

Thesis: Reviving the Dead, Ignoring the Living: Emotions, Ethics, and the Dream of De-Extinction

Editor's note:

Risa Aria Schnebly defended their thesis titled "Reviving the Dead, Ignoring the Living: Emotions, Ethics, and the Dream of De-Extinction," in Spring 2021 in front of committee members Ben Minter, John Lynch, and Christopher Rojas, earning them a Bachelor's degree from Barrett, the Honors College. <https://keep.lib.asu.edu/items/148183>

Abstract:

Scientific reports documenting accelerating global biodiversity decline and urging environmental action have become commonplace in this century. As we move deeper into what many observers call the sixth mass extinction in the planet's history, we are left with a simple but unsettling question. Why has the public largely failed to respond to scientists' calls to action?

Conservation psychologists have suggested one answer to this question, focusing on how environmental issues are communicated to the public. Conservation messaging, we are sometimes told, is far too negative in tone and affect to motivate people to care for the environment and subsequently change their behaviors. Yet, others see such negativity as a necessary appeal to ecological realism.

The goal of this research project was to examine how different messaging techniques, and especially expressions of emotionality surrounding the loss and recovery of biodiversity, can differently influence public attitudes about conservation and the environment. This question was explored using the case of de-extinction, an emerging and controversial conservation technology. De-extinction claims to "resurrect" extinct species, challenging widely held notions of extinction as permanent. Yet seeing extinction as reversible may shift how people feel about biodiversity loss and our moral responsibility to stop it.

I conducted an interdisciplinary literature review spanning the fields of ecology, environmental ethics, and social and conservation psychology to examine how language framing de-extinction as a form of species revival might sway public attitudes. Specifically, I juxtaposed the emotions evoked by the resurrectionist framing to the emotions evoked by understandings of extinction as permanent to understand each framing's capacity to motivate support for conservation efforts.

I found that overly negative conservation discourse could indeed discourage people rather than motivate them to care about biodiversity loss. Although the language of de-extinction is more hopeful and positive, I argued that it is misleadingly so. De-extinction in fact inspires a false optimism about our ability to fight biodiversity loss relying on our technology alone. Of more concern is that it ultimately fails to motivate people to support necessary and wider societal change. Rather than positivity or negativity, I concluded that the most important element of communicating environmental issues was including a sense of efficacy that empowers individuals to feel like their own actions could have a significant impact in the world.