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Fieldwork in conservation organisations–A review of methodological challenges, opportunities and ethics

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REVIEW

Fieldwork in conservation organisations–A review of methodological challenges, opportunities and ethics

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Abstract

1. Social science methodologies are increasingly used by conservation organisations to improve social-ecological outcomes. However, ethnographic approaches seeking to understand organisations themselves and how organisational culture impacts biodiversity and social justice are rarely discussed. By exploring previous studies of the methodological considerations of organisational ethnography in conservation, we provide conservationists and ethnographers with an empirically grounded understanding of the opportunities, challenges and underlying ethical considerations of this approach.

2. We conducted a scoping review of a disparate body of literature where ethnographers were embedded in conservation organisations and discussed their methodology, identifying 26 studies for analysis. We then extracted information on key themes relevant to methodological process and uptake.

3. Our review found such research spanned the globe, with a broad range of methodological and ethical considerations related to how ethnographers and conservationists interact. For example, organisational ethnography was perceived as valuable by conservationists as it allowed tracking progress toward internal goals such as diversification of staff and providing moral and emotional support and valuable information for transforming organisational practices. However, conservationists also worried about ethnographers' presence in their organisations. A key methodological challenge we identify, corroborating with the literature, is how ethnographers can benefit organisations while supplying critique.

4. Based on the results, we provide recommendations and areas of reflection for conservation organisations and ethnographers. Mainstreaming organisational ethnography through attention to certain methodological considerations can be beneficial for the future of conservation organisations and the biodiversity and people they impact.

KEYWORDS
conservation organisations, conservation social science, ethics, ethnography, justice, organisational learning

1 | INTRODUCTION

Conservation organisations, particularly those working nationally and internationally, are a major driving force of modern conservation practice. Their accomplishments are significant: saving multiple species from extinction, preventing forest degradation, mobilising significant funds to protect nature, and learning to work with Indigenous People and Local Communities (IPLCs). Yet ecological collapse continues unabated along with social injustices under conservation's watch (Tallack & Bruno-van Vijfeijken, 2022), provoking both conservationists and their critics to argue for an urgent need to transform the sector and organisations (Carmenta et al., 2023; Díaz et al., 2019; Milner-Gulland, 2021; Tallack & Bruno-van Vijfeijken, 2022). Many concur that this is down to a reluctance to challenge influential political-economic actors and forces, a tendency to prioritise organisational survival, an underestimation of the assumptions that underpin practice, lack of out-the-box-thinking, the challenge of institutionalising self-reflection, and inertia in not listening to internal critical voices (Borie et al., 2020; Mathews, 2011; Milne, 2022; Suarez, 2017; Tallack & Bruno-van Vijfeijken, 2022).

Along these lines, understanding what is happening internally in organisations is needed (Larsen & Brockington, 2018), as is a methodology of enquiry, capable of exploration and sharp scrutiny while being sensitive, careful, and caring. Indeed, eluding essentialisation, organisations are staffed by diverse actors with dreams, ambitions, and complex values. These are individuals trained in a range of natural and social sciences, who negotiate, debate, and contest each other's visions for conservation (Sandbrook et al., 2019), and who both have great influence in certain contexts but also subjected to higher powers in others.

Organisational ethnography, a qualitative approach from anthropology widely applied in sectors such as development aid (Mosse, 2013), can uncover the diversity of practices in conservation organisations, and thus help identify where practices might be improved, or reconsidered to promote better biodiversity and social outcomes. In brief, organisational ethnography is an approach to research formal organisations, their culture and structure through analysing staffs' everyday labour, their challenges, emotions and worries, as well as how organisations operate independently and as entities within wider institutions and cultures. Yet using organisational ethnography to open the black box of conservation is a delicate task; there are particular hurdles, potential backlash (Thaler, 2021), worries and resistance (Milne, 2022), which is unsurprising given most conservationists' unfamiliarity with the methodology.

There is now a substantial body of research that can be demarcated as organisational ethnography of conservation organisations. However, this disparate collection has not yet been synthesised for the methodological processes it entails and the challenges therein, preventing organisational ethnography from being mainstreamed. A major question then is how has doing and hosting fieldwork in conservation organisations been undertaken? Or in other words, what does researching and being researched in what Kiik (2018) calls 'Conservationland' entail?

This paper reviews empirical accounts to explore what organisational ethnography methodologically encompasses so that ethnographers and conservationists alike can be better informed of its opportunities and challenges. We highlight various aspects of the approach including: how access to organisations has been negotiated, the tensions that can exist between researchers and conservationists, how researchers can ethically operate, the hard lessons they learnt, what organisations find beneficial, conservationists' reactions to being studied, and how conservationists can be good hosts. These lessons are summarised to facilitate uptake of organisational ethnography as a mainstay approach in conservation organisations.

1.1 | Studying the conservation landscape

For many, conservation organisations have come to represent an influential apparatus, a set of practices requiring analysis (Larsen & Brockington, 2018). Critical social science research argues that, along with other projects of modernity (e.g. development aid), conservation is inevitably entangled historically, politically, and culturally with forms of power generated through colonialism and its contemporary manifestation, capitalism, that continue to dominate and shape the social-natural world. Strict protected areas gazetted by nation-states under influence of International Non-governmental Organisations (Duffy, 2006) are a product of Anglo-European colonisation and have dispossessed millions of people from their ancestral territories, often causing intergenerational poverty (Agrawal & Redford, 2009). Similarly, by working with extractive industries in a pragmatic bid to protect nature, conservation organisations have also inadvertently reinforced corporate control over the environment (Adams, 2017; Büscher et al., 2012). Green militarisation, encompassing a combination of shoot-on-sight/shoot-to-kill policies (in the Global South), the use of advanced technologies for enforcement, and military partnerships have also resulted in extrajudicial killings and criminalising people's subsistence (Kashwan et al., 2021).

Such practices are rarely undertaken for their merit in protecting biodiversity alone but are driven by those outside of conservation to fulfil Global North and Southern elite's geo-political and economic ambitions of 'national security' (Duffy et al., 2019) and economic growth (Brockington & Duffy, 2010), demonstrating conservation's uneven imbrication within wider structures and its position as 'weak but strong' (Sandbrook, 2017). Where conservation has held influence for longer periods, it has also eroded indigenous knowledges. Instead of seeing IPLCs as living and demonstrated solutions to degradation (Sze et al., 2022), their credibility is still routinely undermined and their knowledge and social experience obscured from understanding by wider society, leading to epistemic oppression (Fricker, 2007).

While this long-standing anthropological and political ecological critique of conservation practice is valued by some practitioners as facilitating reflection and change (Redford, 2018), it is also argued to be a missed opportunity for engagement with conservation (Cleary, 2018). In the introduction to the edited volume,

The Anthropology of NGOs, the editors asked: 'Are anthropological and related critiques one step behind a dynamic reality, or one step ahead in terms of shedding light on NGO practice?' (Larsen & Brockington, 2018, p. 2). We sense many conservationists might feel the former still prevails. For example, as part of conservationists' commitment to livelihood concerns set by social scientists employed in donor agencies, conservation workers already feel they are attempting to address social issues (Brosius, 2006), while external critics fail to recognise the everyday reality conservationists experience. This lack of acknowledgement of practitioner's quotidian struggles by conservation critics has led conservationists to dismiss critical social science (Burgess et al., 2013; Verma et al., 2010), often resulting in selective ignorance and rejection of valuable insights that could improve conservation practice (Milne, 2022).

Recognising the need to go beyond generalisations made by conservation's advocates and detractors (Markowitz, 2001), nuanced counter-critiques have increasingly emerged in the literature. In his essay *Misreading the Conservation Landscape*, Redford (2018) argued that critique of conservation often caricatures conservationists and organisations, for example, as eco-centric. Internal critics of anthropology have similarly questioned, given that pre-industrial societies are humanised and represented heterogeneously in the literature, why is it that conservation workers are homogenised as 'faceless representatives of global ideological regimes and dominant powers' (Kiik, 2018). Cleary (2018), in *Looking Over Fences Will Not Promote Engagement*, was similarly bemused at the reductivism critics imply in claiming that conservation organisations run only through tenets of neoliberal ideology, as opposed to recognising conservation's rapid adaptation to broader political economical change across the decades (Mace, 2014).

Engaging with these concerns, both conservationists and critical social scientists have advocated varying opinions for going forward; to go beyond critique (Chua et al., 2020), for more respectful antagonism (Matulis & Moyer, 2017), or 'modest forms of consensus' (Brosius, 2006). Recent scholarship has illustrated how conservation organisations are diverse, dynamic, and constituted by wider social institutions and contexts they operate within (Larsen & Brockington, 2018; Tallack & Bruno-van Vijfeijken, 2022). Other work highlights the porousness of identity boundaries between conservation employees and beneficiaries or 'locals' (Haenn, 2016; Runacres, 2021), that conservationists suffer consequences themselves in fighting for rights of marginalised actors (Fay, 2016) or against hegemonic practices from within organisational headquarters (Borie & Hulme, 2015; Robertson, 2010; Suarez, 2017).

The Royal Anthropological Institute 2021 conference entitled *Anthropology Making an Impact in Conservation* is testament to the contemporaneous nature of these issues. Discussions during the workshops revolved around the benefit and need for situated engagement with conservationists, as it allowed empathy and the possibility to leverage change from within, e.g. impacting project grant proposals (RAI, 2021). Another form of engagement is through projects where critical social scientists such as anthropologists in academia jointly tackle socio-ecological challenges with conservation scientists and professionals (Chua et al., 2020; Sandbrook et al., 2023).

Organisational ethnography fits in as a particularly generative option alongside this burgeoning work as it is sensitive to the everyday reality conservationists work within. Organisations mostly operate as an effect of what has become automatic (Ahmed, 2012), with injustices or problems not necessarily attached to big events or moments, but rather the mundane and quotidian (Mosse, 2015). Organisational ethnography can pinpoint why biodiversity declines, how staff inequality persists, or how injustice to IPLCs occurs, by giving attention to the organisation's unspoken values, norms, processes, decisions, and assumptions that are often hidden from view. For example, by studying Conservation International (CI) through a project in the Cardamom Mountains of Cambodia, it was found Washington head office placed little importance on expatriate staff needing to speak the Khmer language which made them oblivious to Cambodian local politics and culture. Instead, CI head office assumed they could rely solely on two influential bi-lingual Khmer CI staff to manage the minutiae of the project. This decision led to institutional blindness in what was going on between government partners, illegal logging syndicates and CI staff, which ultimately allowed large swaths of forests to be gradually cut under CI's watch to the detriment of wildlife and community livelihoods (Milne, 2022). Organisational ethnography demonstrated the consequences of failing to address such assumptions.

Organisation ethnography is further valuable for its ability to support staff making change. Claus (2022) analysed struggles of conservation social science employees to effect change, and found they, as minority employees within natural science-dominated organisations, they spend considerable time fitting in with everyday organisational norms and legitimising their presence, reducing their capacity to make internal impacts (Claus, 2022) Organisational ethnographers as temporary 'insiders' can potentially circumvent this challenge. It can also be important for the communities impacted by organisations by helping them identify who or what processes are the source of their suffering (Kiik, 2018). More abstractly, organisational ethnographers with one foot in and the other out of the 'conservation fence' can be cultural brokers, translating epistemological differences between organisations and the academy.

1.2 | Ethnography and organisations

For over a decade now there has been a *Journal of Organisational ethnography*, attesting to the rise in ethnographic examination of organisations. Ethnography was originally developed in social anthropology for the study of non-industrial societies, and is a way of doing research, analysing data, and the final written product (Watson, 2012). It involves a researcher's close immersion with participants in a social setting where data are usually gained from open-ended interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. In long-term ethnographies, one is expected to learn the local language, ultimately gaining a candid and 'native point of view' that can elude

other research methods (Hirsch & Gellner, 2020). Ethnography's holistic, open-ended and inductive approach to data collection reveals unexpected findings. Through interpersonal relationships with research participants, the ethnographer achieves a 'deep hanging out'—often 'a mixture of observation, dialogue, apprenticeship, and friendship' (Clifford, 1996). This helps understand people's decision-making during both mundane and big events. The anthropological concept of 'thick description' (Geertz & Darnton, 1973) is particularly important, where, after observing people's decisions and behaviours, the researcher attempts to interpret what these actions symbolically mean in the wider context of the culture they occur in.

Ethnography, and by extension, organisational ethnography, can be conceptualised as research *on* conservation—analysing the logics conservation is built on. This differs from more widely used methods in conservation social science that are conceptualised as research *for* conservation, underpinned by a mission to conserve biodiversity and entailing improving effectiveness of business-as-usual practices (Sandbrook et al., 2013). Nonetheless, organisational ethnography aligns with qualitative methods already used in conservation social science such as focus groups, semi-structured interviews, participatory methods, and archival research (Bennett et al., 2017).

Ethnographies of environmental governance generally fall into three heuristically distinct but overlapping approaches; (i) place-based, (ii) institutional and (iii) organisational ethnographies. An example of the first is West's '*Conservation is Our Government Now*', where research analysing a conservation-development project was centred on the Gimi people in Maimafu, Papua New Guinea, with ethnographic research also conducted with conservationists around the country. Institutional ethnographies focus on broad institutions or 'rules of the game' such as the carbon market (Thaler, 2021), with the physical field being often being ephemeral (e.g. global conservation conferences) and requiring a deep understanding of global power dynamics.

Organisational ethnography in contrast is a methodology that can be situated in single or multiple sites and involves the researcher focusing on the meso-level - seeking to understand what the internal culture and structure of a formal organisation (e.g. NGO) is and how it is impacted by broader institutions. A formal organisation, no matter its size, and including those which are more amorphous and not geographically bounded (e.g. IUCN Species Survival Commission Specialist Groups), involve a 'conscious monitoring and control of the relationship between means and ends' (Morgan, 1990, cited in Hirsch & Gellner, 2020), with this control or management over staff, ideas, and norms, being what organisational ethnography analyses. At the same time, it appreciates the individual agency of people who steer organisational bureaucracy through design or contestation in everyday work.

Within this mundaneness, the researcher is immersed for long or intense periods, where the researcher's body and senses should also become 'a vector of knowledge' so that the *visceral* and not only verbal conditioning effects of an organisation on their staff can be experienced (McConn-Palfreyman et al., 2022). This involves, for example, being attentive to how the ambitions of staff are flattened by the combination of unempathetic bosses, stuffy claustrophobic rooms, and peer exclusion at the canteen. Through this, the researcher can become emotionally involved, ethically obligated to some research participants, understanding both their organisational wins and struggles and the conflicts between individuals. The ethnographer also recognises that what may be initially thought of as culturally specific to an organisation is rather an artefact of the wider society it operates within (Watson, 2012). For example, although social organisation (kin, family, patronage, etc.) are not formal organisations per se since they have no consciously created governing ethos to achieve a strategic goal (Hirsch & Gellner, 2020), they are inevitably a part of any ethnographic understanding of environmental governance.

Through these situated engagements, the ethnographer can understand (i) the practices, discourses, and networks that produce conservation knowledge and how this leads to controlling effects and impacts on humans and non-humans, (ii) how biases, assumptions, and world views that organisations and their staff hold come to be replicated or articulated at project sites, and (iii) how these are reproduced or contested by staff or other stakeholders, and therefore, how organisations are held together in constant tension (Li, 2007).

Carrying out an organisational ethnography or hosting one is challenging due to the very characteristics that make it such an insightful methodology (Hirsch & Gellner, 2020; Thaler, 2021). It is to these methodological, ethical, practical, and messy considerations we next turn our attention to.

1.3 | Introducing key methodological considerations of organisational ethnography

1.3.1 | Access and positionality

Access refers to the acceptance or the level of embeddedness the ethnographer is granted in a community. Access is multi-layered and includes access to people, spaces, and events. If access is granted, negotiating its extent is further necessary. There are often multiple gatekeepers who differ in willingness to welcome outsiders (Bryant, 2014). A key factor that determines access is who carries out the research, particularly their identity, which shapes how ethnographers are trusted and perceived by those from the community.

A fundamental methodological concept is therefore positionality. Positionality is recognising how multiple facets of identity, such as nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, marital status, religion, caste, and language, shape the researcher's role in the research process (Lunn, 2014). Positionality affects how research is designed, the type of data collected, its interpretation, and how one is perceived in relation to research participants or access to them in the first place (Staddon, 2022). An example of the latter is how discourses of white saviourism continue to facilitate certain identities' belonging to wildlife organisations while marginalising others (Duff, 2020), which in contexts such as South Africa is can be linked to publicly visible

campaigns associating blackness with rhino de-horning (Burnett & Milani, 2017). In combination with access, positionality thus shapes who can study conservation organisations, which inevitably impacts research design and results.

1.3.2 | Troubling 'insider-outsider' boundaries, research for or research on

Overlapping with positionality, an ethnographer can be an 'insider' who gains insights to internal workings through an embedded role, with access sustained potentially over long-time frames. In contrast, those who have a more distant relationship with an organisation and less opportunity to participate in daily workings may be considered 'outsiders'. However, in reality, these 'insider-outsider' positions have no discrete boundaries, and one's status may change over time, dependent on the social situation, one's lived experience and morals. (Robertson, 2010). For example, as attested by the experience of an anonymous reviewer, a researcher may choose to work within a conservation organisation to gain resources or political capital for marginal indigenous actors, thus being physically an 'insider' but ethically an 'outsider'. Organisational ethnographers, unlike traditional ethnographers of a community, may also hope to be employed by the organisations they study (Ybema et al., 2023), troubling 'insider-outsider' boundaries and thereby shaping research.

Another related methodological (and ethical) issue is whether ethnography is used in research *for* or *on* a conservation organisation. For example, in the context of international development, an ethnographer in collaboration with a development NGO helped adapt aquaculture technology for villagers in Bangladesh (Lewis, 1998, cited in Mosse, 2013). This part of the study was considered *for* the NGO. However, through the fieldwork, research *on* the organisation also occurred. The ethnographer demonstrated that the Bangladeshi villagers did not actually need such technologies, and this 'solution' was chosen as it served NGO organisational survival from the funding granted by donors. Although ethnography showed how development problems were constructed to serve financial needs of the organisation, these findings compromised the legitimacy of the NGO and led them to dismiss the ethnographer. Producing unexpected findings and having research directions evolve during the research process are key traits of ethnography, however, they can become an especially unsettling prospect when those studied are organisations (Mosse, 2015).

Hence, while working with organisations, ethnographers may feel pressure to sanitise their research aims and questions and to hide the critical nature of research (Bryant, 2014) which is ethically misleading. In contrast, other ethnographers conduct what has been called 'oppositional research', where the ethnographer is openly opposed to certain aspects of how the organisation operates (Massé, 2017), and through proximity, engages in dialogical exchange which gives staff benefit of the doubt and 'avoids finalising who they are and what they are capable of' (Rech et al., 2015, p. 56. cited in Massé, 2017). There are also dilemmas of allegiance where

ethnographers may empathise with marginalised conservation staff as much as they do with the communities who face marginalising interventions (West, 2006).

1.3.3 | Ethics

Ethics is a cross-cutting methodological consideration that intersects with all the above. Generally, anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent are the staple ethical considerations that ethnographers from universities are expected to fulfil. Guidelines commonly used in the social sciences have traditionally been imported from the biomedical sciences and often centre on protecting individual rights (Bryant, 2014). However, although individual rights are important, this produces friction with organisational ethnography's goals of fulfilling societal rights, such as inquiry into social injustices produced by organisations. Laura Nader argued that because organisations and institutions have 'the power of life and death over so many members of the [human] species' (Nader, 1972, p. 284), researchers should 'study up' and disseminate knowledge to inform public understanding. Ethnographers of conservation will thus face a dilemma in balancing confidentiality, anonymity, and continued access whilst forwarding justice-based agendas, if the latter requires revealing non-public knowledge of organisations to hold them to account.

Such methodological considerations are not exhaustive but are important challenges already identified and widely discussed in work on ethnography. We use these broad themes to structure our review of organisational ethnography in conservation, as discussed next.

2 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 | Review protocol

By identifying literature where conservation organisations have been studied ethnographically and unpacking the methodological content therein, the purpose of review is to reveal a selection of trends and themes that can inform readers on the field-based and ethical practicalities of organisational ethnography. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to synthesise findings of the studies, we acknowledge their wider ambitions far beyond methodology, often centring injustices and seeking to address prevalent issues of marginalisation. As such, we provide a database of these studies that future researchers can refer to: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10213228.

We conducted a scoping review aimed to cover a range of scenarios ethnographers and conservationists may face. Scoping reviews intend to (i) map and identify available evidence, (ii) examine how research is conducted in a certain field, (iii) identify key characteristics related to a concept and (iv) identify and analyse knowledge gaps. They are usually a good precursor to a systematic review and, although following a systematic approach, are not intended to produce a pillar of evidence

to inform policy (Munn et al., 2018). Given the challenges of reviewing large bodies of qualitative work (Toye et al., 2014), we cannot anticipate all potential issues, it is a partial account, but undertake this exploratory work as a first key step. Search terms (Supporting Information S1) were generated based on the authors' knowledge of the field, and supplemented by a quasi-automated search strategy (Grames et al., 2019). Although not previously applied with ethnographic literature, this approach is argued to reduce time needed on administrative tasks such as deleting duplicates when using multiple databases and can potentially diversify search recall (Grames et al., 2019). We used the Listsearchr package 1.0.0 (Grames et al., 2019) in R version 4.0.0 (Supporting Information S1).

The search terms (all English language) were entered into the Web of Science main database, Scopus and ProQuest Dissertations (11 May 2021) for all years up to and including 2021. After excluding results from irrelevant disciplines, we screened the titles or abstracts from the remaining articles. This included 951 from Scopus, 1551 from the Web of Science Main Collection, and 1915 from ProQuest Dissertations. From this initial selection stage, the first author identified 206 articles after removing duplicates. The online Citation Gecko software (www.citationgecko.azurewebsites.net) as well as Connected Papers (www.connectedpapers.com) were further used to find articles (through citation networks) missed through traditional search strategies, with 3 and 2 respective additional articles subsequently added. The first author read the full text of 211 studies (WoS 123, Scopus 71, Proquest 12, Citation Gecko 2). Three studies were subsequently added based on a reviewer's suggestion and use of Connected Papers citation tool. Studies that focused primarily on a conservation project or organisation and its practitioners and involved embedded ethnographers were included for further analysis. Since the first author undertook this exercise in preparation for doctoral field work with a conservation organisation, he assessed studies based on the concerns anticipated when undertaking such an ethnography himself.

From the remaining 53 studies, the first author read each study explicitly for details pertaining to our aforementioned a priori themes of (1) access, (2) positionality, (3) 'insider-outsider' dynamics, (4) for-on conservation, and (5) ethics. To be eligible for final selection, a study had to contain in-depth discussion of at least two of these themes. For example, a study that only comprised routine ethical discussion of anonymity and confidentiality was not considered sufficient to warrant inclusion (see Supporting Information S1). In total, 26 studies were considered for final inclusion.

2.2 | Inductive analysis approach

After searching for methodological information on our a-priori themes, new themes were also added inductively. The first author identified six additional secondary themes from the review. In addition, descriptive information on organisations, their locations, stakeholders interviewed, number of respondents, time spent doing ethnography, social science sub-discipline, and particular methods

used were recorded; these can be found at: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10213228.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Overview of studies

Our final selection of 26 studies spanned 22 countries across the globe and 31 organisations, the majority being non-governmental. One study focused explicitly on Global North conservation (USA), while the rest involved organisations with a worldwide or Global South (Figure 1) focus. The research occurred in conservancy lodges, ranger canteens/barracks, protected areas, international and national NGO and government offices, vehicles, villages, and cafes.

Those studied included Global North conservation volunteers, employed rangers and reserve managers, NGO conservation scientists, international agency employees, full-time office and field staff from government agencies in the Global South. Ethnographers were predominantly based at Global North universities and within the discipline of anthropology; 17 were PhD students, and 17 first authors were women. Language and use of interpreters were reported to a limited extent (Figure 2).

3.2 | Past experiences of fieldwork and hosting in conservation organisations

3.2.1 | Access

Examples from a-priori and inductive themes are visually outlined in Figure 3. Sixteen of the 26 papers discussed the initial attainment of access. When discussed, approaches for gaining access fell into three categories: (i) links of academic supervisors or previous research; (ii) being a past employee; and (iii) independently approaching the organisation. To secure access, ethnographers offered their skills (Arevalo et al., 2010; Fay, 2016; Massé, 2017; Suarez, 2017; Thaler, 2017), such as report writing, conducting surveys, translation, or teaching. Research is a relational exercise between researcher and researched where maintaining access, proximity, and trust also relied on reciprocity (Maguranyanga, 2009; Milne, 2022; Rhee, 2006). For example, despite it being initially uncomfortable, Gould (2010) played along with jokes by his colleagues that he was in fact a spy wanting to expose deficiencies of the organisation. This helped develop good relations as hard teasing was part of their culture, and tolerating it facilitated becoming part of the 'in-group'.

3.2.2 | Positionality and beyond

Of the 26 studies, nine reported explicitly on their positionality. Seven reported on issues of race (Cousins et al., 2009; Gould, 2010; Lowe, 2013; Massé, 2017; Milne, 2022; Pratt, 2012;
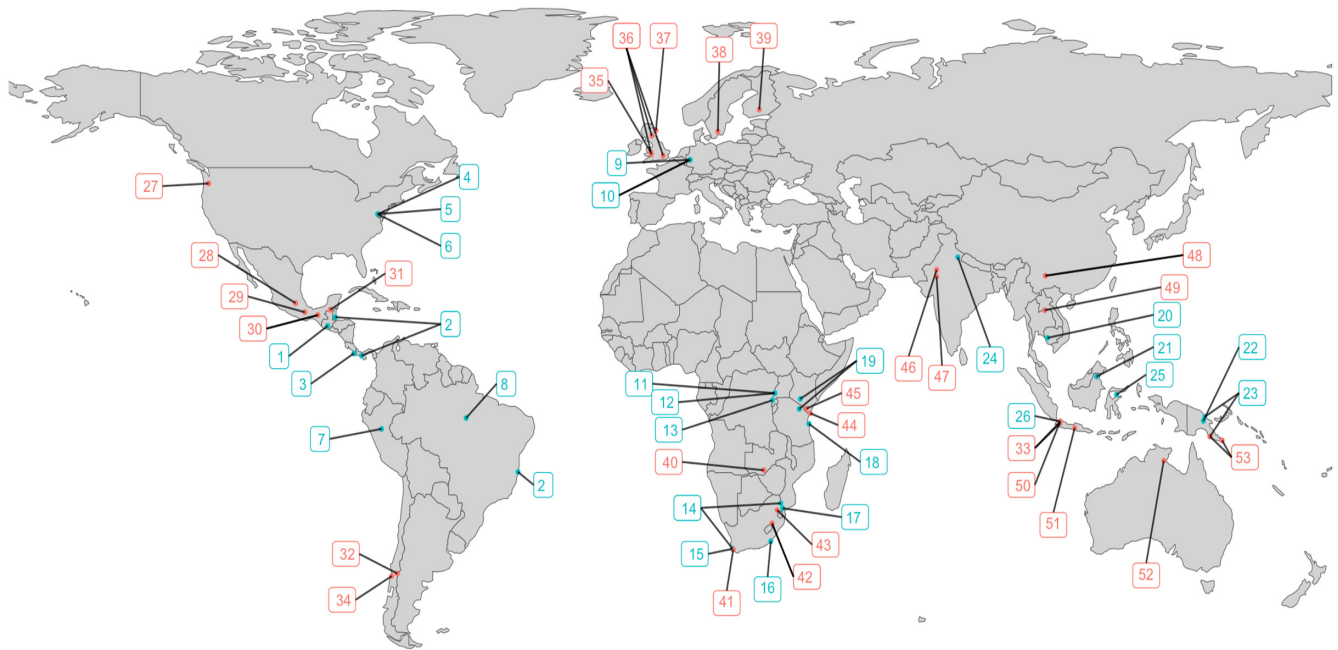
FIGURE 1 Map representing the locations and organisations where ethnographies had been undertaken. Blue dots/labels represent studies included in the final review (26 studies) and red dots/labels represent studies that were embedded ethnographies but contained insufficient methodological information to warrant inclusion (53 studies). Reference to broader 211 studies and information on stakeholders is available at: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10213228. 1: The World Bank. 2: Conservation International. 3: Asociacion De Servicio Comunitario Nacional Y Ambiental. 4: EarthConserve. 5: USAID Environmental Progamme. 6: US government environment protection agency. 7: Pradera. 8: The Nature Conservancy. 9: IPBES. 10: IPBES + Natural Capital Project. 11: Queen Elizabeth National Park. 12: Queen Elizabeth National Park. 13: Transboundary Gorillia Conservation Initiatives. 14: South Africa National Parks. 15: Anonymous. 16: Eastern Cape Parks and Tourism Agency. 17: Kruger National Park. 18: Sabie Game Park. 19: College of African Wildlife Management. 20: African Wildlife Foundation. 21: Conservation International. 22: Center for International Forestry Research. 23: World Conservation Organisation (Pseudo-anonymised). 24: Corbett Tiger Reserve. 25: Indonesian Foundation for the Advancement of Biological Sciences. 26: Oragnutan rehabilitation centres. 27: Pacific Fishery Management Council. 28: Mexican government PES programme. 29: Mexican government agency. 30: World Wildlife Fund + Mexican government agency. 31: Mexico government agency. 32: Chilean Ministry of Agriculture. 34: REDD+. 35: Association of Forest Engineers for Native Forest. 36: The Wildlife Trust. 37: UK government Forestry Commission. 38: Anonymous. 39: Finland government regional forestry. 40: CONASA (CARE + WCS + AWF). 41: Cape Flats Nature Programme. 42: The World Bank + Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project. 43: Mpumalanga Parks Board. 44: Kenya Forest Service. 45: Kenya Wildlife Service. 46: Gram Vikas Manch (Pseudonymised). 47: Ranthanbore National Park. 48: World Wildlife Fund + The Nature Conservancy. 49: The World Bank. 50: REDD+. 51: State Forestry Corporation. 52: North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance. 53: REDD+.

Scholfield, 2013) and three on gender (Gould, 2010; Massé, 2017; Simlai, 2021). Gould reported that being a white male foreign researcher who benefited from imperial histories that bound the US and Guatemala (i.e. military, developmental, and business connections), provided him a privileged position to negotiate with gatekeepers at the World Bank. Being white-skinned also facilitated access to these arenas due to colonial histories of lighter-skinned Guatemalans (descendants of Spaniards) being the ones who traditionally exercised control over land policy in the 17th and 18th century. Other reflections on positionality included ethnographers being in weaker power positions than the people they studied (Borie, 2016; Fay, 2016; Milne, 2022; Rhee, 2006), or being perceived as an untrustworthy foreign national. For example, being a US citizen doing research in Chile during George Bush's second term, Pratt (2012) reported being treated with hostility and mistrust in her attempts to collaborate with practitioners in the forest conservation sector. She attributed this to their resentment of US imperialism and the US-based Nature Conservancy's rise in

influence, and their assumptions of her alignment with the Nature Conservancy's agenda and therefore with US foreign policy.

Next, disciplinary background was reported to have bearing on how ethnography was undertaken. For example, Lowe (2013) was requested by a conservationist to understand the social structure of the Togean people to change them, however, she wrote how she was 'not willing to put my research to ends that this training [political ecology] had taught me to perceive as unjust or coercive' (p. 43). Challenging his assumptions on difficulty of access to forest bureaucracy, Simlai (2021) speculated he was given expedited access to department staff as the chief warden was a fellow political ecologist. However, gaining access also strongly related to male and upper caste privilege.

3.2.3 | Insider-outsider

Regarding embeddedness, seven researchers were considered 'insiders' as they previously worked or were consulting in the organisations
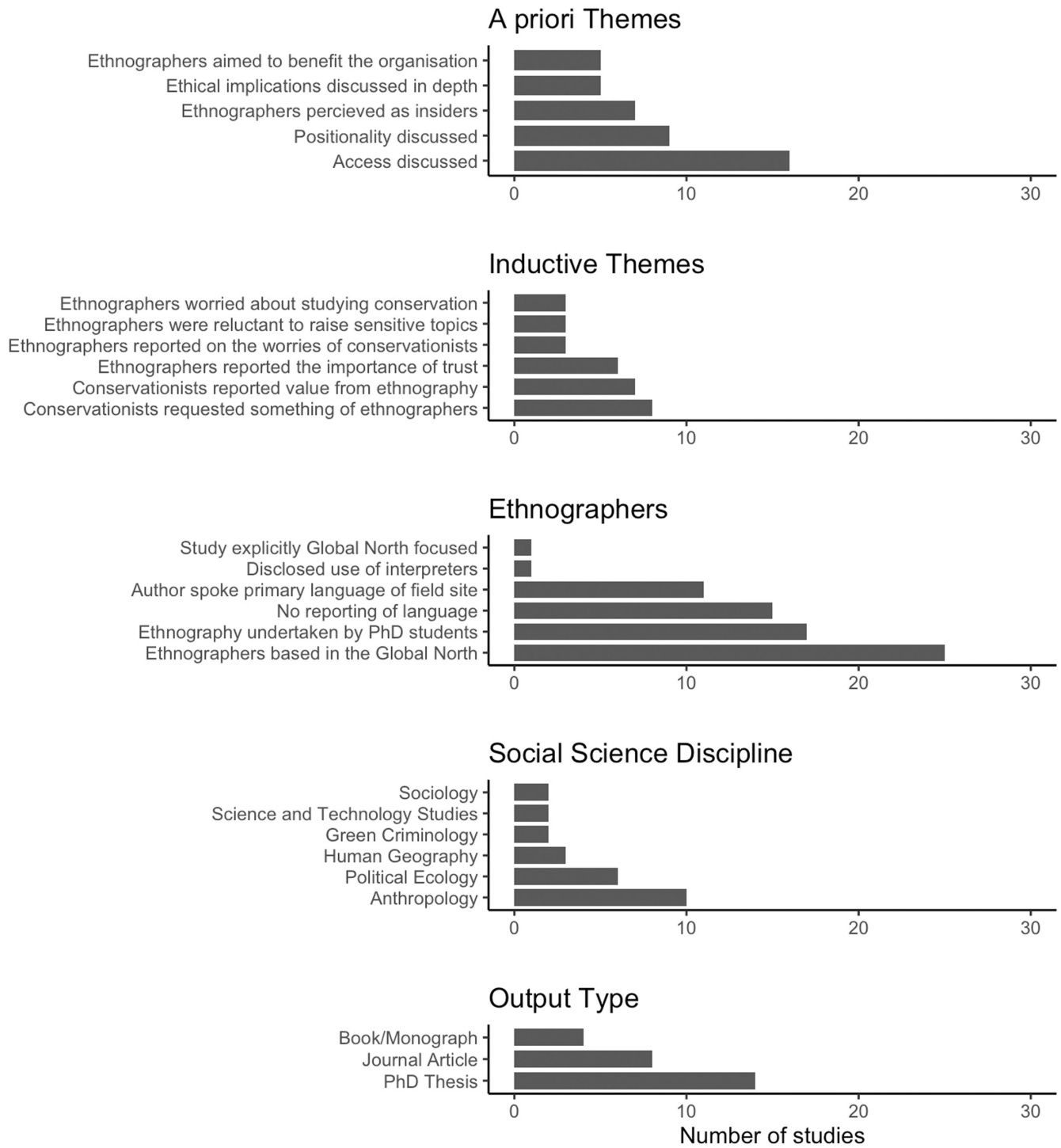
FIGURE 2 Number of studies, out of the 26 in the final selection, that discussed a priori, inductive themes, provided information on the ethnographers, their disciplinary homes, and medium their outputs were published in.

they were studying. The remaining studies involved researchers initially being 'outsiders', with no previous affiliation with the organisations, and only gaining organisational intimacy later. Time spent within an organisation ranged from 20 days to 10 years (mean: 633 days, median: 382 days). Ethnographers felt 'insider' status helped them identify the influence head-office Global North staff had on Southern in-country programmes (Milne, 2022) or permitted more candid conversations than could be had with an 'outsider' (Thaler, 2017; Wahlen, 2013). Other ethnographers recounted that having too much proximity with organisations led to experiencing threats from anti-NGO groups (Massé, 2017), which likely arose from the violence and injustice such groups experienced at the hands of conservation.

The distinction between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' also eluded generalisations. Robertson's (2010) time in the US environmental
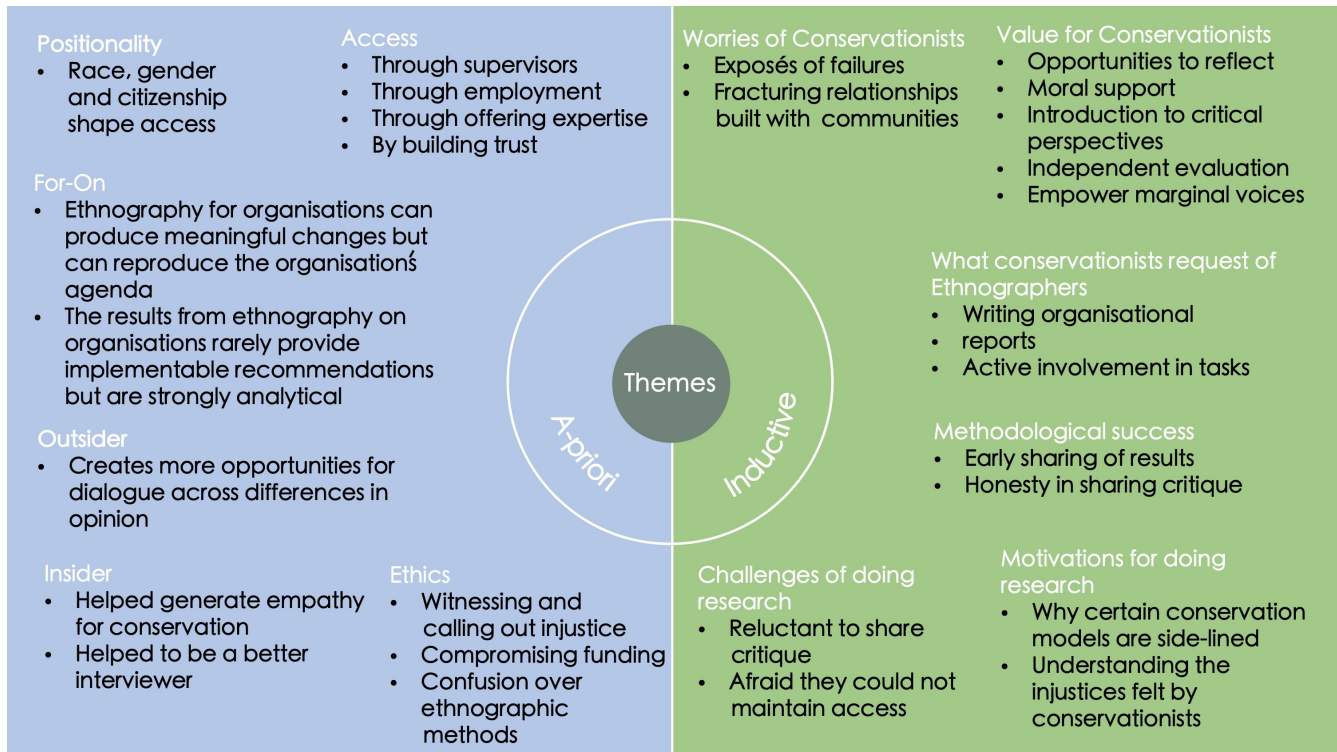
FIGURE 3 The full selection of a priori themes as reviewed in *Past experiences of fieldwork and hosting in conservation organisations* and inductive themes (arising through analysis), with some examples.

department's wetland division led her to conclude 'there is no clear inside to penetrate and there is no unambiguous outside from which to launch external critique'. She initially thought workers would support neoliberal conservation practices, but found that workers were instead highly skilled at circumventing them. Similarly, in Suarez's (2017) ethnography of The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), he found to his surprise that almost everyone employed in an organisation ostensibly set up to promote ecosystem services was either apathetic or more commonly 'hostile to the notion of the commodification, marketization, and financialization of nature' (p. 253). Rhee (2006) further reflected it was hard to research the Center for International Forestry Research scientists as their world views were 'too close to my own to be able to accurately and consistently draw boundaries' (p. 384), demonstrating the challenge of being part of the world one is trying to study (Mosse, 2004).

missing an opening for meaningful engagement and dialogue with those actors and institutions that could open a space for change' (p. 45).

Ethnography *on* or *for* conservation carried varying ethical considerations depending on where the organisation was headquartered (Global South or North, metropolis or periphery), its organisational form, its size, and who it is staffed by, all of which have bearing on how critical or empathetic the ethnographer may be. In her ethnography of an Indonesian organisation responsible for marginalising poor fishers in Togean National Park, Lowe (2013) discussed the challenge of balancing an 'analytic perspective on the political logics of conservation and development, and simultaneously... share an empathic relationship with Indonesian scientists who believed that conservation biology and projects of economic development would contribute to the advancement of their nation' (p. ix).

3.2.4 | For-on

We found five studies which were explicit in framing their contributions as research *for* the organisation (Hastings, 2011; Lowe, 2013; Milne, 2022; Palmer, 2020; Wahlen, 2013). For example, Wahlén discussed that while valuable critiques of conservation exist, these rarely 'provide practical recommendations for individuals with the motivation and power to address such critiques in their own organisations' (p. xii). Whilst oppositional research was not framed as *on* or *for*, Masée argued that shying away from oppositional research 'risks

3.2.5 | Ethics

We found many ethnographers worried about individuals' or organisations' anonymity since, despite anonymisation, the phrasing of words could reveal respondents' identity. Other ethical considerations towards conservationists included how critical viewpoints are unsettling for conservationists or observations of how critique impacts practitioner perceptions of losing funding (Milne, 2022; Scholfield, 2013; Suarez, 2017; Wahlen, 2013). It was difficult for staff to fully grasp what participant observation meant, making

Milne (2022) uncomfortable about issues of consent. Further, due to her 'insider' position as an ex-employee, she was privy to sensitive information she felt she should not have heard, which was challenging to disentangle from her overall analysis. Those who are studied also requested for real names to be used (Korsant, 2018; Simlai, 2021), such as in Korsant's case where a respondent demanded this so that certain actors could be held accountable for causing social injustice. Yet in this example, the researcher refused the request, arguing that pseudonyms are paramount for participant safety, demonstrating the influence academic ethics boards have on researchers.

Lastly, a critical ethical dilemma was how to address discovering injustice or violence in the field caused by the organisation (Milne, 2022; Sachedina, 2008). For example, Milne tried repeatedly to warn CI of their complicity in illegal logging to little avail, eventually exposing them publicly. She remarked her 'intention was only ever to strive for social and ecological justice—a stance which unfortunately brought me into conflict with CI' (p. 53). For Palmer (2020), previous literature 'around ethnographic ethics offer[ed] no obvious guide on the circumstances under which to speak out or keep quiet' (p. 196). She decided to remain silent about observed wrongdoings as she felt she lacked substantial evidence to make the claims public.

3.2.6 | Motivations for doing research

Ethnographers were motivated to explore what counted as successes and failures in conservationists' eyes (Thaler, 2017), why certain conservation practices were prioritised and others side-lined (Corson, 2016), and how global policy-making was experienced locally (Milne, 2022). Many expressed their motivations were born out of a conviction that mainstream environmental interventions and policy are harmful for the rural poor (Gould, 2010), that local knowledge is marginalised by conservation (Rhee, 2006), and that organisations perpetuate powerful narratives about human-nature relations that dominate indigenous world-views (Scholfield, 2013), and had thus hoped their work could produce shifts to alternative models of doing conservation. Understanding the injustices that conservation workers experience, particularly field staff from the Global South and the censorship and marginalisation they faced when trying to diversify dominant conservation practices, was commonly discussed and attests to the broad spectrum of stakeholders researched in our studies (Fay, 2016; Garland, 2006; Massé, 2017; Moreto & Matusiak, 2017; Suarez, 2017; Wahlen, 2013).

3.2.7 | Challenges of doing research, methodological successes, and reflections on relationships

A major challenge elucidated was ethnographers not knowing the extent to which they could study organisational realities and complete their research. Rhee (2006) related how 'it was never entirely clear or definitive to what extent I would be able to study up to

examine institutional realities' or how comfortable staff would be (p. 68). Even after being initially accepted, clarity over the extent of access such as knowing which meetings one could or could not attend, was further cited as a frustrating concern (Borie, 2016; Maguranyanga, 2009; Scholfield, 2013), and led to covert approaches. Ethnographers also felt being embedded amongst people with whom they felt no political or value-based affinity led them to personally feel anxious, stressed, and isolated (Gould, 2010; Massé, 2017; Pratt, 2012). Tangible challenges included the physical exhaustion and danger associated with being embedded with field workers (i.e. rangers) (Moreto et al., 2016).

Methodological considerations discussed by researchers often centred on building trust. Tactics to improve relations involved visiting public organisational spaces such as the library or the canteen during tea breaks just to 'hang out' and build relationships with staff (Maguranyanga, 2009). In other cases, trust developed due to the large amounts of time spent patrolling and driving alongside conservationists, which were deemed prerequisite before formal interviews could be arranged (Massé, 2017). Rapport allowed some conservationists to become more comfortable with the ethnographer's research, but in some cases, the more familiar conservationists were with the research, the more mistrusting they became (Rhee, 2006). Ethnographers sharing frequent reports helped staff understand what the ethnographer was doing, providing them also the ability to provide input, giving them a sense of control and participation, which increased trust (Hastings, 2011; Massé, 2017).

3.2.8 | Conservationists' reactions to ethnography, conservationists' worries, and their requests of ethnographers

At the individual level, conservationists said the presence of a listening ethnographer allowed reflection on their actions and strategies in doing conservation. This is something they otherwise lacked the luxury to ponder over. As one respondent described, a temporary 'insider' taking interest in their work was a form of conservation therapy (Wahlen, 2013). The value of ethnographers' presence extended to moral support, as was the case with the only community liaison officer in a bio-centric organisation who found that a visiting ethnographer alleviated his feelings of marginalisation caused by his colleagues. This can be twinned with ethnographers providing valuable information to local community-liaison staff, who may lack the time to travel to villages and hear community issues first hand (Fay, 2016).

On a larger scale, multiple actors in an organisation collectively valued the work of embedded ethnographers (Maguranyanga, 2009; Scholfield, 2013; Suarez, 2017; Wahlen, 2013). Senior executives at SANParks were supportive of Maguranyanga's (2009) PhD research studying organisational change post-apartheid, as it allowed them to track progress towards transformation and helped them fulfil government-ordered mandates towards diversification. Maguranyanga wrote that 'such support reflected to me an

organisation that is willing to learn itself through scrutiny and independent research' (p. 205). During his time embedded in the IPBES office, Suarez (2017) was similarly asked explicitly 'not to hold back—to not pull [his] punches and to be as critical as [his] analytical intuitions demanded' (p. 39). Further, the contribution of critical opinion offered opportunities for rarely-had internal debates. For example, Masśe's (2017) openly critical stance against para-militarised conservation in a ranger outfit created spaces for dialogue challenging conservation-based violence. The presence of an outside researcher served to empower the voices of dissenting personnel within organisations who also thought that things could be done differently.

Only one study reported conservationists' reactions to ethnographic writing; Milne (2022) gave an opportunity to CI to react to her thesis before it was published. Although she received no formal response, she was complimented by colleagues. However, once the ethnographic knowledge contested the coherence of CI's narrative about the project, CI began to aggressively censor her. Otherwise, little was written about constraints such as funding or supervision shaping the ethnographers' studies.

Conservationists also commonly made requests of embedded ethnographers, such as what research could reveal about communities' views of conservation organisations (Hastings, 2011; Maguranyanga, 2009; Scholfield, 2013; Wahlen, 2013). Conservationists wanted ethnographers to be involved in day-to-day work (Moreto et al., 2016; Moreto & Matusiak, 2017) and not to be a 'fly on the wall' (Masśe, 2017, p. 45). In Peru, an NGO with a unique participatory way of working with local communities wished to publish their organisation's work, requesting the embedded researchers to help them write a methodological book on their approach (Arevalo et al., 2010).

Next, conservationists worried about the underlying motives of ethnographers (Pratt, 2012; Sachedina, 2008). Fears were expressed that ethnographers could compromise the organisation's legitimacy and the tenuous relationships the organisations had built with communities (Pratt, 2012; Scholfield, 2013; Wahlen, 2013). Lastly, Lowe (2013) noted Indonesian scientists' worries and sensitivity around the potential criticism they would receive from her: 'They were continually evaluating me as to what kind of person I was: was I the type of foreign scholar who wanted to tell them how they had it all wrong, or could I also learn from them and value their contributions?' (p. ix). Overall, these methodological concerns discerned from this scoping review raise many salient aspects of fieldwork with conservation organisations, which we further distil in our next section.

4 | DISCUSSION

We reviewed a disparate literature, identifying 26 empirical studies with the goal of discerning whether and how organisational ethnography can be incorporated into conservation. We found that conservationists reported value from ethnographers' presence, suggesting a willingness to integrate organisational ethnography into practice. Encouraging were the common requests conservationists would make of ethnographers and appreciation of critique, implying

a desire to interact productively and reflect. Our results pointed to methodological and ethical challenges which are reconcilable but require concerted efforts by both ethnographers and conservationists. Given conservation operates through logics of powerful institutions, we also argue some issues pose significant barriers. We structure the following synthesis through a set of key reflections and provocations addressing ethnographers and conservationists in turn.

4.1 | For ethnographers

4.1.1 | Tensions in organisational ethnography being useful but critical to conservation organisations

Ethnographers provided social science expertise, moral support, participated in organisational tasks, provisioned information not usually accessible to practitioners, measured progress towards internal goals, and facilitated opportunities to reflect, which were all appreciated by conservationists. It has been argued that if ethnography is to be welcomed in organisations, it must provide value (Mosse, 2004), therefore we suggest ethnographers unaware of how to benefit organisations can take these as starting points on which to build their collaborations. However, providing an organisation with findings that are valuable and useful while simultaneously undertaking a rigorous organisational ethnography which uncovers uncomfortable realities is perhaps one of the hardest tasks for an ethnographer (Milne, 2022; Wahlen, 2013), and we focus our synthesis on addressing this challenge.

First, those who value ethnography might be different to gatekeepers, those steering organisational strategy, or those in power. Well-articulated by Milne (2022), she asks, 'why would a self-preserving non-profit organisation willingly open itself to the scrutiny of an ethnographer who is curious about power dynamics and justice?' (p. 54). After many years as an ethnographer of development aid, Mosse concluded that organisations are rarely 'tolerant of research that falls outside design frameworks, that does not appear to be of practical relevance, is wasteful of time or adds complexity and makes the task of management harder' (Mosse, 2005, p. 12, cited in Rhee, 2006, p. 78). Ethnography certainly complicates management by highlighting the differences between what is said and done in organisations, highlighting complex field realities in project implementation, or pointing to various injustices including those perceived by staff (Sachedina, 2008; Wahlen, 2013).

The crux of the matter is that organisations are usually incredibly reluctant in allowing outsiders to challenge the self-image they broadcast to the public realm, and therefore guard information/knowledge and interpretations of their projects very closely (Mosse, 2013). This was evident in Milne's ethnography of CI, where, upon unearthing CI's role in creating the political conditions for widespread illegal logging in the Cardamom mountains for private companies and the state to make profit, CI denied claims and responded with pseudo-scientific arguments in their public response to maintain legitimacy (2022), which was even more ethically concerning

considering environmental defender Chut Wutty's murder due to these events. Part of the conservation sector is argued to have made a Faustian bargain, aligning with corporations and extractive governments in a bid to become influential, but as consequence of the deal, have become co-opted (Adams, 2017). One of the results of this bargain is 'Corporate Nature', where conservation's ideological and organisational orientation has been altered, leading to corporate logics of institutional growth being prioritised over local relevance and socio-ecological justice (Milne, 2022). This phenomenon of corporatisation is also recognised by conservationists (Cleary, 2018), which many staff struggle to challenge (Sachedina, 2008; Wahlen, 2013). Corporate Nature leads to situations such as Milne found herself in, where she was told to ignore these issues and appreciate the bigger picture. Unable to bear with the socio-ecological injustice of doing so, whistle-blowing was undertaken as a last resort.

However, at the other extremity, ethnography being feasibly and effectively integrated into organisations is likewise not resolved if the ethnographer just undertakes their research within the scope of organisationally accepted norms. Tania Li believed that 'the positions of critic and programmer are properly distinct' (Li, 2007, p. 17), suggesting the ethnographer's role is *not* to contribute to organisational objectives, since doing this is likely to reproduce their existing logics (Mosse, 2004). By being co-opted by the organisation's imperatives, ethnography would lose its capacity to be sharply analytical and open-ended. It thus becomes unable to shed light on inner workings, highlight power asymmetries or problems in organisational culture. This balance of doing ethnography *for* and *on* an organisation is therefore potentially irreconcilable, a fundamental methodological impasse.

4.1.2 | Organisational ethnography alongside conservation organisations

Given this tension, what do our results suggest for moving forwards—balancing *for* and *on*? On Suarez's last day of his two-year ethnography, IPBES staff gifted him a cake; imbued with 'multifarious symbolism', it read 'Nobody's perfect'. He reflected: 'Gazing into this biscuit, I thought to myself, ecosystem services was indeed not perfect, but maybe the contested knowledges and ambivalent scientific subjects it was producing were worth the struggle and not yet beyond redemption' (p. 257). Through the rise of ecosystem services, Suarez observed nature gradually being wrestled into the portfolios of corporations but equally found most staff at IPBES were amenable to resisting these forces, changing ecosystem services from within. The desire for egalitarian and just alternatives yet faced with political economic structures constraining their capacity to resist is well captured by the term 'unfree radicals' (Castree, 2017). Over the years, Suarez noticed how the pressure of ecosystem service's more neoliberal expressions increasingly weighed down on staff, visible through their bodies' resigned 'pragmatic shrug of the shoulders' (p. 235) of what unfortunately must be done to save nature, and thus rendering them 'unfree'. Suarez showed how ecosystem services would not have been the diverse kaleidoscope of visions it is had it not been

for staff. But likewise, working within organisations for years wears down the radical, reducing their energetic freedom to make change.

To avoid the impending socio-ecological crisis, organisations must transform, but in addition to social movements or macro-level drivers being an answer, scholars in one way or another seem to be making the suggestion for what Ojha et al. (2022) call, Critical Action Intellectuals, who generate alternative evidence, shift policy discourses and challenge assumptions while aiming to empower marginal groups and perspectives from within. We believe organisational ethnographers are well placed as Critical Action Intellectuals, as they understand where in an organisation to make change and, critically, who to do this with. In this humanising but critical approach to challenging conservation-as-usual, the tension in research *on* and *for* organisations can be transcended by manoeuvring instead to a space of critical solidarity, to ethnography *alongside* conservation. We suggest *alongside* is a useful turn of phrase because it suggests being with practitioners, inhabiting their social worlds, walking alongside them in the everyday, listening, and recognising their intellectual capacities. Yet, at the same time, *alongside* implies a parallel path, an independence beyond what staff can do, and maintaining the distance necessary to be that critical friend. If ethnographers can cultivate a critical empathy of conservation practice and help increase the diversity of fingers pointing to problematic structures, they may draw practitioners out of a 'hopeless rebellion by conformist quiet, and cheerful endurance (Sen, 1984, p. 309: Cited by Lobb, 2017)' and promote the already progressive work and often latent alternative perspectives existing in an organisation (Mosse, 2004).

To do this, we suggest ethnographers reduce their tendency to obscure research intentions and censorship of their often-critical research objectives, as it not only leads to distrust but loses the opportunity for solidarity with conservationists. Considering it is difficult for staff to openly articulate their desire for change or act upon their reflexive stances (Staddon, 2021), ethnographers, as temporary 'insiders' immune from being fired and other pressures of organisational culture, should take up the cause of critical practitioners and articulate constructive critique to those with power to affect change on their behalf.

Building interpersonal trust and engaging with managers who strongly shape organisational trajectories is also likely key. Acknowledging and recognising these actors may well know about the problems they create, it is important to address and talk through the worries they may have of ethnographic research, but emphasise the benefits simultaneously. It may sometimes be necessary to attend to organisational problem-solving needs and occasionally abandon the ethnographer's analytical objectives and focus on the micro-level or mundane to build trust. However, many will come across organisations that prioritise retaining power and influence above all else, and in these instances, a critical and more distant relationship to the organisation will likely be taken. Therefore, we hesitate to recommend contractual obligations with organisations that may legally censor the ethnographer from calling out issues of conservation violence and compromising the primacy of the ethical.

What we want to emphasise, however, is that the space between ethnographers being used by organisations to meet instrumental goals

on the one hand, or situations that result in exposés on the other, is not a thin line or simple dichotomy, but instead a wide plateau. There are chances to build trust and solidarity with staff, point out violence both tangible and epistemic, encourage reflection through critique and empathy, and create change. However, given the myriad actors, complex politics, power dynamics, and interests, finding the way across is a navigational craft to be honed and will require many more ethnographers struggling through this space to help coming generations.

4.1.3 | Towards mainstreaming organisational ethnography

Our review only surfaced one example where a small organisation was studied, therefore organisational ethnography's relevance for such organisations requires further exploration. In our review, ethnographers' focus on larger organisations might have been due to their often violent and dispossessory impacts. Considering broad political currents such as increased federalisation of nation-states, local governments are becoming democratically elected entities capable of enacting constituent-friendly environmental policies, and organisational ethnographers' role in such contexts could be potentially significant. To such organisations, what ethnography and reflexivity even are, and social science generally, may be a radical epistemological leap. To help see eye-to-eye, it is likely necessary to first understand what the local social-cultural terms for outputs of ethnography might be and frame it as such, be it an internal audit evaluation, 'outsiders' view' or something else entirely.

Although past researchers showed that conservationists' worlds and organisational lives are rarely the subject of careful anthropological research (Kiik, 2018; Redford, 2011), our review suggests this is no longer the case, with our database and paper an attempt to promote this niche but no longer nascent field. However, we do find a pronounced dearth of methodological reflection in these texts. We would welcome future ethnographers to write on how their work was received by conservationists, what they appreciated and what transformations did occur due to their presence. We would also like to know how norms of anonymity/confidentiality differ between Global North and South conceptualisations, and about the translation work needed to convey ethnography to organisations. Finally, PhD theses were those which contained the richest detail, but upon transition to academic articles, we note that rich methodological material became side-lined. Although methodological and ethical focus might be considered a distraction from the content many ethnographers wish to write about it, it is nevertheless necessary if we are to strive for a reflective and mainstreamed organisational ethnography.

4.2 | For conservationists

A naturalist by training, Redford commented 'researchers are working on institutional ethnographies and placing social scientists in the workplace of conservation organisations...we need this work, we need to learn of, and from, our mistakes ...we need the help—and informed criticism—of our social scientist colleagues' (2018, p. 254). So, if ethnographers fulfil their role, reflecting on issues in the section above, what is the role of conservationists in supporting these ethnographers?

For conservationists working across the polyphony of organisations that exist, ranging from those which continue to perpetuate neo-colonial violence to ones which embrace an anti-colonial stance, providing prescriptive recommendations on how to engage with organisational ethnography will likely be too general. Instead, we provide provocations and areas for reflection.

Our results suggest that it is in the hands of conservation organisations to take key steps to become mediators of organisational ethnography's mainstreaming. Our findings, such as ethnographers' experiences of character assassination, their tendency to conceal findings, the prevalence of PhD students doing this research, denial of access based on gender or other intersections, or their worries about maintaining access and feelings of ideological distance to conservationists, are suggestive of power imbalances between the researched and researchers. Ethnographers, we argue, are not always in the position or inclined to fight for access or take the lead in instigating ethnography alongside conservation, and here we see a role for those within collaborating conservation organisations.

4.2.1 | Powerful actors' responsibilities, going beyond selling success and co-produced ethics

Foremost, it is the onus of those with most influence in an organisation to facilitate organisational ethnographers' acceptance. Given the hierarchical nature of most organisations, it is unlikely managers will do so unless blessings are received from those providing funding or legislative support. For example, Maguranyanga was supported by senior SANParks executives to analyse the organisation because it seriously wished to meet the government's post-apartheid reformatory staff structure and diversity goals. SANParks, being accountable to do this, therefore welcomed organisational ethnography. In contrast, in another study, once the director of the African Wildlife Foundation understood Sachedina's critical inclinations, Sachedina was moved away from headquarters as a form of speculative damage control. While potentially easier to initially get access to, based on evidence in our study, we note NGOs may be more sensitive to ethnographic criticism compared to state organisations as their legitimacy to operate is reliant on more precarious donor funding.

Donors and financial bodies indeed hold a powerful *eminence grise* on the trajectory of conservation, however, directors and managers may sometimes hold rigid assumptions of what they think the donor perceives e.g. assuming that the discovery of conservation related injustice will always be negatively taken. Potentially, if the ethnography is undertaken through an official partnership with the organisation, it can be framed as organisational learning. Assumptions about philanthropic foundations are made by practitioners and academics alike, with their role as agents who have the

capacity to change and reflect too often denied. A recent study on the Ford Foundation showed how since the 2000s, it has radically transformed its donor practices through the agency of its staff and now funds indigenous environmental grass-roots and rights-based movements (Sauls & López Illescas, 2023). As the black box of philanthropy opens, conservation directors and managers should better engage them on issues of conservation injustice. We suggest taking advantage of donors' increased interest in social safeguards as a way in. This can help discourage the performance and selling of success as an organisational practice, which is ostensibly why organisational ethnography is seen as a threat.

Next, given that keeping with academic ethical norms can keep information hidden from public or political debate, potentially defeating change-based objectives and calls to 'study up' (Nader, 1972; Taylor & Land, 2014), organisations should engage in ethics policy-making. This will also help ethnographers from the very onset to identify what part of the organisation is up for analysis and how they can give critical feedback.

4.2.2 | Creating safe spaces and opportunities to receive critique

Organisations should be responsible for initiating platforms for communication, since, following an invitation, ethnographers will be much more likely to come forward with constructive critique (Suarez, 2017). For example, this could take the shape of an ethnographer being invited to observe staff meetings and comment on how to improve meaningful participation. Ethnographers also felt ideological distance from conservationists, which can be addressed by the organisation facilitating the ethnographers' introduction to more social science-orientated staff in the organisation. Further, given prevalent ethnographer frustrations in knowing which spaces are accessible and when events occur (particularly in offices which are separated into rooms), organisations should help inform the ethnographer by including them in emails and demarcating research sites within the organisation (meetings, certain projects, etc.) that ethnographers can explore.

Overall, more opportunities need to be created for expressing critical opinion (be it for ethnographers or conservationists). From our studies, there was also instances for critical voices to be ostracised by colleagues. This may be due to concern for job security; however, we believe this behaviour also occurs because staff temper their actions in accordance with how they think others will respond. This habitus ends up contributing to organisational inertia and automaticity, which stifles transformation (Bourdieu et al., 1994). Ethnographers could thus be used as catalysts by organisations, for example inviting them to give critical presentations that shifts inertia at least momentarily or helping upper management to become more curious, about their employees conservation values and ideas on how to improve, even change the organisation.

Other tangible actions an organisation might take is provisioning a 'reflexivity officer' (Borie et al., 2020), or giving this task to an organisational ethnographer. Practically, this would involve the ethnographer listening to staff's feelings, supporting them with social science expertise, and disseminating perspectives to managers in an ethically appropriate way. This provides officially mandated opportunities of giving feedback to the organisation and also produces feedback into the academy to aid reflection there. In smaller grass-root organisations, study circles have been used to assess how much the organisation is doing to address say, issues of caste and patriarchy (Pienkowski et al., 2023), or organising retreats where reflection and open discussion is the primary aim (Jack Covey, Personal Communication).

5 | CONCLUSIONS

We sought to demystify the process of critical researchers studying and working with conservation organisations through the process of organisational ethnography. We began by arguing that the value of studying conservation organisations has not been given due attention within conservation social science. Studying conservation organisations can help reveal how internal structures, automatic processes, institutional inertia, as well as externally imposed political interests perpetuate practices that compromise social and ecological outcomes. Equal attention must be paid to conservationists, who in their encounters with people and planet, both marginalise and empower, dispossess, defend and restore, govern, control, misunderstand and dissent (Kiik, 2018). In anthropology and associated disciplines, a disparate but emerging literature has thus sought to understand conservation organisations and their staff. In our scoping review, we identified this literature and further synthesised empirically grounded experiences of undertaking organisational ethnographies from 26 studies and highlighted methodological and ethical considerations that can benefit conservationists and organisational ethnographers alike.

We found in some instances that organisations were open to critique, that conservationists were refreshed by critical perspectives, and welcomed the opportunity to reflect, and that ethnographers cared for ethics and worries of conservationists. However, there were many practical challenges such as ethnographers' fears of expressing critical aims of research and conservationists' reluctance to provide comprehensive access to the organisation's spaces.

Although such challenges are navigable following our suggestions, there were also more intractable conflicts. One such issue is conservation organisations' reactively censoring ethnographer's knowledge which compromises organisations interpretive authority over interventions. On the other hand, for ethnographers to align research interests with conservation organisational goals may lead to reproducing conservation practices that rather ought to be transformed. We suggest that ethnographers adopting the lens of critical empathy can support and empower progressive movements already existing within organisations and undertake ethnography alongside conservation. For conservationists, suggestions included facilitating ethnographer's logistical immersion in organisations, connecting

them with staff they may share more affinity with, and leading the way when it comes to arranging ethical agreements. For all involved, we would recommend acknowledging each other's perceptions of injustice, due to social science and conservation's intertwined historical legacies, recognising problematic misrepresentations and being inclusive in the procedures through which ethnography is undertaken or hosted so to build a meaningful trust (Saif et al., 2022).

While we conducted a review of empirical studies, it cannot be assumed that reality and the public record match, and we can only synthesise what was reported in writing. Follow-up interviews with the studies' authors and their conservationist respondents would be required to thoroughly understand the nuanced challenges of studying organisations. The studies reviewed may likely have omitted sensitive details to avoid negative repercussions for the organisations and authors, thus, this paper necessarily presents only a partial story.

Ultimately, the interests and ambitions of some actors at the helm of transnational conservation might reject organisational ethnographies' insights. This anti-reflexive stance relates to conservation being significantly impacted by its Faustian bargain to gain influence, as well as the broader political economic forces of capitalism and nation states which are powerful institutions that organisations must operate through and in if they are to survive, even though these very structures cause the biodiversity collapse conservation tries to stem. Other methods such as participatory action research may be more fruitful where an organisation is resistant to deep ethnographic study. Furthermore, ethnographic approaches take a long time and as such, may be given limited attention or space by practitioners working within rapid project cycles. In addition, the output of organisational ethnographies will require concerted translation work to better integrate and communicate findings across disciplinary boundaries. However, many actors in the sector are ready for change. Although powerful institutions drive the logics by which organisations operate, organisational ethnographers can make these logics legible, demontrate why they are problematic and by working alongside conservationists, the assumptions, norms and business-as-usual approaches that hold back conservation organisations from really addressing social-ecological challenges can be transformed.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Omar Saif wrote the original draft and conducted the scoping review and analysis. All authors contributed to the paper's conceptualisation. Sam Staddon and Aidan Keane contributed to reviewing and editing of the manuscript.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

Table S1: Reference to the reviewed studies that fulfilled methodological eligibility criteria with key information described.

Supporting Information S1: Quasi-automated search term generation procedure.

Supporting Information S2: Detailing processes of exclusion and inclusion of studies for review.

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