The right to fail? Problematizing failure discourse in international conservation

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ABSTRACT

A growing body of critical research interrogates the tendency within international conservation circles to present interventions as successful, even when evidence points to substantial negative impacts. The flip side of this 'selling' success is a growing emphasis on the importance of embracing and even celebrating failure. Yet this important trend in international conservation policymaking has yet to be examined in depth. We address this research gap by first tracing the origins of the embracing failure narrative, linking it to the historical handling of failure in conservation and in fields such as business management and international development. We then explore the implications of this framing of failure for international conservation policy and practice by examining relevant policy literature and illustrative case studies in Tanzania and Peru. Based on this analysis, we demonstrate how a 'right to fail' can justify both continuing and discontinuing conservation interventions in highly problematic ways. We show how the framing of failure as a positive outcome for global learning can reduce accountability for significant and long-lasting negative consequences of failed interventions. Furthermore, the emphasis on approaches to learning that employ narrow technical frames can depoliticize issues and limit possibilities to fundamentally question and transform dominant conservation models with histories of persistent failure. Consequently, we argue that by affording interventions the 'right to fail', conservation actors with a stake in dominant models have taken control of failure discourse in ways that reinforce instead of undermine their ability to 'sell' success amidst negative (or limited) local outcomes. While it is of course important to acknowledge failure in order not to repeat it, we caution against embracing failure in ways that may further exacerbate conservation injustices and hinder transformative societal change. We advocate instead for an explicitly political approach to addressing failure in conservation.

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1. Introduction

A growing body of literature problematizes the 'selling' of success narratives in conservation and development, demonstrating the ease with which such narratives tend to proliferate despite often grossly misrepresenting project outcomes (Büscher, 2014; Svarstad & Benjaminsen, 2017; To & Dressler, 2019). In response to this critique, and a growing sense that many projects indeed fail to achieve intended outcomes, conservation researchers and practitioners have increasingly turned instead to acknowledging and addressing this 'failure' itself (Catalano, Lyons-White, Mills, & Knight, 2019; McShane & Wells, 2004; Redford, Padoch, &

Sunderland, 2013). Despite this burgeoning emphasis on failure, however, there has been very little critical discussion of how this discourse functions in relation to the persistent success narratives of dominant international conservation models, or of its implications for the recipients of failed conservation interventions.

In this article, we address this research gap by tracking the trajectory of failure narratives in conservation (see overview in Fig. 1). We begin by examining how 'failure' has been historically handled in conservation, from an early exploitation of failure to promote competing conservation models, towards widespread suppression of failure in narratives that 'sell' success. Recently, however, these conventional strategies have become insufficient to address growing documentation of and concerns over project failure. Thus, conservation efforts have increasingly turned towards confronting their own failure head on by openly acknowledging and discussing it in order to learn the lessons failure ostensibly holds for future practice (Catalano et al., 2019; Wilkie, Stevens, & Margoluis,

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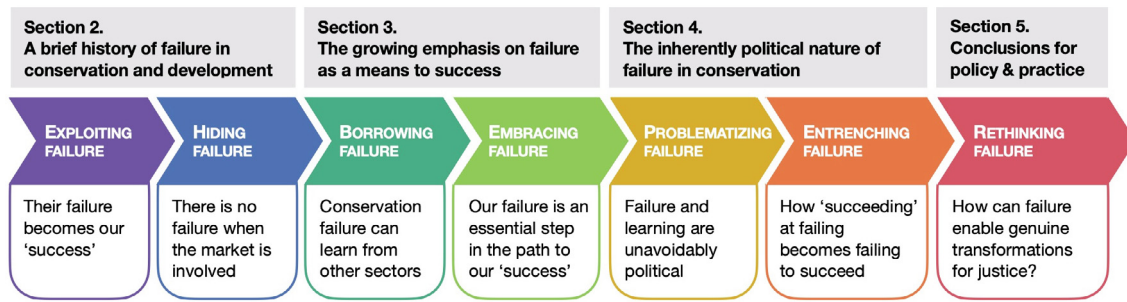
Fig. 1. An overview of the main failure narratives explored in this paper, listed in the order presented. The linear progression does not reflect the many chronological overlaps across these narratives.

2019). In the process, conservationists have drawn lessons from other sectors, such as business, technology, aviation and development, which have increasingly acknowledged and even celebrated failure in their own future planning.

Following these trends, there is now widespread recognition of the importance of promoting openness and sharing around conservation failures to learn from and build on past experiences, rather than simply repackaging old approaches (Redford & Taber, 2000; Knight, 2006; Redford et al., 2013; Catalano, Redford, Margoluis, & Knight, 2018). While this is of course important, little work has been done thus far to critically examine the particular way of framing and handling failure that has emerged in conservation, as in other realms, wherein the exploration of failure is increasingly seen as an essential step on the path to eventual success. This approach is now present on the international stage via the establishment of initiatives that focus explicitly on failure in conservation, including the "Failure Factors" initiative (WCS 2020) and the "Embracing Failure in Conservation" project (Dickson, 2019). Its effects are also found at the project scale, where international donors and local project managers alike are turning their attention towards failure in certain conservation sites, and responding in particular ways. By problematizing the growing attention to conservation failure in this paper, we do not seek to criticize the important attention that these efforts are giving towards failure. Rather we aim to foster reflection over current ways of framing and handling failure, with the purpose of constructively exploring alternative approaches to failure that may better address biodiversity loss and social injustice.

In our analysis of these dynamics, we combine discourse analysis of policy discussions with the results of ethnographic research in Tanzania and Peru on how failure is dealt with in conservation interventions. We find that a 'right to fail' risks reducing accountability for projects' negative impacts on local people. We identify both a 'right to discontinue' mentality that frames local projects as serving broader lessons learned towards eventual global success, and a 'right to continue' mentality that fosters recognition of failure and 'learning' based on relatively narrow definitions of success and failure, to then justify continuing practices with adverse local outcomes. These dynamics combine to further entrench existing international conservation models and thereby foreclose consideration of alternative models with greater transformative potential. We conclude by highlighting that a partial approach to failure promoted by the same international actors with a stake in maintaining current dominant models may serve to further the unwarranted sale of 'success'. We therefore emphasize the need to address the concept of failure in ways that offer genuine potential to transform dominant models of intervention in favor of more socially and ecologically just alternatives and offer some suggestions for achieving this.

2. A brief history of failure in conservation and development

There is growing recognition that international conservation strategies implemented over the past half century have broadly failed to achieve intended outcomes (Asiyanbi & Lund, 2020; Blaikie, 2006; Brechin, Wilshusen, Fortwangler, & West, 2002; Chambers, Del Aguila Mejía, Ramírez Reátegui, & Sandbrook, 2019; Lund, Sungusia, Mabele, & Scheba, 2017; McShane & Wells, 2004; Redford et al., 2013). In this brief section, we do not attempt to provide a comprehensive history of how or why various approaches to conservation and development have failed. Rather, we illuminate some broad historical trends regarding how failure has often been framed and managed – from exploiting to hiding failure (Fig. 1). These trends have helped pave the way for more recent efforts that explicitly embrace failure in conservation (elaborated in section 3).

2.1. Exploiting failure: their failure becomes our 'success'

It is widely acknowledged that longstanding approaches to conservation, such as the creation of strict protected areas (PAs) and community-based conservation (CBC), have largely failed to limit global biodiversity decline, and in many cases have led to concerning social impacts (Adams & Hutton, 2007; Duffy et al., 2019; Kelly & Ybarra, 2016; Lele, Wilshusen, Brockington, Seidler, & Bawa, 2010). The rise of CBC, beginning in the 1980s, was indeed framed precisely as a response to the growing conviction that strict PAs were commonly failing to adequately preserve biodiversity while also adversely impacting local residents (Hutton, Adams, & Murombedzi, 2005). CBC promised, by contrast, to redress both issues by encouraging local residents to support conservation both within and beyond PAs via cultivation of sustainable livelihoods that would minimize their need to rely on endangered natural resources (Mulder & Coppolillo, 2005). However, by the next decade, disenchantment over the widespread failure of CBC to achieve these envisioned aims, often diagnosed as due to the fact that conservation and economic development were contradictory goals (McShane et al., 2011), led to a resurgence of a 'back to the barriers' strict protectionist approach (Hutton et al., 2005). In this way, early approaches to addressing failure in conservation were marked by the strategic exploitation of particular framings of failure to justify the introduction of novel (or revived) approaches that claimed to offer greater potential for success. This approach to framing failure is still apparent today – for example, by emphasizing the failure of destructive human activities to mobilize protectionist and 'militarized' approaches to conservation in parts of the world (Büscher et al., 2017; Duffy et al., 2019; Kelly & Ybarra, 2016; Lunstrum, 2014). Efforts to exploit failure have led to the enthusiastic adoption of 'conservation fads' that are then abandoned and replaced

by a new fad once they fail to live up to expectations (Lund et al., 2017; Redford et al., 2013).

2.2. Hiding failure (i.e. selling 'success'): there is no failure when the market is involved

As recognition of the social and ecological limitations of both PA enforcement and CBC grew, 'the market' appeared to offer yet another novel strategy to overcome past conservation failure. From the perspective of what has become termed 'neoliberal conservation' (see Apostolopoulou et al., 2021), it was argued that reliance on neoliberal markets to generate finance could more effectively, efficiently and equitably generate social benefits to incentivize conservation, thereby creating 'win-win' outcomes for people and nature (Pagiola, Bishop, & Landell-Mills, 2002). In contrast to their historical exclusion of local people, many PA managers thus began to integrate participatory and neoliberal discourses and strategies to attempt to redress pronouncements of previous failure (Chambers et al., 2019; Holmes, 2015; McElwee, Nghiem, Le, Vu, & Tran, 2014). They argued that local people no longer had to be displaced or forced to conserve, but instead could actually obtain economic benefits from conservation, which would ostensibly convert them into long-term conservation allies (Chambers et al., 2019; Fletcher, 2010). Thus, rather than viewing PAs, CBC and market-based conservation as distinct and antagonistic approaches, it is now commonplace to see neoliberal conservation projects employ a range of market-based, participatory and protectionist strategies in different combinations to conjoin conservation and development objectives (Chambers et al., 2019; Fletcher, 2017).

Since the early 2000s, neoliberal conservation has rapidly expanded worldwide via a range of so-called 'market-based instruments' (MBIs) including ecotourism, eco-certification, sustainable agricultural intensification, payment for ecosystem services (PES) and reduced emissions from deforestation and degradation (REDD+), facilitated by new private–public sector alliances (Arsel & Büscher, 2012). With the growth of global conservation networks and models, the stakes for donors and organizations to demonstrate success to enhance reputation, resource access and power reached a new high (Büscher, 2014). This has resulted in an even greater turnover of conservation fads, with each failure explained by simplistic factors, such as lack of implementation capacity or interference of non-market factors in market mechanisms, as opposed to deeper questioning of the solutions themselves and their win–win discourses (Li, 2016; Lund et al., 2017; Redford et al., 2013). Numerous studies have demonstrated the ease and frequency with which organizations manage to 'sell success' despite substantial conservation failures and social harms on the ground (Büscher, 2014; Cavanagh & Benjaminsen, 2014; Mosse, 2004; Moyo, Ijumba, & Lund, 2016; Singh, Liebrand, & Joshi, 2014; Svarstad & Benjaminsen, 2017; To & Dressler, 2019; Warner & van Buuren, 2011).

One important aspect is how project evaluations are often designed in ways that discursively position paradigms driving interventions as successful even when projects could otherwise be seen to have failed (Massarella, Sallu, & Ensor, 2020; Mosse, 2008). This positive translation of project outcomes has been aided in part by the growing emphasis on technical and measurable outputs, such as the percentage of area under conservation management, which can be readily "sugar-coated" in their communication to donors (Büscher, 2014). These measurement processes have been shown to themselves be performative in how they can reinforce certain intervention pathways, such as an emphasis on carbon stocks cementing fortress style approaches in MBI development (Leach & Scoones, 2013). On the other hand, attention to rigorous forms of monitoring has also opened up space for newfound critiques of dominant models, such as through the use of randomized control trials (RCTs) to demonstrate how interventions are not fulfilling their promises for conservation (e.g. Wiik et al., 2019; Wilebore, Voors, Bulte, Coomes, & Kontoleon, 2019).

Given mounting critiques and challenges to these overarching intervention models and their 'win-win' claims, as well as clear evidence that global conservation efforts have thus far done little to halt overall biodiversity loss or climate change while exacerbating social inequality (see Büscher & Fletcher, 2020), organizations and donors have recently been pushed to explicitly engage with the concept of 'failure' in new, more direct ways. Yet the relationship between selling success and this growing recognition of failure has yet to be systematically addressed within the research previously outlined. Our analysis thus offers an important contribution to this discussion.

3. The growing emphasis on failure as a means to success

Within conservation circles, evidence of widespread failure reached a point that it could no longer be swept under the rug – particularly by many well-intentioned conservationists who want to see their efforts lead to beneficial outcomes for both nature and people. Calls to explicitly acknowledge and systematically evaluate past failure in future conservation planning are therefore growing in strength, including in relation to recognition of the proliferation of conservation fads (Redford et al., 2013). Redford et al. (2013: 438) thus caution that "we must take such fads more seriously, to work collectively to develop learning organizations... and study where new ideas come from... why they are adopted, why they are dropped, and what residual learning remains". Yet conservationists certainly did not initiate this emphasis on systematically integrating learning from failure in institutional development and decision making. In the following subsections, we trace the origins of the embracing failure narrative within other sectors including management, medicine, technology, and development. We then show how narratives, including the idea of failure as a stepping stone to success and the need to treat projects as policy experiments, have been borrowed from other sectors and have influenced the way in which conservation increasingly frames failure. We conceptualize this as 'borrowing' failure towards 'embracing' failure (Fig. 1).

3.1. Borrowing failure: conservation failure can learn from other sectors

An emphasis on the importance of systematically acknowledging and learning from failure has been growing for some time now in fields as diverse as management, technology, medicine and development. Within management studies, for instance, leadership guru John Maxwell published an influential book in 2000 called *Failing Forward: Turning Mistakes into Stepping Stones for Success* in which he claimed, "Failure is simply a price we pay to achieve success. If we learn to embrace that new definition of failure, then we are free to start moving ahead—and failing forward" (Maxwell, 2000: 343–344). Maxwell elaborated, "If you can change the way you see failure, you gain the strength to keep running the race. Get a new definition of failure. Regard it as the price you pay for progress. If you can do that, you will put yourself in a much better position to fail forward" (ibid: 384). His book is filled with similar quotations from others offering similar advice.

We have since seen the rise of management consultancy firms explicitly selling their focus on failure. Consider Fail Forward, a Toronto-based firm that defines itself as "the world's first failure consultancy" and its mission to "support people and organizations to acknowledge, create and evolve from failure."[1]. They explain, "Not many would call themselves Failure Experts. I do. And with great pride… Fail Forward helps businesses, governments and non-profits harness their failures to learn, innovate and build resilience". Through the trainings, coaching sessions, event design workshops, and other activities they offer, Fail Forward thus promises to "help people reach their full potential by turning failure into insights, innovation, and inspiration."[2]

There is also a growing focus on failure in international development policymaking, with Best (2014: 3) observing that "[o]ver the past two decades, the main organizations involved in financing international development have become preoccupied with the problem of failure". For example, in his critique of the largely ineffective outcomes of development interventions implemented throughout the world in the second half of the twentieth century, Rondinelli (1993) argues that this widespread failure is largely due to the fact that most interventions had been planned as rigid blueprints that proved inappropriate and inflexible in the face of unforeseen exigencies and complexities in the contexts in which they were implemented. Hence, he advocates an approach to understanding development projects as "policy experiments" implemented via an "adaptive management" approach that allows them to be revised in the course of learning in the field. Part of this alternate strategy entails explicitly acknowledging and accepting failure as part of this learning process. Particularly in the case of 'pilot' projects, "innovative techniques, organizational reforms or 'foreign methods' may be tested on a small scale, usually without incurring massive resistance or obstruction by those benefiting from the status quo" (Rondinelli, 1993: 138–139). Favorably quoting Hapgood (1965: 113), Rondinelli thus asserts that since "[p]ilot studies do not engage the prestige of the national bureaucracy… [i]f one proves unworkable – and it should be stressed that a high proportion of such experiments will probably fail – it can be abandoned or drastically altered without serious loss of face" (Rondinelli, 1993: 138).

This growing preoccupation with failure and its implications, Best contends, has produced a wholesale change in how international development interventions are conceived and governed, prompting introduction of a suite of "new practices of governance" that "are more preoccupied with the problem of failure: its ever-present possibility, its many sources in the form of risks or dysfunctional politics, and the need to avoid it at all costs" Best (2014: 7). Among these novel practices she identifies four as particularly prevalent: "fostering ownership, developing global standards, managing risk and vulnerability, and measuring results" (ibid: 5).

Consequently, failure narratives have become increasingly widespread in international development arenas (Best, 2014), such as through the creation of "Failure Reports" (e.g. EWB Canada, 2017) and "Fail Festivals", which advocate "celebration of failure as a mark of leadership, innovation, and risk-taking in pushing the boundaries of what is possible in scaling ideas from pilots to global programs"[3]. As we show below, emerging initiatives to embrace failure in conservation often cite such projects and discussions from business, management and development fields to foreground the role that explicit attention to failure can play in paving a path towards eventual success.

3.2. Embracing failure: our failure is an essential step in the path to our 'success'

Bolstered by the failure discourse emerging from other fields, the international conservation community has increasingly sought to develop initiatives that explicitly focus on acknowledging and more effectively managing failure. In contrast to the exploitation of others' failures to further a particular approach, this growing narrative directly acknowledges people's *own* role in past failures. Proponents of this focus on failure in conservation argue that people tend to report and share successes, but that a lot more can be learned from failure, and that people need to feel safe both to fail and to admit to this failure in order to foster learning (Catalano et al., 2019; Redford & Taber, 2000). As Redford & Taber explain,

Few have ever been rewarded for anything other than success. We in the conservation business have locked ourselves into a straitjacket of partial truths. Inside this straitjacket we will not achieve effective conservation because we will never learn. Learning requires experimentation, and experimentation sometimes means failure. When failure is not tolerated, learning will never take place. (2000: 1568)

Consequently, alliances have emerged between conservation organizations and scientists seeking to embrace failure and create safer environments in which to innovate, experiment and learn from failure – all in the name of improving conservation. These efforts have been facilitated by the growing trend in conservation science to develop more rigorous evidence bases to identify which strategies do or do not 'work', and understand why this is the case (Brooks, Waylen, & Mulder, 2013; Ferraro, Pattanayak, & Mace, 2006; Sutherland, Pullin, Dolman, & Knight, 2004). This evidence-based approach places particular emphasis on the need to create clearly defined and measurable goals early in the planning process (Blom, Sunderland, & Murdiyarso, 2010; Morandi, Piégay, Lamouroux, & Vaudor, 2014). As conservation behavior change consultant Brooke Tully explains, if success is "never clearly defined to begin with… it's nearly impossible to know if failure has occurred… you must know what you want to achieve" (Tully, 2019).

Emerging failure initiatives have therefore focused particularly on understanding the views of practitioners regarding implementation of their goals. As an example, the Cambridge Conservation Initiative's (CCI's) project "Embracing Failure in Conservation"[4], which began in 2018, starts by acknowledging that the conservation sector is broadly failing to achieve its mission. They argue that there has been "a lack of standardization in the way that conservation failures are reported", and that this "limits efforts to gather, analyze and summarize information from multiple cases and mainstream learning into the hands of those who would find it useful" (Dickson, no date: 25). They claim that other sectors such as medicine and aviation have already demonstrated progress from "systematically recording, discussing and learning from failure" (ibid: 2). As a result, CCI worked with conservation organizations to develop a "taxonomy of root causes of failure in conservation"[5] to support such efforts. Their taxonomy, available online in the form of a survey designed to test it[5], focuses on six main aspects related to the ability of conservation organizations to achieve their goals: 1) Planning/design/-knowledge (e.g. poor knowledge of context, insufficient stakeholder consultation); 2) implementation (e.g. poor communication, lack of staff motivation); 3) internal governance structures (e.g.

poorly defined roles and responsibilities, unclear legal structures); 4) resources (e.g. insufficient funding levels, insufficient technical expertise); 5) relationships with external stakeholders (e.g. community support, government corruption); 6) unexpected external events (e.g. natural disaster, insecurity).

In 2019, a second failure initiative, the Wildlife Conservation Society's (WCS) "Failure Factors" project, was established. This initiative aims to "create a safe space for sharing information and experience to allow us to harvest the lessons offered by failure more easily" (WCS, 2020). The idea is to create a "cultural shift" within conservation funding and implementing institutions to take advantage of the learning that can be gleaned from errors without stigmatizing the people behind them. Similar to CCI, Failure Factors argues that "the military, aviation and engineering sectors have long embraced failure to learn and adapt, and the tech sector is increasingly pushing for a similar cultural change. The development and conservation sectors have been slower to adopt" (Wilkie et al. 2019: 1). WCS is facilitating the creation of a platform to allow people to anonymously share and discuss "things that did not work out as expected, even within otherwise successful projects… [to help] teams and organizations to learn faster and avoid the same pitfalls in the future" (ibid: 1). One of the initiative's leaders explains their work through the following analogy:

> David loves to bake bread. Each time it is an experiment that relies on a never truly understood, almost magical, transformation of yeast, water, and flour into an airy, crispy, edible platform for butter, cheese, jam, or anything. When he makes a perfect loaf, he doesn't think about it. He simply lets it cool (well, not always) and eats it gleefully with family and friends. But when he botches a new or even a tried-and-true recipe, he ponders deeply about why it failed and what must be done in the future to avoid repeating the same mistake.

> Though bakers like David learn from their mistakes, they rarely if ever make them public. Along similar lines, people working to conserve nature and improve people's lives may not report failures because they may worry about compromising their own and their organization's reputations and jeopardizing future support. Neither organizations nor individual professionals who have worked hard to be regarded as experts are anxious to be associated with failure.

> To address those concerns, WCS is taking the lead in launching what we are currently calling the Failure Factors Initiative. We hope to identify ways that individuals, teams and their organizations can grow to value failure, learn from it, and improve their decisions and actions, making our efforts to conserve nature and benefit humanity more effective and quicker to adapt to change. (Wilkie et al. 2019: 1)

The WCS and CCI initiatives, which both seek to learn from failures post-hoc to facilitate future success, are still evolving in their framing of failure and developing outputs. Thus, their impacts on people's perspectives and handling of failure in practice in the long run remain to be seen. However, general assertions of the need to learn quickly from both project failure and success have already shaped the fundamental design of conservation interventions on the ground in various ways. One of these is through the expansion of 'pilot projects', similar to the development approach advocated by Rondinelli (1993), particularly within the framework of broad funding regimes that aim to test and refine approaches prior to rolling them out (such as REDD+ piloting schemes, further discussed in section 4.2) (Asiyanbi & Massarella, 2020; Massarella et al., 2018). Research examining the implications of this 'pilot' approach remains scarce. Some studies argue for the importance of pilot projects to facilitate broader learning (Ameha, Larsen, & Lemenih, 2014; Caplow, Jagger, Lawlor, & Sills, 2011), while others

have shown how the logic of using pilot projects as a short-term test to expand innovation and impact can create "hype and disappointment cycles", wherein standardized assessment procedures help legitimize global 'fads' that are deemed too big to fail (Massarella et al., 2018: 377).

A major assumption in these emerging conservation initiatives that seek to learn from failure is that the root causes of failure can be standardized across cases and common lessons drawn to improve future interventions, such as has been done in other sectors like aviation, medicine, business and technology. However, due to the strong emphasis on analyzing failure and success in direct relation to conservationists' goals and intentions, it is no surprise that acknowledgement of failures and proposed solutions have similarly been strongly linked to implementation issues. For example, findings already emerging from studies that have examined conservation failures advocate for solutions such as: collating and leveraging available information to improve design; improving stakeholder relations and communication strategies; tailoring strategies to local contexts; and managing fear of failure (Catalano et al., 2019; Howes et al., 2017; Meek et al., 2015). While some studies point to barriers related to broader economic and political factors, such as an "overriding imperative for production", such barriers are often reframed as merely providing "no incentive for conservation" (Catalano et al., 2019: 4), thus neglecting to consider the underlying reasons for documented dynamics like economic profitability or weak political will. Embracing failure can therefore strengthen original commitments to failed strategies – for example, by explaining the failure of market mechanisms in conservation as being due to not engaging the market to a sufficient degree, rather than acknowledging what others have claimed are fundamental problems with the basic nature of market mechanisms (Fletcher, 2013).

The emerging model for embracing (and in some cases even celebrating) failure in conservation has therefore focused particularly on issues of design and implementation, rather than on fundamentally questioning the nature of adopted approaches. Approaches have become grounded in local level pilot/testing sites for innovation, as well as exploration aggregated into a standardized global evidence base where 'fail-safe' cultures are encouraged to learn and adapt or 'scale' approaches. Yet such projects typically operate at a superficial level, never fully engaging with nor reflecting the complex, messy, political realities that characterize biodiversity governance (Balboa, 2018; Li, 2016; Massarella et al., 2020; Myers et al., 2018), leading to a number of potential implications that will be explored in the next section.

4. The inherently political nature of failure in conservation

The framing of failure outlined in section 3 is thus partial and disconnected from research that sheds light on the political and practical implications of embracing failure in this way. Here, we explore literature that demonstrates the unavoidably political nature of failure before highlighting some problematic implications of the dominant framing of failure for negatively impacting local lives in project areas and inhibiting broader scale change in dominant conservation models. By 'problematizing' failure, we set the stage for exploring how current framings risk 'entrenching' failure (Fig. 1).

4.1. Problematizing failure: failure and learning are unavoidably political

The growing literature problematizing 'failure' sees it not as something that can be objectively studied at a broad scale to rationally improve theory for better outcomes, but rather as a

social construct typically valued more for its discursive appeal than its predictive value (Beunen, Van Assche, & Duineveld, 2013; Blaikie, 2006; Joseph, 2016; Mosse, 2004). For example, ideas may be adopted to defend a viewpoint or secure legitimacy and power, which may have little to do with their potential to actually work (Redford et al., 2013; Warner & van Buuren, 2011). Indeed, 'failure' and 'success' are performed in diverse ways, such as by repeating convenient criteria, aligning with particular allies, or incorporating a story into a more visible discourse (Beunen et al., 2013; Van Assche, Beunen, & Duineveld, 2012). The criteria for judging failure can even strategically shift over time, as evidenced by how many conservation policies are increasingly criticized for failing to demonstrate efficiency and profitability, even though this was peripheral to original aims (Beunen et al., 2013; Boda, 2016). Given the wide range of possible interpretations and performances, it is easy for success to be found if one is motivated to do so, especially when definitions are so often predisposed to find it (Blaikie, 2006; McConnell, 2010). Conversely, every 'success' can also be reinterpreted as a 'failure' (Venugopal, 2018), and actors work hard to maintain representations of success and failure that are most in their interests (Mosse, 2004). If organizations begin to align in their framing of 'success' or 'failure', and in the solutions these interpretations point to, it can become harder and harder to introduce alternative assessment criteria and narratives (Van Assche et al., 2012).

When examining the emerging global failure initiatives in light of this literature, it becomes apparent that one particular framing of failure is typically promoted. In the previous section, an initiator of WCS's Failure Factors offers an analogy of the baker 'David' to demonstrate how sharing his failures in bread making helped to improve his recipes to create success for himself and others. This analogy places David – tellingly, a male individual – in the position of 'expert', responsible for refining the ideal combination of ingredients to pursue his desired outcome. The framing of CCI's failure taxonomy is similar, in its prioritization of the views and interests of conservation organizations, even referring in their survey to local communities as "*external* stakeholders" [5]. As the bread maker, David is given the power to frame 'failure' as the making of bad bread, and to decide when and how failure has or has not occurred. The analogy therefore unquestioningly assumes that David's breadmaking activities are a normative good. But what if David is head of an industrial company producing a sugary product that is unhealthy for consumers and based on unsustainably harvested ingredients? A focus on perfecting the technical implementation of bread making precludes interrogating the broader structures within which this experimentation occurs, thus ensuring that a technical expert brought in to 'objectively' examine failure will do so only within those bounds, and thus can further legitimize the fundamental approach in question. It also may not be in David's interest to question these broader structures, as he benefits financially from maintaining the status quo, and likely himself buys into the normative good of his own work.

Bread makers may seem far removed from conservationists, who more explicitly pursue collective aims. Yet conservation's newfound attention to failure similarly replicates the process that Ferguson (1994) calls 'anti-politics' and Li (2007) 'rendering technical', in which the political constraints and implications of project designs are overlooked through a narrow focus on how to improve implementation within the bounds of a given approach (see Section 4.2.2 for tangible examples). The root causes of conservation failure increasingly highlighted by critical research – for example: the failure to question global economic and political narratives, policies and structures; the problematic emphasis on changing poor smallholders' behaviors when wealth is driving global environmental degradation; and, the imposition of global 'expert' models that consistently undervalue and undermine other knowledge

forms and disempower genuine local engagement (see Büscher & Fletcher, 2020) – thus often remain unquestioned, and are even reinforced.

Indeed, the emerging failure initiatives outlined earlier, while laudable in their intentions, were never designed to consider systemic or structural causes and forms of failure, thus constraining their potential for learning and transformation. Instead, they primarily focus on technical programmatic failures that view failure as a dependent variable, overlooking procedural and political failures which tend to be resistant to the form of technical or 'thin' learning that a focus on program failure permits (Dunlop, 2017a; Howlett, Ramesh, & Wu, 2015; Howlett, 2012; McConnell, 2010; Myers et al., 2018). This is reminiscent of what has been called 'single-loop' or 'double-loop' learning, which confines learning to correcting detected errors or governing variables without fundamentally questioning underlying paradigms or structures (Argyris, 1999). While literature on 'triple-loop' learning attempts to bring learning to a 'deeper' level, scholarship varies widely regarding what this means in practice (Tosey, Visser, & Saunders, 2012).

Consequently, the growing acknowledgement and embracing of conservation 'failure' risks becoming yet another discursive commodity used to appropriate resources that facilitate the continuation of dominant conservation models and associated flows of capital to powerful actors and organizations (cf. Lund et al., 2017). This will likely serve to deepen neoliberalization within conservation, further emphasize piecemeal fixes over broader transformation (Boda, 2016), and increase the 'projectification' of aid more broadly (Li, 2019). It may also lead conservation organizations to further prioritize the very capacities that grant them local access (e.g. raising funds, enhancing their brand, stabilizing problem definitions, standardizing solutions), but impede their ability to create meaningful interventions capable of lasting and significant change (Balboa, 2014; Scott, 1998). Efforts to address failure therefore risk becoming yet another strategy to 'sell success' even more efficiently, contributing to the building of global models that are increasingly deemed 'too big to fail' (cf. Blyth, 2013).

4.2. Entrenching failure: how 'succeeding' at failing becomes failing to succeed

In addition to encouraging a focus on narrow technical solutions for broader political problems, the growing discussion of conservation failure holds critical consequences for the many local people in conservation-critical areas who struggle with the negative social impacts of existing conservation strategies (Blaikie, 2006; Myers et al., 2018; Svarstad & Benjaminsen, 2017; To & Dressler, 2019). In being allowed – and even encouraged – to fail, conservation interventions may negatively impact local stakeholders in ways that can be overlooked or obscured by an emphasis on using failure mainly as an opportunity to learn for future practice. We illustrate this danger using two cases of joint conservation-and-development projects in Tanzania and Peru.

Both regions have received large amounts of conservation funding via the UN-led REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation – plus enhancing forest stocks through improved forest conservation and management) scheme[6]. This scheme has mobilized around US$10 billion in funds globally since its inception in 2004 (Angelsen et al., 2017) and can be found in some form in around 65 countries (Asiyanbi & Massarella, 2020). REDD+ consists of carbon financing mechanisms designed to incentivize countries in the global South to simultaneously deliver climate

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[6] The REDD+ projects in Tanzania and Peru were not managed by the UN, but intersected with broader UN-REDD programs focused on capacity building within in these countries, as part of REDD+ readiness activities (see https://www.un-redd.org/)

change mitigation, forest conservation and human development. Much of the early REDD+ funding was channeled into pilot and demonstration projects in order to test the approach and generate evidence on how it would work on the ground (Madeira, Sills, Brockhaus, Verchot, & Kanninen, 2010), making it the "world's largest experiment in Payments for Ecosystem Services" (Corbera, 2012: 612).

Analysis of both cases is based on ethnographic research of the projects in question, conducted by one author (K.M.) in Tanzania during 2015–2016 and another (J.C.) in Peru during 2013–2019. In both cases, the research critically explored the projects through narrative interviews, document analysis and observations. In both countries, over 70 people involved in the projects were interviewed, including policy makers, project managers and local 'beneficiaries'. The Tanzania case focuses on an extended case study of a pilot project undertaken in the Kilosa District, Morogoro region, narrative interviews with four people directly involved in the pilot project that took place in Kazimzumbwi Forest Reserve, Pwani Region, and interviews with conservation professionals about both these projects and the piloting experience as a whole. The Peruvian case draws on diverse perspectives in two different village sites in the ongoing REDD+ project in Alto Mayo Protected Forest (La Esperanza/El Limón and Sol de Oro), as well as interviews and workshops with ten staff of Conservation International Peru and the Peruvian Service for Natural Protected Areas (SERNANP).

Discourse and practice surrounding 'failure' emerged as an important topic of analysis in both sites, although with notable differences, leading to the identification of two contrasting failure narratives – a 'right to discontinue' and a 'right to continue'. We unpack these narratives in the following subsections. This site-level analysis supplements our analysis of material emerging from the two international-level failure initiatives (presented in section 3.2). We do not provide a comprehensive analysis of how conservation interventions have played out in these countries, but rather spotlight very real concerns that have emerged in relation to the growing failure discourse.

4.2.1. The right to discontinue: Broken promises in REDD+ pilot projects in Tanzania

First, we explore the failure discourse in relation to REDD+ projects in Tanzania, and the implications for local communities engaged in these projects. As one of the original nine UN-REDD pilot countries, Tanzania embarked on an ambitious pilot program from 2009 to 2014, which was funded as part of a US$80 million investment into 'REDD+ readiness' by Norway's International Climate Change and Forest Initiative (Kaijage & Kafumu, 2016). Nine pilot projects were undertaken across Tanzania, and over 150 rural communities were involved in a range of conservation activities including trial payments (NIRAS, 2015). Seven of the nine projects were completed (including Kilosa), while two were cancelled early (including Kazimzumbwi). Several reasons for the two early cancellations were cited by people involved in the broader REDD+ readiness program, including mismanagement of funds, implementation issues and lack of progress. The seven completed projects were run by well-established NGOs, some international such as Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the Jane Goodall Institute, and some national such as Tanzania Forest Conservation Group (TFCG), who led the Kilosa project, and the Mpingo Conservation and Development Initiative. The Kazimzumbwi project was also led by a national NGO: The Wildlife Conservation Society of Tanzania (WCST).

The piloting part of the REDD+ readiness program was guided by four objectives set by the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Dar es Salaam, who managed the process with support from newly-established REDD+ institutions that included the National REDD+ Task Force (consisting of a range of government officials and led by the Department of Environment in the Vice President's Office) and the REDD+ secretariat hosted at the University of Dar es Salaam. These four objectives were defined as "local REDD readiness", "policy testing", demonstrating "REDD results" and ensuring "broad stakeholder involvement" (Milledge, 2010: section 3.1). It was advised from the start, however, that there should be an "emphasis on testing key policy issues" (ibid) and the NGOs were encouraged by the Embassy to "test payment and benefit sharing arrangements in the expectation of making longer-term carbon sales" (Blomley et al., 2016). The NGOs implemented this advice to varying degrees, with some NGOs intensively testing all aspects of REDD+ and trying to prepare communities for the much anticipated country-wide REDD+ roll-out, and other NGOs taking a more reserved approach by gathering measurements and implementing alternative livelihood projects. Among donors and international actors, the pilot projects were framed as a means of testing and learning about *global* as well as national REDD+ policy and practice. This framing was grounded in the evidence-based policy discourse, as without such evidence it would be "policy making in a void" (Interview, international consultant, February 2016). However, among national and sub-national actors the pilot projects were seen as the first step towards a larger, ongoing REDD+ program in Tanzania:

> You pilot something because if you pilot then you can pilot and you can forget. But our idea was to do something, and then from there... after knowing what really works... do something afterwards. (Interview, national government official and Task Force member, March 2016)

This global versus country-wide emphasis highlights one of several contradictory framings of REDD+ in Tanzania that occurred between international actors and (sub)national actors. Contradictory framings could also be identified in relation to how failure was spoken about specifically. Among the international consultants, diplomats and UN officials interviewed[6], the pilot projects were largely framed as a means by which the REDD+ mechanism could be freely tested without consequences if it didn't work. They were, in short, given the 'right to fail':

> I think in general pilot projects are a good thing to test ideas and test approaches, that's all. I can't really think of something that doesn't provide any value. You know the idea of a pilot is trial and error – if it doesn't work you've also learnt something. At least you should draw the lessons from failures in such cases and do it better the next time... you can't expect that all these pilot projects would now show 100% success. I mean it's not the intention of pilots anyway. (Interview, UNDP representative, March 2016)

In fact, some international and senior national conservation professionals became involved in the pilot program despite having doubts about whether it could ever work in Tanzania. It can thus be argued that framing the projects as having a right to fail helped to mitigate these doubts, since the aim becomes merely to test whether the approach can work, rather than to make it succeed. Conversely, among national-level actors, the pilot projects were commonly viewed as a tool for mitigating failure further down the line:

> Piloting is an important mechanism if you want to implement something, which you haven't implemented [previously]. You see, it's a mechanism to avoid risk or failure. It's like not carrying all the eggs in a single basket. (Interview, government official and National REDD+ Task Force member, March 2016)

However, the villagers involve in the Kilosa project did not frame the projects as pilots at all, and for months after the projects

ended there were expectations that REDD+ – or *MKUHUMI* as it is known locally – would continue:

> ...they [the villagers] haven't given up, but you find that when we go to the public meetings they normally discuss that we were told that we'd be paid every year. [They ask] what's going on? (Interview, village leader Kilosa, April 2016)

These contradictory framings demonstrate that even if something is conceived as a pilot – with a 'right to fail' – at the international level, this is not necessarily how it is perceived at the (sub)national levels. Pilot projects, especially when linked to longer-term proposals like REDD+, are both driven by and result in raised expectations. In Tanzania, national and local actors became engaged with the pilots because they hoped that it was the start of something big for them and their organizations and communities (Massarella, Sallu, Ensor, & Marchant, 2018). This happened even when – as was the case in Kilosa – the NGO tried to be clear about the short-term nature of the projects and manage expectations (ibid). Thus, when the pilots ended – whether prematurely or as planned – there was disappointment that the promise of REDD+ was not fulfilled. In the case of the cancelled project in Kazimzumbwi, the people interviewed expressed dismay that they did not receive an explanation as to why the project ended so abruptly and reflected on feelings of confusion and betrayal that they still felt:

> [It's] like they have denied us something... they failed, but we don't know what the reason was (Interview, environment committee leader, Kazimzumbwi, may 2016).

Environment committee members in Kazimzumbwi also reported how the abrupt exit of the NGO and their REDD+ project left the forest less protected, opening it to 'encroachers' from outside the village coming to harvest timber and make charcoal. This resulted in significant challenges for the environment committee and other villagers trying to govern and conserve the forest with very little funds, as despite this project receiving a large amount of initial funding, very little made it to the people of Kazimzumbwi before the project was cancelled. This disappointment was also reflected on a wider scale once all the projects were formally completed:

> It felt like the project had ground to a halt. What's next? You know almost feelings of betrayal - you know 'we've received two cash payments, where's the next one coming from?' That's the problem. (Interview, international consultant, September 2015).

In short, disappointment was evident among people involved in both the cancelled projects and those that ended at the proposed time, with the latter largely due to the raised expectations of the projects being the start of a longer-term REDD+ program. International and national level actors suggested a wide range of reasons for Tanzania not being "REDD ready" following the pilot phase. These included a lack of international carbon funds, the fact that 4–5 years was not enough time to get things in place, and a lack of involvement of the government in the pilot process.

Both the involvement in the pilot projects and their termination had wide-ranging impacts in Tanzania, especially among the villagers involved in the projects. In Kilosa, impacts included conflict among people supportive of the new conservation measures introduced by REDD+ and those who disagreed, mistrust of village leaders, and mistrust of future projects and interventions (Massarella et al., 2018, 2020). Responsibility for managing the myriad impacts and challenges that resulted from the ending of the REDD+ readiness activity in Tanzania largely fell on the NGOs and forestry institutions – particularly the district-level NGO outreach staff and the district forest officers – who continued to work with REDD+ pilot

villages and fielded questions, frustrations and concerns. Many of the national NGO teams – including TFCG – also procured funding from other donors for new projects so that they could continue some of the initiatives introduced to the villages. However, the new donor requirements and objectives meant that in many cases the emphasis of the new projects was very different from the REDD + pilots, and hence learnings from the pilots could not be fully utilized. NICFI and the Norwegian Embassy, and other international actors, were seen by many national actors as having "walked away" without taking any responsibility or accountability for the fall-out from the pilots:

> ...when you are starting something you have to have an eye on the long term and like I said I did think it's fundamentally unethical to suggest that you can just walk away from things like this. (Interview, national NGO, September 2015)

Notwithstanding broader criticisms of international donor funding and its characteristic focus on short-term projects (e.g. Li, 2007; Mosse, 2008), the 'right to fail' narrative that accompanied Tanzania's REDD+ pilot projects enabled international actors involved in the readiness program to move on without taking responsibility or accountability for these projects' impacts within target communities. Embassy representatives maintained that the projects were never meant to be more than demonstrations or 'pilots', and that no more funding was ever promised. The framing of pilot projects as being about experimentation in which failure is allowed was still found among international actors postpilot. The failures were not, however, celebrated. In fact, there was a sense of regret among many international and national actors about what had happened, and it was evident that the donors were cautious about undertaking more pilot projects in the future.

4.2.2. The right to continue: Broken learning in REDD+ conservation projects in Peru

Next, we examine joint conservation-and-development projects in the region of San Martín, Peru, which have applied international impact evaluation practices that aim to rigorously and adaptively address project failures on the ground. We show how, in this context, the growing emphasis on quantitative monitoring to proactively manage failure has paradoxically reinforced the 'right to continue' an intervention model that is struggling to deliver intended 'win-win' outcomes for people and nature in practice. We highlight some main features of this 'broken' form of learning that encourages continuation of existing models – within San Martín and beyond – thereby inhibiting potential to fundamentally transform dominant conservation approaches. The ongoing positive translation of on-the-ground dynamics into international narratives makes this case reminiscent of 'selling success' (Büscher, 2014). However, we spotlight the added dynamic that a growing explicit attention to failure in this context has played in the ability to sell success here.

The region of San Martín is home to numerous initiatives that employ combinations of protected areas, economic incentives, and community-based management to pursue better outcomes for both forest conservation and local wellbeing (Chambers et al., 2019). San Martín has experienced a steep increase in conservation funding since the late 2000s, driven by several voluntary REDD + carbon offset initiatives facilitated by various international NGOs and climate investment funds (Chambers et al., 2019; Nakamura, 2017). For example, sales of carbon credits have thus far raised a total of US$30 million for a single conservation area in the region – Alto Mayo Protected Forest (AMPF) – funded by multinational corporations such as Walt Disney, BHP Billiton and Microsoft (Lang, 2020). The main partner bringing this funding to AMPF –

Conservation International (CI) – is one of several international players that increasingly shape conservation strategies employed in the region.

A core component of CI's global conservation strategy is to promote monitoring and evaluation to foster "adaptive management and accountability to donors" (McKinnon, Mascia, Yang, Turner, & Bonham, 2015: 2). This proactive handling of failure therefore emphasizes 'rigorous impact evaluation' as an important basis to foster learning. For example, CI's strategy to enhance global impact entails moving from "innovation" ("the development and piloting of new approaches to conservation science, policy and financing, including novel tools, methods, data or evidence"), to "demonstration" ("application of these approaches in CI's priority geographies by CI programmes and partners"), to "amplification" ("facilitating mechanisms that promote the adoption, influence or replication of such innovative approaches by others") (McKinnon et al., 2015: 2). As a result, the very models that have been brought into San Martín, such as "incentive-based conservation agreements"[7] and "fortress conservation" (for example, using drones and police helicopters; Lang, 2020) are based on globally 'tried and tested' models, just as these sites in Peru are equally seen as a means to enhance impact elsewhere.

Consequently, incentive-based conservation approaches now feature prominently in San Martín, with the idea that they can, alongside education and enforcement, "offer people the opportunity to become conservation allies — seeing them not as enemies of the forest, but as its guardians"[7]. In particular, the conservation agreement model is based on the premise that conservation should be "win–win" ("benefit[ing] both biodiversity and the resource owner/manager") and "quid-pro-quo" (in that "provision of benefits is conditional on conservation performance") (Conservation International, 2007: 1). This approach relies on rigorous monitoring to improve the model via building socio-economic and biodiversity baselines, conducting short-term trials, applying monitoring systems during implementation, and participating in a global learning network (ibid).

In 2008, CI began signing conservation agreements (CAs) with families living inside AMPF, which entailed compliance with existing deforestation restrictions in exchange for technical support for organic coffee production and alternative livelihoods. A project manager explained how "the first attempt at using a CA went horribly wrong. There was violence and the population did not want to work with us" (Interview, CI representative, December 2013). The population's response was influenced by the incredibly challenging history of the park, where the state's initial fortress approach had exacerbated tensions with an increasingly defensive local population. Nevertheless, over time CI signed CAs with several individual families to create organic coffee demonstration plots. For these plots, they conducted "a standard monitoring every 3 or 6 months for the PDD [Project Design Document] to verify the carbon and socioeconomic information, like how crop yields are changing" (Interview, CI representative, December 2013). Early project monitoring revealed several barriers to the presumed straightforward agrotechnology transfer; for example:

> What was observed during the first nine months of implementation of the CAs reflects that all subscribers have the predisposition to replicate the proposal; However, for economic reasons, few can do it in its entirety (particularly for the purchase of organic fertilizer). (ICAM, 2011)

Despite challenges to the model amidst declining yields from coffee rust outbreaks, CI continued to expand the number of CAs,

signing ~850 in total by 2016. However, half of all subscribers experienced an overall income decline (Conservation International, 2016), and 39% chose not to renew, citing insufficient benefits (Tatum-Hume, 2018). An independent study of 15 different joint conservation-and-development project sites across San Martín, including inside AMPF (Chambers et al., 2019: 365), claimed that a major reason behind persistent failures to achieve 'win-win' outcomes was the "external design of conservation projects based on fixed and limited interpretations of human motivation", such as lack of money, knowledge and/or laws. Crucially, these strategies failed to foster intrinsic motivation for conservation (ibid). A CI manager described how this has challenged the permanence of their intervention efforts:

> According to our analyses, we know that the populations are working with us only for the benefits, not because they are properly motivated for conservation, because when there are problems, their first support should be the conservation agreements, but nevertheless either due to pressure or due to fear, they change their minds. Likewise, the leaders were subscribers and now they are on the opposite side. (Interview, CI representative, February 2016)

Another major issue was that, in direct contradiction to the theory of change informing the interventions, wealth (not poverty) is driving deforestation inside AMPF (and across San Martín) (Chambers et al., 2019). As a result, those most likely to deforest have used their resources and networks to acquire additional land and evade restrictions, while the poorest families bear the burden of restrictions. While CAs have generated some benefits for families, as mentioned above, benefits have been highly uneven and broadly insufficient (ibid). These dynamics have sparked extended conflicts in AMPF, where local community vigilance groups (rondas campesinas) have periodically halted park management and state actors have become increasingly involved. For example, in 2016, rondas campesinas held 31 park staff captive for a day and violently expelled them from the park, and in 2019 they blocked the highway for four days in response to plans to evict inhabitants (Lang, 2020).

In response to ongoing challenges, a park manager explained how "from their point of view it would have been better to talk about these things [referring to *communal* benefits such as health and education] from the beginning because it would have avoided many unnecessary conflicts" (Interview, CI representative, February 2016). However, the state had refused to allow collective benefits inside the park, and the individual agreements made it easier to prove additionality to carbon donors. As a result, park staff – genuinely seeking to do the best they can amidst broader constraints and a highly challenging situation – have adopted a pragmatic fail forward mentality wherein they search for small wins within fixed protectionist and incentive-based intervention strategies and neglect broader political economic forces that heavily constrain what is possible. The explicit discovery and exploration of failure via monitoring continues to play a central role in the presumed pathway to success:

> Monitoring is important because it helps you identify the difficulties you are having at the time it is implemented and that are making it difficult for you to achieve results. Many times they tell you that your project is not giving results, and the difficulties that are occurring muddy the activities, but also the system itself can be flexible to be able to modify it. (Workshop, CI representative, June 2019)

Given the acknowledgment of failure by implementation staff on the ground, why has funding for AMPF expanded in recent years? We argue that the explicit attention to failure and learning

through quantitative impact monitoring has paradoxically furthered the international 'sale' of the same conservation model that continues to constrain possibilities for success on the ground. CI's approach to generating global impact through local trialing has prioritized quantitative measures, such as the number of signed agreements and trainings delivered, expansion of park guards, farm yield and income levels, and avoided deforestation – as calculated using a Verified Carbon Standard methodology (Conservation International. (2016), 2016; Tatum-Hume, 2018). Consequently, despite the local CI fail forward mentality, these indicators were externally used to 'sell' success and guarantee continued funding. For example, CI's website claimed (until recently) that "the results of a second independent verification showed that the project has reduced deforestation at the site by 75% from baseline levels — the first time a project in Peru has reached this milestone"[7]. Yet, this claim is based on an avoided deforestation modeling methodology which inflated the historical annual deforestation rate by a factor of three, thereby guaranteeing success (see Lang, 2013; Chambers, 2018). CI's website now simply reads: "the results of a second independent verification showed that the project had reduced deforestation"[7].

The ongoing learning approach based on technical monitoring, and increasingly explicit discourse about what failures have occurred and how they will be effectively addressed, has therefore contributed to locking AMPF into particular patterns of intervention – attached to available funds. This has additionally bolstered the application of these same strategies elsewhere. This case is therefore not simply a matter of failures being hidden or sugarcoated into project success. Rather, 'failure' and 'learning' (to address failure) have themselves become discursive commodities that further the selling of success, aided by particular frames that are inherently predisposed to emphasize partial success and hide the roots of ongoing failures, backed by 'objective' language to affirm the rigor of assessments. For example, when selected measures could *not* demonstrate success, the awareness of ongoing challenges and risks was stressed to celebrate how the initiative was proactively learning from failures and thus poised for success:

> Additional risks that could prevent the expected benefits regarding Community and Biodiversity aspects were identified. Among them are risks posed by the coffee diseases, such as coffee rust (Hemileia vastatrix); lack of livelihood alternatives, particularly the dependence on coffee as the sole source of income; the long-term sustainability of technical assistance, social conflicts, and effects of climate change. For each of these risks we have identified specific actions… that will be developed and implemented in a participatory manner with project beneficiaries to increase their level of resilience to these potential risks. (Conservation International, 2016: 27)

Growing efforts to actively manage failure, if accompanied by a technical implementation-based frame, therefore risk further entrenching existing conservation models and inhibiting alternatives – in a similar way to the example of David, the bread maker. Developing learning approaches with greater transformative potential necessitates confronting some fundamental assumptions and constraints at higher donor/organizational levels, such as the assumption that poor people need to change their behavior to address global challenges, despite playing a relatively minor role in overall impacts. The current framing of failure – of using local cases to generate globally rigorous evidence of success or failure of a general intervention model – therefore risks ultimately hindering better outcomes for people and nature. Nevertheless, there is still promise for explicit attention to failure to play a constructive role in this setting. For example, as part of this research, Peruvian CI staff participated in reflective dialogues in 2017 and 2019 to

think outside of the box regarding their existing challenges and approaches, leading to several ideas for more inclusive conservation strategies in the future (Chambers & Schleicher, 2017).

5. Conclusion: rethinking failure in conservation and development

Today, failure is everywhere and hardly a surprise. Yet there are significant consequences to how failure is framed and the solutions such framing facilitates. For example, the branding of a policy as a failure can in itself weaken faith in efforts and become its own cause of failure (Beunen et al., 2013; Bovens & Hart, 1995; Kay, 2017). Recognizing the dangers of openly exploring failure, conservation organizations increasingly use management consultancy's notion of 'failing forward' to highlight the potential for explicit engagement with failure and the creation of 'safe-fail' cultures to facilitate progress and learning (Catalano et al., 2019; Redford & Taber, 2000; WCS, 2020). This is an attractive concept for donors and organizations alike as it presents the possibility that they can succeed through the very act of failing. However, as we have shown, an overly simplified framing of failure does not acknowledge how this 'failing forward' may proceed in practice – namely, by promoting circular cycles of policy failure, intervention and disappointment, based on insufficient learning, that paradoxically deepen failures while facilitating expansion of the same intervention models that failed in the first place (Johns, 2015; Jones, Kelemen, & Meunier, 2016). Using failure as a means of attracting conservation funds is reminiscent of how the framing of the 'third world' as underdeveloped facilitated the expansion of the development industry, yet in highly problematic ways (Escobar, 1995).

While we have problematized how failure is increasingly handled in international conservation in this article, we are certainly not suggesting that the solution is to abandon attention to failure entirely. On the contrary, we agree that the capacity to openly acknowledge and discuss failure is vitally important for conservation (and other sectors) moving forward. Yet our analysis suggests that to be productive, this attention to failure must be operationalized in a particular manner. Hence, we advocate an approach that is much more reflexive concerning how failure is framed and assessed, as well as how it impacts local project stakeholders, and in this way aims to become explicitly political. We understand that most conservationists care about better outcomes (Moyo et al., 2016), and thus that there is potential for genuine reflection that acknowledges deeper constraints to learning and change, such as personal ideology, institutional dynamics, and the logics imposed by funding sources. However, such an approach cannot take failure at face value, view 'learning' as a neutral and objective activity, or frame innovation as objectively good and apolitical (Adams, 2013). As we have shown, this view of failure risks exacerbating the same core underlying problems with conservation practice that continue to reproduce failures.

A more reflexive approach would critically examine the politics behind why failure so often leads not to its correction but instead further failure – an approach that can *also* draw insights from other fields such as critical studies of medicine and development (e.g. Mosse, 2004; McGoey, 2010; Johns, 2015; Jones et al., 2016). Such an approach would foreground critical reflection on the key questions of who is in the position to frame failure and whose framing of failure counts most in deliberation and policymaking – making it an explicitly political approach to understanding failure. It would also differentiate between different types of learning – for example, between instrumental learning (i.e. learning about policy instruments) and social or 'triple-loop' learning (i.e. reconceptualizing the very nature of problems) (Bennett & Howlett, 1992; Dunlop, 2017a; May, 1992; Tosey et al., 2012) – as well as

exploring the 'dark side', or pathologies, of dysfunctional learning (Dunlop, 2017b). Learning can be made intentionally dysfunctional (e.g. through secrecy, non-knowledge, or willful ignorance – see Taussig, 1999; Newman & Bird, 2017), but non-learning can also be an unintended product of self-referential systems that are predisposed to reproduce particular interpretations without the explicit awareness of how individuals operate within them (Agger, 1990; Luhmann, 1995).

Reclaiming the politics of failure necessitates breaking down the veil of objective truth which is so often used to conceal the power relations underlying the framing of failure and its evaluation (Bovens & Hart, 1995; Wahlén, 2014). A starting point might be to acknowledge the multiple ways of framing failure and the varying consequences these confer. For example, Venugopal (2018) differentiates between "implementation", "design" and "hidden agenda" failures, and shows how these ultimately point to different underlying causes – ineptitude, ignorance and malign intent, respectively. While the "hidden agenda" framing points to engaging the political realm to develop solutions, the other framings indicate that failure can be circumvented if only enough knowledge is brought to bear on the situation to improve design and implementation (Venugopal, 2018).

Developing a sense of 'frame-reflexivity' among conservationists may facilitate reflection and reconsideration of their and others' approaches to understanding failures and pursuing learning (Schön & Rein, 1994). As Majone argues, "the need today is less to develop 'objective' measures of outcomes – the traditional aim of evaluation research – than to facilitate a wide-ranging dialogue among advocates of different criteria" Majone (1989: 183). Such reflection and dialogue may help accounts of failure to move beyond those that either deny local voices and complexity through global standardization (e.g. CCI, 2019; WCS, 2020), or oversimplify intent by seeing projects as destined to fail because they were never intended to succeed in the first place (e.g. Ferguson, 1994; Mosse, 2004). It is essential to develop approaches to exploring failures that are capable of zooming out to encompass broader structural conditions and governance arrangements that play a significant role in social-environmental failures in multiple concrete contexts (Moyo et al., 2016).

Finally, it is important that conservationists acknowledge and take seriously the implications of failed interventions for people living in conservation-critical areas who are being asked to change their lives to facilitate conservation outcomes. Failing in conservation, after all, is not the same as baking a loaf of badly tasting bread or exploding a prototype device in one's garage. Rather, as we have shown, such failure in the field means that a significant number of people's lives and livelihoods – as well as their potential support for future conservation efforts (Fletcher, Dressler, Büscher, & Anderson, 2016; West, Igoe, & Brockington, 2006) – are often negatively impacted, and at times dramatically so. Thus, the emerging 'right to fail' discourse is precisely problematic because it entails globally privileged actors claiming the right to fail globally marginalized actors, rather than marginalized actors claiming the right to iteratively design and improve interventions that affect their own lives (Arias-Loyola & Vergara-Perucich, 2020). In planning for failure, conservationists must therefore ensure that projects are proactively designed in such a way that responsibility and accountability for these impacts is assumed from the outset and addressed in the aftermath – what Balboa (2018) calls developing "local accountability norms" – rather than merely being taken as a learning experience useful for other beneficiaries elsewhere in the future. Local people subject to conservation interventions and their allies in global social movements promoting just conservation, such as the Indigenous and Community Conservation Areas (ICCA) consortium, can contribute to this aim by demanding that interventions implemented in their communities are subject to such accountability norms as well.

In addition to offering important lessons for addressing failure in future conservation practice, our study also points towards a productive agenda for further scholarly research concerning such failure. As we have shown, failure is an increasingly important yet underexamined complement to how success in conservation is commonly framed and sold. We therefore invite other researchers to also explore the extent to which similar dynamics are present in their own study contexts, and the similarities and differences to what we have presented here. Moreover, we have shown how failure on the ground can lead to adverse impacts on local populations and incitement of negative attitudes towards conservation more generally. This occurred through both a 'right to discontinue' mentality and a 'right to continue' mentality, where conservation actors with a stake in dominant models took control of failure discourse in ways that reinforced instead of undermined their ability to 'sell' success. We invite other researchers to critically explore these issues in greater depth, as well as further elaborate and operationalize a more explicitly political analysis of failure and examine its implications in conservation policy and practice.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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