided loss which is, after all, the real purpose of reserves. Common measures of conservation progress used in policy and science are then assessed as to whether they can be manipulated to hide lack of progress in avoiding loss of biodiversity. All of the measures are open to manipulation and many are frequently used to obscure the lack of real conservation gains. Finally, the presentation moves to approaches to measurement that reflect the real purpose of conservation reserves and considers the opportunities and obstacles to bringing these approaches into policy and practice.