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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Conservation and conviviality in the American West

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The emerging field of convivial conservation (CC) draws on the tradition of political ecology (PE) to present a "radical" alternative to contemporary environmentalisms, speaking to the challenges of conservation in the Anthropocene as well as the global ascent of reactionary populism. Building on previous work arguing for the ongoing value of dialogue between PE and the American West, I here develop a conversation between CC and another radical intervention, the collaborative conservation of the West's so-called "radical center" (RC). Using the nexus of wolf–livestock conflict and public lands grazing, I first trace a genealogical history of western environmental politics before turning to CC as critical corrective to the shortcomings of the RC. Scholarship on the commons and commoning provides an analytical bridge and political toolkit for linking the empirics of place with the aspirational aims of conviviality, and naming and navigating on-the-ground obstacles to collaborative conservation efforts in the region. This dialogue in turn highlights deeply rooted tensions of capitalist political economy and questions of non/belonging rooted in settler colonialism—necessary regional engagements for building from polarized antagonism toward an alternative environmental politics of coexistence and conviviality.

Keywords: Commoning, Environmental politics, Human–wildlife conflict and coexistence, Land ethic, Public lands, Radical center

1. Introduction

The practical and ideological challenges of conservation in the Anthropocene—ranging from mass extinction to climate and land use change—have seen the emergence of diverse "radical" environmental proposals around the world.[1] Büscher and Fletcher (2019, 2020) have roughly yet usefully characterized these in terms of *neo-protectionism* and *new conservation*. Neo-protectionism emphasizes protected area expansion and the separation of humans from nonhuman natures—including recent 30×30 initiatives (Dinerstein et al., 2019; Rowling, 2021) as well as more ambitious propositions to designate up to half the earth as a human-free preserve (Locke, 2015; Wilson, 2016). New conservation, in contrast, promotes a "post-wild," "rambunctious garden" of hybrid socio-natures (Marris, 2011)—yet one that sits too comfortably, according to its critics, with the techno- and market-optimism of neoliberalism and eco-modernization (Soulé, 2013; Castree and Henderson, 2014).

In contrast to both camps, critical scholars of society and the environment, particularly those from the field of political ecology (PE), have long shown such approaches to be inadequate and even counterproductive in a world of historically entrenched power relations and interconnected socio-ecological crises (Robbins, 2004; Neumann, 2005; Perreault et al., 2015). Building from PE's critical and normative engagements, Büscher and Fletcher have proposed *convivial conservation* (CC) as a "liberating, positive vision" for a more sustainable world, a justice-oriented environmental politics for the Anthropocene moment (2020, p. 149). They argue that CC—emphasizing "living with," and inspired by on-the-ground examples of holistic, community-engaged conservation from around the world—presents an alternative environmentalism to both neo-protectionism and new conservation. They also emphasize that CC speaks to the challenges of the contemporary political landscape, and the need for a "truly radical new politics capable of providing an effective counterbalance to the inertia on the (populist) right" (p. 205).

By Büscher and Fletcher's own admission, however, CC is "an exercise with many loose ends," with their proposal simultaneously a call for further development (p. 159). As has been previously argued (Martin et al., 2019), the American West represents a valuable site for considering the complex socio-environmental challenges of our time and an opportunity for ongoing dialogue with PE scholarship (see also McCarthy, 2002; Walker, 2003; Schroeder et al.,

1. While I concur with critical social science engagements with the Anthropocene framing—including alternative formulations such as the "capitalocene," "plantationocene," and the syncretic "racial capitalocene" (Haraway, 2015; Moore, 2017; Vergès, 2017; Davis et al., 2019)—I retain its usage here for its greater prominence in both academic and popular discourse, treating it as roughly synonymous with our current historical era as well as eco-Marxian ideas of "second nature" (Smith, 2008).

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2006). The West has also historically been home to conflict and controversy over questions of land use and conservation. The current period has seen partisan struggles over the federal government's ownership and control of public lands, yet this is only the most recent wave in a punctuated history of contestation and populist reaction, with range wars and sagebrush rebellions dating back over a century (Riebsame, 1996; Inwood and Bonds, 2017). In this article, I develop a dialogue between Büscher and Fletcher's framework and environmental politics in the region—including another "radical" intervention, the collaborative conservation of the so-called *radical center* (Ruhl, 2002; White, 2017)—as a means of exploring the broad dynamics of American environmental politics vis-à-vis our current moment, and what CC might mean and require in the West.

Emerging in the 1990s as an alternative to regional- and national-level polarization, efforts from the radical center (RC) have sought common ground around land use questions and environmental regulation, and promoted pragmatic and collaborative approaches to the durable challenges of the West (Charnley et al., 2014; White, 2017; cf. Halstead and Lind, 2001). While the RC has resulted in important, positive results for environmental sustainability and local livelihoods—inspiring a wave of similar efforts around the region—our current moment of renewed reaction demonstrates a shortcoming of RC politics, one perhaps exemplified in the wolf question (Martin et al., 2019; Martin, 2020). Gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) recovery in the Intermountain West since the mid-1990s has sparked polarizing socio-political conflict, often centered on livestock predation yet also bound up with broader anxieties over land use change and regional futures. Despite concerted efforts to address these tensions—including via RC-inspired collaboratives like the Wood River Wolf Project (WRWP) in Idaho—recently expanded wolf control measures in Idaho and Montana and similar controversies over wolf reintroduction in Colorado underscore the linkages between right-wing populism and (anti-)conservation (Williams, 2022; see also Wilson, 1997; Hamilton et al., 2020; van Eeden et al., 2021; Tindall et al., 2022). Durable controversies like the wolf question thus highlight the shortcomings of both mainstream conservation and an RC approach—and hence the need for alternatives.

To help bridge the gap between conditions on the ground and the normative aims of CC, I draw here on scholarship around *commoning* as both analytical and political intervention (Bollier and Helfrich, 2015; Bollier, 2020). Scholars of commoning have built from research on historical commons—including within PE—to emphasize the processual, relational, and actively produced qualities of "actually existing commons" in the present (Eizenberg, 2012; Turner, 2017). Commoning presents a bottom-up, hybrid alternative to enclosure, private property, and market relations, as well as a means for producing *commoners*: those with intimate relationships with the commons as more-than-human, life-sustaining systems (Singh, 2017; García-López et al., 2021). Political ecologists have long emphasized the necessity of engaging local resources users, even when they hold political ideologies at odds with conservation goals (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987; McCarthy, 2002; Robbins, 2004). Commoning provides a means of speaking to the concerns of local people and places while also engaging with political and economic realities, thus providing a means of concretizing CC in place while disrupting the conflation of rural landscapes and right-wing political orientations (see also Van Sant and Bosworth, 2017; Scoones et al., 2018).

In what follows, I first lay out Büscher and Fletcher's framework of global environmental politics before exploring how contemporary dynamics can be traced through a history of conservation in the American West. I then move to my own research on wolf–livestock conflict and coexistence in the region, considering the challenges faced by RC-informed efforts and the potential value of CC approaches. From here, I turn to work on commoning to help theorize these issues (bringing commoning to bear on livestock grazing and public lands governance, in particular), while highlighting two key questions raised by this dialogue—engagement with which will be essential for the deployment of a CC approach. I conclude by emphasizing the political value of both commoning and CC for navigating regional tensions and moving us toward multispecies conviviality and more just futures.

2. The great conservation debate

Büscher and Fletcher (2019) define CC as "a vision, a politics and a set of governance principles that realistically respond to the core pressures of our time." In *The Conservation Revolution: Radical Ideas for Saving Nature Beyond the Anthropocene*, they explicitly position CC as starting from a PE perspective (Büscher and Fletcher, 2020, p. 9), building on scholarship from PE's "big tent" and fellow travelers (Martin et al., 2019). Following Robbins' (2004) "hatchet" and "seed," CC provides both critique and normative intervention around what they dub the "great conservation debate" of the early 21st century—a complex set of questions with roots in the people and parks controversies of previous decades (Büscher and Fletcher, 2020, p. 13; see also Neumann, 2002; Adams and Hutton, 2007). Conviviality (from the Latin *convīvium* ["a feast"], from *con-* ["together"], and *vívere* ["to live"]) provides an alternative, PE-informed approach to the challenges of shared space between humans and nonhuman natures.

Büscher and Fletcher's characterization of the current moment places conservationists into 3 broad camps: *mainstream conservation*, *new conservation*, and *neo-protectionism* (2022, p. 7). This typology breaks down along axes of capitalist/beyond capitalist, on the one hand, and the rejection or promotion of a nature–culture dichotomy on the other (**Table 1**). *Mainstream conservation* (1) is a "broad amalgam" that revolves around protected areas, with some broadly participatory inclusions and an implicitly capitalist character—including market-based instruments like ecotourism and payments for ecosystem services (Büscher and Fletcher, 2020, pp. 3, 18–20; see also Brockington et al., 2008). The so-called *new conservation* (2) embraces novel ecosystems and disturbed landscapes, emphasizing the emergent possibilities of "land

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Table 1. Conservation's contemporary camps

	Nature/Culture Dichotomies	Beyond N/C Dichotomies
Capitalist	1. Mainstream conservation	2. New conservation
Beyond capitalist	3. Neo-protectionism	4. Convivial conservation

Adapted from Büscher and Fletcher (2020, p. 7), where it appears as "Four main positions on saving nature in the Anthropocene."

sharing" amid the hybrid socio-natures of the Anthropocene (Marris, 2011; Kremen and Merenlender, 2018)—with many supporters embracing "natural capital" solutions while leaving capitalism as such unproblematized (Büscher and Fletcher, 2020, p. 8). *Neo-protectionism* (3), in contrast, re-entrenches a binary view of nature/culture, seeing the separation of humans from nonhuman nature ("land sparing") as necessary for the latter's protection, and extending the model of protected area-based "fortress conservation" (Brockington, 2002)—often critical of contemporary capitalism, yet lacking a coherent analysis or politics (Miller et al., 2014; Büscher and Fletcher, 2020, p. 9).

This heuristically valuable yet admittedly simplified schema opens up the possibility of a fourth—and, as Büscher and Fletcher argue, necessary—alternative: a conservation that seeks to transcend capitalism while simultaneously rejecting the problematic nature/culture binary so central to the history of western environmental thought. CC is "steeped in a critique of capitalist political economy," while highlighting the historical intertwining of capitalism and the nature–culture dichotomy (including, we might add, via colonialism) (Büscher and Fletcher, 2020, pp. 9, 11). Büscher and Fletcher's proposal thus grapples with the failures of environmentalism as a whole to sufficiently contend with these two great stumbling blocks. CC provides a normative frame for interventions around the challenges of contemporary conservation that stresses a post-capitalist approach and, as I will argue below, necessitates a decolonial de-alienation of humans from nonhuman natures.[2] However, *The Conservation Revolution* works at a high level of abstraction; as the authors note, there remains a need for deployment and specification of the CC framework in particular contexts (p. 159). CC is thus potentially complementary with other efforts to revitalize and extend PE analyses to questions and regions historically underexplored (Martin et al., 2019; Wesner et al., 2019).

Drawing a connection between CC's *living with* and efforts at *coexistence* within the human–wildlife conflict literature (Fascione et al., 2004; Woodroffe et al., 2005; Frank et al., 2019), I here build from research conducted on wolf–livestock conflict and public lands governance in Idaho and the broader West. Earlier work centered on the efforts of the WRWP, a collaborative of ranchers, environmentalists, and government agencies that has pursued nonlethal coexistence and shared space between wolves and livestock in Central Idaho since 2008 (Martin, 2021b; see also Stone et al., 2017). Using qualitative mixed methods grounded in ethnographic and archival modes, I conducted an in-depth case study of the WRWP between 2015 and 2017, evaluating its history and practices through semi-structured interviews with project partners and other regional stakeholders ($N = 40$), combined with participant observation (with the WRWP, University of Idaho agricultural extension, and at sites of livestock production and processing), as well as historical research at local archives (the Idaho State Archives and Research Center in Boise and the Regional History Department of the Community Library in Ketchum) (Martin, 2020). Between 2020 and 2023, I additionally worked with public lands managers around wolf–livestock conflict and coexistence efforts across western states as part of the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) Research Participation Program, putting the experiences of the WRWP within a broader regional context (Martin et al., 2021; Anderson et al., 2023).

In what remains of this section, I move away from CC to trace, in broad strokes, the dynamics of American environmental politics since the late 19th century (Section 2.1). This historical genealogy provides an important backdrop for the emergence of the RC (Section 2.2), and the dynamics observed in my research (Section 3), as well as a jumping off point for the dialogue explored below (Section 4).

2.1. A brief history of American environmental politics

The American West[3] is a region of complex socio-environmental tensions surrounding land, identity, and power—arguably "one of the most contested landscapes in the world" (Sheridan 2007, p. 122)—which, as argued here, lie at the root of those camps identified by Büscher and Fletcher (**Table 1**). One defining feature of western development patterns is the key role played by *public lands* (Merrill, 2002; Robbins et al., 2009; Wolters and Steel, 2020). Today, the U.S. federal government owns nearly half

2. Against the claims of the authors of *Half-Earth Socialism* that their project represents an alternative fourth branch in Büscher and Fletcher's framework, theirs appears to easily fit within a neo-protectionist frame—albeit one with a more explicitly anti-capitalist politics—particularly given their dismissal of the nature–culture dichotomy as not "actually matter[ing] much" (Vettesse and Pendergrass, 2022a, 2022b).

3. Following Stegner (1992 [1962]) and the U.S. Census Bureau, I define the American West pragmatically here as the 11 contiguous U.S. states fully west of the hundredth meridian, in particular those landscapes west of the continental divide. This area—following other PE scholars working in the region—maintains coherence despite elusive and always porous boundaries, always in relation to processes at multiple scales (Walker, 2003; Robbins et al., 2009; Walker, 2016).

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(47%) the land area in the 11 contiguous western states, with the majority managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) (247.3 million acres) and the USFS (192.9 million acres) (Bui and Sanger-Katz, 2016; Ruple, 2020). Yet these lands only came to be "public" following a complex history of private and federal interventions—including extended campaigns of dispossession and the genocide of indigenous nations (Wolfe, 2006; Nichols, 2020; Farrell et al., 2021)—aimed at the extension of territorial and market logics of power (White, 1983; Hinton et al., 2014; Wise, 2016; see also White, 1991; Banner, 2005; Saunt, 2020).

While this region was the birthplace of a globally exported model of wilderness preservation (Cronon, 1995; Neumann, 2002; Igoe, 2004), the American West has also been home to a parallel history of contestation over land access and the promotion of "sustainable use" (Fortmann, 1990; Jacoby, 2003; Taylor, 2016). West of the hundredth meridian, arid and mountainous conditions made much of the North American landscape impossible to farm absent irrigation. However, these landscapes could provide an important resource base for seasonal and transitory livestock grazing (Wentworth, 1948; Stegner, 1992 [1962]; Knight et al., 2002). Given the uneven distribution of forage over space and time, grazing necessitated access to large areas of land without the need—or desire, in many cases—for private ownership. Today, public lands continue to serve as a significant support for the economy and culture of rural communities across the West (Brugger et al., 2020; see also Sloggy et al., 2023). Importantly, the question of privately owned livestock grazing on the public range presents a central yet often underappreciated juncture in the history of conservation (Rowley, 1985; Sayre, 2017), to which we now turn.

Widely told is the turn-of-the-last century origin story of American environmentalism, often presented as an ideological dialogue between John Muir and Gifford Pinchot. Muir—the naturalist, "savior of Yosemite," and semi-mythical founder of American environmentalism—promoted *preservation* through government management, shielding key wilderness sites from the "gobble-gobble school of economics" based on spiritual and aesthetic values (Meyer, 1997, p. 279; DeLuca and Demo, 2001, p. 550). Pinchot—first head of the USFS and lifelong advocate of *conservation* (what we might today term *sustainable development*)—viewed himself as a centrist between two extremes: on the one hand, private extractive interests with designs on the public domain and, on the other, those like Muir who would "lock up" forest resources from economic use (Robbins et al., 2014 [2010], p. 68). Their antagonism is often described through the battle over Hetch Hetchy Valley in California, where we see the ethical debate between the so-called anthropocentric conservationism and ecocentric preservationism on full display (Meyer, 1997; Nash, 2014 [1967]; Robbins et al., 2014 [2010]).

Left implicit in this story of activist versus agency is the role of the *resource user*, a figure that would become central to later PE scholarship (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987; Walker, 1998). We can remedy this absence, however, through a less frequently told story, this time in the forests of the Pacific Northwest at the end of the 19th century. Once again, we have Muir on one side but now clashing with one John Minto, pioneer sheep farmer and secretary of Oregon's State Board of Horticulture (Rowley, 1985, p. 29). Minto participated alongside Muir in early debates on forest management, including disputes over sheep grazing in the Cascade Range in the late 1890s. These concerned the question of "whether forest reserves were areas reserved *from* use or *for* use" (Rakestraw, 1958, p. 371, emphasis added)—an early version of land sparing versus land sharing debates—and the perennially thorny issue of grazing-driven resource degradation (Sayre, 2017).

The two Johns were both self-purported lovers of wilderness and its "effect on the human spirit," and each wanted the public land system revised toward more rational management of natural resources. Their point of difference was in the *how*: Muir looked to the federal government for centralized, top-down regulation of the public domain, while Minto looked to Australia's example of long-term leases with permission to purchase, arguing that such a system would promote "improvement" and rational land use by the lessee (Rakestraw, 1958, p. 373; see also Hays, 1959). The debate reached a climax with the contentious National Academy of Sciences Report of 1897, the outcome of a Department of the Interior committee investigation that included a young Pinchot (the only forester in the group) and John Muir, and which largely reflected the latter's influence—including Muir's infamous "hoofed locusts" epithet for sheep (Rowley, 1985, pp. 26, 27; see also Sayre, 2017, p. 46). The report recommended doubling the size of the reserves and removal of grazing from the forest. Minto and other grazers, unsurprisingly, were highly critical of this outcome (Rowley, 1985, pp. 28, 29), and subsequent reactions to the report would lead to the rift between the schools of Pinchot and Muir later on display at Hetch Hetchy (Rakestraw, 1958, pp. 373, 377), as well as Minto's own reactionary opposition to the forest policies of later President Theodore Roosevelt (Cox, 1983, p. 146).

Notably, however, many grazers would in fact *support* subsequent moves toward regulation as "an effort to achieve stability and permanency," given the destructive competition and resultant devastation of range conditions over the late 1800s (Rowley, 1985, p. 5). The western range was a classic open-access property regime—itself a by-product of settler colonial dispossession—in which overstocking "resulted from capitalist penetration overwhelming or outracing cultural and political checks and balances" (Sheridan, 2007, p. 124). These lands would become (re)regulated through the Forest Reserve Act of 1891 and the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934—establishing what would become the USFS and BLM, respectively—with allotments made available to grazers through a system of long-term leases establishing exclusive access. Continued grazing on the public range (against the advice of Muir and the 1897 Report) was deemed politically expedient by the agencies governing the reserves (Rowley, 1985, p. 31) and could be considered a compromise necessary to their

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Table 2. A triadic tension

Notable Figure	Social Group	Philosophy	Corresponding Camp (Büscher and Fletcher, 2020)
John Minto	Resource users	Utilitarianism	New conservation
John Muir	Environmentalists	Preservationism	Neo-protectionism
Gifford Pinchot	State agencies	Conservationism ("wise" or sustainable use)	Mainstream conservation

creation. However, tensions between the federal government-as-landlord and those who relied on the public domain for their livelihood would remain (Hays, 1959; Skillen, 2009; Brugger et al., 2020).

With the addition of the resource user, we see a triadic tension familiar to those working on conservation and land use in the American West today—between utilization-minded private operators, preservation-minded environmental organizations, and "wise use"-minded agencies—roughly corresponding to the camps identified by Büscher and Fletcher (**Table 2**). Others have observed a similar tripartite breakdown; see, for example, Monlezun (2002), whose Q sort resulted in groupings characterized as "sustainable utilitarian," "ecocentric naturalist," and "multi-use steward" (pp. 101–108).[4]

2.2. The rise of the radical center

These dynamics would continue to evolve over the 20th century, with a suite of new environmental legislation passed in the 1960s and 1970s aimed at balancing the interests of multiple stakeholders and sometimes divergent priorities (Martin, 2021a). Importantly for the USFS, these would include the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960, emphasizing a commitment to balancing timber, range, water, recreation, and wildlife interests on the national forests.[5] Yet with new regulations, growing ecological knowledge and environmental concern among the broader public, and the economic and demographic transformations of the so-called "New West"—including the decline of extractive industry dominance vis-à-vis growth in amenity migration, recreation, services, and high technology sectors (Riebsame and Robb, 1997; Winkler et al., 2007; Robbins et al., 2009)—the last quarter of the century saw instead heightened polarization.

On one side, regional socio-economic transformations coupled with a new federal regulatory regime would give rise to a new wave of populist reaction and partisan division, manifesting in the Sagebrush Rebellion and Wise Use movement of the 1970s and 1980s (Cawley, 1993; McCarthy, 2002; Turner, 2009) and continuing in the 1990s with the northern spotted owl controversy in the Pacific Northwest (Watson and Muraoka, 1992; White, 1996; Prudham, 2005; Gutiérrez, 2020). Some increasingly professionalized and litigious environmental groups (henceforth, environmental nongovernmental organizations, or ENGOs) would use shifting national politics and the new legal apparatus to push for the enforcement of new laws as well as changes in land management practices. For some ENGOs, this included the reduction or removal of public lands livestock grazing (Donahue, 1999; Wuerthner and Matteson, 2002; see also Sheridan, 2007, pp. 128, 129)—in turn providing fuel for the fire of anti-environmental opposition in the rural West.

The increasingly polarized dynamic of the late 20th century is prefigured in Garret Hardin's (1968) (in)famous essay, "The Tragedy of the Commons." Notably, Hardin uses the conceit of livestock grazing on a shared pasture (drawing on an 1833 pamphlet from William Forster Lloyd) to explore the neo-Malthusian question of global population, paralleling Ehrlich's (1968) "population bomb" from the same year.[6] Hardin's "solutions" to a story of otherwise-inevitable environmental degradation are (A) privatization of the resource, based on the supposed economic rationality of private ownership, or (B) regulatory control, a top-down "rule of experts" (cf. Hays, 1959; Mitchell, 2002)—mapping cleanly onto the Minto and Muir positions discussed above. Despite a thorough debunking provided by Elinor Ostrom and subsequent critical scholars—who have contested the premise, logic, and classist and racist implications of Hardin's "tragedy" (Ostrom, 1990; Huntsinger, 2016; Mildenberger, 2019; see also Harvey, 1974)—this binary view would inform an emerging "common sense" of mainstream environmentalism in the late 20th and into the 21st century, in both neoliberal and neo-protectionist forms (McAfee, 1999; Igoe et al., 2010).

4. Given Pinchot's concern with the "the greatest good to the greatest number for the longest time"—a highly utilitarian perspective—these categories should not be considered mutually exclusive so much as poles on a continuum; indeed, the U.S. Forest Service often finds itself attempting to balance multiple uses and values, including and through a utilitarian framework (Kury, 1975).

5. Other key legislation included the National Environmental Policy Act (1969), the Endangered Species Act (1973), the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (1976), and the National Forest Management Act (1976). See also Davis (2001).

6. Although Hardin's usage of grazing management is deployed as part of arguments around human reproduction, Sayre (2017) has pointed to the interrelationships between range science and such neo-Malthusian concerns, with ideas of carrying capacity brought to bear in coercively breaking up communal land tenure systems around the world (pp. 166–167; 178–179).

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In the American West, the polarization of the 1990s would see organizations like the Western Watersheds Project (WWP, n.d.; founded as the Idaho Watersheds Project in 1993 in the Wood River Valley, where I conducted field research) carry forward Muir's regulatory-preservationism—along with a focus on "the negative impacts of livestock grazing." Through litigation and other methods, Western Watersheds became "Public Enemy Number One" among public lands ranchers (Ryberg, 2003; see also Protect the Harvest, n.d.). Rural populists like those of the Sagebrush Rebellion and Wise Use movement in turn exploited anxieties over shifting dynamics of land use, invoking both "federal tyranny" and "radical environmentalism" as rationale for the devolution of public lands to the states or distribution into private hands (Coggins, 1996; Krannich and Smith, 1998; Turner, 2009; Edwards, 2017; Tindall et al., 2022). In this increasingly acrimonious political context, lost was any kind of middle ground alternative (such as that previously represented by Pinchot). And it was into this gap—particularly in the wake of the 1980s farm crisis (Goodman and Redclift, 1989; Barnett, 2000) and amid ongoing pressures of New West regional transformations—that there emerged a proliferation of local efforts, variously referred to as the "radical middle," "eco-pragmatism," and henceforth as the "radical center" (RC).

As a descriptor, the "radical center" first appears in the early 1990s in the work of the southwest's Malpai Borderlands Group (apparently coined by one of the group's partner ranchers, Bill McDonald), with parallel undertakings taking place in the work of Sustainable Northwest led by Martin Goebel (Sayre, 2005; Allen, 2006; White, 2013; LeMenager and Weisiger, 2019). While diverse in their contexts and histories, these early RC efforts positioned themselves in contrast to both the "radical environmentalism" of groups like Earth First! and Western Watersheds, as well as the anti-environmentalism of the Sagebrush Rebels and Wise Use advocates. Their efforts sought to transcend the "jobs versus environment" and "Old West versus New West" frameworks that predominated regional politics and conflicts like the "timber wars" (Prudham, 2005; Johnson et al., 2023). In his "Manifesto for the Radical Middle," Ruhl (2002) argues that much of the 20th century indeed witnessed a war between opposing philosophies: "preservationist 'tree huggers' on the one side, and the resourcist 'bean counters' on the other" (pp. 385, 386)—again, roughly corresponding to the preservationist and utilitarianist camps described above. Against the "hyper-binary" character and dogmatism of contemporary environmental law, policy, and popular discourse, the RC sought instead a dynamic middle ground alternative (Ruhl, 2002, pp. 386, 387).

By the early 2000s, proponents of the RC were actively inviting others to their cause (Bean et al., 2003), emphasizing pragmatic, solutions-oriented approaches to longstanding socio-environmental challenges in the region and a commitment to collaborative, grassroots environmental stewardship. The RC was also in conversation with the global rise of community-based conservation and the related "win–win" environmental politics of new conservation (Rosenzweig, 2003; Brosius et al., 2005; Dressler et al., 2010)—as well as "third way" centrism in the United States and abroad (Halstead and Lind, 2001; Satin, 2004; Giddens, 2013 [2000]). In the American West, however, the grounded efforts of the RC struck a particular chord, with new collaboratives and experiments blossoming through the 2000s (Charnley et al., 2014; White, 2017).

Importantly, RC efforts drew inspiration not only from contemporaries but also from an earlier figure of American environmentalism, Aldo Leopold. Born in 1887, Leopold predated Hardin by a generation and lived through the debates between Muir and Minto. A forester and nature writer, he was trained at the Pinchot-founded Yale School of Forestry and made his career in land management. Often credited as a founder of wildlife ecology, Leopold remains one of the most widely cited and influential environmental thinkers: by the 1960s, the posthumously published *A Sand County Almanac* (Leopold, 1966) had become "compulsory reading" for environmentalists (Van Auken, 2020, p. 39). Famously, Leopold's (1966, p. 239) essay "The Land Ethic" argued for the extension of ethics to a more-than-human community, which included "soils, waters, plants, and animals." This relational and ecological view of interdependence and obligation in some ways mirrored indigenous ontologies (Whyte, 2015; Meine, 2022) and demonstrated what we might later recognize as an ethos of ecocentric sustainability. Importantly, the land ethic extended conservation beyond protected areas and "wild" nature (*à la* Muir) to include environmental stewardship of privately held and working landscapes, something central to those of the RC inspired by his work (e.g., the Western Landowners Alliance).

Leopold's ideas provided an important countercurrent amid the growing polarization of American environmental politics, inspiring not only the RC but also the development of critical socio-environmental scholarship, from environmental history to PE to research on the commons (Worster, 1993; Harvey, 1996; Meine, 2020). The successes of the RC in the American West, in turn, helped to shift popular discourse and practices, including moves toward adaptive governance and more collaborative management styles within federal land and resource agencies (Ruhl, 2002, p. 388; Martin, 2021a). However, many RC efforts remained geographically limited and embattled, while the revival of reactionary populism and endurance of the triadic tension described above point to the shortcomings of a centrist politics in the face of contemporary challenges (Singleton, 2002; White, 2014; cf. Utne, 2004). I turn next to research on the wolf question and the work of the WRWP—an environmental collaborative that emerged from the tradition of the RC—to explore these tensions.

3. Sharing space with the wolf

Gray wolves were once one of the most widespread land mammal species in the world, ranging across most of the northern hemisphere (Mech, 1970; Mech and Boitani, 2010; Musiani et al., 2010). Over the 19th and early 20th centuries, however, they were extirpated from much of North America, a removal bound up with a settler

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colonial remaking of social relationships with the land and an expanding capitalist livestock economy (White, 1983; Coleman, 2008; Wise, 2016; Rutherford, 2022). Public and scientific attitudes toward predators began to shift over the last century, however, with wolves increasingly framed as an ecologically important keystone species and paragon of abused nature requiring restoration (Manfredo et al., 2003; Musiani and Paquet, 2004; Jones, 2010; Marvin, 2012). In "Thinking Like a Mountain," Leopold (1966, p. 138)—who once promoted predator extirpation in the interest of game management[7]—lamented the "fierce green fire" in a dying wolf's eyes. His conversion reflects a budding ecocentric mindset that would inform subsequent developments within wildlife ecology and management (Flader, 1994; Robbins et al., 2014 [2010], p. 72). Wolves were among the first species listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1974. Following decades of planning and debate, they were then reintroduced through federal action to Yellowstone National Park and Central Idaho in 1995 and 1996 (Fischer, 1995; Bangs and Fritts, 1996; Smith et al., 2003).

While reintroduction was hailed as a biological success—populations expanded across the region, reaching recovery targets in the Northern Rocky Mountain region ahead of schedule—wolf return has also sparked intense socio-political backlash, becoming an emblematic instance of human–wildlife conflict (Woodroffe et al., 2005; Nyhus, 2016; Frank et al., 2019). Anti-wolf opposition is most often framed around the impacts of depredation on livestock production (notoriously difficult and controversial to quantify; see Muhly and Musiani, 2009; Steele et al., 2013). This conflict has been described elsewhere as a tension between rewilding and heritage landscapes (Tokarski and Gammon, 2016; Drenthen, 2018) and is rhetorically bound up with regional anxieties around livelihood, identity, sovereignty, and the future (Nie, 2003; Clark et al., 2005). As with many other socio-environmental challenges in the region, the wolf question has been conceptualized as part of the transition from "Old" to "New West." Yet wolves remain contested and polarizing even today—decades after their return and often seemingly disproportionate to their material impacts—a surplus antagonism (Ortner, 2006) and wicked problem (Rittel and Webber, 1973) I have referred to elsewhere as *the wolf question* (Martin, 2020).

In much of the American West, privately owned livestock (primarily cattle and secondarily sheep) are grazed across a "mosaic" of land tenures and jurisdictions, including deeded lands (private ranches, often originating as homesteads), state lands, and federal allotments (Sheridan, 2007, p. 125). Historically, much of the region's livestock industry was reliant on extensive and seasonally mobile—or *transhumant*—grazing, an adaptive response to the spatial and temporal unevenness of forage availability across the West's semi-arid landscapes (Wentworth, 1948; Rowley, 1985; Sayre, 2017; see also Huntsinger et al., 2010; Starrs, 2018). Idaho, where my research took place, was long considered "good sheep country," and today retains significant rangeland sheep operations. These operations are generally based on a combination of land holdings: sheep graze on home ranches or BLM allotments in the winter, follow the "green up" into mountainous USFS allotments in the summer, and trail back down in the fall. Idaho is also home to the largest percentage of state land under USFS management as well as the largest contiguous wilderness area outside of Alaska (USFS, 2012; n.d.; Our Public Lands, n.d.)—representing significant core wolf habitat and accounting for its choice as one site of federal reintroduction in the 1990s. While cattle also face predation pressures from wolves, sheep are especially vulnerable to predation, particularly when on the public range—with National Forest lands representing a key site of shared space and tension between rural livelihoods and wildlife conservation (see Martin et al., 2021).

Importantly, neither of the main camps described by Büscher and Fletcher (and articulated by Hardin) appear to adequately address the wolf question. A *regulatory-preservationist* approach (neo-protectionism) runs up against the shortcomings of protected areas vis-à-vis wide-ranging carnivores—a dynamic that provided initial motivation for the landscape-scale view of rewilding (Soulé and Noss, 1998; Terraube et al., 2020). For neo-protectionists, however, this motivates the extension of wilderness and land sparing—with the needs of wolves and livestock positioned as fundamentally incompatible (Wuerthner, 2017; cf. Robbins et al., 2014 [2010], p. 199)—further heightening polarization and reaction. A *privatization-utilitarianist* approach (new conservation), in contrast, promotes wolf conservation through an appeal to ecotourism and ecosystem services effects of wolf return (Nelson, 2009; Wilson, 2019), with rewilding potentially revalorizing "abandoned" and depressed rural landscapes (Navarro and Pereira, 2012; see also Tokarski and Gammon, 2016). Yet predators create challenges for both the conservation and tourism aspects of such schemes (Macdonald et al., 2017; Gilbert et al., 2021), while economic benefits do not necessarily accrue to those who bear the added costs of living with wildlife (McInturff et al., 2021). Indeed, Leopold (1966, p. 247) himself critiqued the economistic move within conservation—"we invent subterfuges to give [nature] economic importance"—as have subsequent political ecologists and other critical scholars (McAfee, 1999; O'Neill et al., 2008).

In contrast, efforts from the RC have pursued coexistence between conservation and rural livelihoods through the promotion of nonlethal tools and techniques—from modified husbandry practices to new detection and deterrence technologies—aimed at reducing predation and promoting shared space (or "coexistence") between wolves and livestock. Previous research has focused on the WRWP, an environmental collaborative based in Blaine County, Idaho, emphasizing its role as an early adopter and developer of many of the nonlethal methods increasingly regarded as best practices in the region and around the world (Martin, 2020, 2021b; see also Stone et al., 2017;

7. "I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise" (Leopold, 1966, p. 138).

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Wilkinson et al., 2020).[8] Grazing thousands of sheep in the Sawtooth Mountains while boasting the lowest depredation loss rates in the state, the WRWP garnered international attention as a model of nonlethal management and collaborative conflict resolution, holding out the possibility of a peaceful end to the "wolf wars" (Keim, 2017; WRWP, n.d.; cf. Fischer, 1995). Interventions like those of the WRWP aim to give producers the necessary support to adapt to the presence of predators on the landscape (Carter and Linnell, 2016), while promoting tolerance and trust-building among their partners—aligning with convivial conservation's aims of *living with*.

3.1. Collaborative coexistence

The WRWP emerged from what I have elsewhere referred to as a crucible of the New West, a microcosm of regional economic and demographic transformations and juxtapositions (Martin, 2020, 2021b). The Wood River Valley (including the cities of Bellevue, Hailey, Ketchum, and Sun Valley) was long considered prime sheep country, with a booming livestock-based economy from the late 1880s through the 1930s. Ketchum for a time even claimed the distinction of shipping more sheep than any other depot in the country (Holland, 1998, pp. 10, 131; Stahl, 1999), and sheep still hold prominence in Idaho vis-à-vis cattle when compared with other western states. Over the 20th century, however, the once-dominant "sheep kings" (Oliphant, 1948; Shadduck, 1990) saw their economic and political power wane, even as a burgeoning recreation and amenity migration economy emerged (Holland, 1998; Hines, 2010, 2012).

Blaine County today is a political outlier in the generally conservative Idaho (Cotterell, 2014), often referred to as "an island of blue in a sea of red."[9] Earlier efforts sought to bridge Old and New West values and the urban–rural divide (Stahl, 2000; Sheridan, 2007, p. 123), including through the mid-1990s creation of the annual Trailing of the Sheep festival (Stahl, 1999; Stuebner, 2015). Local ranchers also demonstrated commitments to socio-environmental sustainability and landscape-scale stewardship prior to the arrival of wolves (Stevens, 2014; see also Brunson and Huntsinger, 2008). Hence, in 2007, following a depredation event involving a recently established wolf pack just north of Ketchum, the representatives of the ENGO Defenders of Wildlife (DoW) met with local ranchers and government agencies and received approval to use the opportunity to try nonlethal alternatives. After a successful first field test, the Blaine County Commission voted to contribute seed money to the founding of the WRWP in 2008.

Every summer, Idaho sheep ranchers graze thousands of sheep on national forest allotments around the Wood River Valley. During the grazing season, when wolf–sheep interactions are most likely (Martin et al., 2021, pp. 3, 4), WRWP staff and volunteers coordinate with producers and government agencies to communicate information on wolf presence and deploy various nonlethal deterrents, supplementing human presence and active husbandry efforts, to keep wolves away from sheep and minimize losses to predation—or the need for lethal removal of "problem wolves" (Stone et al., 2017; Wilkinson et al., 2020). Over 15 years and across more than a 1,000 square miles of the western range, the WRWP has demonstrated proof of concept around many of its tools and techniques—from human presence and livestock guardian dogs to turbo-fladry, Fox-lights, and starter pistols—and with them the feasibility of shared space between wolves and livestock (Martin, 2021b). Importantly, the WRWP has grown despite the broader conservatism and anti-wolf politics of Idaho, as well as the persistence of local animosity—including from the neo-protectionist WWP, discussed above, whose offices sit just a few blocks from the WRWP's in Hailey—as well as "range war" dynamics in the broader region.[10] According to the Project itself, its commitment to a collaborative "win–win" model—one rooted in the RC and based in trust-building, co-management, and conflict transformation—has helped facilitate its success.

As previously explored (Martin, 2021b), however, the WRWP has struggled to sustain and scale up its model, facing challenges around the economic costs of conservation, contrary policy and incentivization (e.g., Idaho legislative support and subsidy of lethal control and wolf population reduction), and ongoing cultural–political polarization.[11] Recent federal ESA delisting (2020/2021) and relisting (2022) of wolves (see Kareiva et al., 2022), the repetition of familiar patterns of opposition among cattle ranchers facing recovering wolf populations in northern California and reintroduction in Colorado (Niemiec et al., 2020; Ditmer et al., 2022), and the uptick in anti-wolf rhetoric and new policies aimed at drastically reducing wolf numbers in Idaho and Montana—the very places wolves have been present the longest and where nonlethal tools have been most promoted—all show the "wolf wars" to be far from over (Hamilton et al., 2020; Williams, 2022; Idaho Department of Fish and Game, 2023). Hence, while the tools and techniques demonstrated by the WRWP may work, there remain more-than-technical challenges to coadaptation and

8. For additional details on nonlethal tools and techniques in use in the region, see overviews in Stone et al. (2017), Martin (2021b), and Martin et al. (2021). For further engagements with the state of the field and mechanisms of these nonlethal interventions, see Moreira-Arce et al. (2018) and Wilkinson et al. (2020).

9. A reference to the binary party structure of the United States, with Democrats popularly represented with the color blue and Republicans red.

10. A portion of my research took place concurrent with and about 300 miles east of the occupation of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge, the militant takeover headed by Ammon Bundy that grabbed headlines in early 2016 (Levin, 2016; Walker, 2018). Ranchers I spoke with generally denounced the action, but there was often an undercurrent of sympathy with the Hammonds (the ranchers whose trial kicked off the issue), or at least around the broader question of public lands grazing (see Tracey, 2017).

11. Since 2021, the WRWP has become associated with the International Wildlife Coexistence Network (wildlifecoexistence.org; see also Boronyak et al., 2022) and begun to address some of these challenges; my research focuses on the prior period.

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coexistence (Lute and Carter, 2020; Martin et al., 2021, p. 11)—challenges ripe for insights and interventions from PE and CC.

3.2. "Conservation costs money"

As noted above, wolf conflict (as with many other instances of HWC) is frequently framed around the uneven costs and benefits of living with wildlife. Impacts are at times described in hyperbolic terms; for example, the idea that the return of wolves will spell "the death of the livestock industry" (a claim that echoes similar concerns around coyote management expressed by sheep ranchers in the 1970s). However, there are real material and psychological costs associated with sharing space with predators—and potentially devastating effects for individual producers—along with the challenges of transition as wolves return to socio-ecological systems from which they have been absent for half a century or more (Muhly and Musiani, 2009; see also Carter et al., 2012; Thondhlana et al., 2020; Pettersson et al., 2021; Eklund et al., 2023).

In the American West, compensation for confirmed livestock kills is generally provided through federal monies distributed by the states (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, n.d.) but has been the subject of frequent critique for failing to fully capture producers' losses (Steele et al., 2013; cf. Dickman et al., 2011; Macon, 2020). Nonlethal tools and techniques, the primary technical interventions for preventing livestock depredation aside from lethal removal (Bangs et al., 2006; Stone et al., 2016; Stone et al., 2017; Wilkinson et al., 2020), represent added costs—new equipment and/or additional labor—for producers already working at thin margins.[12] As one Idaho cattle rancher put it in a meeting of the Idaho Rangeland Resource Commission, "conservation costs money." Producers often balk at this additional cost and recommended changes to their livestock management practices in response to wolves. As one Wood River Valley sheep operator argued, wolf return was "a problem we didn't ask for" and "sure as hell didn't need." There is thus a sense of unfairness or injustice often invoked, which can undermine coexistence efforts through the accrual of local resentment—the challenge, as Dickman et al. (2011) put it, being one of "how to facilitate protection of species that are highly valued at a global [or national] scale but have little or even negative value at a local scale" (see also McInturff et al., 2021; Swette et al., 2023).

Particularly, in its earlier stages, the WRWP subsidized the labor and materials costs of nonlethal interventions, providing tools and volunteers to rangeland operators free of charge (Martin, 2021b).[13] Around the region, groups like DoW have also helped to purchase, deploy, and train producers in the use of fladry, range riding, and other tools; as one California ENGO representative put it, "a lot of these guys live right on the tip of a very, very narrow margin. It's like, okay: $3,000 for a mile of fladry? That's not going to work for me. Having to hire a new ranch hand so that I can have a 24/7 range rider? Not going to happen." Another rangeland scientist I spoke with also emphasized the "financially marginal" and thus "not risk tolerant" quality of many livestock operations; while money was often not the primary factor in anti-wolf attitudes, added costs were a major hurdle. Additionally, while ENGO efforts have played an important role in demonstrating and providing assistance around nonlethal tools and techniques, the nonprofit funding structure—often reliant on and in competition for fluctuating philanthropic donations—represents a key challenge for expanding and sustaining this model across the region (Martin, 2021b, pp. 5, 9). This in part accounts for the earlier transition from a DoW-run regional compensation program to federal provision in 2010 (DoW, 2010). More recently, Wildlife Services, part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (USDA APHIS) has taken on a more substantial role in promoting and providing nonlethal tools and training across the region, both through research and via the establishment of nonlethal coordinator specialist positions in multiple states (USDA APHIS, 2020, 2022).

These interventions represent a form of public *subsidy*, with socialized funding taking up some of the added costs for producers living with wolves. Although agricultural subsidies are a frequent target of socio-political critique, the problem might be reframed as a question of which priorities and practices are promoted through these policies, rather than one of agricultural subsidies as such (Nie, 2002, p. 69). In an early PE text, Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) note how the state has historically been concerned with supporting farm *incomes* through subsidy, rather than achieving other social goals; however, the agricultural subsidy as a policy tool potentially presents "opportunities for conservationist measures, and also opens up a means for [political] alliances" (p. 231)—a question I return to below.

Globally, various forms of "payments to encourage coexistence" have been proposed (Dickman et al., 2011). In the United States we have primarily seen *ex post* compensation, in which producers receive financial payments for confirmed losses of livestock to wolves. As alluded to above, this approach has been widely criticized based on the difficulty of confirming said losses (particularly on an extensive range and given the presence of other predator and scavenger species), and for inadequately capturing the full range of economic impacts (including purported weight loss, psychological harm, and lost breeding potential) (Steele et al., 2013). Such compensation programs have also done little to encourage coadaptation or greater tolerance for wolves (Naughton-Treves et al., 2003), and raise questions of moral hazard, transaction costs, time lags, and issues of trust and transparency (Zabel and Holm-Müller, 2008, p. 247). As a result, the region has increasingly seen

12. Notably, the efficacy and cost of lethal control is rarely subject to the same scrutiny among producers due to a lack of full-cost accounting: These costs are borne not by individual operators but distributed across industry associations and the broader taxpayer base (Martin, 2020, p. 34; see also McManus et al., 2014; Lennox et al., 2018).

13. The WRWP has also focused on sheep producers who, in contrast with the move toward reduced labor usage among the region's cattle ranchers over the 20th century, continue to employ herders who remain in close proximity to their charges.

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pushes for alternatives, including toward *ex ante* or "pay for presence" approaches to compensation (Macon, 2020), which target sustaining predator presence rather than addressing the negative impacts thereof. When it comes to such alternative strategies, one former IDFG researcher noted the need to think "outside the box," stating that "we haven't looked at Europe nearly enough." Rather than having to "show us dead cows" like in the United States, they said, "If you're a reindeer herder in Finland and you find wolf tracks, they just give you money." Continuing, they noted that "[If] society wants wolves, [then] we're going to put our money where our mouth is and just pay you [ranchers] for your inconvenience."

In *The Conservation Revolution*, Büscher and Fletcher (2020, p. 186) lay out a handful of concrete actions for moving toward CC, including the proposal of a conservation basic income (CBI). Building from the ideas of universal basic income (UBI) (Bidadanure, 2019; Haagh, 2019; Hoynes and Rothstein, 2019), a CBI would provide monetary payments to residents and resource users sharing space in or alongside habitats and species of conservation concern (Büscher and Fletcher, 2020, pp. 187, 188; see also Fletcher and Büscher, 2020). Such a proposal speaks to insights from rural sociology around the economic "satisficing" behavior of ranchers, who are driven less by the so-called economic rationality than by a range of values that emphasize keeping in business and staying on the land (Smith and Martin, 1972). Diverse income streams—for example, the widespread use of conservation easements among western landowners (Anella and Wright, 2004; Rissman and Sayre, 2012)—are often combined to "break even," with questions of lifestyle and land stewardship frequently ranked as more important than profit maximization (Tanaka et al., 2005).

On the question of subsidy, while Büscher and Fletcher (2020, p. 188) argue that CBI payments "are not meant to 'bribe' or incentivize communities away from their resources" as a sort of *quid pro quo* for fulfillment of certain conservation actions, these very questions of conditional incentivization are frequently discussed when it comes to predator coexistence in the American West. Environmentalists working in this space recommend stricter regulation and enforcement on public lands allotments as a condition of their use: "requiring the use of nonlethal deterrents ... I think that seems like a no brainer," and "... if it's not a requirement for their permit, it's not going to happen." Another IDFG manager argued for wolf depredation policies comparable to those already in place for agricultural crop depredations: "It's great if you can require them [livestock producers] to do something to manage and mitigate losses. We have that requirement to get compensation for elk in your hay field; you have to *do* something ... you have to allow us to implement deterrence, you have to be a partner in that ... if you want to file a claim for your losses. We don't have that [requirement] for wolves."[14] In contrast, this manager also pointed to "an interesting model in Europe, I think originated in the Scandinavian countries, which is actually quite similar to our agricultural depredation model here in Idaho"—one based on previous loss patterns and provision of up-front assistance: "you can use that money however you want, but obviously now it's in your financial best interest ... If I can use this to save some of my livestock, that's my profit."[15]

Crucially, CBI (and CC more generally) promotes shared space while challenging the logic of a market-determined "highest and best use" of land, rejecting both neoprotectionist and new conservationist thinking (the nature–culture binary of the former and the capitalist logics of the latter). CBI payments that directly or indirectly promote pro-predator behavior among livestock producers could help alleviate competitive pressures on land use and decision-making (Sayre, 2002; Sheridan, 2007). This in turn could reduce the dynamic by which ranchers perceive wolves as the potential "straw that [breaks] the camel's back," to quote one California cattle producer. While a CBI that requires the adoption of particular practices (e.g., the implementation of nonlethal tools and techniques) as a precondition for payments represents a point of departure from Büscher and Fletcher's conception, it also presents a potentially novel social contract for the region, one grounded in responsibility and environmental stewardship akin to that promoted by Leopold's land ethic. Instead of an easy scapegoat for those contending with uncertain markets and land access, wolf presence might instead be linked with the material basis for co-adaptation and the enabling conditions for sustainable rural livelihoods more generally. Such questions create openings for alternative political alliances, as argued by Blaikie and Brookfield (1987), and link CC to both the stated aims of the RC as well as the ideas of the commons, to which we now turn.

4. A radical alternative to the radical center?

RC efforts have explicitly sought to transcend the acrimony surrounding some of the West's most polarized socio-environmental challenges (Bean et al., 2003; LeMenager and Weisiger, 2019), and for a time the RC was even posited as an inspiration for national-level partisanship: "... if ranchers and environmentalists can get along, why can't Democrats and Republicans?" (White, 2013; see also Halstead and Lind, 2001; Satin, 2004; Utne, 2004). While such efforts have helped reduce or diffuse extremism in certain instances (e.g., Walker, 2018), the RC has proven unable to counter the regional return of populist reaction, to say nothing of polarization at the national level (Manfredo et al., 2017; Berlet and Sunshine, 2019; Swette et al., 2023). By the turn of the century, Idaho—which had Democratic governors from the 1970s to the mid-1990s—had become one of the most conservative states in the country, with notable rural–urban divides and hotbeds of white

14. Notably, other states have already explored requiring proactive implementation of nonlethal tools prior to authorization of lethal control (see Anderson, 2022).

15. Compare "performance payments" schemes practiced in Northern Sweden (Zabel and Holm-Müller, 2008; Zabel et al., 2014).

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supremacy (Aiken et al., 2006; Petersen, 2017; Smith, 2022).

The wolf question—that surplus antagonism and enduring conflict surrounding wolf return, bound up with challenges of shared space and debates over public lands grazing (Martin, 2020; see also Ortner, 2006)—provides a valuable lens onto environmental governance and regional futures more broadly. It also highlights the inadequacies of the major conservation camps identified by Büscher and Fletcher. Despite the success story of reintroduction and the work of collaborative coexistence efforts like the WRWP, wolves remain a lightning rod for sociopolitical controversy and populist reaction over 25 years since their return, and seemingly wherever populations expand (e.g., in California and Colorado). The wolf question today appears increasingly bound up with polarized partisan identity (van Eeden et al., 2021; Judge et al., 2023; Swette et al., 2023; see also Wilson, 1997), yet it also presents an opportunity to critically contend with—and potentially transcend—the shortcomings of environmental politics-as-usual.

There are indeed real challenges associated with coexistence: wolves bring with them additional costs for livestock producers (whether via direct predation, reduced return on investment, or by requiring new outlays in technology or labor), one widely recognized as necessitating some form of assistance. Yet as a framework for understanding and action, the RC has often failed to move many of its adherents in this case beyond what Leopold (1966, p. 244) called "enlightened self-interest." Leopold's critique of farmer hesitancy around environmental practices "not clearly profitable to themselves" (1966, p. 245) could easily be applied to many a rancher, happy to adopt "win–win" measures around range health and maintaining open space, yet balking at the added burdens of sharing that space with wolves.[16] Although the RC aimed at replacing Pinchot's tepid centrism with something more robust, its voluntarism and private property orientation[17]—rooted in a regional ethos of libertarian "self-reliance"—remains squarely in quadrant 2 of Büscher and Fletcher's schema (**Table 1**). For the most part, the RC leaves unexamined questions of private property and markets, among other political economic and social justice concerns. Critiques of extant community-based natural resource management in the region have thus emphasized issues of equity, distribution, and intracommunity politics (Singleton, 2002; Walker and Hurley, 2004; Martin et al., 2019, p. 229)—issues opportune for PE's critical strengths.

The RC's supposed radicalism, to apply another quote from Leopold, remains "...too timid, and too anxious for quick success, to tell the farmer the true magnitude of his obligations" (1966, p. 246). Its interpretation of the land ethic represents a shallow or truncated reflection that "entail[s] privileges but not obligations" (pp. 238, 244), a point similarly argued by Fortmann (1990). CC, in contrast—informed by PE insights around power and inequality—presents a potentially "more radical" corrective, one that emphasizes working lands conservation *à la* the RC while also explicitly promoting a post-capitalist vision. CC might thus better address the more-than-economic value orientation of Leopold's land ethic, yet getting from here to there—from RC to CC—necessitates engagement with the drivers of contemporary conflicts, along with deeper regional histories and political economic dynamics. I turn next to insights from scholarship on the commons and commoning as a potential bridge between the contemporary American West and the aims of coexistence and conviviality. Commoning helps clarify the challenges of place that have motivated the emergence of the RC, while providing a novel vocabulary and political toolkit—rooted in local histories and bottom-up self-governance—which might better speak to contemporary challenges like the wolf question.

4.1. Commoning and the public domain

Researchers on the commons have been long-time fellow travelers and cross-pollinators with PE. Their work has highlighted a diversity of meanings around the commons, including an important distinction emphasized by Ostrom (1990) between common-pool *resources* (those things that, by their nature, are difficult to exclude others from, e.g., fisheries, extensive rangelands) and common-pool *property* systems as a form of governance, which emphasize the collective management of land or resources. Ostrom's institutionalist approach served to effectively deconstruct and refute Hardin's premises by drawing a distinction between the commons and open access, and by identifying the conditions by which communities around the world had successfully built rule systems and institutions to sustain common-pool resources over generations (Ostrom, 1990; see also Wall, 2014, p. 22).

Other scholars, including historians and economic anthropologists, have emphasized cultural factors and expanded our view of "rationality" to account for the behavior of commoners—as well as how such norms and practices have broken down in the face of capitalist and state pressures (Watts, 1983; Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987; Thompson, 2013; also see White, 1983, on similar patterns in the North American context). Grounded in historical and cross-cultural observations, ideas of bottom-up collective management have challenged the assumption of degradation as the inevitable result of collectivity, with both traditions providing important contributions to PE's analytical approach (Turner, 2017; see also Robbins, 2004, p. 45; Robbins et al., 2014 [2010], pp. 52, 53).[18] PE is not alone in making these connections: Meine draws a line between Leopold's concerns and a "third way" linking "von Humboldt to Lewis Mumford to Elinor Ostrom and

16. "When the private landowner is asked to perform some unprofitable act for the good of the community, he today assents only with outstretched palm" (Leopold, 1966, p. 250).

17. As mentioned above, one of the more prominent radical center-aligned organizations in the region today is the Western Landowners Alliance (westernlandowners.org).

18. Although as Turner (2017) notes, PE sits somewhat awkwardly with more formal, institutionalist approaches to the commons.

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Wendell Berry," which strives for constructive, interdisciplinary, systemic approaches to wicked socio-environmental problems (Meine, 2020, p. 35).

Out of these dialogues, commons research itself has evolved, including through more recent work on *commoning*. This new emphasis (re)conceptualizes the commons not as historical remnant but as actively produced in the present (cf. Wall, 2014, p. 69). Some of this work presents the commons as a Polanyian countermovement to market relations and capitalist enclosure (De Angelis, 2004; 2013; see also Polanyi, 2001 [1944]; Turner, 2017). Others have used a commoning framework to direct attention toward the "actually existing commons" present in developed capitalist contexts and under conditions of neoliberalization (Eisenberg, 2012, cited in Turner, 2017). Here, commoning emphasizes hybridity and sits uneasily with work on "pure" historical commons-as-institutions (although compare McCarthy, 2002, on the value of "First World" research for illuminating complexity in developing world contexts, as well). Others still have used commoning to emphasize a post-capitalist mode of affective, more-than-human relational practice (Gibson-Graham et al., 2016; Singh, 2017; Nightingale, 2019). Each of these threads offers important insights for considering the American West and the wolf question through a commons lens, as well as potential connections with Büscher and Fletcher's CC.

The public range of the American West is by no means a traditional commons in the sense described in the literature. The historical commons of the Americas, stewarded by indigenous nations since time immemorial, were largely erased by settler colonial dispossession—a process ironically central to the establishment of the public domain itself, along with the much-critiqued wilderness ideal (Cronon, 1995; Spence, 2000; Fletcher et al., 2021; Neumann, 2002). Prior to its (re)regulation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the western range was an open access regime (as noted above); when Hardin drew on U.S. rangelands as proof for his arguments, they had not, in fact, been a commons in over a century (Sayre, 2017, p. 180). Public lands as we know them today are perhaps better understood as government-owned and -managed properties, protected from the ravages of full market exposure (as argued by both Muir and Polanyi (2001 [1944])) for the long-term use of both society and capitalist production (see also O'Connor, 1998; Prudham, 2005). However, a commoning lens retains value for considering debates and tensions surrounding the use and governance of western public lands.

These landscapes have long been a source of local livelihood and usufruct claims (Hays, 1959; Fortmann, 1990; Brugger et al., 2020). Fortmann (1990) highlights patterns of rural protest around claims of customary rights of access and use of national forest lands, with easy connections to be drawn with ideas of moral economy and social conflict as described by cultural and environmental historians (see Thompson, 2013; Jacoby, 1997, 2003). As noted by Sheridan (2007, pp. 124, 126), western rangelands also have many characteristics of common pool resources (see also Huntsinger et al., 2010); while grazing is often described as an extractive relationship to forage resources, transhumance patterns, in particular, might better be understood as usufructuary relationship to the landscape (and one in tension with the excludability of private property, as discussed below).

Importantly, however, a commoning lens also provides a basis for the critique of such patterns. Returning to Fortmann (1990), rural protests represent a form of *truncated* customary property law (or, we might say, a truncated commons), in that rights claims are separated from the responsibilities of local governance (in the face of assumed government regulation). While the RC's Leopoldian slant seeks to address this gap through its emphasis on local environmental stewardship, this tension is brought into sharp relief by both the wolf question and the public lands arena through the challenges of shared space and multiple values. While not a proper commons, public lands do serve as a kind of contested public or "common" good (LeMenager and Weisiger, 2019, p. 6). Yet the persistent triadic tension described above (**Table 2**) highlights a central question at the heart of regional environmental politics around the appropriate use of public lands: who and what belongs, and who is responsible?

An eye toward the commons and commoning challenges a neo-protectionist, top-down regulatory approach—which has alienated local people and produced anti-environmental antagonism (Jacoby, 2003; Griffin et al., 2019; Tindall et al., 2022; see also Hays, 1959)—in favor of bottom-up collaborative alternatives rooted in place and agreed to by commoners themselves (Wall, 2014, pp. 34, 113). At the same time, commoning diverges from the RC in its move away from a private property framework and promotion of a post-capitalist, if not anti-capitalist, ethos of community obligation and the common good. This provides a linkage to Leopold's land ethic, with its expansion of community beyond the terms of economic value, as well as CC's aims and methods, promoting local livelihoods and conservation through political economic interventions like CBI. However, considering commoning in the American West also highlights enduring contradictions faced by collaboratives on the ground—including those posed by capitalist political economic pressures and questions of non/belonging rooted in a history of settler colonialism—which must be addressed as part of the move toward conviviality.

4.2. Post/capitalism in the West

For Büscher and Fletcher, the question of capitalist political economy forms one of the central axes and challenges of contemporary environmental politics (**Table 1**). As they put it, "without directly addressing capitalism and its many engrained dichotomies and contradictions, we cannot tackle the conservation challenges before us" (2019, p. 286). We might usefully define capitalism here as a political economic system in which social reproduction is mediated through and dependent on competitive markets and the commodity form—one which, notably, has an agrarian origin via the enclosure of land (Wood, 2002; see also Polanyi, 2001 [1944]). Marx (1992 [1867]) emphasized the centrality of expropriation

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and colonialism in the origins and expansion of capitalism—a history "written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire"—while others have explored the capitalization of agriculture through ongoing commodification of the means of production (Kloppenburg, 2004 [1988]).

A commoning framework highlights the coercive pressures of capitalist political economy, including as a key driver of environmental degradation—a line of argument shared with early PE (Watts, 1983; Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987; Robbins, 2004). While CC's post-capitalist orientation may at first appear as a nonstarter in the American West, given the region's often-discussed ideological commitment to private property and "rugged individualism" (Bazzi et al., 2020), the lived experience of New West transformations demonstrates capital's myriad contradictions. As Sheridan notes, "[p]erhaps no other region in North America better epitomizes the fundamental spatial convulsions of capitalism" (2007, p. 122). From boom-and-bust extractive economies to the production of space through international capital flows and the territorial power of the state, the West is no stranger to cycles of investment and devaluation, which have remade these palimpsest landscapes many times over (White, 1991; Robbins et al., 2009; Martin et al., 2019).

As noted above, the rise of the New West has seen a reduced dependency on formerly dominant extractive industries (including ranching), alongside growing recreation and service sectors and amenity migration—sometimes discussed in terms of "rural gentrification" (Walker and Fortmann, 2003; Ghose, 2004; Bryson and Wyckoff, 2010; Hines, 2010, 2012). Here, the sheep kings and cattle barons of years past increasingly confront a regional economy in which the "highest and best use" of these landscapes is no longer theirs. Regionally, land prices increased steadily between the 1980s and 2000s, alongside falling livestock prices and rising production costs (Sheridan, 2007; Muhly and Musiani, 2009). Rangeland operators I spoke with frequently discussed these and other economic pressures. Fluctuating commodity prices—both inputs to production and their own final products—made long-term planning difficult. Sheep ranchers in Idaho cited rising winter feed costs as a reason for moving away from the more predation-defensible shed lambing, demonstrating the challenge of cost-benefit calculations and risk management. Competition from large-scale feedlots and international producers (notably Australian and New Zealand lamb imports; see Stahl, 1999) and uncertainty over labor availability and costs (sheep ranchers in Idaho largely rely on Peruvian herders through the H-2A temporary agricultural worker visa program; see Bier, 2020; Tracey, 2022) put additional pressures on producers.

The question of land availability and access is particularly relevant to livestock producers given the extensive grazing patterns of the region. With uneven distribution of necessary resources (forage, water) across space and time, ranching has always sat at odds with the "agrarian myth of Jeffersonian yeoman farmers" (Sheridan, 2007, p. 124)—relying not on ownership of small plots but rather necessitating extensive land access and mobility. As noted above, this has historically meant movement across and including a patchwork of both public and private lands.[19] Traditional stock trails, formally recognized by the federal government under the Stock Raising Homestead Act (1916), were rolled back into the public domain following the passage of the Federal Land Policy Management Act in 1976, with grazers losing the protection of this form of "common property resource" (Starrs, 2018, p. 596). Ranchers I spoke with stressed the challenge of maintaining operations given shifting regional land ownership patterns, again associated with rural gentrification. One producer with deeded lands north of Boise explained how one of their former trailing routes had been converted into a golf course, while another route crossed lands being sold off for over a million dollars, a cost "outside [their] price range."[20] This highlights the question of usufructuary access to others' private lands, a difficult conceptual challenge for a strict private property framework yet one often raised by political ecologists and commons scholars (e.g., Ribot and Peluso, 2003; see also the work of Haggerty and Travis, 2006, on hunters' access claims to private lands amid regional transformations in Montana).

Rising property values and tax burdens associated with New West transformations also create pressures on ranchers to sell off or subdivide their own deeded lands for development, with a resultant decline of open space and consequent environmental impacts. Muhly and Musiani appear in agreement with Sheridan (2001, 2007) on the negative environmental consequences of ranching's removal from the landscape, pointing out how land conversion to residential development "could negatively impact wolf conservation via large scale habitat change and increased human presence" (Muhly and Musiani, 2009; see also Starrs, 2002).[21] On public lands—again, a central component of the resource base for many livestock producers in the region—ranchers face competition and reaction from recreationists, who see domestic animals as unsightly and out of place, and from ENGO litigation pressuring agencies to reduce or remove grazing

19. The use of federal lands for livestock grazing represents a complex pseudo-property relationship: "range rights" have always been prescriptive, claimed based on prior occupation and use (Rowley, 1985, p. 11; compare Fortmann, 1990), yet grazing leases are also treated as part of the economic value of the ranch itself: "When ranchers apply for bank loans, the value of the entire ranch is put up for collateral; when ranches are sold, grazing leases accompany the deeded lands" (Sheridan, 2007, p. 125).

20. This rancher also described themself as one of the few operators in the area who still trailed sheep rather than transporting them by truck. Trucking became the regional norm over the latter half of the 20th century with the decline of the railroad and the availability of cheap fossil fuels, paralleling broader patterns of mechanization in agriculture (Kloppenburg, 2004 [1988]).

21. Also note how Sheridan (2001) frames this question of private land use conversion as one of the "contested commons."

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entirely (e.g., Wuerthner and Matteson, 2002; cf. Swette and Lambin, 2021). Insights from commoning scholarship can provide nuance to our understanding of the "necessarily ambiguous" (De Angelis, 2013, p. 609) property relations of the western range through a more relational understanding emphasizing struggles over access and use; transhumant grazing's usufructuary relationship to land is indeed in tension with the excludability of private property, while contestation over the appropriate use of public lands highlights the ways in which (re)regulation can bring with it a form of proxy enclosure (Martin, 2020; see also Castree, 2003).

It is worth recalling how environmental degradation of the sort described by Hardin—and invoked by ranching's opponents—is linked not to grazing as such but rather the competitive pressures of capital, particularly under open access or underregulated governance regimes. Critical environmental scholars have identified systemic drivers of overgrazing and boom-bust dynamics in the cycles of market activity and pressures to maximize commodity production and use (Langston, 1995, p. 304; Wall, 2014, p. 39; see also Sayre, 1999; Sheridan, 2007). As noted above, ranchers do not generally behave as "rational" economic maximizers but rather demonstrate "satisficing" behaviors in the pursuit of multiple aims and values (e.g., maintaining the ranch as a business, home, and way of life) (Smith and Martin, 1972, p. 218; see also Torell et al., 2001; compare Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987). Tanaka et al. (2005) note that the rates of return from livestock operations are "well below comparable average non-agricultural rates" (p. 17) and many producers I spoke with emphasized how sheep ranching, in particular, was "not a bread-winning career choice." Indeed, the seemingly economic irrationality of ranching is something often highlighted by its critics alongside its environmental effects (Wuerthner and Matteson, 2002).

While low economic margins clearly do not stand in the way of ranchers choosing this livelihood, economic compulsions can undermine aims of stewardship and sustainability. Smaller scale operators, in particular, face pressures to maximize outputs and minimize losses (e.g., to wolf predation), even as marginal returns undercut their adaptive capacity and willingness to experiment with new methods and technologies. These pressures, however, also account for the adoption of alternative income streams (e.g., through off-ranch employment or conservation easements) and create a potential opening for something like a CBI. Indeed, it is likely not a coincidence that many "conservation ranchers" in the West are also larger land holders, as they are able to rely on economies of scale and outside sources of capital to experiment and pursue conservation aims (see Epstein et al., 2022). RC aims of conservation in working landscapes are not insincere, then, but they are undermined by the dynamics of capital—as Leopold (1966, p. 262) puts it, "...economic feasibility limits the tether of what can or cannot be done." Yet as Harvey (1996, p. 120) notes, the land ethic itself is "a hopeless quest in a bourgeois society where the community of money prevails ... [and] necessarily entail[s] the construction of an alternative mode of production and consumption to that of capitalism." The value of CBI (and, by extension, CC broadly) thus lies in shielding land users from capitalistic pressures—political economy as constraint and compulsion—and thus facilitating the sort of satisficing and stewardship practices already being pursued by ranchers.

Sheridan (2007, p. 128) has noted that the quintessential paradox of Western ranchers is one of "rugged individuals who must operate within an economic and political milieu of government regulation."[22] We might add to this another paradox, in which those who espouse an ideological commitment to laissez-faire and private property are increasingly on the losing side of devaluation and uneven development.[23] While the neo-protectionist focus on grazing as cause of environmental degradation does little to explain underlying drivers (Robbins, 2004, p. 38), it does arguably drive the association of resource user interests with capitalist political economy even as its contradictions multiply (Martin, 2020; compare Peluso, 1992 and Prudham, 2005 for other cases of resource users self-identifying with capital and elite interests). In contrast with the RC, commoning provides a more coherent economic analysis—something absent in both neo-protectionist and reactionary populist alternatives—that can make sense of the structural challenges to economic and environmental sustainability in the region.[24] Commoning also provides a framework for understanding and supporting on-the-ground moves toward collectivization and the socialization of costs, from discussions of repastoralization[25] to collaborative governance and economic cooperatives (as seen in the work of the Mountain State Lamb Cooperative and others to navigate the challenges of scale; see Boland et al.,

22. This tension indeed dates to the early history of western grazing; recall how livestock producers "preferred nominal regulation to the chaos that had occurred" under open access (Rowley, 1985, p. 4).

23. Opposition from ranchers and farmers to the American Prairie Reserve in Montana, a nonprofit-led wildlife refuge built through land purchases from willing sellers, in many ways exemplifies this contradiction (see Davenport, 2018).

24. As an aside, we should be very careful when thinking about rural responses through the lens of the double movement (Polanyi, 2001 [1944]). Fraser's "triple movement" (2013) is useful here as a critical corrective to the political ambivalence of the Polanyian dyad within existing socio-economic dynamics (see also McCarthy, 2002; Prudham, 2005).

25. Arguments have been made elsewhere for a turn toward pastoralization and (re)commoning of lands to resolve the socio-ecological contradictions of ranching (LaRocque, 2014; see also Sayre, 2004, p. 673; Huntsinger et al., 2010). While Behnke (2018) challenges the appropriateness of common property theory for understanding pastoralism, commoning's emphasis on collective responsibility might serve to address the tension between mobility and attachment to place (Langston, 1995, p. 303). Newer research has also explored the possible relationship between the commons and transhumance in the European context (Renes et al., 2023).

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2007). Commoning helps us to understand these efforts as simultaneously adaptive responses to the lived pressures of capitalist political economy and the germinating seeds of beyond-capitalist alternatives (Gibson-Graham, 1996; Gibson-Graham et al., 2016)—despite otherwise voiced commitments to free markets, private property, and so on. As one multigenerational Idaho rancher I spoke with explained, "I firmly believe in cooperative ventures."

4.3. Nature/culture and non/belonging

Büscher and Fletcher's other axis concerns the nature–culture binary or dichotomy (**Table 1**), based on earlier critiques of nature and wilderness (e.g., Williams, 1980; Cronon, 1995; Castree, 2005; Smith, 2008) and insights from the people and parks debates, including around the broadly colonial history of conservation (Guha, 1989; Grove, 1996; Neumann, 2002; West et al., 2006; Adams and Hutton, 2007; see also Spence, 2000; Jacoby, 2003, for related arguments in the North American context). Viewed through the lens of commoning, this question becomes one of *community* and *belonging*—namely, who and what belongs, in a community and in place. This concern is shared with Leopold (1966, p. 239), who emphasizes the extension of the boundaries of the community "to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land." However, a commoning framework also directs our attention to the *challenges* of being in common. Following insights from PE, communities are shot through with relations of power and dynamics of in- and exclusion (Nightingale, 2019). In the context of the American West, the relationship between humans and the natural world is also inseparable from a history of settler colonialism. Although Leopold provides an important touchstone for ethical extension beyond the human—one in part taken up by the RC—a commoning lens highlights the ways in which an environmental politics adequate to the region, following LeMenager and Weisiger's (2019, p. 12) critique of the RC, must also be a *decolonized* one.

Both Leopold and the RC do appear to reject the N/C binary, emphasizing conservation in working landscapes rather than a neo-protectionist model of parks without people. Indeed, the work of groups like the WRWP demonstrates the effectiveness of community-based conservation, as well as the ire received from neo-protectionists (e.g., Wuerthner, 2017). In this, at least, Leopold and the RC converge with PE critiques of fortress conservation as well as the broader aims of CC. Indeed, Meine views Leopold as "a forerunner" of interdisciplinary, socio-ecological systems thinking (2020, p. 31), while Van Auken sees his work as prefiguring discussions of the Anthropocene (2020, p. 40)—both efforts to move away from a neo-protectionist orientation and challenge the nature/culture dichotomy. Others have noted "consonance" between Leopold's ideas and indigenous perspectives (Van Auken, 2020, p. 43, note 9) around themes of more-than-human community, traditional local knowledges, and environmental stewardship. However, such commonalities also obscure key divergences, including major blind spots around the history and ongoing effects of settler colonialism.[26]

Ranchers in the West often narrate themselves as victims—in the face of government regulations, economic pressures, and the return of wolves—as well as the legitimate and prior users of western landscapes in the face of New West transformations. However, such narratives obscure the disproportionate power that ranchers have held and often continue to hold in the region, particularly in states like Idaho and Montana, to say nothing of the relationship of ranching to histories of colonial dispossession. While some efforts from the RC have sought to include tribal governments as stakeholders, such incidents have been all too rare (LeMenager and Weisiger, 2019, p. 12), and even these fail to engage deeper questions of history and power (including the inappropriateness of a stakeholder framing for collaboration with native nations).[27] Both Leopold and the RC appear to relegate indigenous peoples to the past, ignoring their ongoing presence and claims to the dispossessed lands often used as models of collaborative conservation. Importantly, in the absence of a serious and explicit engagement with the history and structuring power of settler colonialism, the RC cedes ground to white supremacist narratives—see, for example, discourse around the Malheur takeover, in which populists invoked "ancestral rights" to public lands while ignoring the claims of local tribes (Dickson, 2014; Glionna, 2016; Inwood and Bonds, 2017; see also Fortmann, 1990; Van Sant and Bosworth, 2017). While resource users may speak in terms of rights, traditions, and belonging, they do so on stolen land.[28]

The history of wolf removal in the West is likewise inseparable from settler colonialism (see Wise, 2016), and much of the wolf question today broadly hinges on the ideas of *non/belonging* (see Wolch and Emel, 1998; Philo and Wilbert, 2000, on non/belonging in animal geography more generally). Even otherwise conservation-minded ranchers, including many sheep producers I spoke with,

26. While some have argued that Leopold's land ethic presents "a potential option for bringing together environmentalists of all heritages in North America based on a common ethical orientation," there are also "serious issues" in drawing too close a comparison between the land ethic and indigenous perspectives (Whyte, 2015, p. 2). As Liboiron (2021, p. 23) puts it, there are dangers in a "we" that "erases difference and power relations"—to say nothing of indigenous erasure in Leopold's own work, e.g., the claim that there was, prior to the land ethic, "no ethic dealing with man's [sic] relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it" (1966, p. 238).

27. These questions are not disconnected from my own research: in Idaho, a booming sheep economy only emerged following the Nez Perce War of 1877 and the Bannock War of 1878; over a century later, the Nez Perce would play a key role in wolf management and monitoring following reintroduction (Wilson, 1999; see also https://www.nezpercewildlife.org/gray-wolf).

28. Such blind spots are shared with Leopold himself, who "did not directly address the reality that the boundaries of human community also needed significant enlargement (along the lines of race, class, and gender) in order to achieve widespread transformation of society" (Van Auken, 2020, p. 43).

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struggle with wolves—ironically, given the centrality of wolves in Leopold's "Thinking Like a Mountain"—highlighting the lingering presence of antagonistic and colonial attitudes toward nature. As Sheridan notes, both environmentalists and ranchers in the West have often "perceive[d] humans as external to Nature, above or at least outside it" —the former through ideas of wilderness and neo-protectionism, and the latter in viewing the land and other species as adversaries (2007, p. 133; cf. Leopold, 1966, pp. 261, 262). Although the region has seen notable moves toward "mutualism" (Manfredo et al., 2003; Manfredo et al., 2020), attitude and value shifts are uneven across diverse and heterogenous populations, and "values gaps" persist between social groups and between publics and managing agencies (see Bonnie et al., 2020; van Eeden et al., 2021; Edelblutte et al., 2023). This dynamic is thrown into sharp relief in discourse surrounding wolves, in which a restored native species is framed as a foreign invader and thereby out of place and delegitimized, as seen in regional discussions of "Canadian wolves"—supposedly bigger, meaner, and hungrier than the wolves of the past (Martin, 2020).[29]

Again, questions of belonging are inseparable from questions of community, and there is a more-than-etymological link between *community* and the *commons*. Singh (2017) connects commoning with community (or collaborative) governance, as well as ideas of "being-in-common"—with further potential links to CC's "living with" and human–wildlife coexistence. In this, we also see parallels with indigenous scholarship and ways of knowing, grounded in respect, reciprocity, and relationship to place—as Larsen and Johnson put it, "[c]oexistence begins in place" (2017, p. 1). Such thinking, following Whyte, "center[s] value on the harmony of the biotic community and qualif[ies] human status as relational" (2015, p. 1), embracing even inconvenient natures like wolves as cohabitants and relatives (Larsen and Johnson, 2017, p. 18). With commoning—in part through cross-pollination with decolonial and feminist PE critiques—questions of in/exclusion and non/belonging are brought to the fore, complicating simple visions of "the community" with questions of power and thus also linking to contemporary discussions of decolonization (Nightingale, 2019; see also Wesner et al., 2019). Büscher and Fletcher likewise emphasize CC's "concern with historical justice and thorough decolonization" (2020, p. 187).

There are notable and important synergies between PE and decolonial scholarship (Wesner et al., 2019; Zanotti et al., 2020), and although efforts by settler scholars to bridge indigenous and western ontologies must be made cautiously and with respect, there is potential in building on these affinities toward an alternative way of thinking and politics for the future (Richmond et al., 2013; Whyte, 2015; Larsen and Johnson, 2017; Burow et al., 2018). Wolfe (2006) has importantly argued that settler colonialism is best understood as "a structure not an event." We might add, following insights from commoning, that it is also ongoing and processual. As Ellam Yua et al. (2022) then explain, "[d]ecolonization is the intentional and active process of recognizing and counteracting processes, structures, and institutions imposed on Indigenous Peoples."[30] Here, the position of the *landowner*—so emphasized by the RC and Leopold—becomes most obviously in tension with the aims of commoning and conviviality. Communal obligations already sit uneasily alongside a "framework of private tenure and entrepreneurship accentuated by the region's frontier heritage of rugged individualism" (Sheridan, 2007, p. 127), and landownership itself is bound up with a history of expropriation and ongoing patterns of exclusion (Nichols, 2020). Thus, moves toward conviviality may necessitate difficult but important conversations—and actions—around property, land ownership, and governance. Büscher and Fletcher stress that such questions are "anything but straightforward," but will likely require historic reparations and reconciliation efforts (2020, pp. 186, 187; see also Turner, 2017, p. 799).

4.4. Getting from here to there

Courtney White, one of the cofounders of the Quivira Coalition and prominent writer from the RC, has noted that while the RC has been "developed and field-tested," it lacks both "an economic model that values regeneration and restoration" and strong leadership "to break through business-as-usual paradigms and policies" (2014, p. 93). As shown above, much of what Büscher and Fletcher's CC seeks ought to resonate with people in the West, as it speaks to concerns of community and environmental sustainability while addressing many of the long-standing critiques of mainstream and neo-protectionist conservation in favor of bottom-up collaborative decision-making. Insights from commoning, in turn, might provide just the sort of economic model that White hopes for. Yet getting from the RC to CC requires engagement with histories of colonial violence and dispossession, the patterns of capitalist political economy, and a decolonial dealienation of humans from nonhuman natures—difficult yet necessary questions for moving toward a new paradigm of life-in-common (García-López et al., 2021).

Although a commons framing may be inappropriate to questions of the public domain given the central role played by the federal government, *commoning's* emphasis on complex and ambiguous relations "beyond state and market" (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014) makes a valuable lens for considering contemporary struggles over public lands and collaborative environmental governance in the region. In this, commoning also serves to

29. See also Olwig (2003) and Robbins and Moore (2013) for important caveats to a "nativeness" framing.

30. Importantly, as Liboiron (2021, p. 26) notes, "there are many colonizations and thus many decolonizations," with the term too often used in a shallow form that leaves colonial land relations "securely in place." Hence, Tuck and Yang (2012) note how "[t]he metaphorization of decolonization makes possible a set of evasions, or 'settler moves to innocence', that problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity."

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link the aims of the RC to regional communitarian alternatives—whether those promoted by John Wesley Powell in the 19th century (Stegner, 1992 [1962]; Starrs, 2002, pp. 11, 12; Sheridan, 2007, p. 124) or the collectivist responses to political economic pressures discussed above—and even to degrowth and solidarity economy alternatives from other contexts (Schneider et al., 2010; De Angelis, 2013, p. 608). Commoning diverges from the RC in its move away from a private property framework and promotion of a post-capitalist, if not anti-capitalist, ethos of community obligation and the common good, and in highlighting the need to engage with questions of power and in/exclusion bound up with settler colonialism. Although this presents a significant hurdle, especially in the face of the region's durable patterns of polarization and division, commoning might also help us move from contemporary "common sense" toward ways otherwise—through the bottom-up formation of both commons and *commoners* with "other-than-capitalist subjectivities" (Singh, 2017, p. 769)—who, following Büscher and Fletcher, might build place-based alternatives to reactionary populism.

The American West presents a palimpsest landscape of layered dispossessions, attempted erasures, and conflicting claims to the past and future (Martin et al., 2019; see also Meinig, 1979; Drenthen, 2015). Büscher and Fletcher's CC builds from decades of scholarship from political ecologists and fellow travelers in the socio-environmental sciences—along with the efforts of social movements from around the world—toward an environmental politics more adequate to our contemporary global challenges. Bringing CC into dialogue with the American West, as I have begun here, helps clarify the central tensions of the region's environmental politics while advancing a radical rethinking of the RC that simultaneously helps ground and develop what CC could mean in practice. The provocation of CC in turn raises the thorny question of *how we get from here to there*. How do we bridge the gap between these normative aspirations (of coexistence, multispecies justice, and sustainability) and realities on the ground (of multiple-use tensions, deep-seated polarization, and more existential concerns over the value of public lands)? The value of commoning here lies in helping us name and navigate such challenges, clarifying the enduring contradictions faced by collaborative efforts like the WRWP and providing a potential path forward. The dialogue begun here also serves to disrupt the too-frequent conflation between reactionary politics and rural landscapes by providing another radical alternative—radical in the sense of *rooted*—to the commonsense stories of the region. Through this, coexistence is reconnected with its "transformative roots" in conviviality (Fiasco and Massarella, 2022): if coexistence implies living with troublesome nonhuman natures despite the associated conflicts and costs (Martin et al., 2021), we might then conceptualize conviviality as co-flourishing, in which sustainable rural livelihoods and wildlife conservation each provides the preconditions for the other.

5. Staying with the trouble

> *"We shall never achieve harmony with [the] land, any more than we shall achieve absolute justice or liberty for people. In these higher aspirations, the important thing is not to achieve, but to strive"*
>
> —Aldo Leopold, *Round River* (1953, p. 155)

The wolf question, along with the perennial challenges of public lands governance, provides a fruitful lens onto global themes of landscape-scale environmental change, rural political economic transformation, and populist revolt. Since the 1990s, efforts from the RC have sought to address such issues through collaborative experimentation and local stewardship, in parallel with community-based natural resource management around the world. However, the recent history of rural reaction and enduring polarization surrounding wolves demonstrates the inadequacy of both environmental politics-as-usual and the RC alternatives on offer for addressing the challenges of multispecies coexistence in the Anthropocene. To quote Wall's *The Commons in History*, "[w]e need to ask why many environmental policies appear to be failing at present and to what extent commons-based solutions provide an alternative" (2014, p. 104).

As many have noted regarding the American West, we also need "another set of stories" (Langston, 1995, p. 300; see also Brugger et al., 2020; Lybecker, 2020)—an alternative vocabulary and narratives with which we might speak to the challenges of the future while critically contending with the sins of the past. Elsewhere, I have emphasized the importance of dialogue and cross-contextual learning (Martin et al., 2019), thinking disparate traditions together through their congruences. As the epigraph above implies, whether such dialogues achieve this aim or not, there is value in these interventions for providing alternative visions and ways of relating and being in place. The vision presented here is not one of easy harmony; coexistence and conviviality emphasize not the absence of conflict but rather "staying with the trouble," collectively contending with the challenges of living with and through this building a basis for a future of hope (Haraway, 2016; see also Martin et al., 2021).

Based on a genealogical exploration of western environmental politics and my own research on wolf–livestock conflict and land use change, I have argued here for the value of commoning as a bridging analytic between the RC and CC. Commoning provides a lens for reorienting our perceptions and practices, giving name to the structural challenges that stand in the way of convivial futures, and navigating the gap between a focus on individual rights and the need for collective, more-than-human responsibilities. Building community and sharing space are not easy, and in the American West especially we think and act on "complex and compromised terrain" (Liboiron, 2021, p. 21). The questions of capitalism and colonialism raised here are difficult yet necessary engagements for realizing the aims of the land ethic and conviviality in the region. The nexus of wolf–livestock conflict and public lands governance, in turn,

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presents a valuable site for exploring these questions and a potential entry point for conflict transformation and communitarian alternatives. Grafting CC onto the tree of American environmental politics, cross-pollinated with insights from commoning, might yet bear fruit: speaking to the challenges of the present while nourishing future possibilities.

Data accessibility statement

No online data sets for this article were generated. The participants of this study did not give consent for their data to be shared publicly, but anonymized portions of supporting findings are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

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The author declares that no competing interests exist. JVM played no role during the review process of this article, and this is ensured by the publisher.

Author contributions

All work presented here is that of the author, JVM.

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