Liana Chua

Uncommoning conservation?

In our research on orangutan conservation, my colleagues and I have often noted a fundamental tension—an uncommonality, if you will—that arises at the interface between conservation interventions and the rural communities with whom they work in Borneo and Sumatra. This is a tension between the imaginary of an encompassing, territorial, planetary commons, on the one hand, and more localized moral frameworks and mechanisms for living in common, on the other.

Conservation interventions are generally geared towards creating safe environments to ensure the survival of the critically endangered orangutan—a project that doesn't only involve protecting land, but also changing hearts, minds and livelihoods to promote better human/orangutan coexistence. For many conservation professionals and scientists, saving endangered species and ecosystems is an inherently worthwhile thing that should be beyond politics. This assertion stems partly from an imaginary of global commonality that underpins international environmentalist discourses: We are *all* in the same planetary mess together, and humans don't have the time or luxury to mess around with internal disputes and differences—in other words, to bring politics into it. Since there is no Planet B (as Mike Berners-Lee puts it), we (that is, humanity) all have a responsibility to save our global commons from collapse.

This commoning imaginary is widely invoked across orangutan conservation. Take, for example, this post by a well-known NGO. Noting that the orangutan is in danger of going the way of the woolly mammoth, it points out that

'Orangutans are known as "gardeners of the forest," playing a crucial role in seed dispersal, which helps maintain the biodiversity of their habitat. If they disappear, the rainforests they call home could collapse, leading to devastating consequences for global climate stability'.

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Noting that rainforests are the 'lungs of the planet', it continues:

'If these forests disappear, not only will orangutans be lost, but we will see a dramatic increase in carbon emissions, further fueling climate change. The destruction of these vital ecosystems affects weather patterns, agricultural productivity, and air quality worldwide. Saving orangutans isn't just about wildlife conservation – it's about ensuring a stable future for all life on Earth.'

The page then goes on to list all the things that can be done to save orangutans.



Fig. 1 *A sign in a village that works with NGOs and ecotourists converging on a nearby orangutan rehabilitation centre in Central Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo). Photo by Liana Chua.*

This narrative frames specific creatures, like orangutans, and specific places, like Borneo's and Sumatra's rainforests, into global concerns that humanity has an urgent responsibility to save. This translates into a moral imperative to act that (in theory, at least) overrides the small-scale, more specific concerns and vested interests that might exist in these forests…such as the customary rights and livelihoods of the indigenous and other rural communities who live there. Such communities are not generally included in the 'we' invoked by orangutan conservation websites, but routinely framed as targets of conservation who need educating, punishing, or incentivising—all for the greater good. By the same token, their lands are often treated and increasingly managed as part of this larger imaginary of an environmental commons in which everyone in the world has a stake. Unsurprisingly, for many of our Bornean interlocutors, conservation is not that different to the state or extractive corporations: these are all powerful outsiders with interests in their customary lands, whose presence comes with both benefits and risks.

But their concerns are not only about territory. They're also about the impact of conservation interventions on a different kind of commons: one that's built around ways of being and acting according to a set of shared moral principles centred on reciprocity, responsivity and mutual accountability. Such frameworks can be found in varying forms across Borneo. Broadly speaking, they're geared towards maintaining a social, moral, and cosmological equilibrium in which all individuals are autonomous and equal, and debt or power isn't able to build up to excessive degrees, or at the expense of others.

I've often seen this principle playing out in the Bidayuh villages where I've worked since 2003. At busy times of the rice year, you often see labour exchange parties, mostly related by kinship, taking turn to work on each other's hillside farms. Each group then receives a portion of the eventual harvest as acknowledgement of their input into the process. Once that's done, everyone's equal again and no one's indebted to others, and the community as a whole is ready and well-prepared for the

year ahead. But these principles don't apply only to humans. For example, protective rituals are basically activations of a social contract between humans and spirits: humans offer songs, dances and food to various spirits, in exchange for which spirits are obliged to keep the village safe and healthy, or at least not cause trouble for it. In a slightly different vein, some communities have communal forests that no one owns, but that all villagers are allowed to use. These are inhabited by place spirits (*pu'tărun*) who let people cultivate and extract from that land. However, if someone exploits the land too much for too many years, the *pu'tărun* can punish them for taking more than they're due.



Fig. 2 A *rice-planting party dibbling and sowing on a steep slope in Sarawak (Malaysian Borneo). Photo by Liana Chua*

These ideals of maintaining balance and keeping everyone (and everything) accountable also extend to nonhuman animals. For example, one of my colleagues had a long conversation with a villager in West Kalimantan who'd shot and killed a female orangutan that was raiding his durian tree and taken the baby as a pet. When asked if he felt sorry for the baby, he said no, and explained that orangutans were especially mischievous animals who—when they found fruit trees, didn't only eat the ripe fruits but also threw the unripe fruits to the ground, where they'd rot. So when he saw orangutans near his durian trees, he wouldn't think twice about shooting them—whereas he would if they were other animals like gibbons, which had much more decent eating habits. So for him, it wasn't just about protecting his fruit—many of our interlocutors acknowledge that animals, like humans, get hungry and want to eat fruit occasionally. It was about holding a particular animal accountable for its particularly anti-social, wasteful attack on his fruit tree.

What holds these examples together is an expectation that all beings should be responsive and responsible to each other as part of a more-than-human commons made up of (nominally) equal and reciprocal relations, and a shared commitment to living alongside each other. But it's important to note that living and acting in common doesn't require actual engagement and sameness. In fact, sometimes that balance can be sustained through a commitment to *non*-engagement or an acknowledgement of *un*commonality. When offerings are made to spirits to tell them to stay away, humans are basically saying: we respect you, and we acknowledge your presence, but it's best for all of us if we don't mix, *because we are not the same*. And as my colleague Viola Schreer has found, when Ngaju Dayaks and wild orangutans encounter each other in the deep jungle, the ideal course of action is to move on—theirs is a relationship of mutual absence in each other's lives, which is best for everyone.

So what happens when orangutan conservation's commoning imaginaries and mechanisms encounter local modes of living in (more-than-human) common? In

legal and territorial terms, conservation acts as an incorporative force, drawing local land rights, livelihoods and more-than-human relations into a specific bureaucratic, technocratic regime—a conservation commons. This commons comes with new laws, increased surveillance, behaviour change and education programmes, livelihood restrictions and transformations, restrictions on resource use, burning and logging, and the creation of new protected areas. Much of this is framed and funded through invocations of that planetary commons, which have so much cachet in the Global North. At the same time, conservation disrupts existing more-than-human commons by plucking one animal out of the mix, giving it a set-apart status, visibility and protection that overrides earlier modes of relations. In this way, the orangutan—which isn't seen by most communities in Borneo as unusual or special—becomes a privileged subject that isn't accountable to anyone/anything else, thus becoming exempt from that social contract of mutual responsivity and responsibility.

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As the above examples suggest, the impacts and implications of commons imaginaries in specific places far exceed the realms of territory, rights, and resource management. For our Bornean interlocutors, they're also about moral imbalances, relational disruptions, and far-reaching questions of (in)justice and accountability. These tensions have been widely dissected in critical social scientific analyses of conservation. But how might we think through them in order to grapple with the concerns of this conference? Here, I offer a few half-formed thoughts that I hope will spark conversation.

1. *Provincialising the commons?* Many academics and policymakers have latched on to a highly positive, valorised figure of the commons as a hopeful alternative to extractive, capitalist, colonial logics. But what I hope I've shown is that we can't take for granted the inherent goodness or universality of 'the commons'. Instead, when we think about commons and commoning, it's vital to keep those directional, relational questions

at the fore: who/what is this commons for? What does commoning actually do, and not do? And who/what are included and excluded from these processes? Such questions push us to provincialise our understandings of 'the commons'—to see it as a historically and politically contingent construct that's built on specific assumptions and ideals, and invoked by specific players for different ends. Which in turn raises the question of what *other* models of territorial, relational, and more-than-human commons exist out there, and how we might put these in productive engagement with dominant international notions of the 'global' and 'planetary' commons.

2. *Reconceptualising the commons?* To take a cue from my interlocutors and recent scholarship, I wonder how we might think of the 'commons' not in classic territorial, rights-based, or resource terms—as a thing—but as set of moral and relational commitments shared by different beings in more-than-human worlds. By this I don't just mean blind subjection to some meta-level moral or cosmological order—a Durkheimian 'social'—but a situation whereby autonomous subjects are mutually responsive and accountable to each other. This is not a bounded unit, but a set of shared understandings and responsibilities that cannot be abstracted from grounded specificities and dynamics.
3. *A non-incorporative commons?* My third, related question, then, is to ask how we can act and live well, in common, *without* forcing commonality on everyone. And here, I'm thinking about how my interlocutors want to live alongside spirits, but without being the same as them or joining them, or how Ngaju Dayaks and orangutans are quite happy to pass each other in the jungle without needing to interact. What seems to be key is the ever-present capacity to detach, to acknowledge uncommonality, *as a condition* of being in common. And so the question that arises is: what could a non-encompassing commons that holds space for disengagement and uncommonality look like? What might an ethical commitment, or at least willingness, to disengage, and be uncommon, bring to this commons? And perhaps most challengingly, how might we build a non-incorporative commons in an increasingly polarised world where uncommonality has become weaponised?

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