

THE LEGACY AND FUTURE VISIONS OF CONSERVATION BIOLOGY ON THE COLORADO PLATEAU

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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes a half-day panel discussion and larger audience discussion on a topic that doesn't receive enough attention at the scientific conferences we all attend: collectively reflecting on how our individual research and efforts have served the Colorado Plateau for the past several decades. And, what do we need to do more of in the future to assure the preservation of biological diversity in this magnificent region? During the 2007 USGS conference at Northern Arizona University, the Colorado Plateau Chapter of the Society for Conservation Biology held a two-part session, discussing first with our distinguished panelists what strategies have either forwarded, or hindered, the understanding and protection of biodiversity on the Plateau. In the second session, we hypothetically traveled forward in time to develop visions of a future for conservation biology on the Plateau within the context of current (and future) challenges such as a changing climate and shifting human demands for natural resources. Our panelists, all leaders in the field of conservation biology, gave us many valuable "take-home lessons," ranging from the benefits of collaboration with non-scientists, to how to deal with the influence of political processes in the scientific realm, to the power of hope to sustain conservationists through tough times. Overall, a common thread among the presenters was one of using beneficial lessons

learned to proactively and effectively work towards a positive future for our Colorado Plateau landscapes and wildlife.

Thomas L. Fleischner

In conservation biology, "conservation" comes first. Conservation biology represents constantly shifting sets of interactions between three realms: values, policy, and science.

We tend to focus too much on the science piece, but the real action and the real challenges—and where success will ultimately lie—are in the values and policy pieces of our discipline. Consequently, as we look to the future of conservation biology on the Colorado Plateau, it is important for conservation biologists to take their citizenship seriously—to understand the policies and processes, and to know the people involved, in addition to knowing places and species of concern.

The work of conservation biology should be rooted in love. Conservation then remains a personal, practical reality, not a set of academic abstractions. That's why a priority for me is to try to instill a sense of love of critters, ecology, and place in my students on the many field courses I teach. I feel it myself, after all these years, and so hopefully my own excitement is conveyed to my students, and they "catch it." This leads to strong passion for the places they end up studying and caring for, and supports the growth of these students into well-rounded conservationists, scientists, and teachers. Love is ultimately a more effective motivator than fear.

As pointed out in the first panel discussion, many of us in the Society have bemoaned what appears to be the demise of natural history in conservation biology. I too have written on this topic and I personally define natural history as "a practice of intentional, focused attentiveness and receptivity to the more-than-human world, guided by honesty and accuracy" (Fleischner, 2001 and 2005). I believe a firm grounding in natural history is essential to the practice of conservation biology, for both practical and profound reasons. Practically, natural history undergirds all good conservation work: how

can we know what to save if we don't know where it is, how many exist, etc.? But on a more profound personal level, natural history continually recharges the conservation biologist's passion. Natural history is our "secret weapon"—a constant reinfusion of affirmation that helps us deflect despair.

In this age of climate change a sense of hope and empowerment is ever more critical to our long-term persistence in this work. As writer Scott Russell Sanders has pointed out, the roots of the word "hope" mean, essentially, "to leap up in expectation." So what is reasonable for us to expect? That loving the world is always a worthy endeavor. That this world will go on, in some inventive fashion. That our imaginations, coupled with our hard work, will make a difference. To quote Norman Cousins: "We don't know enough to be pessimistic." And as we put forth our best efforts, we must support our colleagues more than ever. A sense of network and support among colleagues buoys up our collective sense of hope. Lastly, we need to reach out to new and diverse, maybe even unlikely, partners. We should always seek out more voices—both human and more-than-human. We need to be vigilant about trying to represent the underrepresented.