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# Living with Gorillas? Lessons from Batwa-Gorillas' Convivial Relations at Bwindi Forest, Uganda

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## Abstract

In recent years, convivial conservation has been proposed as a better alternative to fortress conservation by working with marginalised communities. This is a welcome development because most of the injustices and failures of fortress conservation arose from neglecting local communities' view of being with nature, and knowledges of nature (plural of knowledge highlights that there are multiple ways and types of acquiring and transmitting knowledge through generations). A critical analysis of the conservation literature indicates a disharmony between the indigenous ways, and Northern ways of being with nature—an ontological discord in conservation. This article considers convivial conservation as starting point to address this discord. Based on the content analysis of stories of Batwa's historical relations with gorillas, unstructured interviews, ethnographic village stays, and empirical observations, we argue that open-mindedness—to learn from, to be affected by and affect our fellow dwellers on earth (human and non-human)—marks the starting point of convivial living. Therefore, convivial conservation can further be enriched by expanding the scope of historical reparations to include knowledges that have been historically excluded. To do so, convivial conservation scholars need to emphasise the co-creation of knowledge with their human and non-human counterparts. By doing so, these scholars will safeguard against marginalising other ways of knowing, thus achieving its transformative agenda.

**Keywords:** convivial conservation, Batwa, gorillas, indigenous ontologies, Uganda

Abstract in Swahili: https://bit.ly/3wsPwjd

## CONSERVATION DYNAMICS AND THE 'NEW' CHALLENGE

For a long time, conservation of biological diversity has been dominated by fortress and community conservation models. The fortress conservation model operates through fines, fences and militarisation of boundaries to ensure strict separation between human and non-human natures (Brockington 2002; Duffy 2014). Over time, this model proved to be counter-productive, prompting attempts to make changes to the model. The changes included enlisting communities into conservation through the Community-based Conservation (CBC) model (Kothari et al. 2013); as well as attaching a financial value to nature through market-based conservation mechanisms (Bishop and Pagiola 2012). However, as Büscher (2016) argues, such changes still reinforce the original ideals of fortress conservation and have failed to curb the deteriorating environmental situation. Moreover, some conservationists continue to emphasise the need to allocate half of the earth to biodiversity (Locke 2014; Kopnina et al. 2018). These calls illuminate the fact that conservation practice is not ready to let go of the fortress model for at least some time in the future. For example, in the 'half earth' proposal, (Wilson 2016) makes apparent the traditional thinking that 'nature' needs to be protected by some humans from other humans by sealing off networks of protected areas void of humans. Although the need to protect biodiversity is justified, Büscher et al. (2017: 408)

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have analysed this proposal and found it to be, "Infeasible, and will have dangerous and counter-effective consequences if implemented. The only logical conclusion of the Half-Earth proposal would be injustice on a large scale without effectively addressing the actual roots of the ecological crisis."

The persistence of this fortress thinking also continues to marginalise indigenous peoples' knowledge, capabilities, and long-term contributions to the survival of species (Montgomery et al 2020). Yet various scholars have demonstrated that through their long-standing interactions with their environment, indigenous tribes made important discoveries and have specialised knowledge of the animal and plant species they live(d) with. Examples of these scholarly works include Pitman's (1935) accounts of the daily interactions between indigenous Batwa and gorillas of Bwindi, Uganda, and Amir's (2019) exposition on local peoples' knowledge on gorillas and how this knowledge was marginalised by western scientists. Away from gorillas, Kistler et al. (2018) makes the role of indigenous people apparent in the evolution of maize, and Kajobe (2007) reveals how indigenous Batwa's taxonomy of stingless bees aided the study of the nesting biology of these bees. The body of literature on Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) emphasises that, "local traditional knowledge [...] rooted in an intimate and long-time involvement in local ecosystems, can be a crucial tool and source of knowledge for long-term sustainability and immediate resource conservation" (Menzies and Butler 2006: 1).

Although TEK has been recognised for more than two decades (Menzies and Butler 2006), the persistence and prominence of fortress thinking and the renewed emphasis on separating humans from non-humans points to a problem in TEK scholarship. The problem, Gómez-Baggethun and Reyes-García (2013) argue, is that TEK has predominantly focused on documenting, and lamenting the loss of TEK among indigenous peoples and communities. As a result of the increased recognition of how traditional knowledge has been marginalised, some scholars have argued for a need to decolonise science and suggested some methodologies that reclaim the position of indigenous people's knowledge (see Smith 1999; Cannon 2019). Büscher and Fletcher (2019: 286) have proposed the idea of convivial conservation—"the building of long-lasting, engaging and open-ended relationships with non-humans and ecologies"—to address the flaws of mainstream conservation. In their proposal, Büscher and Fletcher (2019) outline the five major elements of convivial conservation as: 1) moving from protected to promoted areas; 2) from saving nature to celebrating human and non-human nature; 3) from touristic voyeurism to engaged visitation; 4) from spectacular to everyday environmentalisms; and 5) from privatised expert technocracy to common democratic engagement. Importantly, convivial conservation emphasises historic reparations, including paying a Conservation Basic Income to affected local communities, as one of the ways to address the injustices that characterise mainstream conservation. It appears that this proposal echoes indigenous peoples' arguments about the nature of being—inseparability and co-becoming of human and non-human worlds (see Suchet-Pearson et al. 2013). In other words, although the term was coined recently by Büscher and Fletcher, indigenous people like the Batwa in Uganda have always practised convivial conservation through their long-standing open-ended interactions with nature.

The convivial conservation proposal aligns with the increasing evidence that 'nature' is neither pure, timeless nor static, but rather vibrant and inhabits everywhere (Lorimer 2015). Various species have exhibited adaptability to multiple and even different spaces. Notable examples are Asian elephants *Elephas maximus* that seemed to have adapted to disturbed primary forests as well as the seasons of shifting cultivation known as chena cultivation (Lorimer 2010). Likewise, Hurn (2015) explains that Chacma baboons *Papio ursinus* of the South Africa's Cape Peninsula have been able to "adapt to increased urbanisation through, amongst other techniques, the exploitation of non-traditional foodstuffs appropriated from their human neighbours" (Hurn 2015: 152). Ampumuza and Driessen (2020) reveal that mountain gorillas in Bwindi have adapted to cultivated fields and the presence of various groups of people with their gadgets such as tourists, and scientists among others. In his account of the lively biogeographers of the Asian elephants, Lorimer (2010), notes the move by the Sri Lankan Department of Wildlife Conservation to open up to conviviality by testing the possibility of 'temporal resource partitioning'. This conviviality involves time-sharing between the elephants and chena cultivators, "whereby elephants only graze outside of national parks during the fallow season for shifting cultivators" (Lorimer 2010: 500). This particular example of conviviality provides insights on how convivial conservation may already be working in practice.

Scholarly work on time sharing, resource partitioning, and other strategies such as respectful avoidance (Fletcher et al. 2020), common-sensing (Boonman-Berson et al. 2016) or learning to read the communication cues of non-humans (Hinchliffe and Whatmore 2006); seem to imply a possibility of coexistence. I take this coexistence to be premised on an ontology of interconnectedness of the human and non-human worlds. This way of being in intricate connectedness with nature is similar to what I discern in indigenous ontologies (Suchet-Pearson et al.. 2013) and therefore a point of intersection to be explored further. The Sri Lanka example provides evidence that governments can indeed make deliberate moves towards adopting context-specific conviviality informed by histories of the human and non-human relations. By accentuating meaningful long-term engagement and connectedness beyond or even without financial attachment, the conviviality model of conservation resonates with the aforementioned emphasis on traditional human and non-human relations. This makes convivial conservation an attractive proposal capable of reclaiming the place for traditional ecological knowledge in conserving biodiversity. This is so because the propositions put forward in the convivial conservation proposal seek redress of the

historical exclusion of indigenous communities—and therefore their ecological knowledges.

Unfortunately, the ontological roots of western conservation and the knowledge production processes that institutionalised this version of conservation are not given due attention in convivial conservation. Krauss (2021) explains other gaps in Büscher and Fletcher's (2019, 2020) proposal such as not explaining how the proposal builds on experiences with community-based and indigenous conservation efforts in diverse contexts, lack of clarity on the practicalities of implementing the proposed elements, and failure to problematise gender issues: in sum, it is important for convivial conservation to continuously learn from indigenous and local knowledges in diverse contexts and avoid external imposition by safeguarding that especially marginalised voices and knowledges are heard (Krauss 2021). Indeed, in order to create the radical transformation promised by convivial conservation (Massarella et al 2021), I argue that it is important to problematise the foundations of conservation itself. Although both Ivan Illich's conviviality and convivial conservation proposals are rooted in the Global North (Krauss 2021), the idea comes through as a 'new' way of doing conservation, and a solution to the challenges of mainstream conservation. There is a question whether convivial conservation is sufficiently different from the way mainstream conservation was birthed to solve the problem of biodiversity loss. Because, as Kothari (2021) notes, Global North conservationists need to listen to the voices of the global South conservationists, especially the indigenous people.

Therefore, I argue that taking interest in understanding multiple ontologies—varied ways of being—and knowledge production processes can ensure that convivial conservation actualises its transformative and decolonising potential. In a review of Büscher and Fletcher (2020)'s recent book, *The conservation revolution: radical ideas for saving nature beyond the Anthropocene*, Dunlap (2020: 3) notes that paying more attention to the connection and affinity of convivial conservation to "indigenous horticultural practices, forest gardening and permaculture will advance its praxis." In this article, I advance this argument by applying it to the Batwa of Bwindi's indigenous knowledges on living with gorillas. I do this by using insights from decolonisation literature, and stories told by the Batwa of Bwindi, to highlight the various ways in which convivial conservation can be advanced by taking into account multiple ontologies and knowledges from indigenous and other conservations.

The following sections of the paper are arranged as follows: first, I explain the analytical concepts that guided my research. Next, I provide an overview of conservation practices at Bwindi, followed by a description of the methods used for this study. Thereafter, I use the stories told by the Batwa and other studies on indigenous knowledges and practices to explore the ways in which Batwa's conservation knowledge and historical relations with gorillas could advance convivial conservation at Bwindi, and enrich convivial conservation more broadly.

## MULTIPLE ONTOLOGIES AND ONTOLOGICAL DISCORD

Conservation practice has undergone several waves of change in line with paradigmatic and policy shifts, and global events such as colonialism, scientific advancements, and social movements (Ahebwa 2012). Various conservation practices and subsequent changes have been largely informed by particular views about nature and society. The main view by western scientists was that of a pristine nature, enshrined in the concept of wilderness (Adams 2013). This nature, therefore, had to be protected from humans, especially the indigenous peoples whose lifestyles were perceived to be destructive, giving rise to protectionism model of conservation (Otto et al. 2013). Over time, the focus on nature has changed with the rising critique of the nature-society divide and silence about the injustices and structures underlying protectionism (Adams 2005; Martin et al. 2015). This critique is best illustrated by the literature known as political ecology—a field that has also undergone changes since its inception in the 1970s (Escobar 2010). While political ecology used to pay attention to power and broader conceptualisations of nature (Escobar describes this as PE1), and 'PE2' focused on engaging with epistemological debates, Escobar (2010) traces a new wave of critique (PE3), that pays more attention to issues of ontology.

I use the term ontology to mean the nature of reality and way of being (Woolgar and Lezaun 2015). I position myself in the body of literature that considers researching ontology as a way of problematising the assumption of a singular ordered world (Woolgar and Lezaun 2013). The turn to ontology is traceable in other fields such as medicine (Cussins 1996; Mol 2002), tourism studies (van der Duim et al. 2013), and natural resource management (Suchet-Pearson et al. 2013). A notable, and perhaps transformative, argument in these works is that; "reality does not precede the mundane practices in which we interact with it, but is rather shaped within these practices" (Mol 1999: 75). This stance posits that reality is multiple, which has been illustrated using various examples such as the human body in medicine (Mol 2002), and gorilla tourism (van der Duim et al 2014) among others. Law (2015) uses the multiplicity argument to challenge the western/North-centric world-view of a single container world:

> one-world metaphysics are catastrophic in North–South encounters(...) They turn other worlds into the mere beliefs of people who are more or less like you and me – and correspondingly more or less (probably more) mistaken. They insist, in the end, that there is a universe and that we are all inside it, one way or another(...). On the contrary, (...) we do not live in a single container universe, but partially participate in multiple realities or a fractiverse (Law 2015: 134).

Mol's (2002; 1999) and Law's (2015) multiplicity arguments imply that different realities coexist alongside each other. Among these are the indigenous ontologies (Suchet-Pearson et al. 2013) alongside Western/Northern ontologies (Law 2015) The above quote from Law (2015)

describes the western/northern ontologies characterised by singularity, separation and control. Suchet-Pearson et al. (2013: 196) explain that an indigenous ontology—which is also multiple—can be best understood as an ontology of co-becoming where humans and non-human worlds share in and are all responsible for the continuous becoming of the world. Such a world replaces the language of separation, human-centeredness and control with the language of mutuality, connectedness, of becoming-together, diversely, respectfully and carefully in the world. Since convivial conservation also emphasises connectedness, understanding how indigenous knowledge relates to convivial conservation is important. Such an understanding cannot only enrich both indigenous knowledge and convivial conservation but also ease the current impasse in mainstream conservation. This impasse is defined by continued loss of biodiversity despite the numerous interventions (Büscher et al. 2017). I argue that ontological discord—the lack of harmony between indigenous and other ontologies—is at the root of this impasse.

In this paper, I dwell on the disharmony between contemporary/expert conservationist and indigenous people on the nature of reality. Contrary to what most conservation planners commonly assert, I argue that this is a significant conservation problem at Bwindi, not the growing population, nor the need for alternative livelihood options to be provided for by market-based interventions. Rather, any intervention to address this core problem would start from the understanding of and explore the human and non-human connectedness that incessantly makes Bwindi and the world in general. This idea informed my empirical observations of the ways through which the Batwa's historical relations with gorillas could inform a foundation for all attempts to adopt a convivial conservation model at Bwindi. Before I proceed to the methods that inform this research, I first present a brief overview of conservation practices at Bwindi to set the context for the sections that follow.

## OVERVIEW OF CONSERVATION PRACTICES AT BWINDI

Bwindi Impenetrable National Park is located in Southwestern Uganda, East Africa. The forest was first protected in 1932 as a forest reserve before becoming the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in 1991 (Butynski and Kalina 1993). The Batwa, who were former hunter-gatherers, lived with other species at Bwindi for many years before European explorers and mainly the western scientists perceived them and their lifestyle as a threat to other non-human species. Now, the Batwa live in villages near the forest boundaries. They always emphasise the deep connectedness of humans, animals, and plants to the extent that they describe gorillas as relatives who stayed in the forest (Ampumuza et al. 2020).

As noted by Ampumuza et al. (2020), the declaration of Bwindi as a national park marked the start of the process to detach humans from non-human nature as all human activities, settlement, and access to the forest were halted. These changes in human and non-human relations sparked local communities' struggles to reinstate their access and traditional relationship with the forest. In their attempts to do so, 5% of the forest was burnt in 1992 (Mujuni et al. 2003) and park staff were denied communal services such as buying foodstuffs from the community (Ahebwa 2012). To address community concerns, Integrated Conservation and Development Projects (ICDPs) were introduced at Bwindi to implement a CBC approach (Blomley 2003; Mujuni et al. 2003).

ICDPs included restricted access to harvest ecologically determined quantities of selected species of plants for medicinal and livelihood use under the Multiple Use Zone (MUZ) intervention (Blomley 2003). In addition, gorilla tourism with a revenue sharing scheme (20% of park entrance fees reimbursed to a pool from which community livelihood projects are funded) was introduced (Ahebwa et al. 2012; van der Duim et al. 2014). In spite of these attempts to address the community concerns, Baker et al. (2012) note that enclosing Bwindi Forest as a park and ICDPs still play a critical role in the conflicts around Bwindi. This is because even the seemingly community responsive interventions are premised on a protectionist philosophy of controlling access, maintaining the boundaries, and designing all interventions, while the key decisions such as how much or what species to harvest, or not harvest, are taken by 'expert' scientists. Important to note is that these scientists are usually physically, emotionally, and spiritually detached from the forest. It is of little wonder that "despite over 25 years of ICD at Bwindi, people still harvest resources illegally from the park" (Baker and Brinckerhoff 2015: 8). This is because, in my view, conservation 'experts' are still locked into the protectionist mode in which all interventions, community based and otherwise, focus on compensating communities with alternative livelihoods, and sources of income, rather than addressing communities' long-standing connectedness to all forms of nature where they dwell. Moreover, all the conservation models at Bwindi are predominantly informed by a particular mode of knowing championed by western scientists such as Fossey (1974) and Butynski (1984) that completely write out the knowledge and experiences of the local natives, especially the Batwa who have had historical relations with the gorillas.

From the overview above, it is clear that the bottom line to the conservation impasse at Bwindi is a discord between 'expert' conservationists' and communities' beliefs about the nature of being/ontology. Such discord is discernible in the assumption that indigenous people are not conservationists and the underlying belief by conservationists that communities are threats to biodiversity. Such beliefs led, and continue to lead, to biased conclusions evident in descriptions such as "Bwindi has become an island of forest in a sea of rural farmers and pit sawyers. There have been a number of encroachments along the boundary and in many places there is no transition zone between park and pasture" (UNEP-WCMC 2011 57). Other conclusions based on these biased views about communities continue to dominate debates on Mountain Gorilla *Gorilla beringei beringei* conservation. Such debates argue for

restricting encounters or space sharing between humans and gorillas (Butynski 1984; Seiler and Robbins 2016). Moreover, communities, especially the Batwa, who have historically shared the forest with gorillas and other animals view non-human nature as an inseparable inherent part of humans. They feel strongly attached and a part of not only the fauna, but also the entire Bwindi environment (Ampumuza et al. 2020).

## METHODS: STORYTELLING

For this article, I used storytelling as a method of collecting data on the Batwa's past experiences living with gorillas. Stories not only provide vivid depiction of events, but also enable the researcher to observe emotional/non-verbal cues as stories are being told (Rooney et al. 2016). Both, the content and the ensuing emotions, provide rich information for social research. Storytelling as a qualitative tool for data collection works well in research around communities with rich oral traditions because stories clearly bring out the relational ways of being (Palacios et al. 2015).

The results of this article are drawn from a total of five personal stories told by Batwa (3) about their interactions with the gorillas, and scientists (2) whose ecological studies at Bwindi were guided by Batwa. There are not many surviving Batwa who grew up in the forest. I focused on the elderly Batwa (2 males and 1 female) who lived in the forest for at least 11 years before their eviction, and treated each as a separate case because they lived in different parts of the forest. I held multiple storytelling sessions with each individual in different places including at a fire place, in their homes, aboard a vehicle to and from Bwindi, and after meetings with Non-Governmental Organizations' (NGO) project staff.

Information obtained from these stories was triangulated with ethnographic village stays conducted in five different villages ranging from three weeks to one month, and unstructured interviews with two scientists who have worked with the same Batwa on research and other projects for more than ten years. This information was further supplemented with a review of literature about the Batwa and their life in the forest. In order to analyse the stories, I analysed the content of the stories for key emerging themes.

## TRACING CONVIVIALITY IN STORIES OF HISTORICAL BATWA-GORILLA RELATIONS

The inseparability of human and non-human nature was central to all stories narrated by the Batwa. The connectedness is so engrained in their lives that it permeated through all their talks whereby they continuously referred to other non-human entities and the forest land as 'part of us'. They often mentioned that 'we are not complete without all these things' because of the long-term interactions.

Because of the connectedness mentioned above, the Batwa's ways of knowing the behaviour of gorillas and other non-humans was, and still is through sensory cues, experiential and spiritual sensibilities, and not by means of objectively observable variables. The Batwa particularly reminisced about how they progressively learned to read the imprints left by the gorillas, and to pay attention to their spiritual prompts to guide their movements and activities in the forest. They learned from what could be considered negative experiences. For example, one of the Batwa elders, who has guided several researchers in Bwindi, explained that while still living with the forest and other inhabitants, his relative was killed by a stressed gorilla because the animals had not yet learned when to avoid close encounters. He explained that,

> gorillas are spiritual beings that is why an encounter with gorillas on my way to hunting signalled that I should not proceed. But there were also instances where we accidentally bumped into a solitary or group of gorillas. Those were the main causes of attacks, and in defence killing the gorilla before he killed you was the option. It still feels sad to think that I did that but to be honest, it happened. Over time we learned to pay attention to many non-verbal signs to guide our interaction with other members in the forest. For example, on our way to hunting, we looked out for cues such as scents, consistency of faecal matter, footprints, trails, leftover foods and vocalisations. We interpreted watery stool as a sign of fearful flee from danger. In such cases we would take a different route to avoid attacks from an already frightened individual. (Batwa male elder, September 2019).

This excerpt illuminates the need for continuous learning of the ways though which our non-human counterparts communicate as an important aspect of conviviality (Boonman-Berson et al. 2016). Such a kind of openness to learning also implies allowing our affective faculties to be connected with those of our fellow dwellers on earth. The Batwa stories further demonstrated this devotion to connectedness as expressed in the following extract:

> With time, we learned that gorilla's negative emotions (expressed through charging, attacking and biting) were partly a result of stress from high temperatures, and food scarcity. This is because we realised that attacks were common during the dry and hot months. Of course, life was stressful for us as well during those times (Batwa female elder, June 2019).

Further to this, stories from researchers indicated that Batwa deployed these experiences or modes of knowing during fieldwork. For example, one of the researchers narrated:

> On one of our field days, my other research assistants suggested that we go back to the forest to follow the gorillas and observe their afternoon behaviour. It was during those very dry and hot months and the sun was scorching hot. My Mutwa [singular for Batwa] research assistant warned us; the sun is too hot and you want to follow the gorilla? They will certainly attack and bite you! (Scientist, August 2019).

The warning in the above excerpt demonstrates the sensibility of the field assistant to the connectedness of the weather, gorilla's bodily processes, and the field exercise. In other stories of encounters with bees, elephants, chimpanzees, as well as people from other tribes, Batwa often explained that

they paid attention to past experiences, scents, vocalisation, faecal matter, leftover foods, and most importantly listened to their 'spirits' in order to adapt to the changing moods, and experiences of their co-inhabitants of Bwindi forest.

It is important to note that these relations have not been erased by several decades of physical separation. In fact, all my research participants were surprised when I asked about their views on the restoration of human and non-human relations. They wondered if there was a time when the two were ever separated because to them "physical separation by boundaries never separates the inner connection, unless if you are talking about restoring the physical interaction" (Female elder 2, August, 2021). This belief was justified by narrating several instances revealing the more-than-physical connectedness between the Batwa and non-human co-inhabitants of Bwindi forest. They disclosed that most of the relations with other nature transcend physicality since particular individuals had, and still have special revelations, powers and abilities to speak with nature.

Two particular situations stand out: first, while on a walk through the forest, one of my colleagues probed further about the possibilities of taking us to worship at the sacred tree that the guide had mentioned. Our guide informed us that he was not eligible or gifted to step in that particular section of the forest. He added that even if the eligible person was with us, we still could not be taken because it is forbidden. Further to that, our guide revealed that even mentioning the name, or pointing to the direction of that spot in the forest had serious consequences on one's body. In another story, a female Mutwa shared an example when she called up obukyere (a type of amphibian) from the stream on their way to collect seeds from the forest, and another when she talked to an agitated gorilla to save her non-Batwa colleagues from the attack. She clarified that on both instances, she did not use vocalisation as it is with those who habituate gorillas. At the stream, she simply informed obukyere that she had longed to see them, and they immediately gathered at the spot where she was. She collected and thanked them for giving her the energy and released them back into the stream. For the gorilla, she simply pleaded for forgiveness and the Silverback went away. She explained that this is all possible even after several years of physical separation because their connection with nature starts even before someone is born as the mother introduces the growing foetus to her outside environment. This idea was corroborated by a male participant who shortened our conversation in order to perform a ritual in a nearby community forest for his pregnant wife.

Although these connections still exist despite the physical separation, the Batwa still suffer the consequences of the separation evident in the stories of their current life outside the forest. Some of them indicated that their supernatural instincts to go and visit the forest, or particular hot springs for healing, meditation, revive their energies or simply get immersed in nature are constrained because these reasons do not make sense to the conservationists. They are only allowed to collect the stipulated materials at a time approved by the park managers. In their narration of the current situation, all participants challenged the view that they pose risks to the gorillas. To them, this view can only be validated by reflecting on whether biodiversity, including gorillas, existed at the time 'intruders' first visited Bwindi.

Finally, the Batwa view western conservation as 'detached and profit-driven,' which is the opposite of their reality of conservation. They expressed strong convictions that non-human nature of Bwindi misses them too, that is why they respond at any opportunity of their physical interaction with the forest such as the call to participate in projects such as the Bwindi Batwa Forest Experience. To them conservation is not about protecting species, but rather a change of who should be in the forest (tourists, rangers, researchers) and who should not (local communities). They further acknowledged that it would be very difficult for them to regain unlimited physical interaction with the gorillas because the forest was turned into a 'garden' for government and partners to harvest money. Yet to them, the intrinsic value of the feeling and communion brought by physically interacting with other nature is invaluable as one of them concluded that,

> government tries to bring projects under revenue sharing scheme and some benefit from them but most of us are left out. But what they do not understand is that no amount of money can give me the feeling I get as I sit in the hot spring and interact with all the trees, herbs, insects and other animals. In our beliefs, nature is not bought or paid for. We shared our resources, even when we first interacted with abairu settlers; we did not ask for money, we simply shared forest products and they too shared with us their farm products. The same can still be done. We know that the government cannot let go of the tourism money, but let them share the forest with us. They should remain in charge of tourism, but allow us unrestricted physical interaction with the forest (Female elder, August 2021).

The facial expressions of this particular participant as she narrated the feeling of interacting with the hot spring and the surrounding environment is incomparable to worth anything in this world. I could feel the nostalgia in her voice, with eyes closed facing upwards and her hands spread out, while tears uncontrollably rolled down her cheeks. All these observations motivated me to explore the ways in which convivial conservation can radically transform the western view of conservation by capturing these views of reality.

## DISCUSSION: ADVANCING CONVIVIALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF BWINDI

In this article, I started by delineating the core conservation problem at Bwindi as ontological discord—the disharmony between 'expert' conservationists' and the indigenous Batwa's knowledge of reality. I argued that the Batwa practised convivial conservation, although they did not label it as such. Additionally, I noted that Krauss's (2021) analysis highlights several gaps in the proposed convivial conservation model, including insufficient attention to knowledge production processes, and practical ways of implementing the proposals.

However, I argue that there is need to take a step back and problematise the roots—ontologies—that produced and sustain mainstream conservation, as a starting point to realising convivial conservation. To do so, I use Batwa's stories of practical convivial conservation with a view of advancing convivial conservation by challenging the ontology and knowledges that produced western conservation in various ways.

First, attempts to decolonise conservation or provide alternative conservation models need to pay attention to ontology. This is important because, as Mol (2002: 7) argues, ontologies "inform and are informed by" the objects we deal with such as bodies, systems and technologies, and in this case, nature, threats to nature and conservation models. So far, I have noted that whereas northern ontologies purify nature and view humans as threats to this nature, the stories told by the Batwa, like other indigenous ontologies, indicate a different reality. The stories indicated that their mundane practices of gathering, hunting, worship, bathing in hot springs, and treatment of ailments among others weaved into deeper, inner and more than physical relations. And, through these relations, the Batwa, the forest and all other nature co-constituted each other. In fact, the female elder's story of her 'conversation' with gorillas and 'obukyere', especially the fact that these non-humans responded or acted according to her verbal utterances, attests to the persistence of relations even after decades of physical separation. These stories provide insights into the practical ways through which the shift from spectacular to everyday environmentalism proposed by convivial conservation can be planned by taking into account the multiple ontologies already highlighted by Law (2015), Suchet-Pearson et al. (2013), Pitman (1935) and Amir (2019) so that not a single ontology is considered at the expense of another. This is not far-fetched because Mabele, Krauss and Kiwango (2022) demonstrate that the convivial conservation proposal to move from the concept of protected areas to promoted areas resonates with the Ubuntu philosophy. Additionally, the philosophy is also seen in practice through human and non-human relations of care and co-becoming. The revival of these relations and intersections point to the possibilities of overcoming the pitfalls brought about by ontologies that emphasise separation in western conservation.

Second, ontologies define the mode of knowledge production. Convivial conservation's focus on re-initiating human and non-human ways of co-becoming suggests a shift in the mode of knowledge production for inhabiting with nature. This shift relates to the argument for historic reparations for the damages caused in the process of implementing both mainstream and the 'new' market-based conservation. While Büscher and Fletcher's (2019, 2020) argument for historic reparations focuses on people and their land, Smith (1999, 2021), Amir (2019) as well as Mbaria and Ogada (2016) point out that colonisation not only parcelled up people's land but also their knowledge and minds. Hence, if convivial conservation wishes to be a decolonial approach, it should begin by broadening the scope of reparations to address the colonisation of local knowledge and focus attention on decolonizing conservation knowledge production. As my analysis of the stories of the Batwa reveals, the western construct of nature and conservation was the starting point of dispossession, militarisation and all other injustices they have experienced since the establishment of the Bwindi Impenetrable Park. The ecologists demeaned local ways of life, knowledge, and accounts of human-wildlife interactions, dismissing them as unscientific, and excluded them from their publications (Amir 2019).

Unfortunately, as Smith (1999) observes, such trends are traceable to date regardless of whether or not the indigenous peoples are located in the South or have become scholars in the North. For example, one can feel Spivak's (cited in Smith 1999) frustration by the consolidated opposition to indigenous knowledge in the academy, and how scholars from the North do not want to listen or take seriously the contributions of scholars from the South. But what exactly does decolonising conservation knowledge practically entail? Cannon (2019) argues that decolonising requires non-indigenous scientists to deliberately step back and let indigenous peoples take the lead. Such a step will be rooted in a realisation and understanding that the knowledge held by indigenous people is not inferior or less scientific than western science/knowledge (Cannon 2019). Smith (1999: 98) argues that this paradigm shift will be a deliberate "long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power."

However, as the Batwa stories reveal, and as Büscher and Fletcher (2019) have observed, going back to the original state of affairs is not feasible. Instead, the task of realising the idea of convivial conservation requires scholars and practitioners to reinstate and incorporate indigenous peoples' realities into research and resultant publications. Particular attention should be paid to the knowledges that arise from more-than-physical interactions and observations during fieldwork. As the Batwa stories show, it is these ways of open-mindedness—to learn from, to be affected by and affect our fellow dwellers on earth (human and non-human)—that mark the starting point of convivial living. Therefore, even our methods and final outputs of these methods should adjust to these sensibilities. In short, this means multiplying realities by drawing from various claims: scientific, indigenous and any other that may arise depending on the context (see, for example, Tsai et al. 2016). Practically, there should be an increase in publications from scholars from the South, either singly or jointly with their counterparts on the North, and acceptance of such as science too. Therefore, by restoring indigenous and Southern peoples' ontologies and knowledges, convivial conservation scholarship can productively contribute to this aspect of reparations.

Finally, in addition to the call for historic reparations, Büscher and Fletcher (2019, 2020) suggest a Conservation Basic Income for people living in or near in conservation areas. My reading of their explanation is that there is a category of people who have accumulated wealth from exploiting resources at the expense of the less or not-wealthy category, and the first should share it with the latter. This idea is somewhat

akin to the sharing principle held by the Batwa, but differs in a sense that the Batwa-sharing transcends material stuff to values, physical and other spaces as well as values. Moreover, as highlighted in the stories told by the Batwa, financial sharing arrangements at Bwindi take the form of a revenue-sharing scheme that is riddled with complications in its implementation and exacerbated by corruption (see also Ahebwa, et al. 2012; Franks and Twinamatsiko 2017). The income argument is theoretically a good idea; however, it also places the communities in a recipient position and risks reproducing marginalising effects. As much as these communities are economically disadvantaged, they are greatly endowed with social, cultural, spiritual and intellectual wealth that is only hampered by the restrictions of 'western conservation' ideals (Ampumuza et al. 2020). Therefore, although the sharing of income is a good idea, it should be expanded to include sharing of powers and control of the sites that define the communities involved.

## CONCLUSION

This article has used insights from stories of Batwa's historic convivial relations with non-human nature at Bwindi to explore ways through which convivial conservation can be advanced. I explained that the foundations of 'western conservation' and its related challenges lie in disregarding and omitting other ontologies and knowledges about conserving biodiversity (see also Adams 2005). Although the first western explorers, ecologists and later colonialists witnessed the said conservation practices, they dismissed them as barbaric, superstitious, or inferior. Subsequently their publications on the reality of nature and guidelines to conserve that particular reality of nature did not acknowledge other realities of what constitutes nature. I have also argued that most of the propositions put forward by convivial conservation resonate with Batwa and other indigenous ways of relating with non-human nature. However, convivial conservation should explicitly problematise the ontologies that inform and are informed by mainstream conservation and also ensure that the concept's rooting in Global North academia does not further marginalise other ways of knowing. The scope of historic reparations should go beyond land to include knowledges, and while the idea of a Conservation Basic Income may seem a good welfare idea, it is likely to jeopardise the objective of convivial conservation by placing local communities in a subservient position. If convivial conservation is to be realised, then its scholars and advocates should take a step back and allow communities to co-create knowledge with their human and non-human counterparts via affective means as illustrated by the Batwa's ways of knowing nature.

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## Conflict of interest

The author declares that she has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Research Ethics approval

This research is part of the PhD project that passed the ethics criteria of Wageningen University at proposal level.

## Data Availability

Data is available on request and in accordance to the Wageningen University data policy.

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