Conservation Biology

Editorial

Fads, Funding, and Forgetting in Three Decades of Conservation

A fad is defined as "an intense and widely shared enthusiasm for something, especially one that is short-lived" (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2013) and likely to fade away once the perception of novelty has gone. As practitioners of a science-based discipline, we who work on conservation issues probably consider fads amusing distractions in the more superficial matrix of everyday life, that apply to gadgets, clothing, music, haircuts, and video games but not to the serious business of conservation.

Yet in our collective 8 decades of work in the field, we have observed that, unfortunately, fads (meaning approaches that are embraced enthusiastically and then abandoned) are as much a part of conservation as they are of any other human endeavor be it business, the arts, development, economics, or psychology. But perhaps because of the seriousness of the purpose and the magnitude of the stakes we tend to believe we are immune to such frippery. Surely, the immense task of saving Earth's biological diversity is not prone to fads and fashion.

We feel compelled to write this editorial for 2 reasons: first, and most importantly, to ensure that a new generation entering our field is cognizant of this phenomenon and learns to do better than we have done and second to attempt to reframe the conversation away from the latest fashionable approach and toward learning from, and building on, experiences rather than regularly rejecting, reinventing, and repackaging approaches.

Let us start with the evidence. Since the late 1970s we have seen at least 10 fads related to biological diversity conservation. Some of these are in current favor, and calling them fads is likely to provoke protest that they are not, and perhaps they will not all be replaced next year. But the way they are promoted, and the denial itself, suggest otherwise. These fads include, in no particular order, marketing of natural products from rain forests; biological diversity hotspots; integrated conservation and development projects (ICDPs); ecotourism; ecocertification; community-based conservation; payment for ecosystem or environmental services (PES); reduced emissions from deforestation and degradation (REDD); conservation concessions; and landscape approaches that integrate agriculture, sustainable uses, and conservation.

But fads do not just happen of themselves. They are products of our own thinking and culture and the processes that drive innovation, adoption, and naming of approaches. They seem to originate from different sources, including the key project, the driven donor, the charismatic advocate, the critical yet influential paper or the path-setting meeting.

Approaches, once generated, still have to be adopted and then promulgated. It turns out there is a sizeable literature on how this happens, developed by the management field—where they themselves recognize a plethora of fads. In a review article, Sturdy (2004) discusses 6 different ways of understanding how approaches or ideas are spread: the rational, the psychodynamic, the dramaturgical, the political, the cultural, and the institutional. In the rational view, new ideas are adopted because they work or promise to work. In the psychodynamic, a manager adopts new ideas because of anxieties and a need for a sense of order or control. The dramaturgical view focuses on persuasive powers of consultants, academics, or others, whereas the political view sees ideas being adopted to secure power. The cultural perspective focuses on the spread of practices through institutional cultures, and the institutional view posits that ideas are adopted for symbolic reasons such as seeking peer legitimacy, perhaps regardless of efficiency or outcomes.

Conservation fads are often driven by an institutions' need to secure donations, create a new brand, or a new hook. And many donors drive the dissemination of fads by insisting that whatever approach might be good in one situation needs to be replicable in a thousand more or it is not worth supporting. We think that most of you can identify how our 10 fads have been taken up and promoted for one or several of these reasons. You may have your own list of fads and know of other mechanisms you have seen at work. However, our focus is not on the mechanism but on the consequences of fads and our continued search for the next best trendy conservation approach.

Fads seem never to die of their own weight but rather are replaced by or incorporated in a new approach. There seem to be 3 integral parts to this process: first, an absolute abnegation of the previous approach or fad; second, an insistence that the next approach is totally new, usually signaled by a snappy new name; and third,

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not uncommonly, incorporation into the "new" approach of strong elements of the approach it is replacing. In conservation, where positive outcomes are rarely articulated, difficult to achieve, and often impossible to measure to any degree of certainty, fads may be particularly prevalent. The skipping from fad to fad may not reflect the introduction of something truly novel, as such, but rather a repackaging of an old approach, which may or may not have had some beneficial effect, into something perceived as new.

So how do you recognize a fad when you meet one? One way is to see if it is dominating the literature and scientific meetings. Are graduate students drawn in droves to working on it and organizing reading groups to pursue the topic? Are there meetings organized to discuss the new approach and are donors developing new programs of funding accordingly? Is the argument for adoption of the new approach based on rejecting a previous approach accompanied by protestations about how what was learned from the old approach shows why the new approach is the answer? Most importantly, is the new approach talked about as *the* answer that will finally solve the problem whereby other approaches have failed? And ultimately, will the approach be rejected in favor of a shiny new one, thus turning a fix into a fad.

Should we then discourage innovative ideas and new approaches in conservation in fear that these may signal yet another fad? This is not what we are suggesting. Each innovation or approach we listed above has something—often much—to offer, as, of course, each previous one had. But not one fad and for that matter not one "sacred" approach in conservation (not strictly protected areas, not indigenous reserves, not community forests, not conservation easements, and not real sacred forests) offers the answer to all the problems and opportunities that arise in a rapidly changing and increasingly globalized world. The initiators of our fads were neither duped innocents nor enlightened saviors. Each of the approaches—because they started as ideas—probably was the best (or at least an effective) conservation tool in some place, for some group, at some time, but not everywhere, not for everyone, and not for all time. Rejecting approaches outright is the wrong thing to do. What we ought to do is learn where they are working and why.

Recognizing fads and thinking of them as learning opportunities is part of accepting that the practice of conservation has a culture, just like all other practices. Conservationists have begun to recognize this and reflect on the nature and effect of our culture on our practice and on ourselves (e.g., Knight 2006; Adams 2010; Swainsgood & Sheppard 2010; Patten & Smith-Patten 2011). This is a very important transition for us to make and will allow us to move from being reflexive practitioners—accepting whatever fad comes along—to reflective practitioners (Schön 1983) who sift through multiple good ideas, test those that are appropriate, and share our results. Adopting this behavior individually will then allow us to work collectively to develop learning organizations (Senge 2006) and study where new ideas come from (Johnson 2011), why they are adopted, why they are dropped, and what residual learning remains. We have not been good at this to date—witness the fads—but this change is important to help achieve our mission.

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