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Storytelling in the Conservation of Endangered Species: The Case of Snow Leopard Conservancy

Abstract: This article explores the use of storytelling as a method for protecting endangered species, with the Snow Leopard Conservancy as a case study. It critiques the limitations of a linear, scientific approach to conservation, drawing on Joshua P. Howe's analysis of the intersection of science and politics. Using Donna Haraway's S-F concept and Thomas Berry's vision of an ecozoic epoch, the paper argues that storytelling can drive meaningful environmental change. The Conservancy, which works with local Indigenous Cultural Practitioners to reframe snow leopards' role in spiritual traditions, exemplifies how integrating local knowledge and narratives can reshape attitudes toward wildlife conservation. The study highlights storytelling's potential to foster broader ecological understanding and influence conservation efforts.

Keywords: Snow Leopard, storytelling, ecozoic, conservation, Anthropocene, indigenous culture

1. Introduction

The last half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century have been a time of broadening knowledge about environmental threats. The spread of ecological movements in the 1960s, publications such as *Silent Spring* (1962) by Rachel Carson or *Whole Earth Catalogue* (1968) by Stewart Brand, as well as the reports of the Club of Rome and numerous intellectual gatherings (the UN

Conference in Stockholm in 1972 or the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992) marked key moments of growing ecological awareness. A significant initiative in understanding the human-environment relationship was the establishment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) by the United Nations Environment Programme and the World Meteorological Organisation in 1988. The main goal of the IPCC is to assess the state of scientific knowledge on climate change and to inform policymakers and societies about possible strategies to counteract these changes. Since its inception, the IPCC has published over 30 reports, including six major ones, known as Assessment Reports. It is worth noting that each IPCC report methodically analyses vast amounts of scientific data and articles published in peer-reviewed scientific journals. The latest, sixth report was created by 721 scientists based on the analysis of over 1400 scientific articles (2023 Impact Report).

Observing the dynamics of emerging research on the human-environment relationship, one can notice not only a significant increase in the amount of scientific information but also growing certainty about its reliability. For example, thanks to systematically conducted meta-analyses on the anthropogenic nature of global warming, we know that the thesis of climate change caused by humans is not a scientific controversy but a scientific fact (cf. Cook et al. 1). It is also worth noting that since the mid-1990s a new paradigm in natural sciences, known as Earth System Science, has been formulated. We know that human activity unprecedentedly destabilises the functioning of our planet (cf. Hamilton 13-14). As a species, we not only impact local ecosystems by polluting rivers, destroying landscapes, and cutting down forests, but we also negatively affect the planet as a whole. Summarising research conducted in the field of Earth System Science, Ewa Bińczyk writes that

> humanity is making dangerous, simultaneous modifications to many key planetary parameters. Data indicate that so-called planetary boundaries have been crossed, particularly due to climate change, soil degradation, ocean acidification, disruption of Earth's biogeochemical cycles (i.e., nitrogen and phosphorus cycles), and the rate of biodiversity loss (the so-called sixth mass extinction). (12)

This article uses the example of the Snow Leopard Conservancy to discuss the role of storytelling in helping to protect endangered species. Starting from an overview of the current relationships between knowledge and power in the context of the ongoing extinction and with limited possibilities for taking up action, we turn to the work of Thomas Berry and Donna Haraway to argue for the potential of storytelling to foster broader ecological understanding and influence conservation efforts. The article concludes by describing the present efforts of protecting snow leopards and highlighting the importance of grounded, local knowledge systems.

2. Stagnation, Knowledge, and (In)action

Despite the above-mentioned abundance of scientific data on the negative impact of human activities on natural surroundings, environmental reflection recognises the problem of the inability to take pro-ecological actions. This applies both to the collective dimension – nation states stick to established paths and do not shift their economies to a low-emission mode; they do not implement numerous international agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol, Copenhagen Protocol, or the Paris Agreement (Bińczyk 47–58); and, as for the individual dimension, support for pro-ecological actions does not reflect the scale of the challenges currently facing societies. In this context, many authors speak of stagnation, passivism, climate impasse, inaction, and the continuation of business-as-usual policies. The collision of abundant scientific data on the one hand, with the passivity of pro-ecological actions on the other, provokes the naming of the 21st century as a time of irrationalism (Bińczyk 51) or the Age of Twilight. This term, proposed by Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway in their 2014 book *The Collapse of Western Civilization*, ironically refers to the hopes associated with the Age of Enlightenment, expressed in the belief that by following the light of reason, humanity would create a better world.

The belief in a strong connection between empirical research of natural reality and the ability to transform the world appeared at the end of the 16th century in the writings of Francis Bacon. In the famous phrase "knowledge is power" (*Scientia potentia est*), Bacon expressed the postulate of studying nature to achieve concrete, practical effects. This approach was widely accepted within Western culture, for which the development of natural sciences was strongly associated with practical benefits: technological systems, innovations in chemistry, biology, agriculture, and medicine are the results of the so-called success of laboratories, i.e., the ability to manipulate elements of the external world enabled by the development of natural sciences. However, due to growing environmental problems and the passivity of societies, it has become clear that science (especially in the case of natural sciences) does not have the power to change the world. It is precisely in this vein that Oreskes and Conway claim the opposite: while referring to the situation in which societies fail to take sufficient action despite possessing knowledge about the destructive effects of destabilising the planetary ecological system due to greenhouse gases emissions and the destruction of biodiversity, they state that knowledge is not power (2).

The sense of disappointment and lost hopes placed in the natural sciences leads some scholars to turn to the humanities as a remedy for the climate and biodiversity crisis. It is within the humanities and social sciences that the issues related to our desires, goals, and aspirations are truly studied. In a world where almost every aspect of our functioning is related to the use of energy, which translates into the destabilisation of planetary systems, understanding the deeper causes of our behaviour is crucial. On this note, the Swedish historian Sverker Sörlin claims that

> Our belief that science alone could deliver us from the planetary quagmire is long dead. For some time, hopes were high for economics and incentive-driven new public management solutions […] It seems this time that our hopes are tied to the humanities. […] in a world where cultural values, political and religious ideas, and deep-seated human behaviors still rule the way people lead their lives, and consume, the idea of environmentally relevant knowledge must change. We cannot dream of sustainability unless we start to pay more attention to the human agents of the planetary pressure that environmental experts are masters at measuring but that they seem unable to prevent. (788)

Similarly, Ursula K. Heise points out the need to redirect our attention to the "soft" dimensions of the climate crisis. She observes that "[w]ithout detailed attention to the political, social, cultural, affective, and rhetorical forms that the climate problem takes in different communities, simple insistence on the scientific facts will often remain politically pointless" (24).

Drawing attention to the potential of the humanistic dimension in efforts to ensure a stable future for our planet is associated with the fundamental question of how nature exists. What emerges in the above-mentioned approaches is the growing awareness that, along with understanding the functioning of the planetary systems, our basic ontological categories, such as nature and culture, must be redefined. The characteristic modern division into two independent spheres of nature and culture is unsustainable in an era where the scale of the human impact on planetary systems is so evident. The distinction between the objective world of material objects, studied by science using quantitative methods, and the subjective world of subjects possessing agency, value systems, and the entire realm of inner experiences, is unsustainable in the Anthropocene. Bruno Latour sees the reasons for our inability to respond to the climate crisis in clinging to this outdated division:

> If people are now lost in the face of ecological problems and cannot quickly respond to a situation that everyone knows is catastrophic, it is largely because they still live in the previous world, in a world of objects that have no agency and can be controlled through calculations, through science […]. However, this is not the world we are in now, and that is what I mean when I say that we have found ourselves in a different world. (Latour 25)

In the view presented by Latour – but also by other authors such as Donna Haraway, Isabelle Stengers, and Dipesh Chakrabarty – our planet has a post-natural character. This means that the functioning of the Earth is currently determined both by deterministic processes discovered by natural sciences and by human actions. Therefore, changing the factors on which our actions depend is a key aspect of the functioning of planetary systems. Narratives that convey values are one of the fundamental factors driving our actions. Therefore, they must be modified first. The

philosophical basis for such understanding of relationships between nature and the network of intersubjective meanings can be found in the concept formulated by the American theologian Thomas Berry. A characteristic feature of Berry's thought is the category of the story, a narrative. Berry, like other 20th-century thinkers – e.g., Charles Taylor or Paul Ricœur – attributes a key role to the human ability to tell stories in the process of understanding and transforming reality. Correspondingly, the history of Western civilisation is a history of changing stories. Whether we are dealing with the visions of Saint Augustine of Hippo in *The City of God*, calling for the rejection of worldly concerns and directing our gaze towards the Kingdom of God, or with the modern visions of scientific and technological progress and earthly prosperity, what drives us to action, both at the collective and individual level, are precisely stories. However, since the Industrial Revolution, stories not only set the direction of our civilisation but also transformed the functioning of our planet. Berry notes:

> The issue now is of a much greater order of magnitude, for we have changed in a deleterious manner not simply the structure and functioning of human society: we have changed the very chemistry of the planet, we have altered the biosystems, we have changed the topography and even the geological structure of the planet, structures and functions that have taken hundreds of millions and even billions of years to bring into existence. Such an order of change in its nature and in its order of magnitude has never before entered either into earth history or into human consciousness. (1988, xiii)

Given that the scale of our species' impact on planetary systems has reached critical levels, Berry calls for the transformation of the very foundations of our culture, i.e., the stories that explain the world and our place in it. Since the most fundamental stories are religious narratives, Berry devotes the most attention to them. In his 1996 essay, "An Ecologically Sensitive Spirituality," he writes that "the great spiritual mission of the present is to renew all the traditional religious spiritual traditions in the context of the integral functioning of the biosystems of the planet" (135). Referring to Berry, Elizabeth Allison (161) says that the environmental ills of our time stem from a disconnection between religions that place the locus of value in the transcendent realm, on the one hand, and the specific, material needs of the Earth and its beings, on the other. Combining these two different perspectives – spiritual and ecological – is the beginning of a new story that humanity must formulate if it wants to maintain hope for a stable future for our planet. The problem, however, is that this story cannot be monopolistic – that is, it cannot be one rigid narrative according to which humanity is to act for the stabilisation of planetary systems. Berry writes that the new narrative must be pluralistic – different nations, cultures, and minorities should tell it from their own perspective. Currently, this perspective is increasingly widely shared. For example, Jürgen Renn notes that globalised science, based on international competition and specialisation, and

integrated into the market economic model, proves unsatisfactory in the face of the challenges of the Anthropocene. Above all, the bottom-up, local perspective, which could be used to improve ecosystems, is ignored by global science. The problem, however, is that this way of seeing contemporary environmental challenges, constructed by globalised science, permeates societies. Ultimately, it turns out that local communities, instead of using their own traditions, try to solve environmental problems based on a globalised model that claims universality. Renn writes:

> The ensuing globalization of science tends to replace reflection with competitiveness and to downplay the role of specific contexts and local knowledge in favor of principles of science organization that are assumed to be of global and even universal validity. Yet it is through this perspective that most societies have come to view their problems, often disregarding the potential inherent in their own particular traditions or in opportunities for adapting those principles – opportunities that sometimes only come with a decoupling from global trends and adapting science policy to local conditions. (8)

Renn's and Berry's reflections on the necessity of seeking multiple stories to address the Anthropocene do not exclude the possibility of referring to a single conceptual framework. Many Anthropocene researchers point out that such a framework could be the concept of degrowth. However, for local communities to identify with a given story, it should have a local source. Combining these two requirements could be one of the main challenges of storytelling in the Anthropocene era.

3. Storytelling

In "The New Story," Berry claims, "It's all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story [...] The Old Story sustains us for a long time [...] It did not make men good" (2003, 77). As an advocate for the ecozoic, a future period where humanity lives in harmony with the Earth, Berry envisions a time when humanity creatively reorients toward the natural world, with storytelling offering an alternative to scientific approaches to environmental crises, such as mass extinction. Human activity has historically driven five mass extinctions, defined by the loss of over 75% of species in short geological periods (Barnosky et al. 51). Biologists warn of a sixth, in which storytelling could reshape public responses (Castricano 125; Malecki et al. 846).

The "new story" calls for a perspective that views Earth's processes as the foundation for facing future challenges. As Earth reveals itself "in and through [it]" (Berry 2003, 87), humanity finds renewed "confidence" to co-exist with other species. In this respect, Berry aligns with Haraway, who stresses the need for "inventive practices rather than [...] game-over cynicism" (2018, 102). This

evolutionary view draws on Haraway's SF framework – string figures, science fact, science fiction, speculative feminism, and speculative fabulation (2016, 10) – to guide humanity in confronting the reality of co-perishing with other species on a compromised Earth. Storytelling must evolve into a collaborative effort between humans and nonhumans. This era calls for reimagining life's possibilities, moving beyond traditional narratives. Berry's 'new story' emphasises a reality shaped by Earth's processes, aiming for a truthful alignment between events and their descriptions. Haraway's insight (qtd. in Greenhalgh-Spencer 43) conveys the message that "stories tell stories, thoughts think thoughts, and knots knot knots," reflecting the interconnectedness of species for the Earth's sake. However, she also advises caution about the fact that storytelling needs to consider who owns the narratives and who has access to them, as misrepresentations can undermine efforts to promote planetary responsibility (Haraway 2019, 565). Compelling narratives must be grounded in factual truths to avoid harm because storytelling, as Aline Wiame (525) notes, is a political and heuristic tool that creates an "imbrication of speculation and politics." Echoing Foucault's focus on how epistemologies shape individuals and worldviews, this aligns with Haraway's approach (qtd. in Vint 289). She argues that humanity's political praxis relies on epistemic resources fostering ethical coexistence with other species, challenging human exceptionalism and separateness from nature. Such knowledge engages individuals deeply, as issues such as biodiversity, extinction, and endangered species are not just scientific but entwined with history, values, and the identities of nonmodern cultures (Malecki et al. 846; Heise 5).

Stories bridge diverse perspectives across time. Haraway's reference to Medusa and Gaia as archetypes highlights how these figures unfold in "bumptious temporalities" (102), resonating with multiple meanings. Brian Boyd's *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (2009) explains how these archetypal divergences are manifestations of the mind's natural inclination for stories and storytelling – a dopamine-driven enjoyment – that fosters communal bonding and epistemic enrichment (Cf. Zipes 152-161). While science remains relevant, it is no longer the sole response to the Anthropocene; actions like reducing carbon footprints are insufficient. Inspired by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's evolutionary philosophy, Berry expands this view to emphasise a more holistic understanding of human responsibility toward Earth. Berry's concept of the ecozoic era signals the advent of a survival-oriented phase rooted in the redemptive value of reconnecting with one's inherent, inscendent nature. In *Dream of the Earth* (1988), Berry writes: "We must invent, or reinvent, a sustainable human culture by a descent into our pre-rational, our instinctive, resources. Our cultural resources have lost their integrity. They cannot be trusted. What is needed is not transcendence but 'inscendence,' not the brain but the gene" (207).

Human transience calls for intuition, or as David Hinton (125) puts it, a "wild mind, unformed yet inseparable from the wild earth." A genetic cue is required to embrace our primal selves, shifting from intellectual detachment to embodied

experience. Haraway's book *Staying with the Trouble* urges a grounded approach to the damaged Earth, insisting we persist "with" its ailments rather than escape. Brian Swimme's and Thomas Berry's *The Universe Story* supports this by advocating for evolving "transgenetic cultural codings" that reinforce sustainable relationships with Earth (158–159). Indigenous Buryat activists in Siberia embody a "conservation gene" through ancestral ecological knowledge, echoing Berry's cosmology-ecology dynamics (Vasquez, para. 2). The Taoist-Ch'an model of "empty-mind belonging to earth/Tao without any separation, which is love and kinship at the deepest level" reflects kinship with the Earth, as Hinton (101) describes, emphasising love and connection beyond bloodlines, as Haraway also advocates. She argues:

> There can be no environmental justice or ecological reworlding without multispecies environmental justice and that means nurturing and inventing enduring multispecies – human and nonhuman – kindreds. Kin making requires taking the risk of becoming-with new kinds of person-making, generative and experimental categories of kindred, other sorts of 'we', other sorts of 'selves', and unexpected kinds of sympoietic, symchthonic human and nonhuman critters. (Haraway 2018, 102)

This expanded notion of kinship transcends familial ties, redefining kinship as an inclusive, interspecies connection, pushing communal existence beyond isolationist thinking. Haraway suggests that coexistence with the planet's myriad species invites broader ethical obligations. Her conception of kinship, comprised of "florid mechanic, organic, and textual entities with which we share the earth and our flesh" (2004, 1), underscores the careful deliberation needed in addressing environmental injustices, as she posits that these cannot be solely attributed to anthropocentrism. In her view, humans do not act alone; non-human agents, including textual entities, participate in the ongoing remaking of Earth.

Berry, influenced by Teilhard de Chardin, critiqued his optimism that Earth's renewal could be achieved through technological progress alone. Instead, he advocated for a balance between technological aspiration and ecological realism, addressing persistent environmental degradation. This vision speaks to interdisciplinary, holistic storytelling that can forge a deep connection between humans and wildlife, providing a framework for ecological stewardship (Lin and Yuh-Yuh, para. 1). A nuanced treatment of interdisciplinarity must account for the interplay between technological determinism and indigeneity. Excluding technological determinism from discussions of the ecozoic framework undermines the journey back to primal dwelling. Sartre's famous assertion that "existence precedes essence" ripples in Hinton's insight: "rather than being defined by some predetermined and ineluctable human nature constructed by the Western tradition, we are free to define anew our nature and our future at any moment" (127). Haraway's SF-based storytelling facilitates this inscendent epiphany, bringing visionary neologisms to life as "earth stories propose reconfiguring organisms as holobionts to foreground

collective becoming-with" (2019, 565). This method shifts emphasis from individual survival or competition to a model of mutualism and collective survival, underscoring that the welfare of one is intrinsically linked to the well-being of others and of the broader ecosystem. Berry's confidence in this ethos underscores its viability in addressing today's ecological crises.

Responding to environmental threats requires narratives that ritualise mourning and channel collective grief into eco-social transformation. Mourning reinterprets grief as a catalyst for intentional action – a behavior Icek Ajzen sees as deeply influenced by beliefs, attitudes, and personality (99–113). The 'grief imperative' should address the "Great Vanishing," which elucidates our "capacious selves;" hence, the Great Vanishing becomes a "profound teacher of our age" (Hinton 104). Empathy toward extinction geographies stirs a nostalgia for nature, which Jennifer Ladino identifies as sparking movements for social and environmental justice (xiii) – movements shaped by ecocritical agency. Injustice prompting this nostalgic climate created a "lost kingdom," *Animalia*, representing "the theological collapse of transcendence, the foreclosure of a realm beyond the earthly that would seem to […] offer grounding and direction […] to the wayward confusion of quotidian life" (Castricano xiv). Berry's insistence on "inscendence" resonates with Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman's *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Grief and Loss,* which advocates for a broadened sense of mourning and ecological ethics that transcend anthropocentric concerns. Acknowledging grief for non-human lives and ecosystems, and expanding what is considered worthy of mourning, transforms ethical and political perspectives, nurturing an ecological reverence that affirms all life forms within the ecosystem.

Such an affirmation of breathing entities requires an attitudinal platform promoting ascetism, which cultivates a deeper sense of interconnectedness. In this context, Charles Batson argues that altruism is an inherent human trait and cautions that the failure to "appreciate its importance has handicapped attempts to understand why we humans act as we do and wherein our happiness lies [and] has also handicapped efforts to promote […] a more caring, humane society" (3). Altruism and cooperation are shaped by communal needs, particularly in pastoral and foraging societies where collaboration is crucial for labor division, managing environmental challenges, and accessing resources. In Mongolia, pastoralists rely on kinship-based groups, or *khot ail*, to share herding tasks and defend territories, key to resource management (Conte, para. 9). In this undertaking, a succinct embodiment of collectivism among herders can be derived, which shapes the altruistic nature of their communal bond.

Religious traditions also emphasise altruism, as seen in the protection of the snow leopard – a spiritual and totemic animal – sightings of which in the high-altitude terrains of Central Asia are extremely rare. It has large, powerful paws that act as natural snowshoes, preventing it from sinking into the snow, and a long, bushy tail that helps maintain balance while navigating lofty landscapes. Its range

spans approximately 772,204 square miles, with 60% of it located in China (World Wildlife Fund, para. 2). As an iconic symbol in the mythology of Central and Eastern Asia, it is often associated with Pari, a goddess who embodies spirituality and purity, and guards the mountainous regions. For the Wakhi people of Pakistan, China, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan, mountain spirits known as *mergichan* are believed to take the form of snow leopards, along with other animals (Knosala 2022a, para. 6). These elusive spirits inhabit remote, rugged mountain areas, where they protect wild sheep and ibex herds. *Mergichan* are regarded as powerful beings the presence of which can either aid or threaten humans, depending on the respect shown toward them. Hunters believe that by honoring these spirits, *mergichan* can lead them to game or warn of dangers such as sudden weather changes. Shamans, on the other hand, view them as intermediaries – particularly when they appear as snow leopards – connecting the human world to the sacred, untouched realm of the mountaintops.

Indigenous knowledge systems, as one scholar believes, are often unfairly dismissed as superstition, but they should be understood as complex and meaningful belief systems that have shaped humanity's relationship with the universe for generations (MacDonald 17). In the foreword to Anthony Nanson's 2011 *Word of Re-enchantment: Storytelling, Myth, and Ecological Desire,* Eric Maddern asserts that narratives, conveyed through the ages and enlivened by the imaginative contributions of storytellers, immortalise truths. Over time, these stories become mythological barnacles on society's cultural fabric, with meanings that endure and thrive (x). This complexity is perhaps mirrored in how all elements of a place converge to form a climate that shapes language, which, for the Gumtj – original inhabitants of North East Arnhem Land in Australia – serves as a primary marker of identity. Their song, *Wuymirri*, honors whales, preserving their worldview and language (cf. Burarrwanga et al., para. 1). Effective conservation strategies must be tailored to the unique cultural and geopolitical contexts of these communities to harness indigenous knowledge fully (Jackson and Wendy 139). The intrinsic link between cultural and ecological diversity underscores the necessity of embedding moral, cultural, and spiritual dimensions into conservation efforts. For example, 336 Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in the Sanjiangyuan region – through patrolling sacred peaks and educating local communities – could protect more snow leopard habitat than the nature reserve's core zones (Li et al. 87; McCarthy and Mallon 2016a, 197). However, it is essential to sensitise oneself to the potential risks of promoting eco-populism or even eco-fascism through spiritual storytelling. A critical distance is essential for a balanced perspective, that is, grounding the discussion in practical, evidence-based approaches to conservation, while also addressing the complexities of spiritual narratives in environmental discourse.

Storytelling shapes reality through cultural practices, with snow leopards seen not just as conservation subjects but as sacred beings integral to indigenous spiritual, cultural, and ecological identities. This guardianship, rooted in cultural

narratives and social, cultural, and religious influences, ensures the intergenerational transfer of values and conservation knowledge. Religious frameworks based on sin/reward binaries remain influential, deeply internalised by institutions. This discourse, however, is not indigeneity speaking for itself. Berry (1987, 1) criticises a return to religious fundamentalism as a "sterile gesture," lacking security. In *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway advocates for practices that foster a responsive, collective "we," prioritising openness over rigid knowledge systems. This calls for a modern indigeneity that evolves with others, emphasising connection and adaptability over fixed certainties – of which religious fundamentalism is a prominent example. As Elizabeth Ammons notes, "ambiguity and multiplicity have become ends in themselves in much liberal arts scholarship and teaching" (7), which resist universal truths, particularly those rooted in religious frameworks. While religious fundamentalism faces scrutiny for its rigid belief systems, Kate Vannelli et al. argue that communities must recalibrate their views to foster a deeper appreciation of wildlife (180). Snow leopards are not only subjects of conservation but also integral to the cultural traditions that sustain them, creating a holistic conservation approach that blends ancestral knowledge with modern science. Juan Li and Zhi Lu show how religious leaders, like the monks, need to be equipped with the knowledge of conservation (i.e., systematic wildlife observation, monitoring, and recording) and be given the legal right to evict poachers and miners from their religious/spiritual sites, as well as the mandate to emphasise the value of snow leopards and other wildlife in their congregations (92–93). Their study speaks to the necessary collaboration between monasteries, local governments, and non-governmental conservation organisations for an efficient model, which not only upholds religion as a praxis of helping in the survival of these wild cats but also the means through which such spiritual teachings can be dramatically enforced.

Such a synergistic trajectory opens a new vision for the world – as Haraway states, "Biology is relentlessly historical" (2004, 2), and this history, in which religion and indigeneity shape cultural consciousness, intersects with biology to offer a perspective that amplifies "what has been" to engage with "what is" and "what will be" in the ecozoic blueprint. Storytelling, then, becomes essential for biocultural guardianship, allowing communities to reconnect with traditional values while adapting to contemporary conservation challenges. For Haraway, there is a marker of an attitude heralding what she calls Chthulucene: "a simple word […] of two Greek roots (*khthon* and *kainos*) that together name a kind of timeplace for learning to stay in trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth" (2016, 4). Such an epoch envisions human and nonhuman lives being intertwined. Another layer of consciousness emerges, aimed at cultivating a more active and creative form of sensitisation, which Darla Hillard et al. see as the immanent purpose of Environmental Education (EE) to make us "move beyond passive curricula" where "time and collective power" are very much needed (245). This adaptive creativity is emblematic of homo sapiens, who, as Hinton suggests, "speciated" due to

our capacity to adapt to rapidly changing conditions (106). Within this paradigm, conservation professionals, as Wouter De Groot and Natascha Zwaal argue, must develop "a methodological repertoire" that is both structurally balanced and substantively open (45). This repertoire represents more than a simple understanding of the human-nonhuman bond; it embodies the ability to "inscend," merging authentic creative experiences that the mind recognises as forms of "caring" and "loving" for nonhuman life. To Hinton, this journey mirrors a return to the insights of Mencius, who once proclaimed, "the ten thousand things are all there in me. And there is no joy greater than looking within and finding myself faithful to them" (121). The essential goal is to convey this love and care through visceral expressions of joy that arise within individuals who commune deeply with the non-human.

However, non-human/animal stories, if used excessively to highlight suffering, can present ethical dilemmas. Aaltola warns that the aestheticisation of suffering in advocacy campaigns risks trivialising the issue, which may reduce complex realities to mere visual intrigue (19). To avoid this, Haraway's fact-based storytelling is needed to connect images of suffering to concrete calls for action. In conservation education, cultural integrity in the act of telling is nurtured and forms long-term community commitment. While vital for snow leopard conservation, EE often fails to effectively address environmental degradation or change behavior (Hillard et al. 245). Moreover, a comprehensive study of human-snow leopard conflict (HSLC) from 1970 to 2020 identifies key socio-economic factors, livestock management, ecology, and policy, highlighting common mitigation strategies such as predator-proof corrals, shepherd training, insurance schemes, and compensation (Moheb et al. 11–12). While business incentivisation, as noted by Hotham et al. (277), aims to catalyse corporate social responsibility and support biodiversity conservation, Li et al. argue that these efforts are insufficient for effectively conserving snow leopards (87).

Expanding sustainability efforts, without resorting to the ineffective mechanisms mentioned above, requires organisations to employ unorthodox methods to protect snow leopards from the growing threats posed by human activities. Mining operations (Hotham et al. 277; "What Are The Dangers…" para. 15), particularly in regions like Mongolia and Kyrgyzstan, have been linked to the destruction of snow leopard habitats, as heavy machinery and excavation processes not only damage the landscape but also disturb the local wildlife. Additionally, oil extraction projects in the Himalayan region pose further risks by introducing pollutants that threaten both the snow leopard's prey species and the broader ecosystem (McCarthy and Mallon 2016b, 113). Infrastructure projects such as roads, dams, and human settlements are further fragmenting the snow leopard's already limited habitat (Pan et al., para. 1; "Habitat…" para. 1), making it more difficult for them to move freely across vast territories. Furthermore, poaching remains a persistent and severe threat. Snow leopards are targeted for their fur, bones, and other body parts, which are highly valued on the black market for use in traditional medicine, luxury fashion

(Li and Lu 207), and ornamental objects. The illegal wildlife trade, combined with the loss of prey species like the Argali sheep and ibex due to habitat loss and hunting, has resulted in a significant decline in snow leopard populations. These issues demand a response, prompting conservation organisations to prioritise the involvement of local communities. Educating these communities about the importance of preserving snow leopards and fostering a sense of stewardship toward these emblematic animals is essential for their protection and survival.

4. Snow Leopard Conservancy

Informed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) 1972 classification of the snow leopard as *vulnerable* – based on a projected decline of at least 10% in its estimated global population of between 2,500 and 10,000 mature individuals over the subsequent three generations (McCarthy et al. 1) – the Snow Leopard Conservancy (SLC) is dedicated to the species' protection. The organisation goes beyond traditional conservation efforts by forming a network of Indigenous Cultural Practitioners (referred to as ICPs from here on) – shamans, elders, guardians of sacred sites, teachers, and shepherds. Launched in 2013, the Land of Snow Leopard (hereafter referred to as LOSL) Network brings together Western science and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) to revive the snow leopard's legacy through long-term conservation practices. This approach aligns with SLC's focus on saving snow leopards by fostering strong relationships with mountain communities that share their land. The coalition has gained traction and enthused many to become "Guardians of the Sacred Species" (2022 Impact Report 1) in five regions of Central Asia – Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakstan, Mongolia and China (specifically, areas like the Tibetan Plateau). Healthy coexistence with the "Lords of the Mountains" (2023 Impact Report 7) is focalised through education on their sacrality and role in the ecosystem. This is exemplified by Kyrgyz Sacred Site Guardian and LOSL ICP, Zhaparkul Raimbekov, who continued his Elders and Youth program to ingrain the ontology of snow leopards as both spiritual and ecological entities (2023 Impact Report 7). This episteme-building inspires young people to embrace stewardship and a harmonious relationship with nature.

In 2021, the Conservancy sponsored the LOSL Network, which won the Disney Conservation Hero Award (2021 Impact Report 4). LOSL's ICPs, spiritual leaders, and TEK keepers unite communities to support snow leopard conservation while preserving traditional cultures. LOSL educates a wide range of individuals – children, adults, community members, herders, and officials – through a multimodal platform (e.g. curriculum materials, magazines, social media, artistic media, and performativities). In particular, the Nomadic Nature Trunks Conservation Education Program expanded into Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Mongolia (2023 Impact Report 7), where LOSL coordinators worked with respected ICPs to create culturally

specific lessons rooted in traditional knowledge. This dialogic approach fosters the Conservancy's mission of fostering constructive collaboration among the public, the scientific community, and government to share ideas, solutions, and challenges in reviving snow leopard conservation efforts, which has been made easier by dramatic changes in technology-driven communications that allow for the rapid transmission of ideas to large audiences, as Bayrakçısmith et al. (535) argue, leading to more effective, targeted messaging.

Reviving indigenous practices and attitudes toward sacred species is seen as essential for the planet's preservation, as attested by Qurbon Alamshoev, a journalist from Tajikistan, who recounted ten instances in which snow leopards captured by local inhabitants were released back into the wild. Drawing upon Alamshoev's account, Knosala (2022b, para. 13) demonstrates that, influenced by stories about the ecological and spiritual roles of these animals, shepherds who had initially wanted to kill them in retaliation for livestock losses chose to release them instead. Additionally, Buddhism's teaching that killing wildlife is abominable, as Li et al. (87) further contend, has also prevented local herders in the Tibetan Plateau from taking the lives of these animals. Such a storytelling mechanisation is evidently benefiting the Conservancy to foster coexistence with non-human populations.

SLC also balances local needs with global survival strategies, as the organisation not only fosters cultural preservation but also creates sustainable economic opportunities. Tshiring Lhamu Lama, a local conservationist featured in *Snow Leopard Sisters*, now leads exclusive ecotourism expeditions to Nepal's Dolpo region – the original snow leopard research site of SLC founder and president Dr. Rodney Jackson – offering travelers the chance to explore the Himalayas, spot snow leopards, and contribute to crucial local conservation efforts ("New Ecotourism…" para. 1). In Ladakh, the award-winning Himalayan Homestay Program, a community-driven initiative, has solidified snow leopards' status as revered protectors of the fragile ecosystem, with local conservation efforts ensuring winter expeditions regularly encounter the "Queen of the Mountains" (2023 Impact Report 1). Over time, more positive perceptions of snow leopards (through ecotourism prevalent in Indian communities) reflect a shift away from human exceptionalism toward a more inclusive worldview (Vannelli et al.180; Maheshwari & Sambandam 395) – a change that gravitates toward narrating from the "planetary health" perspective that inspires actionable conservation efforts aligned with local values – all pointing to the "paradigm of hope" (Ammons 169–173). These strategies, however, are not without their fiscal dimension. In SLC's education-driven LOSL, over 40 funding partners help silver-line the mission. For example, based on the 2022 Impact Report (4), the Darwin Initiative Project (funded by the UK government), led by SLC and Nepali partner organisation Mountain Spirit, trained nearly 250 government staff in conservation, improved livestock depredation compensation

programs, and afforded an ecotouristic experientiality, which has grounded SLC's design of resilient, snow leopard-friendly regions.

Understanding co-existence with the unique non-roaring snow leopards (unlike tigers, lions and common leopards) within the aforesaid communities is crucial. De Groot and Zwaal argue that stories, especially those posing dilemmas, empower communities to respond freely (45). In the Pamir-Hindu Kush, local wisdom, conveyed through stories and art, strengthens the spiritual connection to nature while addressing environmental challenges (McCarthy and Mallon 2016a, 197). Viewing biodiversity through the lens of integrity-oriented "staying with the trouble" principle, as Haraway advocates, is crucial for multispecies survival. And no one can detach themselves from storytelling, in the process becoming the most authentic 'knower' of what constitutes the facts of the story. As C.S. Lewis suggests: "We have, so to speak, inside information, we are in the know" (25). One hears the reverberation of self-knowledge that drives action and underscores the responsibility to non-human life within a "planetary consideration." Fostering a cosmology-ecology approach essential for inter-species sustainability requires opening oneself to the reality depicted in T.S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men*, a poem which portrays the fragmentation of the human soul. Spiritual desolation is a dire scenario that compels readers to reflect on emptiness and its consequences.

The adaptability of human thought to survival resonates with building sensitivity towards ecological awareness. As the ancient saying goes, "the careful foot can walk anywhere," a principle Haraway would align with Rosenzweig's (6) reconciliation ecology, which fosters a balance between human needs and conservation. This approach is vital in reconciling habitat conservation with new civilisational developments. Rosenzweig advocates for establishing new structures that markedly complement Berry's call for urgent engagement in preserving habitats. On a more profound note, Michele Crossley's idea of the processual "narrative construction of self" (21) can be used to facilitate the reconciliatory approach, provided one discerns that the rehabilitation of the beleaguered planet is contingent upon "the story" of what human necessity can be made compatible with planetary conservation. Furthermore, as Crossley continues to uphold this paradigm of self-construction, he concludes on a positive note: "Recognition and acknowledgment of the role played by particular narratives in our understanding of ourselves should, hopefully, enable us to step back and become more critical and reflective about the kind of person we are, and the kind of person we would like to be" (21). Snow leopard conservation requires a radical shift in consciousness. As Berry and Haraway argue, this movement entails a redefined perception of humanity's role in the world, which is as primal as the understanding of why the survival of snow leopards – among the least studied big cats (Watts et al., para. 4) – is vital for the sustainability of alpine ecology, as their decline leads to land degradation and desertification.

5. Conclusion

India's Project Snow Leopard develops the idea of protecting not just the predator, but also its prey and the plant layer, hence adopting an interconnected conservation approach that is committed to restoring whole ecosystems (Fiechter, para. 25). This initiative calls for what Suneetha Saggurthi et al. (712) term an ecozoic leadership model – a perspective grounded in cosmic interdependence, equity, and love – which may serve as a blueprint for organisations to prioritise environmental harmony and global well-being over material goals, the pursuit of which birthed the Anthropocene – a phenomenon that Berry addressed through his ecozoic framework. Similarly, Patricia MacCormack argues that challenging human exceptionalism requires shifting from seeing Earth as a resource to understanding that humans exist for the Earth (101). This transformation demands channeling collective grief and emotional exhaustion into innovative, Earth-centered actions, which might allow us to move away from anthropocentrism.

As the case of Snow Leopard Conservancy demonstrates, it is important to emphasise the significance of maintaining a proper balance between the individual elements that make up earth-centered actions. Combining science and spirituality, storytelling with efforts to protect endangered species, although extremely promising, also carries certain risks. First of all, such an amalgam of spirituality and nature conservation, if it is not supported by specific values, risks falling an easy victim to all forms of radical practices, such as ecofascism. Therefore, it is worth considering the suggestion of Tu Weiming, who postulates a reconfiguration of the Enlightenment mentality, in which the ecological future of the planet should draw, on the one hand, from the contribution that is associated with the modern, democratic understanding of freedom and equality, and on the other integrate this heritage with the spiritual perspectives and ethical insights of the world religions (2006, 19–29). The practices undertaken by the Conservancy are a good example of how this might be achieved.

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