

# INTRODUCTION

ON JUNE 30, 1931, THE SECOND INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS FOR THE Protection of Nature was officially opened at the lofty Muséum national d'histoire naturelle, in Paris. Several men took the stage in the Cuvier amphitheater to address a mixed audience of naturalists, politicians, and citizens. Among the speakers was Michał Siedlecki, the leader of the Polish delegation at the conference. In his speech, Siedlecki—a venerable and bearded zoologist—proudly referenced the accomplishments of his native Poland in the field of nature preservation. He was quick to add, however, that these realizations had only been possible thanks to international collaboration, which had been rooted in scientific cross-border partnership. “We know very well,” he said, “that the true base of our efforts is science; and isn't science a common good of all the nations?”<sup>1</sup> Five days later, at the closing banquet, Siedlecki revisited the same theme. The true base of nature protection, he insisted then, was to be found in “a science that knows no borders, no limits, no national egoism and no human egoism.” He ended by raising a toast to true international action and cooperation.<sup>2</sup>

Siedlecki's somewhat overwrought rhetoric will be well recognizable to the present-day reader. After all, the idea that the protection of nature should be

rooted in both science and international collaboration has become a well-worn cliché. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, one encounters this discourse in reports of international institutions, in campaigns of environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), in articles published in scientific journals, and in wildlife documentaries broadcast on TV. It is a discourse that comes with tropes claiming that nature “knows no borders” and that its protection concerns humankind as a whole. Typically, the project of nature protection is, thus, cast in universalistic and politically neutral terms, and its organization is preferably assigned to (equally universalist and neutral) scientists, who are presented as having firsthand knowledge of nature’s laws.

The global nature protection movement, in short, is to a large extent shaped by ideals of internationalism and science. This might appear as self-evident. In the end, preservation problems do cross borders, and it seems only rational to approach them in international concertation and on the basis of scientific evidence. Yet the history of “international” and “science-based” nature protection—which constitutes the central topic of this book—shows that there is nothing self-evident about this approach. First of all, alternative visions were thinkable. Some historical actors stressed national and local sensibilities rather than international ones. And some foregrounded political, aesthetic, and spiritual rationales of protection rather than the logic of science. Secondly, what a “scientific” or “international” approach means is not self-evident either, and the preservationists who used these adjectives did not necessarily agree on what they actually implied. Categories such as “science” and “the international community” might seem inclusive and neutral, but in practice they were launched by particular networks to serve particular purposes. Which approaches counted as scientific and which networks as international was always an object of discussion, and it entailed considerable efforts to give particular interpretations traction and meaning.

Translating international and science-based nature protection into anything concrete involved hard work by men such as Siedlecki. Theories had to be fleshed out, plans of action had to be designed, scientific and organizational tools had to be developed, and potential allies had to be convinced. Defining the project of international and science-based nature protection was not just a matter of rhetoric but also one of power. Depending on the meaning given to terms such as *scientific* and *international*, different actors and natures were drawn into the project of nature protection. Importantly, these processes of meaning making would ultimately settle the questions of which nature to protect, how



FIGURE I.1. The closing banquet of the Second International Congress for the Protection of Nature. TP, 1283-201, Amsterdam City Archives.

to protect it, and why. Given that the stakes were high, such processes were often an object of conflict and negotiation. When giving speeches and raising toasts, men such as Siedlecki acted as diplomats who had the intention to turn the negotiations to their advantage. It is through such activities that they laboriously constructed the international and science-based nature protection movement. *Nature's Diplomats* studies this laborious construction process.

Of course, the term *diplomats* in the title of this book should be taken metaphorically. While the nature protection movement did include a few professional diplomats, those constituted only a small minority. Yet many of the other preservationists active on the international stage acted “diplomatically” as well. They did so in various respects. Firstly, like diplomats, they assumed a mandate to talk on behalf of a particular entity. For them, unlike for professional diplomats, this entity was not primarily the nation-state but rather global nature, an entity lacking representatives up till then. Secondly, preservationists of the international

circuit also took on much of the demeanor and habitus of professional diplomats. They functioned in (and partially created) a world of international conferences, committees, and agreements, of arbitration, mediation, and negotiation. Like diplomats, they made up a cosmopolitan class, with its particular privileges, aura, and codes of genteel conduct—as is, for instance, suggested by the picture of the banquet at the Second International Congress for the Protection of Nature (fig. I.1).<sup>3</sup> They created a role for themselves, as well as a stage on which this role could be enacted. Studying preservationists as diplomats, then, implies an attention for the ways in which they conceived, legitimized, and performed their mandate as nature's spokesperson.

### Early Twentieth-Century Contexts

The focus of this book will be on the period between roughly 1910 and 1960. For readers familiar with the history of international conservation and environmental thought, this might not seem the most obvious choice. Much of the existing literature has, after all, foregrounded the seemingly more spectacular developments of the post-1960 years.<sup>4</sup> It is in that period that environmental conservation, to use the words of Max Nicholson, “rocketed from obscurity to a position of world influence.”<sup>5</sup> The foundation of the World Wildlife Fund in 1961 and the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in the following year are often referred to as seminal moments in that regard.<sup>6</sup> Historians and contemporary actors alike have highlighted that in the late 1960s and early 1970s an “environmental revolution” took place. Space travel and the world-spanning and computerized surveilling techniques of the Cold War stimulated the conceptualization of a “global environment,” while the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm exemplified a global environmental consciousness.<sup>7</sup> In the same period the worldwide surface of protected areas started to expand significantly—picking up in the 1960s and reaching its most dramatic growth between 1985 and 1995.<sup>8</sup> Around the globe, nation-states increasingly took up environmental protection as one of their responsibilities, which, particularly from 1970 onward, led to a proliferation of national environmental ministries and increased state memberships in international environmental organizations.<sup>9</sup> In the 1980s, the number of conservation- and environment-related NGOs saw an unprecedented increase, with the more well-known among them (such as the World Wildlife Fund and Friends of the Earth) experiencing an exponential growth in both membership and revenue.<sup>10</sup> Contemporaneously,

conservation biology became institutionalized as a field of study and as a policy instrument.<sup>11</sup> In just a few decades, the conservation movement—drawing on both a scientific and an internationalist aura—reached a broad cultural visibility across the globe and built up a highly ramified network of supporters.

The world in which people such as Siedlecki were active was of a different kind. Before 1960, international conservation was a small-scale enterprise in which little money circulated and paid staff was considered an exceptional luxury. The movement was driven by modest transnational networks, and, compared to post-1960 developments, its realizations on the ground might seem relatively limited. Furthermore, while international conservation of the early twentieth century did involve a significant number of scientists, these are hardly remembered for building innovative theories or novel insights. By and large, they borrowed their theoretical framework and conceptual language from scientific circles outside the preservationist network.

It is, however, not in its size, affluence, or scientific originality that the significance of the pre-1960 movement has to be sought. Rather, I believe, this significance lies in its role as generator of ideas, ideals, and practices. Siedlecki and his contemporaries, this book will argue, had a great influence on the mental makeup of international preservation. They set important standards of which nature was worthy of protection, of how this protection was to be organized, and who should be included in this enterprise. They mapped out a policy field and developed certain codes of conduct. They actively shaped the public persona of the conservationist. They, moreover, gave the international movement a spatial organization that would have longstanding influence, both in the center-periphery structure of its social networks and in its geographical focus on particular natures. They, finally, devised many of the instruments of the international conservation movement, including paper technologies such as red lists, biogeographical maps, classifications of protected areas, and study-books.<sup>12</sup> In all these aspects, I claim in this book, their work still resonates today.

While the project of international nature protection was modest in size before 1960, it did extend over various institutional contexts. One of these contexts was the League of Nations and its postwar heir, the United Nations. In her pioneering work, Anna-Katharina Wöbse has shown how issues such as oil pollution, whale protection, and the preservation of natural beauty entered the agenda of the league from the 1920s onward. She has also indicated, however, how these topics always remained relatively marginal in the interests of

intergovernmental diplomacy and how the irregular negotiations on nature protection proved to be highly strenuous. As such, the League of Nations did not offer a platform for the creation of a visible and stable network of nature protectors, nor did the United Nations in the early postwar years.<sup>13</sup> This, of course, does not imply that nothing was achieved in intergovernmental settings. The research of Kurkpatrick Dorsey, for instance, has shown how whaling discussions in the League of Nations did, in the 1930s, lead to an international whaling convention, eventually even spurring the creation of a full-fledged International Whaling Commission in 1946. This intergovernmental commission, however, was dominated by nations who did not want to lose control over the profits of their whaling industries, which undermined its power to enforce measures. As such, it hardly functioned as a rallying point for global nature protection either.<sup>14</sup>

Yet intergovernmental institutions—whether generalist ones such as the League of Nations or specific ones such as the International Whaling Commission—were not the only venues in which science-based and international nature protection were discussed. Outside the context of intergovernmental politics, more informal civic networks took shape. These assembled in private societies and committees that were devoted to the protection of nature or particular aspects of it. It is those little researched societies and committees that take center stage in this book. My focus, in particular, will be on organizations that self-defined as “international.” This is not to deny that national, imperial, and even local organizations for nature protection frequently had a clear impact on international events. Often such organizations maintained regular cross-border contacts and engaged in a transnational exchange of ideas.<sup>15</sup> Yet, not surprisingly, it was societies and committees that explicitly identified as “international” that, from the interwar years onward, came to embody and represent cross-border nature protection.

In the early twentieth century, transnational networks—fostered through personal correspondence, conference visits, informal meetings, and dinner parties—solidified in a few (mostly small and understaffed) societies and committees. These included the International Committee for Bird Protection (ICBP), founded in 1922; the International Society for the Preservation of the European Bison (*Internationale Gesellschaft zur Erhaltung des Wisents*, ISPEB), set up a year later; and the International Office of Documentation and Correlation for the Protection of Nature (*Office internationale de documentation et de corrélation pour la protection de la nature*), established in 1928. After

World War II, largely the same networks converged in the semigovernmental International Union for the Protection of Nature (IUPN), which was to be officially launched at Fontainebleau in 1948, and which continues its activities today under the name International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN). Both before and after World War II, the relations of these civic networks of nature protection with, respectively, the League of Nations and the United Nations were ambiguous at best. Partially in contrast to the bureaucracies and the political logic of large intergovernmental organizations, they acquired their own set of cultural codes and modes of action. Given their long-standing influence, I believe these civic networks deserve more historical attention than they have received thus far.

### **Revisionist Scholarship**

This book builds on and hopes to contribute to the (currently very vibrant) scholarship on the history of nature protection. The literature on this topic is expansive, and deals with an increasing set of actors, approaches, and geographies. Yet, as indicated, *Nature's Diplomats* will foreground a subject that has received comparatively little historiographical attention: the civic, internationally conceived, and scientifically inspired organizations for nature protection of the first half of the twentieth century. Furthermore, this book takes a rather different perspective from most of the literature on the history of nature protection, as it focuses explicitly on the ways in which the “international” and “scientific” dimensions of the transnational nature protection movement have been actively constructed. This perspective takes its cue from two revisionist strands of historical scholarship that are situated outside the field of the history of nature conservation. The first, increasingly prominent since the 1990s, aims at rethinking the history of internationalism and internationality, and has been inspired by a larger “transnational turn” in the humanities. The second tradition concerns the history of science, and has, since the 1970s, challenged prevailing notions of epistemic universalism—or, the conviction that science is transcendental and epistemologically international by definition. Both scholarly traditions, I believe, are highly relevant for historians interested in the rise of the international nature protection movement.

Over the last three decades, “transnationalism” has become one of the most fashionable terms in the humanities. After the anthropologists and the economists, historians also have shown themselves increasingly captivated by



transnational approaches and topics.<sup>16</sup> While the exact meaning of the term *transnational history* has been contested for some time, there seems to be a growing consensus around a broad definition. Akira Iriye and Pierre-Yves Saunier delineate the transnational interest as one of tracking “people, ideas, products, processes and patterns that operate over, across, through, beyond, above, under, or in-between polities and societies.”<sup>17</sup> This definition is a comprehensive one, bringing together various perspectives that move beyond nation-centric frameworks of historical analysis.

One of the fields in which the transnational approach has been particularly influential is the history of international organizations and movements. Under the influence of transnational perspectives, this area of research has broadened and reoriented in several ways over the last two decades. Apart from the traditional focus on high-level diplomats and other state representatives, a great variety of transnational institutions and communities have come into the focus of the historian—such as NGOs, voluntary associations, and expert networks.<sup>18</sup> Simultaneously, historians have shown a growing interest in the ideological aspects of internationalism and have highlighted the historical and geographical situatedness of international endeavors. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these scholars argue, different forms of internationalism competed, and each of these was strongly shaped by the distinct ideologies of its promoters. In this way, internationalism involved processes of not only inclusion but also exclusion. Furthermore, it often relied on and reified asymmetrical power relations.<sup>19</sup> In line with these conclusions, historians are reconsidering the relation between internationalism on the one hand and nationalism and imperialism on the other. Rather than as antithetical, they increasingly see these various *-isms* as deeply entangled and, at times, even symbiotic. Scholars point not only to common material foundations of internationalism, nationalism, and imperialism (in new transport and communication technologies) but also to common conceptual roots (in ideas about modernity, civilization, and progress) and common class origins (the bourgeoisie).<sup>20</sup> At the same time, they highlight the ideologically diverse character of twentieth-century internationalism, indicating that the phenomenon took on not only liberal and secular forms but also religious and illiberal ones.<sup>21</sup>

This book continues the aforementioned line of research by focusing on the mechanics of internationalism in early and mid-twentieth-century nature protection. As indicated, the world of early nature protection offers a myriad of



transnational civic networks with different (and partially competing) ideological and epistemic convictions. Its international projects, furthermore, started off in a time that has often been typified as an age of both strident nationalism and imperialism. It remains to be researched, then, to what extent the self-declared internationalism of nature protectors intersected and contrasted with national and imperial agendas, and which particular ideologies it allied itself with. In line with studies on so-called rooted cosmopolitanism, one should furthermore raise the question of how the local embedment of the preservationists in question informed their ideas and activities.<sup>22</sup> As Sidney Tarrow has argued, cosmopolitans might “move physically and cognitively outside their origins,” but “they continue to be linked to place, to the social networks that inhabit that space and to the resources, experiences, and opportunities that that place provides them with.”<sup>23</sup>

By looking more particularly at the period ranging from the 1910s to the 1960s, this book, furthermore, hopes to contribute to the ongoing discussion on the chronology and periodization of the history of internationalism. Recent studies have highlighted the remarkable survival and adaptation of nineteenth-century internationalist ventures into the twentieth century, while also pointing to continuities across the two world wars—which historians traditionally interpreted as important caesurae.<sup>24</sup> In dialogue with this literature, *Nature's Diplomats* will probe the extent to which the international project of nature protection changed throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

This book, of course, is not the first to approach the history of nature protection and conservation from a transnational perspective. Recent studies on specific empires or colonies, nations, postcolonial states, and even particular protected areas or threatened species have highlighted the role that transnational networks played in developing preservationist discourses and practices.<sup>25</sup> Other publications, moreover, have taken international conservation agreements (most notably treaties and conventions) as a starting point of historical analysis.<sup>26</sup> While building on such work, this book approaches the subject from a different angle. Instead of taking particular territories or policy outcomes as its main subject, *Nature's Diplomats* concentrates on the transnational networks themselves and the ways in which these created their specific versions of internationalism. In so doing, communities, ambitions, and practices will be foregrounded that, so far, have received only scant attention.<sup>27</sup>

Alongside the revisionist scholarship on internationalism, current trends

in the history of science are equally significant for studying the activities of early twentieth-century nature protectors. Over the last decades, historians and sociologists of science have developed a sustained interest in the social processes through which science takes shape, receives meaning, and is bestowed with authority. The study of such processes, I believe, is also crucial to understand the conceptual logic, the appeal, and the power of science-based nature protection.

By the 1970s, in a move away from epistemic universalism, historians of science embraced the idea that knowledge is inherently tied up with the particular contexts in which it is produced. This conviction, alternatively labeled as “constructivism” and “contextualism,” incited research into “the role of human beings as social actors in the making of scientific knowledge.”<sup>28</sup> At first this resulted in narratives that particularly emphasized the interaction between scientific research and its social and ideological context.<sup>29</sup> Later—in the wake of the so-called spatial turn—more geographically defined contexts of knowledge production also came into focus. Science, constructivist historians stressed, bore the mark of the specific localities in which it was created (such as laboratories and field sites), while it simultaneously served as an instrument to imbue particular places with meaning.<sup>30</sup> A third constructivist line of research, then, supplemented these approaches with a focus on the identities of scientists themselves and the ways these were culturally shaped. This has resulted in an expanding literature on the self-fashioning of the scientist and the construction of so-called scientific personae.<sup>31</sup> Taken together, these various literatures contributed to a growing consensus that science is both generated by and generative of particular social orders, places, and identities. Moreover, to borrow the phrase of Sheila Jasanoff, these different fields are increasingly seen as “coproducing” each other.<sup>32</sup> Early twentieth-century science-based nature protection, I believe, can be fruitfully understood along similar lines. The science of nature protection, after all, seems to be coproduced with its societal project, with the natural places that are considered of international or scientific value, and with the personae of the nature protectors.

Such an approach of science-based nature protection almost necessarily takes the broad conceptualization of science that has become customary among constructivist historians. In the end, people speaking “in the name of science” are not limited to professional researchers active within the confines of well-established academic disciplines, but also include amateurs, popularizers, and administrators.<sup>33</sup> This diversity can particularly be seen in the networks of

preservationists that assembled under the banner of science. Certainly in the decades around 1900, nature protection was often aligned with the socially heterogeneous field of natural history. While expertise in natural history could be acquired through formal academic training, experiential knowledge gained through hunting, animal breeding, collecting, and traveling equally provided researchers with expert status. In the same period that experimental biology clustered around heavily equipped university laboratories, natural history remained a multisited enterprise—mobilizing researchers active in museums, universities, and public zoos, but also amateur collectors, birdwatchers, and breeders. Throughout the period covered in this book, nature preservation in most countries continued to draw on this generalist and heterogeneous network of naturalists, but roles and relations also shifted. As nature protection institutionalized and professionalized through the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, its work became tied up with new, more specialized fields of knowledge such as ecology, ethology, and wildlife management. These novel disciplines provided nature protection with an aura of modernity and technical mastery. Even so, the position of these disciplines remained marginal in the university curricula of most countries, and very few leaders on the global preservation scene received formal training in them. While, by midcentury, most of the figureheads of international nature protection benefited from some form of academic education in science, their profiles remained diverse. They included zoologists and geologists, but also agricultural scientists and commercial engineers. In this book—like in much of the constructivist historiography—the term “science” thus refers to a varied and dynamic set of knowledges and practices.<sup>34</sup>

In recent years, there has been a cautious rapprochement between the historians of science who are pushing a constructivist agenda and the aforementioned transnational historians.<sup>35</sup> This convergence has taken some time to materialize, because in the first instance constructivism seemed to turn the historians of science away from international topics. It often prompted them to delve into highly contextualized case studies, which allowed for highlighting the local dynamics of science production. From the late 1990s onward, however, a counterreaction took shape.<sup>36</sup> The circulation of knowledge between places was put back on the agenda with studies increasingly focusing on the international flow of ideas, scientists, objects, and money. Rather than locality, it was now mobility and interconnection, brokers and go-betweens that were foregrounded in academic research.<sup>37</sup> Simultaneously, the interest in scientific internationalism and

universalism returned—although this time these were conceived not as timeless qualities of truthful science but as contested and changeable ideals linked to specific social contexts.<sup>38</sup> In a similar vein, scholars started to explore the role of scientists in making the globe legible and governable, thus focusing on science as a tool in administering global geopolitics.<sup>39</sup> In a recent article, Simone Turchetti, Néstor Herran, and Soraya Boudia believe a fruitful way forward would be to extend the transnational explorations into the history of science by concentrating on “hybrid domains (scientific and geopolitical at the same time) in which flexible identities (the scientist-diplomat-politician) operate.”<sup>40</sup> Such domains indeed seem to offer privileged sites to study the role that transnational networks play in the coproduction of science, social order, place, and identity. Early twentieth-century nature protection—a hybrid domain par excellence—is a good place to start.

In short, *Nature's Diplomats* will take inspiration from revisionist trends in both transnational history and the history of science in order to study scientific and international nature protection in the making. In this manner, conservationist ideas that seem self-evident today will be studied as historically contingent, and appear as objects of contestation and doubt.

### **Backstage Voices**

Contestation and doubt, however, are not always readily discernable. When reading published reports, policy recommendations, scientific articles, and conference proceedings, one might get the impression that the movement of nature protection constituted (and still constitutes) a largely harmonious and unitary group—and a self-assured one at that. But, of course, these sources represent peculiar genres. They use specific narratives in order to convince particular audiences. As such, they give access only to what Stephen Hilgartner in his work on expert advice has called the frontstage.<sup>41</sup> In order for experts to appear on this stage as competent, trustworthy, and powerful, dissent within the expert group is often erased and strategic maneuvering hidden from sight. Both the scientific and the international “community” are typically presented as being of one mind with regard to the problems that nature protection addresses and the ways in which these should be solved. In sources such as reports and proceedings, these communities appear as unified both in their global sensibilities and in the neutral logic of science. In his presidential speech at the Second International Congress for the Protection of Nature in Paris, French senator Jean Lebrun described the

group he addressed as “united in the same love for the search of truth, the same ideal, and the same faith.”<sup>42</sup> He stuck to what was, by then, a well-established rhetorical strategy.

To discover the particular behind the universal and the political behind the scientific, one has to enter the backstage of international nature protection. In gray literature and discussion drafts, personal correspondence, and notebooks one stumbles upon the insecurity and calculation, competition, and power dynamics that were integral to the construction of the international project of science-based nature protection. Such sources, however, are only partially preserved. This can to some degree be explained by the aforementioned erasure strategies that make the backstage disappear from sight. Also in the archives of protectionists, backstage material that was considered sensitive or embarrassing has sometimes actively been made invisible. A good illustration of this mechanism is offered in a letter from 1958 of IUPN secretary-general Tracy Philipps to Jean-Paul Harroy, then governor-general of Ruanda-Urundi. In it, Philipps discusses the sensitivity of a note he had sent Harroy a few days before:

Incidentally the reason why I marked my letter personal and confidential was only, in the words of my own warning, that any correspondence which could be interpreted as implying African unwillingness or inability to appreciate and preserve African National Parks had better be kept out of files to which Africans have access and out of archives which may eventually be handed over to African administrations. In this period of passionate and excitable nationalisms, the effect of finding such correspondence might be misinterpreted and thus be disastrous for the future of their National Parks which we want to preserve.<sup>43</sup>

It serves as a reminder that archives construct the past as much as they preserve it, and such construction sometimes involves active forgetting.

Apart from the selectivity of their archival strategies, it is important to note that the societies and organizations studied here were of modest financial means and did not consider long-term archiving policies a priority to begin with. Relocations and reorganizations have further reduced the number of accessible sources. For instance, the successor organization of the ICBP, Birdlife International, destroyed its pre-1980 archives because of storage space constraints.<sup>44</sup> At IUCN, most of the early archives were reputedly burned after the headquarters were moved from Brussels to Morges in 1961.<sup>45</sup> All this leaves the historian

with little archival material of early twentieth-century institutions for nature protection.

Fortunately, there are several personal archives that make up for the lack of institutional collections. The papers of leading figures in international nature protection such as the Dutch insurance agent Pieter Gerbrand van Tienhoven, the American zoologist Harold Coolidge, and the French mycologist Roger Heim offer a wealth of letters, draft texts, and informal meeting reports. One can, furthermore, probe the backstage strategies of early preservationist institutions via a detour—by studying the archives of administrations they regularly interacted with, such as, for instance, the Belgian Colonial Office, or the Science Section of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Often these contain detailed information about the preservationists' networks, antics, and ambitions. The source material that remains of the international nature protection movement, in short, can be described as somewhat haphazard, but often very rich. Or, to continue Hilgartner's metaphor, not all doors to the backstage are still open, but it is possible to reach some of the dressing rooms nonetheless.

### **Concepts of Nature Protection**

In both the frontstage and backstage, strategies of preservationists' terminology mattered. Therefore, some reflection on the terms used in this book might be justified. Two concepts that will often return on these pages, *conservation* and *preservation*, have become central analytical categories in the historiography of nature protection. The first is mostly associated with the rational management of natural resources—including animals and plants, but also soils, water, and energy. The second is often defined as a noninterventionist form of nature protection that focuses on maintaining “wilderness” or “the natural balance” in an unaltered state. As a result, conservation has received a somewhat technical and utilitarian aura in the historical literature, while preservation is often linked with more romantic and nostalgic sentiments. And whereas the former has been described as a crucial and long-standing state concern, the latter has been presented as predominantly an affair of civic groups.<sup>46</sup> Such distinctions, however, are not without their problems. They are useful to show the heterogeneity of nature protection discourse, but they also carry the danger of evoking an image of two neatly delineated projects that in reality did not exist. Historians such as Peder Anker and Bernhard Gissibl have already highlighted that in practice

the ideas of conservation and preservation easily mixed.<sup>47</sup> To further complicate matters, the concepts were also used by the historical actors themselves, who strategically employed them to define their own activities and distinguish themselves from others. In this book, therefore, conservation and preservation are used as actors' categories. Rather than concepts that describe preexisting visions of particular groups, they are seen as instruments that were tactically used in order to construct (and continuously reorganize) such groups.

What is true for conservation and preservation equally applies to the other essential concepts of early twentieth-century nature protection. After all, terms such as *nature*, *wilderness*, and *natural resource* were also contested expressions. Negotiating the project of international scientific nature protection involved appropriating or rejecting these terms, and in either case providing them with particular meanings. Since this book studies transnational networks, it is also of importance to highlight that processes of meaning making often differed from one linguistic context to the next. French, for instance, has no clear equivalent for *wilderness*, and in Continental Europe there was also some uncertainty on how exactly to understand the English term *conservation*. But also within one language, connotations of a term could differ depending on the person who was advancing it and the precise context in which it was advanced. If a historian wants to take processes of meaning making seriously, it also implies that he or she declines to use the terms under consideration as analytical categories with stable and unalterable definitions.

### **The Argument**

Overall, the narrative of *Nature's Diplomats* is organized along chronological lines, while the individual chapters focus on the development of international nature protection in specific social, spatial, and institutional contexts. Before delving into particulars, however, the book starts with two chapters that set the stage, sketching successively the historical antecedents (chapter 1) and the social makeup (chapter 2) of the scientific and international nature protection movement of the interwar years.

Chapter 1 outlines how Western preservation initiatives in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were shaped by the interconnected phenomena of nationalism, imperialism, and internationalism. It highlights how, in this period, preservation traditions coalesced around particular subjects: traditional landscapes, colonial big game, and migrating birds. It is in a combination and



transformation of these traditions, I argue, that by World War I a project of nature protection took shape that put science and internationalism in the center of its self-definition.

Chapter 2, then, explores the social composition and geography of the networks of early twentieth-century international nature protection. It shows how network building was a conscious activity of a handful of ambitious men (and some women), who operated within a civic culture of conferences, excursions, personal visits, and society meetings. The international network, I will argue, was dominated by urban haute bourgeoisie and landowning aristocracy located largely in northwestern Europe and at the American East Coast. This small upper-class network perpetuated the ethos of age-old gentlemanly traditions as exemplified in the practices of animal breeding, estate management, natural history collecting, and big game hunting. Simultaneously, however, they were engaged in modernizing and regulating these activities through engagement in modern zoos, natural history museums, national parks, and documentation offices. The chapter shows, finally, that the influence of what I call “expert gentlemen” came mostly through the informal power brokerage typical of their class. They put to use this power brokerage to regulate access to and control over wild nature across the globe.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 look into the ways in which the “international” and the “scientific” were given concrete forms in the interwar years. To do so, these chapters discuss the functioning of specific international societies, committees, and administrations, their engagement with particular natures, and the specific instruments of protection they created. In particular, they discuss: the advent of international legislation for the protection of migratory birds, the transborder efforts of zoos to breed threatened animals, and the transnational origins of national parks in the European colonies.

Chapter 3 focuses on the activities of the ICBP, founded in 1922 as the (self-proclaimed) first international organization for nature protection. While the ICBP could build on existing initiatives of transborder bird preservation, it also reframed these in significant ways. I study this reframing process by focusing on ICBP’s engagement with the revision of one particularly influential text: the Paris Convention for the Protection of Birds Useful to Agriculture (1902). Negotiating this revision proved a very time-consuming and frustrating enterprise, and it took until 1950 for an agreement to be reached. While the differences between the conventions of 1902 and 1950 might seem modest at

first sight, I argue that they involved important shifts in the rationale of bird preservation, in the networks of the preservationists, in the actual object of their protection, and in the instruments they used to make this protection work. It involved a reorientation of preservation activities from central to northwestern Europe, a subtle distancing from preexisting humanitarian and utilitarian traditions of bird protection, a novel coalition with international circles of wildfowl hunters, a scientific motivation that was increasingly tied up with natural history, and a new focus on habitat protection. These shifts proved of long-lasting influence.

Chapter 4, subsequently, zooms in on the protection of one particular species: the European bison, or wisent, declared extinct in the wild not long after World War I. With only a few dozen individuals surviving spread over European zoos and game estates, the protection of the wisent presented itself as an international endeavor almost by definition. Furthermore, the wisent protectors who congregated in the newly founded ISPEB quickly agreed that “scientific” breeding offered the only viable prospect for saving the species. In this context, a wisent studbook was established. It set an influential example: later in the century, studbooks became the foremost instrument for coordinating international breeding projects of endangered animals. Yet despite the internationalist language and scientific procedures, wisent breeding proved an enterprise rife with ambiguities and tensions. While the wisent became a powerful symbol, the chapter shows that this symbol was a polysemic and highly politicized one—even within the small transnational circle of the scientists who tried to bring the animal back from the brink of extinction. Members of the ISPEB discussed passionately what constitutes a “pure” breed, what counts as the “natural” and “original” habitat of the species, and which nation could claim to offer the most “efficient” preservation measures. The discussions, furthermore, involved American money, Nazi imagery, Dutch middlemen, Polish forests, and, of course, the last sixty remaining wisents.

In chapter 5, the focus shifts from Europe to Africa and from the protection of species to that of entire ecosystems. In particular, the chapter explores the role of transnational networks of naturalists, diplomats, and royals in the creation of the Albert National Park in Belgian Congo in 1925, and their discursive framing of the park as both a “world laboratory” and an “experiment in internationalism.” This framing ultimately legitimized a strict management scheme, turning the park into a so-called integral reserve that aimed to protect a “primitive”

wilderness in its unaltered state. Furthermore, it facilitated control over the area by a transnational group of scientists, while closing it off from unwanted human and nonhuman actors, among which were invasive species, tourists, and much of the local population. While such power could only be acquired thanks to the colonial context of the Albert National Park, the park's administrators used their transnational embedding to gain relative autonomy vis-à-vis the colonial authorities. International and scientific rhetoric thus led to what several officials perceived as "a state within the state." The chapter, finally, shows that similar strategies of carving out territories in the name of international science were also tried out in other imperial contexts—but not everywhere with the same far-reaching effects.

Chapter 6 zooms out again to analyze how the transnational networks described in chapter 1 were reorganized in the aftermath of World War II. At first sight this reorganization might seem to constitute an important caesura. The late 1940s, after all, witnessed crucial institutional developments (including the foundation of the UN, UNESCO, and IUPN), which brought about a further professionalization and bureaucratization of international nature protection. The atomic bomb, the advent of the Cold War, and looming decolonization also drastically changed the geopolitical context in which conservationists had to operate. The chapter shows, however, that to a very large extent the new context saw interwar networks consolidated rather than weakened. Established civic groups were encapsulated in new structures, but without losing their old ethos and contacts. International nature protection continued to be controlled by a small old boys' network, which proved highly influential when headquarters of new institutions had to be designated or vacancies of new positions had to be filled.

While the international networks of nature protection largely survived World War II, the ways in which its members conceived of and structured their scientific work altered in some important respects. Chapter 7 foregrounds these developments as exemplified in the projects of the IUPN in the 1940s and 1950s. In these years, a consensus within the organization arose that ecology should become the scientific bedrock of nature protection. Several prominent voices within the IUPN believed that ecology's universal laws would give coherence to the union's program. Yet when IUPN members finally got new conservation projects off the ground in the 1950s, it quickly turned out that ecology could inspire very different practices. In the Middle East, the union's ecologists became

involved in highly interventionist and utilitarian programs that ultimately aimed to “make the desert bloom.” In Western Europe, IUPN members focused on the protection of historical landscapes such as heath and moorland—which they conceptualized as a valuable form of “semi-nature.” In sub-Saharan Africa, finally, ecology-led conservation aspired to maintain a “pristine” wilderness that was seemingly devoid of human influence. Despite its universalizing rhetoric, the IUPN’s ecological program indeed gave rise to highly divergent approaches.

Taking stock, the epilogue analyzes the long-term influence of the foundational years of international nature protection. While the global nature protection movement grew exponentially after 1960 and witnessed an important institutional and geographical diversification, I will argue that “mainstream conservation” still carries the marks of the early and mid-twentieth-century context in which it originated. Underneath clear changes of rhetoric and institutional structure one can find significant continuities in the ideas, practices, and self-conception of international and science-based nature protection. Also, the old tensions within the network were perpetuated after 1960, which resulted in almost cyclical discussions. In this way, both the disagreements and consensual ideas of the early proponents of international nature protection have left lasting legacies. The concluding chapter assesses these continuities from the period of decolonization in sub-Saharan Africa and institutional reform in the 1960s, through the era of the 1970s and 1980s preoccupied with Spaceship Earth and sustainable development, to the turn of the twenty-first century with its focus on biodiversity loss and climate change.

Current megaconferences devoted to conservation might seem a far cry from the reality of nature protection a century before. Pictures of the (all-white) audience of naturalists, politicians, and aristocrats whom Siedlecki addressed at the Paris Conference of 1932 evoke a sense of historical distance. The tailor-made suits, the brilliantine, the medals—at first sight these seem to belong to a social world long gone. But the distance is relative. This book argues that in many ways the period’s ideas and practices still reverberate in present-day conservation.