

# An Explorer Debunks 5 Myths About Saving The Earth

National Geographic ecologist Enric Sala explains why protecting the planet is not a selfless act.

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To an outsider peering into the world of natural resource conservation, it may not always be immediately clear what the point of it all is.

Why worry about [plastics pollution](#) or deforestation [in the middle of a pandemic](#)? What does the biodiversity of an ocean on the other side of the globe [have to do with me](#)?

But to think that protecting the Earth is somehow superfluous, or counterproductive — or even a choice — is to miss a fundamental truth of life on this planet.

“I study the relationship between species, and the relationship between species and the environment — including us,” said marine ecologist Enric Sala, a National Geographic explorer-in-residence. “The biosphere is one. Everything is connected.”

As he writes in his recent book, “[The Nature of Nature: Why We Need the Wild](#),” “Even if it’s just for selfish reasons — for our own survival — now more than ever we need the wild.”

Sala picked apart five common misapprehensions about conservation for HuffPost. The following are his responses to each myth, edited for length and clarity.

## Myth No. 1: Conservation is an altruistic, bleeding-heart pursuit.

*Sala says:* It's a myth that conserving our life-support system is a luxury. Come on. Everybody's so worried about the financial markets and the economy, but there is no economy without people. And there are no people without the natural world, because everything we need to survive — the oxygen we breathe, the food we eat, the clean water we drink — it's produced by the work of other species. We cannot replicate any of the goods and services that nature gives us for free.



Melanie Jüngling/EyeEm via Getty Images

"Everything we need to survive — the oxygen we breathe, the food we eat, the clean water we drink — it's produced by the work of other species," marine ecologist Enric Sala said.

## Myth No. 2: Conservation costs too much money.

*Sala says:* Actually, the lack of conservation costs more money. One example: [the COVID-19 pandemic](#). Every single person on the planet has been affected by this. What is the cost of the pandemic? [The International Monetary Fund estimated \\$9 trillion](#). Other estimates run as high as [\\$15.8 trillion](#).

How much would it have cost to prevent this pandemic? Well, let's look at the source of the epidemic: wildlife trade. In previous pandemics, it was also wildlife trade — moving species around the world like commodities — but also the destruction of their natural habitat. HIV, Ebola, SARS and many other infectious diseases have come from animals.

So, how much would it have cost to prevent the destruction of these places? We released an economic report this year that estimated that, on average, protecting what the science is telling us is the very minimum, which is 30% of the planet (land and sea), would cost [\\$140 billion per year](#).

***We have been told to worship economic growth without stop. You cannot have infinite growth in a world that is finite. Enric Sala***

Is this a lot of money? Well, let's compare it with a couple of things. One is how much money governments spend today to subsidize activities that actually destroy nature, like burning fossil fuels and industrial agriculture: [hundreds of billions](#) to [trillions](#) of dollars per year. So what it would cost to protect a third of our life-support system is only a fraction of what the governments of the world spend now to destroy it.

This \$140 billion is less than what the world spends today on video games. So

to people who say, "Well, can we afford it?" I would say that is the most disingenuous argument in the world. The question should be, "How can we afford not to?"

### **Myth No. 3: Ending deforestation is at odds with meeting humanity's needs.**

Sala says: We have let ourselves be hijacked by industries that monopolize the use of our land for just a single commodity, at the expense of all the other benefits that society gets if that land is not degraded.

Look at the way we produce food, for example. Three-quarters of the inhabitable land has been transformed, and half of it by agriculture. And we hear, "Well, we need to cut more forests and overgraze more grasslands and fish more of the ocean because [we'll need to feed 10 billion people](#)." Well, we produce enough food for 10 billion people already, today, only [we waste a third of it](#) from the farm or the boat to the table.



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Trees in the Gulf of Carpentaria in Queensland, Australia, have been killed by salinity caused by overgrazing and the removal of trees.

Also, the way we produce that food is so inefficient. Half of agricultural lands go to feed livestock. And we don't need to eat so much meat, especially in America. We can get the protein and nutrients and calories that we need from plants. So if we shifted to a plant-based diet, it would be good for us and also for the environment, because that would release a lot of land that we can give back to nature.

If you keep the grassland intact, you can get red meat (if you had smart grazing of bison, for example) but also the native grasses that are maintained by the natural herbivores would absorb huge amounts of carbon. The natural vegetation retains the rain and prevents floods, too.

We have been told to worship economic growth without stop. You cannot have infinite growth in a world that is finite.

## **Myth No. 4: We cannot protect more of the ocean because we need to fish more.**

*Sala says:* Today only 7% of the ocean is protected, and science is telling us that we need [at least 30%](#). So why don't we have more of the ocean protected? Because there is a conflict with fishing. We hear from the industrial fishing lobby that we need to fish more because we need to feed more people, but now we're going to do it sustainably. Well, we reached peak fishing in the mid-'90s — that was the maximum catch of wild fish and it's been declining since. [Eighty-two percent of fish stocks are overfished](#), meaning we're taking them out of water faster than they can reproduce.

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However, if we get at least 30% of the ocean protected [from fishing], the ocean actually would give us a net gain in fishing catch. In these areas where you don't kill the fish, they take a longer time to die. They grow larger, they have more sex, they produce many more babies. So this helps to replenish the areas around these reserves. We protect the right 30% of the ocean, [then] actually fishing less, with less effort, we will catch more fish. So what's not to like here?

## **Myth No. 5: Humans are separate from nature.**

*Sala says:* We need to shift from our view of humans as masters of the universe and that everything is centered around us. We are one species living among millions of species of plants and animals and a trillion different types of microbes. And even though, ironically, the fate of all these species is in our

hands, without them there will be no us, either.

What is nature doing for us? Well, except for giving us rain and food; protecting our houses from storms and our lands from floods; providing habitat for the birds and insects that pollinate our crops; absorbing much of the pollution that we're putting into the atmosphere, thus mitigating climate change, which would be much worse without intact ecosystems; filtering for free the water we drink; and providing for free the oxygen that we breathe — except for this, and a thousand other benefits? Nothing.

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