Introduction

The Truth about Nature?

#ClimateTruth
#FactsOfWildlife

The two popular hashtags above are meant to communicate the "correct" status of the environment and to push for its conservation. Recently, it seems that promoting environmental facts and truths has become increasingly necessary. On its website about wildlife trafficking, for example, Conservation International argues that this trafficking "is a global problem. One of the best ways to counteract the illicit trade and profit is through education. Share these facts about wildlife trafficking and help make a difference" (figure 1). Below this statement, the site offers several videos, accompanied by short texts that convey the facts about different aspects of wildlife crime. They include the plight of rhinos, pangolins, and tigers, but also the threat that wildlife trafficking poses to international security. If you click on the Facebook or Twitter buttons below them, you can immediately share these facts, along with the hashtag #FactsOfWildlife.

Communicating environmental predicaments is not easy. "Doom and gloom," a favorite mode of conveying environmental crises, can lead to apathy rather than action. On the other side, being optimistic about where things are heading and focusing on positive success stories seems naive in the face of current environmental realities.[1] And while both styles remain popular it might be better, many seem to think, to concentrate on facts and truths. After all, conservation is supposed to be based on facts and truths about nature, which are revealed through science. And as science continues to show that many environmental indicators
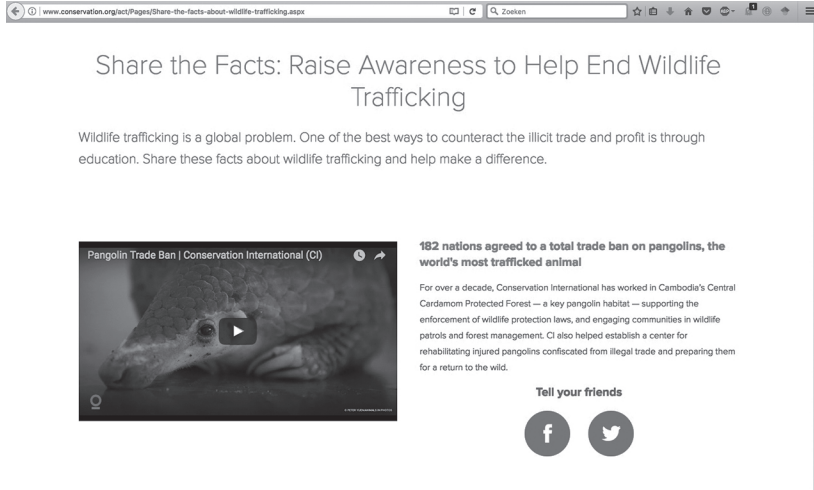
FIGURE 1. "Share the facts" about wildlife trafficking, Conservation International. Source: http://www.conservation.org/act/Pages/Share-the-facts-about-wildlife-trafficking .aspx, accessed 17 May 2017.

are generally getting worse, it makes sharing these facts and truths even more important.[2] As the quote above demonstrates, the idea is that once people understand "the facts," they are better educated and will do things that "make a difference" for the environment.

There is another reason why sharing facts and truths about nature has become more important of late. For the last several years, especially after Donald Trump's election as US president and the UK Brexit referendum in 2016, we have been living in what some have called the post-truth era.[3] Truth, it seems, has been dealt its death blow. We now live in a world where commitment to any shared understanding of "reality" or "facts" seems unrealistic. My reality *competes* with your reality, and "alternative facts" *compete* with "actual" facts. As long as one's reality or facts get traction or generate commercial success, they may seem legitimate in global information markets.

This plainly poses fundamental challenges to environmentalism in the twenty-first century. A good illustration is "an important message you can't miss" from Conservation International in early 2018. The video message summarizes the central problem for environmental action as follows: "Today's greatest threat is not climate change, not pollution, not famine, not flood or fire. It's that we've got people in charge of important sh*t who don't believe in science." The video shows what Conservation

International is doing about this and ends by stating: "If we don't stop the destruction of nature, nothing else will matter. Simple as that."[4]

Evidently, but without saying it, Conservation International here responds to the post-truth conundrum in relation to a "simple" truth about nature. This truth is revealed by science, but the problem is that there are people in charge "who don't believe in science." Hence, CI wants to "change the conversation" because, like Cynthia Barnett in the *LA Times*, they believe that "regardless of alternative facts, fake news or scientific censorship, nature tells the truth."[5] Yet the problem remains: If environmental action is supposed to be based on facts and truths about nature, how to communicate and share these in a post-truth context?[6]

This vexing problem troubles many environmental actors. Some have gone on the offensive. They argue that the dramatic consequences of the sixth mass extinction event we have recently entered into need to be communicated in a "bolder" fashion.[7] Some environmentalists indeed *demand* the truth to be heard and acted on.[8] Take, for example, the Extinction Rebellion movement. Their first of three demands is that governments "tell the truth" about our climate emergency.[9] Another illustration is the "nature needs half" community, which wants half the entire planet to become formally protected. They argue that this is the only solution commensurate with the problem of what "humanity" is doing to nature.[10] According to the Nature Needs Half website, "The magnitude of the global ecological crisis we face today—and the availability of better and more accurate ecological information—demands that conservationists provide a clear and accurate global conservation target that will realistically keep our planet viable." The conservationists behind this initiative believe they "have a duty to speak frankly about the clear implications of the science" and that this truth needs to be boldly and widely shared. "Failure to do so," according to them, "would be the ultimate disservice to people and planet alike."[11]

Other environmentalists are perhaps less bold. But they too believe that post-truth needs to be countered by truths and facts, and that these should be shared by and with as many as possible. Consider the *conservation evidence* project. It "has the wildly ambitious but conceptually blindingly obvious aim of collecting together all the evidence for how well every conservation intervention ever dreamed up actually works, for every species and habitat in the world, and making it freely available on their website." An accompanying book entitled *What Works in Conservation 2017* aims to give conservation managers access to scientific evidence in order to counter post-truth tendencies. The project

encourages all of us to "stand up for science, truth and expertise" and concludes: "So if you are interested in what *really* works in conservation, and what is just hot air and wishful thinking, check out '*What Works in Conservation 2017*' or www.conservationevidence.com. Daily evidence viewing will move us cleanly and effortlessly into a post-post-truth world."[12]

Clearly, things are not this simple. And environmental actors know it.[13] This book also shows that we will not "cleanly and effortlessly" move into a post-post-truth world by digesting a daily portion of evidence (or facts, or truth). But it also demonstrates that this does not stop most environmentalists. Spurred on by new online media technologies, they doggedly and passionately continue to discover, study, and share #FactsOfWildlife, truths, and natures.

THE TRUTH ABOUT NATURE?

In its most generic sense, the truth about nature, according to many environmentalists, is straightforward: nature is not doing well but can be saved through appropriate (evidence-based) action. Looking at the scientific literature, the first part of this statement may be easily corroborated; most of today's major environmental issues are familiar and need little reiteration.[14] What does warrant emphasis is the recent tone and urgency with which they are pronounced. When conservation biologists start using terms like *biological annihilation* we may need to pay attention.[15] But whatever the precise wording, the commonly accepted and widely spread truth about nature in the twenty-first century is that we have a major problem on our hands when it comes to our contemporary environmental condition.[16] And let me make clear at the start that I, too, believe we have an environmental predicament that is intensely problematic and arguably even worse than many think. Yet this predicament does not represent "the truth about nature," let alone "the truth." While environmentalists may have ramped up their efforts to counter post-truth with truths about nature, these will always amount to generic statements that say little about the precise details of the environmental crisis in specific places, the different interpretations of this truth, how they relate to other truths, and whether they may be mediated through environmental action.

The conclusion regarding the complex question of truth and nature thus seems straightforward: there is no "*the* truth about nature" and there can never be one. This is one of the main lessons that the social

sciences and environmental humanities have taught us over the last decades—if not longer.[17] Most prominently, since Bruno Latour declared that in discursive contests "the word 'truth' adds only a little supplement to a trial of strength," we have seen many scholars from poststructuralist, actor-network, critical realist, and other theoretical denominations thoroughly deconstruct ideas about truth to reveal the power relations that truth-discourses inevitably contain and often try to hide.[18] In fact, when reading contemporary environmental studies literatures in political ecology, human geography, anthropology, sociology, and the humanities, the term *truth* rarely features as a productive analytical construct. If mentioned at all, it is often in quotation marks and mostly functions as a "red cape" to prompt charges from the bulls of critique and deconstruction.[19] I myself have used it mainly in this way. And I still believe this work is critically important. We should never lose vigilance in dealing with truth claims, especially in relation to contested terms like *nature*.

At the same time, we have come to a point where this dominant type of engagement with truth—or at least its automaticity—needs rethinking. First, because all of this does not diminish the truthfulness of our global environmental predicament. And following Harry Frankfurt, we should not be indifferent to truth.[20] Indifference to truth is dangerous, especially when the environmental conditions of life on earth are concerned. Many environmental issues may be familiar, but their stakes are extremely high and we need to fully acknowledge them. Does this mean we simply accept those truths that have high stakes attached to them? In fact, the opposite: because of the stakes involved, we need to study and vigorously debate the places, interpretations of, and exceptions to consequential truth claims. Deconstructing truth claims—including claims related to "the truth about nature"—can render truth productive.[21] But this can only happen when a quest for truth is seen as legitimate; when truth is conceptualized *simultaneously as an expression of power and as more-than-power*; and when we think about truth not just in terms of power wars to be won but as tensions to be embraced, even nurtured. Part 1 of the book is dedicated to theorizing truth tensions and rendering them productive as the metatheoretical and political bearings that guide the rest of the book.

Second, the rise of post-truth politics and the specific mode of power this represents demands that we rethink the dominant engagement with truth. Post-truth, contrary to popular conceptualizations, is not some new word for age-old traditions of lying or bullshitting. It is also not, following the Oxford dictionary definition, emotions trumping facts in

politics and public debate. Instead, a key intervention of this book is that post-truth is a recent phenomenon and should be understood as an *expression of contemporary forms of power*. This power, following Nick Srnicek and Shoshana Zuboff, is unprecedented and derives from a new logic of capitalist accumulation that they respectively refer to as "platform capitalism" and "surveillance capitalism."[22] Confronting this logic and the power behind it is critically important for any effective environmental politics. Not doing so will risk even the most astute environmental politics getting stuck in a debilitating vicious circle.

A VICIOUS CIRCLE (AND WHY IT MUST BE BROKEN)

The vicious circle I am referring to is a complicated and tenacious one, imbued with political economic power that works across multiple layers. Yet the basic problem, the one that prompted this book, can be summed up in one sentence: *Sharing truths about nature through online new media to counter post-truth has the unintended effect of reinforcing the structural dynamics responsible for environmental crisis*. This is a stark argument and a dire warning. Yet it might not be stark enough. Thinkers like Shoshana Zuboff and Byung-Chul Han go some steps further and warn us that while the unintended effect of industrial capitalism was the destruction of nonhuman nature, surveillance or platform capitalism could well destroy "human nature" and any idea of "free will." Zuboff refers to this, following the biological "sixth extinction," as a possible "seventh extinction," which according to her, "will not be of nature but of what has been held most precious in human nature: the will to will, the sanctity of the individual, the ties of intimacy, the sociality that binds us together in promises, and the trust they breed. The dying off of this human future will be just as unintended as any other."[23] She comes to this ominous conclusion by showing in detail how big technology corporations have reoriented their operations from *knowing and predicting* our behaviors as key products for their behavioral data markets to, increasingly, *shaping* "our behavior at scale" ultimately "to automate us."[24] Whether or how this will come to pass, I will not get into in this book. Instead, I will focus on the relations between platform/surveillance capitalism, nature, and (post-)truth, which are almost completely absent from Zuboff's otherwise stellar account. These relations are critical to understand the power of this emerging political economy and the vicious circle that it presents for environmentalists (and, indeed, all of us). A first, crude overview of the central

arguments that run through the book will help to clarify the danger of this vicious circle and make the case for why it must be broken.

The argument starts again with environmentalists sharing #FactsOf-Wildlife, truths, and natures through the new possibilities provided by online media. This sharing triggers and intensifies myriad dynamics, including those related to older media, while leading environmentalists into a *political economy of platform capitalism* and its algorithmic logics. This political economy, I will show, *thrives on the sharing, cocreation, and individualization* of products and information online, including truths and natures, *while turning all these into commodifiable data*. The contradictory effect of this online sharing and cocreation is that *what is actually true no longer matters to platforms*: it is all profitable as data. To put it bluntly: *why* I would be interested to save nature becomes secondary—or totally irrelevant—to the information *that* I want to save nature, evidenced by my online clicking, browsing, and viewing choices. The truth, according to algorithms, is the latter. In this model, *any truth (or lie) could potentially be as profitable as any other truth (or lie)*. Which is why I argue that platform capitalism is *responsible for the emergence of post-truth* and why I understand post-truth as an expression of power under platform capitalism. In this way, post-truth also plays into the hands of capitalist power more generally, which *intensifies rather than weakens* the overall political economy responsible for the current environmental predicament.

For environmentalists, the timing of this warning could not be worse. They already feel the environmental crisis as a colossal responsibility, and many seem to grasp at any tool that may help tackle it. Chief among these is digital technology. The largest environmental organization in the world, the Nature Conservancy, for example, appointed a chief technology officer in 2018, who writes: "We know that we can get bigger, faster and smarter with our solutions—what if action for our planet could move at the pace of Silicon Valley? Technology has extraordinary potential to play a key role in this sort of acceleration."[25] Many biological scientists, likewise, urge their colleagues to join "a new era of conservation technology," based on SMART forms of governance and data application.[26]

In other words, precisely when we should become worried about the potential effects of new platform technologies, many environmentalists feel it is time to embrace them wholeheartedly as a way of saving nature, spreading #ClimateTruth and to counter post-truth. This does not mean all environmentalists jump on board uncritically. Later

chapters will show that many recognize major problems and contradictions of new media platforms. Yet the same chapters also show that they nonetheless compound it in their drive to share the truth about nature and to raise awareness about the environmental crisis. This, then, is the vicious circle we need to understand and confront. If not actively broken, this vicious circle could make matters worse for a long time to come. It is therefore vital, the book will conclude, to break the vicious circle by challenging the new forms of hegemonic power under platform capitalism by building post-capitalist platforms and by rekindling the art of speaking truth to power.

Part 2 of the book is dedicated to explaining and illustrating this vicious circle and the above arguments in detail. This is important because we can only challenge the new forms of platform power and the political economic system they emanate from if we understand them. This book does not claim to have concluded this understanding. Quite the opposite: it is offered as one step in an ongoing search that needs many more minds, especially because these new forms of platform power represent unprecedented, moving terrain that increasingly influences but does not determine environmental and conservation praxis. Conservation, after all, is not interested in saving online animals and ecosystems. Which begs the question: how do all these unprecedented platform developments influence environmental and conservation praxis, and vice versa?

PRAXIS FOR THE UNPRECEDENTED

From the frontlines of (researching) conservation praxis, whether in environmental organizations or in field situations around the globe, the above dire warning and arguments may seem rather crude and abstract. What to do with this if you are working in an environmental organization and trying to make a positive impact? How to relate to this when you are sitting behind your computer and these same organizations are urging you to click on a link to save a particular species of wildlife that you are passionate about? Or what to do if you are managing or studying a conservation area in Southern Africa, and you see that power dynamics around race, class, gender, positionality, and others seem to outweigh what is shared on online platforms regarding what transpires in actual praxis?

Questions like these are crucial. They *necessarily* complicate and complement the above political economic argumentation. We will see through diverse case studies in part 3 of the book that environmental