

**CHARISMA IN CONSERVATION BIOLOGY.
PRELIMINARY NOTES TO AN AESTHETIC-
PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH**

Mariagrazia Portera

 ORCID: 0000-0002-3949-8147

Università degli Studi di Firenze (04jr1s763)

Contacts: mariagrazia.portera@unifi.it

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to explore the notion of charisma in conservation biology.

In recent years, this notion has become very popular among conservationists, for example in the expression “charismatic megafauna.” In general, in conservation biology, species are described as “charismatic” when they exert a non-ordinary impact on humans – specifically in their capacity to capture attention, engage the imagination, and evoke memorable emotional responses.

Despite its widespread usage, the notion of charisma has, with few exceptions, received limited critical scrutiny so far from a conceptual and philosophical standpoint within the conservation sciences.

This paper sets out to begin that task, by returning to the Weberian origin of the concept and putting forward an interpretation of non-human charisma as an emergent, relational, context-dependent, and ecologically collective phenomenon.

Keywords: extinction, bias, Anthropocene, Max Weber

**IL CARISMA NELLA BIOLOGIA DELLA CONSERVAZIONE. NOTE PRELIMINARI PER UN APPROCCIO
ESTETICO-FILOSOFICO**

L'obiettivo del presente articolo è esplorare la nozione di carisma nella biologia della conservazione. Negli ultimi anni tale nozione ha acquisito grande popolarità tra i conservazionisti, come è possibile constatare ad esempio nell'espressione “megafauna carismatica”. In generale, nella biologia della conservazione, una specie è definita “carismatica” quando esercita un impatto non ordinario sugli esseri umani – in particolare nella capacità di catturare l'attenzione, stimolare l'immaginazione e suscitare risposte emotive memorabili

Nonostante l'uso diffuso, la nozione di carisma ha ricevuto finora, salvo poche eccezioni, una scarsa attenzione critica da un punto di vista concettuale e filosofico all'interno delle scienze della conservazione. Il presente articolo si propone di avviare tale indagine, tornando all'origine weberiana del concetto e proponendo un'interpretazione del carisma non umano come fenomeno emergente, relazionale, dipendente dal contesto ed ecologicamente collettivo.

Parole chiave: estinzione, bias, Antropocene, Max Weber



The erosion of global biodiversity is one of the most pressing threats currently facing humanity¹. To counteract this decline, the past few years have seen substantial investments of economic, social, and cultural resources, alongside the development of conservation policies at both national and international levels². However, ensuring the effective and unbiased allocation of these resources is a complex challenge, often underestimated in its scope and implications.

A recent study examining approximately 14,600 conservation projects funded over a 25-year period revealed a significant misalignment between funding priorities and actual conservation needs, which threatens to undermine the overall efficacy of global biodiversity protection efforts³. Specifically, the study demonstrated that conservation research funding is not distributed in accordance with the species' objective protection needs (i.e., based on their level of vulnerability)⁴, but is instead influenced by a wide array of biases and distortions. Several highly threatened taxa (such as amphibians) receive minimal conservation support, while other groups (mammals, for instance) receive disproportionately more resources despite facing similar or even less urgent levels of risk. Furthermore, the study observed that even within relatively well-studied clades, financial resources are heavily concentrated on a small subset of species. Perhaps most strikingly, authors found that only 6% of species classified as threatened received conservation funding, while nearly 29% of available resources were allocated to species designated as “least concern”.

When we examine the possible reasons behind this disproportionate allocation of conservation funding and try to understand what factors and dynamics may be responsible for such a marked distortion in the distribution of resources, a pattern seems to emerge: many of the (few) species that receive the majority of funding belong to the category of so-called *charismatic fauna*. These are species to which human beings attribute a certain “charisma”, as discussed in a pioneering study by Albert, Couquet, and Courchamp in 2018⁵. The notion of charisma, thus, appears to be crucial in shaping species conservation strategies.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the role of charisma in conservation biology, by addressing the following questions: What is meant by “charisma” in the context of conservation biology? What is the conceptual genealogy of this term? How is charisma measured? What is the relationship between charisma and aesthetic values? Is the charisma of a non-human animal species an innate, intrinsic property, or is it contingent upon other factors? Can a species' (perceived) charisma fade or diminish over time?

This contribution is structured as follows. The first section traces the Weberian origins of the notion of charisma, bringing to the fore the tension, in Weber's writings, between personalistic-innatist interpre-

¹ To access up-to-date information on the current state of global biodiversity resources, please visit the website of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), an independent intergovernmental body established in 2012, <https://www.ipbes.net>. See: S. Díaz et al., *The IPBES Conceptual Framework – connecting nature and people*, “Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability”, 2015, 14, pp. 1-16; IPBES, *Global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services* [<https://www.ipbes.net/global-assessment>, accessed on June 25th 2025] 2019 May.

² See, on this point, the recent contribution by IPBES, *Summary for Policymakers of the Thematic Assessment Report on the Interlinkages among Biodiversity, Water, Food and Health of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*, by P.D. McElwe et al. (eds.), 2024, IPBES secretariat, Bonn, Germany, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13850289>.

³ B. Guénard, A.C. Hughes, C. Lainé, S. Cannicci, B.D. Russell, G.A. Williams, *Limited and biased global conservation funding means most threatened species remain unsupported*, “Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America”, 2025, 122 (9), e2412479122. See also: M.A., Titley, J.L. Snaddon, E.C. Turner (2017) *Scientific research on animal biodiversity is systematically biased towards vertebrates and temperate regions*, “PLoS ONE”, 12 (12), e0189577.

⁴ On the IUCN classification for threatened species, see for instance A.S.L. Rodrigues et al., *The value of the IUCN Red Lists for conservation*, “Trends in Ecology & Evolution”, 2006, 21, 2, pp. 71-76.

⁵ C. Albert, G.M. Luque F. Courchamp, *The twenty most charismatic species*, 2028, “PLoS ONE”, 13 (7), e0199149. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0199149>.

tations and depersonalized-relational ones. The second section (and its sub-sections) focuses on the role of charisma in conservation biology, paying particular attention to the challenges, limitations, and ambiguities inherent in its current application. The final section explores the conceptual relationship between charisma and aesthetic experience.

The main thesis advanced in the paper is that charisma is not an intrinsic property of a species; rather, it is a relational, contextual and response-dependent one – also, it may be (at least partially) anchored in biologically grounded dispositions (such as human preference and attraction to other mammals, and the emotional attachment toward those animals that most resemble human traits). Of particular interest is the functional, collective and community-sensitive dimension of charisma, which is discussed here as an alternative to its problematic reification (in a Weberian sense).

A few preliminary remarks are needed, before delving into the core of the discussion. Re-engaging with a concept as deeply explored as charisma – especially in light of the vast Weberian literature on the topic – can only be justified if today’s context offers compelling reasons to reassess its relevance and scope. I argue that such conditions are indeed met in the case of charisma in conservation biology. The application to conservation biology truly revitalizes the debate on charisma and raises novel, unprecedented questions. However, owing to limitations of scope and space, this article does not attempt an exhaustive exploration of all the issues surrounding charisma and conservation. For a more comprehensive treatment, readers are referred to a forthcoming monograph currently in preparation on the aesthetics of biological conservation.

1. WEBERIAN ORIGINS AND POST-WEBERIAN SOCIOLOGY

The word *charisma* derives from the Greek *χάρις* (*charis*), meaning grace (i.e. something given for free). The suffix *-μα* (*-ma*), when added to *χάρις*, denotes the action resulting from this gift of grace, i.e. the fact that someone, through a pure act of grace, has been enabled to do something new, or has gained a new ability or capacity to act. In its theological sense, the term can be considered a conceptual innovation introduced by Saint Paul in the first century of Christianity. He appropriated the word from everyday language, where it simply meant “gift”, without any reference to God. In the apostolic writings, we encounter various instances of *charismata*, understood as endowments of the Holy Spirit bestowed upon believers. A paradigmatic passage, particularly relevant to the aims of this article, is found in Saint Paul’s Letter to the Romans, chapter 12. Paul writes:

[4] For as *in one body we have many parts, and all the parts do not have the same function*, [5] so we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually parts of one another. [6] Since we have gifts (*charismata*) that differ according to the grace given to us, let us exercise them: if prophecy, in proportion to the faith; [7] if ministry, in ministering; if one is a teacher, in teaching; [8] if one exhorts, in exhortation; if one contributes, in generosity; if one leads, with diligence; if one does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness [my emphasis]⁶.

In this passage, while addressing the Christian community in Rome, Paul puts forward what I would call an *ecological-functional* understanding of *charismata* (always in plural). Although *charismata* originate from a transcendent, extra-ordinary source – namely, Christ – what counts here is that these gifts of God’s grace are assumed by Paul as mundane functional entities, to be exercised to ensure the optimal functioning of

⁶ *The Holy Bible* online, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/_PZ0.HTM, accessed on June 25th 2025.

the Christian community. The *charismata* seem to follow a logic of distribution and division of collective labor and are expressions of a preexisting web of interrelationships (exemplified here through the metaphor of a single body composed of many parts, each contributing through its proper functioning to the overall health of the whole), in relation to which the fact that *this* or *that* individual has been endowed (within the community), say, with prophecy or ministry is, for Paul, entirely contingent. Every charism does not possess value in and of itself (nor can it be understood as the possession of a special “charismatic” personality), but only in an *ecological* (in a broad sense) connection with all the others; the functional logic of the community is antecedent to individual particularities.⁷

When Max Weber brought the concept of *charisma* back into focus at the beginning of the twentieth century, he was fully aware of its theological origins, particularly within the Christian tradition and in light of the theological scholarship of Rudolf Sohm and Karl Holl, both of whom he cites extensively.⁸

Weber refers to the notion of *charisma* in multiple parts of his work.⁹ As Potts observes, one of his earliest, albeit brief, references to *charisma* can be found in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, originally published as a two-part article in 1904-1905 in the “Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik”. Weber later revised and expanded this material into a volume published in 1920, and the book was then translated into English by Talcott Parsons in 1930. A footnote by Parsons in 1930 erroneously states that “Charisma is a sociological term coined by Weber himself”¹⁰, and it is indeed an interesting remark, as Parsons’ lack of awareness regarding the historical depth of the concept – particularly its Pauline roots prior to Weber’s revival of the term – reflects the extent to which the notion of *charisma* had fallen into obscurity. By the early twentieth century, the concept had become so marginal that it appeared, even to a scholar like Parsons, as if Weber had invented it.¹¹

Apart from this early reference in *The Protestant Ethic*, between 1915 and 1922 Weber addressed the notion of *charisma* in the context of two lectures delivered at the invitation of the *Freie Studentenschaft* (Free Student Union) at the University of Munich. The first, on 7 November 1917, explores the theme of science and the academic profession as a vocation; the second lecture, delivered on 28 January 1919, summarizes Weber’s ideas on what it means to be a politician in a modern democracy¹². Finally, the notion of “charisma” plays a crucial conceptual role in Weber’s *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, published posthumously in German in 1922 (Weber died in 1920), translated to English first in 1947 and later in 1968 as *Economy and Society*.¹³

As is well known, Weber’s revival of the notion of *charisma* takes place against the backdrop of his broader thesis concerning the modern *disenchantment of the world*. This process entails a departure from world-

⁷ On Paul and his notion of charisma, see the chapter by J. Potts in *A History of Charisma*, Palgrave MacMillan, London 2009, titled *Paul Invents Charisma*, pp. 23-50. See also, on these topics, P. Napoli, *Le charisme et la loi. Remarques sur une bipolarité politique*, in D.Y., Cohen (dir.), *Formes de l'autorité, de la grandeur au charisme*, “Politika”, <https://www.politika.io/fr/article/charisme-loi-remarques-bipolarite-politique>, accessed on June 25th 2025.

⁸ On this, M. Palma, *Carisma e demoni. Fonti ed effetti di un concetto politico*, “Scienza & Politica. Per Una Storia Delle Dottrine”, 2020, 32(63), pp. 143-159.

⁹ For an overview on the notion, F. Tuccari, *Carisma e leadership nel pensiero di Max Weber*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 1991.

¹⁰ M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Talcott Parsons, with an introduction by Anthony Giddens, Routledge, London-New York 1992, p. 121 (note by Parsons at p. 258).

¹¹ See J. Potts, *History of Charisma*, cit., p. 116-117.

¹² M. Weber, *The Vocation lectures. “Science as a Vocation” – “Politics as a Vocation”*, edited and with an introduction by D. Owen, T-B. Strong, translated by R. Livingstone, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis-Cambridge 2004.

¹³ On all this, a useful overview (with a selection of sources and texts by Weber on charisma) is: M. Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building: Selected Papers*, edited and with an introduction by S.N. Eisenstadt, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1968.

views grounded in transcendent and religious principles, as well as the emergence of rigid social structures. Within this “iron cage” of rationalization, Weber signals the decline of the “charismatic”. Nonetheless, he suggests that something of the ancient spirit – or of the mythical past – is still alive, though diminished in both scale and intensity. As he writes in *Science as a Vocation*: “Our age is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the disenchantment of the world. Its resulting fate is that precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have withdrawn from public life [...]. Nor is it a matter of chance that *today it is only in the smallest groups, between individual human beings, pianissimo*, that you find the pulsing beat that in bygone days heralded the prophetic spirit that swept through great communities like a firestorm and welded them together” (my emphasis).¹⁴

As this quotation shows, for Weber *charisma* – the notion to which he is clearly referring in the above-mentioned passage – primarily concerns the dynamics of interpersonal relationships (i.e. the physical and emotional proximity between individuals) and the effects of exceptional qualities attributed to a single person. More precisely, in Weber’s account, *charisma* within social groups depends, on the one hand, on the presence of personal traits in a subject perceived as extraordinary or even supernatural, and, on the other hand, on the recognition of these traits by others.

The classic definition that Weber provides of *charisma* is well-known: “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional qualities”¹⁵. This definition is formulated in the framework of Weber’s theory of the three principal sources of legitimate authority – and, by extension, of obedience: rational grounds, traditional grounds, and charismatic grounds, the latter described as “resting on devotion to the specific and exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him (charismatic authority)”¹⁶. Presented in this way – strictly and necessarily bound to the personal qualities of a single individual – charismatic authority is, by its very nature, highly unstable.

This is why, according to Weber, charisma over time inevitably undergoes a process of transformation: it shifts from the individual to institutional procedures, eventually becoming attached to an office, irrespective of who occupies it. This happens, for example, when rituals such as the coronation of a monarch acquire themselves a charismatic aura or when charisma begins to be conceived of as a quality transmitted by heredity:¹⁷ the power of *charisma* becomes “habitual” or institutionalized (*alltöglich*) and is gradually absorbed into one of the two alternative forms of domination – either traditional or rational-legal¹⁸. In this sense, charisma represents (only) the typical *initial* manifestation of religious or political authority. Although its origin is in the extraordinary, it ends up with being integrated into the ordinary as soon as the charismatic power has been consolidated.

¹⁴ M. Weber, *The Vocation lectures*, cit., p. 30.

¹⁵ M. Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building*, cit., p. 48.

¹⁶ Ibi, p. 46.

¹⁷ Ibi, p. 48 ff.

¹⁸ As Potts also points out in his *A History of Charisma*, the routinization of charisma – first of all Pauline charisma – “coincides with the transition from an oral transmission of the Christian message to the establishment of authoritative written texts. The very early Christian communities had little or nothing in the way of Christian texts (even Paul’s epistles were read aloud to congregations). The diverse charismata described by Paul functioned in this oral environment: individuals prophesied, spoke in tongues, interpreted prophecies, taught the Christian message, performed miracles. None of these spiritual gifts was associated with written texts; each was performative and depended on an immediate audience”, p. 60 ff. This is an important point, as it highlights the increasingly institutionalized nature of charisma to the extent that its routinization progresses, and the relation between orality and performativity in the discussion of charisma.

Several pages of *Economy and Society* describe the process by which charisma loses its exceptional authority and becomes objectified in reproducible criteria structured by legal norms. This is especially evident in the section titled “*Charisma and Its Transformation*”, which details the various pathways through which charisma is either traditionalized or rationalized. For this reason, scholars have identified a progressively depersonalizing trajectory in Weber’s conception of charisma – culminating in the notion of “*charisma of function*” (or “*office charisma*”), in which charisma is no longer tied to an individual’s personal qualities, but rather to the objective responsibilities attached to their institutional role.¹⁹

In short – and with a certain amount of simplification – Weber’s treatment of *charisma* unfolds along a dialectic between personalization and depersonalization, between the extraordinary and the ordinary. The starting point is, undoubtedly, the set of qualities possessed by the exceptional individual as intrinsic attributes.

To a degree that Weber himself likely could have never anticipated, the concept of *charisma* gained widespread popularity in the second half of the twentieth century. As Potts notes, by the 1960s, the term “charisma” was already in common use in the media to describe certain politicians with exceptional appeal – most notably the Kennedys. Over time, the word was extended to a wide range of public figures, including actors, pop stars, and other celebrities.²⁰ Celebrity, however, is not *charisma* – especially not in the Weberian sense²¹. The concept appears today to have lost its original meaning as an exceptional gift, particularly in an era in which, as Emanuelle Arielli puts it (quoting Turner), “the extraordinary has become ordinary.”²²

As Clayton Fordahl notes, following Weber’s introduction of the concept into sociology two major interpretative strands have emerged in the discipline, both engaging with an issue that Weber himself only touched upon briefly and somewhat cursorily – namely, the “origin” of charisma. On the one hand, there are those who support a model that Fordahl calls “of emotional resonance” of charisma, according to which “charisma essentially arises when the meanings offered by a social actor articulate the experiences of an audience”²³; on the other hand, proponents of the “reputational management model” argue “that even talented figures require an organizational apparatus to mediate communication to an audience”²⁴. These two strands have come to define today the principal sociological approaches to interpreting the phenomenon. At the same time, there has been a remarkable expansion of the relevance and centrality of the notion of *charisma* beyond the proper boundaries of sociology, extending even into disciplines that are traditionally quite distant from it – such as conservation biology.

2. CHARISMA IN CONSERVATION BIOLOGY

According to the Web of Science database, until the mid-2000s (around 2006), only about ten academic papers per year employed the term “charismatic species”. Over the past twenty years, however, the usage of

¹⁹ M. Weber, *Economy and Society. An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, edited by G. Roth and C. Wittich, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 2013, p. 1111 ff. See on this also M. Barisione, M., *Reviving Metapersonal Charisma in Max Weber*, “Political Theory”, 51 (3), 2023, pp. 530-556.

²⁰ See J. Potts, *A History of Charisma*, cit., p. 159 ff.

²¹ Ibi, p. 182 ff.

²² S. Turner, *Charisma Reconsidered*, “Journal of Classical Sociology”, 3, 5, 2003, pp. 5-26. See, on this, E. Arielli, *Carisma tra estetica e politica*, in H.-C. Günther (ed.), *Kunst im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert Zwischen Klassizismus und Moderne, zwischen privatem und öffentlichem Raum*, Verlag Traugott Bautz, Nordhausen 2017, pp. 151-178.

²³ C. Fordahl, *Beyond Animal Charisma: A Sociological Approach to Charismatic Species*, “Conservation & Society”, vol. 22, no. 1, 2024, pp. 14-24, p. 16.

²⁴ Ibi, p. 14.

the expression has increased exponentially, culminating in more than 400 publications on conservational charisma in the last four years (2022, 2023, 2024, 2025). The very earliest occurrences of the term in the context of conservation can be traced back to the 1980s and 1990s and were associated with the concept of “flagship species”²⁵, i.e. those symbols of general ecological threats, like the polar bear adrift on melting ice or the cormorants covered in tar, elected by conservation advocates on the basis of their charisma.

Why have the notions of charisma – and that related of “flagship species” – increasingly attracted the attention of conservation biologists starting approximately forty years ago and with even greater relevance over the last few years? To address this question, one should first recall that conservation biology is a relatively “young” scientific discipline, formally established with Michael Soulé’s seminal paper²⁶ in 1985. In Soulé’s account, conservation biology is a “crisis discipline,” operating under normative constraints, subject to limitations of time and resources, and therefore requiring the prioritization of interventions, strategies, and research activities aimed at protecting biodiversity at risk²⁷. Given that resources are limited, it is essential to select specific targets for their effective allocation. Furthermore, conservation biology is structurally a transdisciplinary science,²⁸ in which the support of both experts and non-experts, as well as a widespread public endorsement, is essential to effectively address the challenges at stake. Indeed, conservation efforts rely on human decision-making, including the allocation of financial resources, and thus require the involvement of as broad an audience as possible. Consequently, conservationists have developed a strong interest in communication and dissemination strategies of scientific research, often employing flagship and charismatic species²⁹.

Until now, conservation biologists who have engaged with the concept of charisma have done so with virtually no awareness of its conceptual history – let alone its theological and Weberian origins. This is understandable and not necessarily problematic. Research conducted thus far in conservation biology has followed two main trajectories: the first, adopting an *extensionalist* approach, has aimed to compile a list of individual species most likely to be identified as charismatic; the second line of inquiry, at least in principle adopting an *intensionalist* approach, has focused on identifying the underlying variables and factors that shape and define the concept of a charismatic species in general terms.

A study published in 2018³⁰ produced a list of the world’s twenty most charismatic species. The authors compiled this list using the results of two surveys: the first asked respondents to indicate, without prior conceptual framing, the ten animal species they considered most charismatic; the second invited participants to associate up to six traits – rare, endangered, beautiful, cute, impressive, and dangerous – with their selected species. In addition to these surveys, the authors analyzed the presence of wildlife species featured on the homepage banners of zoos located in the world’s 100 largest cities, as well as on the film posters of all Disney and Pixar productions. The resulting list was dominated by large-sized mammals, including big cats, bears, one canid, two primates, two cetaceans, and five large ungulates. The 20 most charismatic

²⁵ On the concept of flagship species, D. Verissimo, D.C. MacMillan, R.J. Smith, *Toward a systematic approach for identifying conservation flagships*, in “Conservation Letters”, 2011, 4, pp. 1-8.

²⁶ M.E. Soulé, *What is Conservation Biology?*, “BioScience”, 35, 11, 1985, pp. 727-34.

²⁷ See G. M., Mace, H. P., Possingham, N. Leader-Williams, *Prioritizing choices in conservation*, in *Key Topics in Conservation Biology*, edited by D. MacDonald, K. Service, Blackwell, Oxford 2007, pp. 17-34.

²⁸ D. Ludwig et al., *Transdisciplinary Philosophy of Science: Meeting the Challenge of Indigenous Expertise*, “Philosophy of Science”, 2024, 91, 5, pp. 1221-1231.

²⁹ See, for instance, F. Ducarme, G. Luque, F. Courchamp, *What are “charismatic species” for conservation biologists?*, “BioSciences Master Reviews”, 2013, 1, pp. 1-8.

³⁰ C. Albert, G.M. Luque, F. Courchamp, *The twenty most charismatic species*, cit.

species were overwhelmingly represented by large-bodied animals (19 out of 20), mammals (18 out of 20), and terrestrial species (17 out of 20). The overrepresentation of mammals was anticipated, given their disproportionate visibility in conservation biology, in public communication campaigns, and in the scientific literature. In particular, as shown by a previous study³¹, members of the felid family appeared to possess especially high levels of charisma.

Before proceeding further with the examination of this line of inquiry in conservation biology, one observation is worth noting: within this context and in the framework of this “list”-centered, extensionalist approach to charisma, the notion of charisma seems to be framed in ways (intentionally or not) that recall at least in part Weberian themes of personalization. Specifically, in Albert’s list charisma tends to be treated as an intrinsic property of the organism – and a species considered charismatic if it produces on the observer psychological effects (fear, awe, admiration, respect, emotional engagement, a sense of extraordinariness, attachment etc.) comparable to those that would be elicited by a charismatic human being. Charisma, in this context, appears to be understood as something immediately perceptible — a surface-level phenomenon or visual impression that captivates and draws in the viewer, eliciting an emotional response. This is, at least, the initial impression one gets from examining the “charisma list”.

2.1. *Difficulties with the extensionalist approach*

Since its early use, the concept of charisma has rapidly expanded in conservation research³². Today, it is being applied in a variety of contexts – for instance, to examine the role of charisma in species invasions³³, the extent to which charismatic appeal influences patterns of scientific publication³⁴, and the correlation between species charisma and extinction risk. What is however becoming increasingly clear is that, despite the good intentions behind its use – namely, to boost conservation efforts and engage wider public support – the reference to charismatic species in conservation campaigns is not without complications. In fact, in some cases, it may lead to unintended consequences that undermine the very objectives it was meant to advance.

A particularly insightful study in this context is that of ecologist Franck Courchamp and colleagues, published in 2018³⁵, which highlights a paradoxical link between species recognized as charismatic and their risk of extinction. According to their findings, the very species most frequently featured in conservation campaigns due to their high charismatic appeal – such as lions, tigers, elephants, and giraffes – are, paradoxically, among those most at risk of extinction.

³¹ See E.A. Macdonald, D. Burnham, A.E. Hinks, A.J. Dickman, Y. Malhi, D.W. Macdonald, *Conservation inequality and the charismatic cat: Felis felis*, “Global Ecology and Conservation”, 3, 2015, pp. 851-866.

³² See, for instance: E.A. Macdonald, A. Hinks, D.J. Weiss, A. Dickman, D. Burnham, C.J. Sandom, Y. Malhi, D.W. Macdonald, *Identifying ambassador species for conservation marketing*, “Global Ecology and Conservation”, 12, 2017, pp. 204-214; M. Brambilla, M. Gustin, C. Celada, *Species appeal predicts conservation status*, “Biological Conservation”, 160, 2013, pp. 209-213; J.C. Skibins, R.B. Powell, J.C. Hallo, *Charisma and conservation: charismatic megafauna’s influence on safari and zoo tourists’ pro-conservation behaviors*, “Biodiversity and Conservation”, 2013, 22, 10.1007/s10531-013-0462-z; M. Adamo, R. Sousa R, S. Wipf, R.A., Correia, A. Lumia, M. Mucciarelli et al., *Dimension and impact of biases in funding for species and habitat conservation*, “Biological Conservation”, 2022, 272, 109636.

³³ I. Jarić, F. Courchamp, R.A. Correia, S.L. Crowley, F. Essl, et al., *The role of species charisma in biological invasions*, “Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment”, 2020, 18, pp.345-353.

³⁴ See, on charisma and academic publications, M. Isaac, C.S. Fukushima, B. Macura et al., *How is the concept of charisma used in the academic literature about biodiversity conservation? A systematic map protocol*, “Environmental Evidence”, 13, 29 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13750-024-00353-2>.

³⁵ F. Courchamp, I. Jarić, C. Albert, Y. Meinard, W.J. Ripple, G. Chapron, *The paradoxical extinction of the most charismatic animals*, “PLoS Biology”, 16 (4), 2018, e2003997. Available from: doi:10.1371/journal.pbio.2003997.

The researchers draw attention to the pervasive presence of these rare charismatic animals in Western cultural representations – from toys and books to advertisements and digital media – and point to a growing disconnection between their symbolic abundance and the actual decline of their populations in the wild. They hypothesize that this overexposure in the cultural imagination may hinder conservation efforts by fostering a false sense of security about their survival. Indeed, public perception often assumes that these species are well protected, and this misplaced assumption may lead to complacency. The study therefore reinforces broader calls within the conservation literature to move beyond an exclusive focus on charismatic species.

As a corrective measure, Courchamp and his colleagues propose that companies using charismatic, threatened species in their branding – such as lions, tigers, or koalas – should pay a fee. At present, no such financial contribution is required, despite the fact that commercial use of these animals’ images may unwittingly contribute to the misperception that such species are widespread and not in urgent need of protection. The authors suggest establishing a regulatory framework in which companies would pay a fee to an existing or specially designated institution representing the global public interest in biodiversity preservation.

A related study, conducted by Colléony and colleagues and published in 2017, investigated the role of charisma in influencing people’s willingness to pay (WTP) in support of species conservation³⁶. The study surveyed over 10,000 participants involved in a zoo-based conservation program in France, which invited individuals to symbolically “adopt” a zoo animal through a financial donation. The results showed that while charismatic appeal positively influenced the selection of animals for adoption – suggesting, as expected, that people are drawn to charismatic species – it had a *negative* impact on the actual amount donated. As the researchers note, “those who adopted less charismatic species probably engage more strongly with species conservation, acknowledging the strong selection biases that might exist in favour of charismatic species. In other words, committed people might tend to make a strategic choice, anticipating that some non-charismatic species are likely to attract little support and deciding to compensate accordingly”³⁷. So, in light of this evidence, do charismatic species ultimately help or hinder conservation? What I wish to emphasize here is that, for the vast majority of the species included in Albert et al.’s charismatic list (discussed above), the public’s experience – at least within the Western context, which is arguably the primary arena for conservation engagement – is a mediated one. That is, people typically encounter these animals through representations: drawings, photographs, digital images, films, and so on. After all, how many individuals have had direct, embodied encounters with a tiger, a lion, or a giraffe?

As Weber reminds us, charisma is a relational phenomenon that depends crucially on bodily proximity – the immediacy of face-to-face interaction. This is also a core assumption in most sociological studies of charisma, including both theoretical models discussed earlier: the reputational management model and the emotional resonance model. In contrast, what we observe with so-called charismatic species is a form of charisma that exists only as an abstraction in the minds of the public – charisma at a distance, without the physical or interpersonal presence of the charismatic entity³⁸.

This mediated (or distanced) nature of public experience with charismatic species deserves closer scrutiny. On the one hand, these are animals we rarely, if ever, encounter directly. Our sense of their charisma is therefore rooted almost entirely in their visual appeal – as captured and circulated in static or moving

³⁶ A. Colléony, S. Clayton, D. Couvet, M. Saint Jalme, A.-C. Prévot, *Human preferences for species conservation: Animal charisma trumps endangered status*, “Biological Conservation”, 206, 2017, pp. 263-269.

³⁷ Ibi, pp. 267-268.

³⁸ On this point, C. Fordahl, *Beyond Animal Charisma*, cit., p. 18.

(bi-dimensional) images. Charisma in this context becomes a matter of “surface” aesthetics, often reduced to a formalist attractiveness. On the other hand, it is also true that this “surface” – the visual appearance that captivates the eye – is mediated by layers and layers of cultural meanings, the vast majority of which we are not completely aware of. Each so-called charismatic species brings with it a whole imaginary: a mix of fantasy, narratives, storytelling, symbolisms, and cultural factors that shapes our visual perception, plus some biological predispositions (like our preference to mammals, the more so the more the species resemble human traits). These imaginaries function independently of the actual biology or behavior of the species themselves. This raises a pressing question: How are such imaginaries constructed? And, more importantly, how can we bring them to consciousness in order to critically evaluate, reshape, or even dismantle them – if they prove to be counterproductive to the goals of biodiversity conservation?³⁹

2.1.1. *Variables and influencing factors*

As previously mentioned, in identifying the list of the twenty most charismatic species worldwide, Albert and colleagues correlated the animal species with a set of traits presumed to underlie charisma: rarity, endangered status, beauty, cuteness, impressiveness, and dangerousness. Additionally, large body size was identified as one of the key predictors of charisma.⁴⁰ Similarly, phylogenetic proximity to humans has also been identified as a predictor of charisma, potentially explaining why mammals are more frequently perceived as charismatic compared to other animal groups.⁴¹

The role of these traits, however, remains problematic. Charisma is an extrinsic (i.e. context-dependent) and relational property, meaning that it arises from the interaction between the (human) observer and the animal species. If it were a non-relational and intrinsic property – i.e., if a species’ charisma depended solely on the possession of a specific trait or a discrete, identifiable combination of traits (regardless of any observer or context)⁴², so that any species exhibiting them would automatically count as charismatic, we would not encounter cases such as whales, which are significantly larger than koalas yet generally perceived as less charismatic; or primates, which are phylogenetically closer to humans but often regarded as less charismatic than large felines; or morphologically similar species – such as leopards, cheetahs, and jaguars – that nonetheless elicit different levels of perceived charisma. Moreover, an increase in body size does not automatically correspond to an increase in perceived charisma. This is all the more evident today, as scholars have noted, due in part to the widespread availability of media that allows us to access detailed, high-resolution

³⁹ The body of work addressing the role of the imaginary and narratives in relation to the notion of charisma is vast. I will limit myself here to citing E. Horn, editor of a special issue of *New German Critique* dedicated to “Narrating Charisma” (2011, vol. 138, no. 3). On the significance of narrating charisma – particularly in relation to scientific research, public outreach, and media – and its specific application to scientific museology and paleontological display, see E. Shever, *More-than-human charisma, iconic fossils, and palaeontologists in the United States*, “Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute”, 2025, 31, pp. 584-604.

⁴⁰ E. Berti, S. Monsarrat, M. Munk, S. Jarvie, J.-S. Svenning, *Body size is a good proxy for vertebrate charisma*, “Biological Conservation”, 251, 2020, 108790; P. Prokop, M. Zvaríková, M. Zvarík, Z. Ježová, Z., P. Fedor, *Charismatic species should be large: The role of admiration and fear*, “People and Nature”, 6, 2024, 945-957.

⁴¹ It is worth noting that although mammals represent only a small fraction of all species, they make up the majority of those receiving the highest levels of protection. This may reflect a broader tendency for people to prefer conserving animals that resemble humans – an inclination that could have biological underpinnings. See, for instance: M. L., DeKay, G. H. McClelland, *Probability and utility of endangered species preservation programs*, “Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied”, 2 (1), 1996, pp. 60-83; and A. Gunnthorsdottir, *Physical attractiveness of an animal species as a decision factor for its preservation*, “Anthrozoös: A Multidisciplinary Journal of the Interactions of People & Animals”, 14, 2001, pp. 204-215.

⁴² On intrinsic properties, see A. Borghini, *Esistono proprietà intrinseche?*, “Rivista di estetica”, 43, 2010, online since April 27 2017, accessed on 25.6.2025. <http://journals.openedition.org/estetica/1813>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/estetica.1813>.

images of even the smallest animals – species that would otherwise remain difficult to recognize or appreciate; “the size of an animal becomes relative when most of the animals you encounter are on a screen”⁴³.

Charisma, then, should be understood as an *emergent* relational (and extrinsic) property, one that arises from a particular configuration of perceptible base properties, yet cannot be reduced to any single one of them, and which is context-dependent. We can further refine this concept of charisma by characterizing it as a *response-dependent* property: a charismatic animal possesses the disposition to elicit a specific response in subjects who exhibit certain traits and who operate under particular contextual and cultural conditions. The point is that the possession of *this* disposition, in the animal, is not innate: even in the original Weberian sense, charisma is inherently dynamic, it is “activated” by particular kinds of context, but it may also remain dormant, and what determines its activation is, first and foremost, a certain kind of cultural work *in the subject* that allows the species to act as charismatic. Frequently, this prior cultural labor – on which the attribution of charisma depends – becomes naturalized (in a Bourdieusian sense) through a process of sedimentation and internalization resulting in the form of a *habitus*, which makes charisma appear as if it were an inherent or natural of the organism/non-human animal itself.

In this regard, attending to cultural variability in the attribution of charisma can be particularly illuminating⁴⁴. As noted by the authors of a previously cited study⁴⁵, there is a certain consistency – but also a degree of variability – in the attribution of charisma, depending on the cultural context in which it occurs. Researchers have observed for example that, across all regions, the koala, African elephant, and red kangaroo were the top “over-performers” when comparing the results of paired preference tests to the predicted charisma based solely on physical traits. In contrast, species such as the African wild dog, aye-aye, and African buffalo ranked among the worst performers. However, in Australia, respondents displayed a strong preference for native species, with the koala, parma wallaby, and red kangaroo all performing significantly better than expected. Conversely, invasive species such as the red fox performed far worse than predicted, despite possessing morphological traits that – at least in theory – should have contributed to their charismatic appeal. Interestingly, the red fox performed considerably better than expected in both the United States and South Africa.⁴⁶

In light of these and similar findings, Fordhal has argued – against any innatist perspective – that charismatic species are historically and socially constructed, and should be understood as the emergent outcome of accumulated cultural labour⁴⁷. Crucially, this social construction need not be conscious or deliberate. In his words, “charismatic species is a concept which describes the uneven distribution of emotional energy and attention which humans give to animals. Those animals which inspire significant

⁴³ C. Fordahl, *Beyond Animal Charisma*, cit., p. 18.

⁴⁴ On Bourdieu, see K. Kraemer, *Charismatischer Habitus*, “Berliner Journal für Soziologie”, 12, 2002, pp. 173-187.

⁴⁵ E.A. Macdonald, D. Burnham, A.E. Hinks, A.J. Dickman, Y. Malhi, D.W. Macdonald, *Conservation inequality and the charismatic cat: Felis felcis*, cit., p. 864.

⁴⁶ It is interesting to note the impact that social media and, more generally, mass-consumed cultural products can have on the increase (or decrease) of a species’ charisma, and on its cross-cultural variability: see Y. Wu, L. Xie, S. Huang, P. Li, Z. Yuan, W. Liu, *Using social media to strengthen public awareness of wildlife conservation*, “Ocean & Coastal Management”, 153, 2018, pp. 76-83; M. Lenda, P. Skórka, B. Mazur, W. Sutherland, P. Tryjanowski, D. Moroń, E. Meijaard, H.P. Possingham, K.A. Wilson, *Effects of amusing memes on concern for unappealing species*, “Conservation Biology”, 2020, doi:10.1111/cobi.13523. But see also T.A. Miltz S. Foale, *The “Nemo Effect”: Perception and reality of Finding Nemo’s impact on the marine aquarium fisheries*, “Fish and Fisheries”, 2017, 18, pp. 596-606; A-C. Prevot, R. Julliard, S. Clayton, *Historical evidence for nature disconnection in a 70-year time series of Disney animated films*, “Public understanding of science”, 2014, 24. 10.1177/0963662513519042.

⁴⁷ M. Krause, K. Robinson, *Charismatic Species and Beyond: How Cultural Schemas and Organisational Routines shape Conservation*, “Conservation and Society”, 15 (3), 2017, pp. 313–321.

emotional energy and attention can be called ‘charismatic species.’ The emotional energy which defines a charismatic species is produced in interactions between an audience (some group of humans) and a performer (the species)”⁴⁸.

3. CHARISMA AND THE AESTHETIC: SURFACE AND DEPTH

Up to this point, two particularly significant critiques of the concept of charismatic species in conservation biology have come to the fore, and I would like to return to them in this concluding paragraph. The first highlights the inherently mediated and distanced character of human encounters with charismatic species. The second focuses on the (supposed) reification that occurs when such species are employed within conservation discourses.

3.1. *The aesthetic*

The strategy of concentrating public attention – especially that of non-specialist audiences – on a limited set of charismatic species risks, as previously noted, simplifying and flattening the complexity of ecological relationships between organisms, species, and environments. Moreover, by privileging charismatic species, this approach tends to objectify them – that is, to turn them into symbols or “artifacts” to be collected and contemplated, arranged within a value hierarchy (more or less important, more or less interesting), while neglecting the dynamic, processual character of the ecological interactions in which they are embedded. This is all the more evident when we consider, as already mentioned, that the majority of charismatic species – according to the list by Albert and colleagues – are rarely, if ever, encountered directly or experientially. A substantial portion of their charisma thus derives from the appeal exerted by the aesthetic-formal qualities of their image, which is offered up for contemplation – either statically or dynamically, analogically or digitally, and at best through the mediated frame of a zoo display. In this context, the *aesthetic* appears to play a role in the construction of charisma – but specifically in the sense of a purely representational, formal-visual, surface-level aesthetic that pleases the eyes. Is this the only way in which the aesthetic can be brought into relation with the charismatic? What, in fact, is the relationship between the aesthetic and the charismatic?

In a seminal paper on the subject, published in 2007, Jamie Lorimer offered important insights from multiple perspectives. Lorimer identifies three facets of non-human charisma: ecological, aesthetic, and corporeal. In this framework, charisma as such emerges from the intersection of these three dimensions.

Let us begin with the first. Ecological charisma broadly refers to a species’ “detectability” – that is, the extent to which various biological and ecological features (such as size, color, shape, speed, seasonality, migration patterns, diel activity, and spatial distribution across terrestrial, aerial, or marine environments) affect “the ease with which an interested human is able to tune with its behavior”⁴⁹. The core of this dimension of charisma lies in the idea of *tuning in* or *learning to be affected* by the animal – an experiential engagement that can be facilitated by certain features of the species in question. For instance, Lorimer suggests that the widespread appeal of birds and butterflies can be explained, in part, by the fact that these animals are ecologically

⁴⁸ C. Fordahl, *Beyond Animal Charisma*, cit. p. 19.

⁴⁹ J. Lorimer, *Nonhuman Charisma*, “Environment and Planning D: Society and Space”, 25 (5), 2007, pp. 911-932, p. 917.

organized in ways that more easily fit into or recall human perceptual capacities. They tend to orient themselves visually, unlike many mammals that rely, for example, on pheromonal communication. This ecological affinity, he argues, “accounts for their relative ease of surveillance and research by natural historians”⁵⁰. As is evident, Lorimer’s perspective is relational and grounded in the model of first-person, direct experience. Let us now move on to the aesthetic. Aesthetic charisma, in Lorimer’s terminology, refers to all the distinctive features of an animal’s appearance and behavior that elicit specific emotional responses in the humans it encounters – often shaped, at least in part, by accumulated cultural labour that associates particular emotions with particular species. More specifically, Lorimer identifies two primary affective registers within aesthetic charisma: on the one hand, *cuddly charisma*, which evokes emotions of care, protective attentiveness, and tenderness; and on the other, *feral charisma*, which focuses on awe and wonder, emphasizing the animal’s radical alterity and its contrast to human norms. Yuriko Saito’s reflections on the *aesthetics of care*, applied to non-human animal charisma, come to mind – particularly her coinage of the complex category of moral-aesthetic judgments, which may offer a fruitful framework for understanding Lorimer’s forms of emotional engagement⁵¹.

Finally, corporeal charisma refers to the affections and emotions elicited through practical, embodied interactions with an organism in the field. This dimension can manifest in terms of *epiphanies* – those moments of connection with the non-human world and of profound experiential absorption which, especially when occurring in childhood, are often retrospectively identified as the origin of a lifelong interest in the natural world by many scientists. Alternatively, corporeal charisma can also take the form of *jouissance*, which is linked to knowledge and expertise – for instance, the “satisfaction experienced by species surveyors in making and managing the list of species they have seen”⁵² or the pleasure felt by field researchers in their ability – cultivated through accumulated knowledge, habit, and attunement – to correctly identify species in complex and multi-layered environments. In relation to this latter form, Lorimer observes that “organisms that are readily differentiated from their taxonomic kin – such as beetles or butterflies – and that can be neatly divided into coherent species trigger this form of *jouissance*”⁵³.

Lorimer’s perspective on charisma is particularly significant, as it productively integrates both what I have called “extensionalist” approaches – focused on species’ appearances and often treating these as if they were innate, intrinsic traits – and sociological-constructivist views such as Fordahl’s. In Lorimer’s account, charisma is neither an essential nor an entirely relativistic property, nor purely natural neither purely cultural. Rather, it is conceived as a *relational emergent property*, situated at the shifting intersection of the biological and the socially constructed. Moreover, by integrating first-person experiential perception (the apprehension of the sensible-perceptible qualities of the non-human organism), knowledge, and emotion in his threefold typology of charisma, Lorimer articulates charisma in a way that, in my view, corresponds to what is an authentically comprehensive concept of *the aesthetic as a whole*. To put it differently, I would argue that Lorimer’s tripartite model of charisma can be assumed, in fact, as a “proper” understanding of the aesthetic – conceived as the tripartite nexus of perception, cognition, and emotion – so that the aesthetic dimension or aesthetic experience (in my view) is not merely one aspect of Lorimer’s charisma (e.g.,

⁵⁰ Ibidem.

⁵¹ See, on this point, Y. Saito, *Aesthetics of care: practice in everyday life*, Bloomsbury, London 2022.

⁵² J. Lorimer, *Nonhuman charisma*, cit., p. 922. As noted on the following page, “in relation of the *jouissance* of list-making, species that are genetically of individually rare are disproportionately endowed with this corporeal charism” (p. 923).

⁵³ Ibi, p. 923.

the visual-formal), but rather is synonymous with Lorimer’s charisma *in its entirety*. To fully elaborate this point would require more space than is available here. I therefore refer the reader to contributions that help clarify and develop this interpretative trajectory.⁵⁴

3.2. *Relational approaches*

The second major critique of the notion of charismatic species, as briefly mentioned earlier, concerns the risk that focusing attention – particularly in the case this is done for communication purposes – on this or that charismatic species may lead to their objectification (as if they were static artifacts in a museum, to be observed and contemplated from a distance), thereby setting aside and marginalizing the complex and dynamic ecological entanglements in which these species are embedded. Removed from their network of ecological relationships, charismatic species would be reduced to decorative symbols, assuming, mistakenly, that such an approach truly advances conservation efforts. This critique, rejecting this approach, draws the attention towards the relational, systemic, and functional nature of charisma.

A similar emphasis on relationality and functionality, as noted at the beginning of this paper, can already be found in the Pauline conception of *charisma*. For Paul, charisma is always plural and each specific God’s gift is since the beginning embedded within a larger framework in which individual instantiations of charisma are already oriented by a functional order. In each case, the singular person who receives charisma holds a role that only incidentally and contingently “happens” to them – a role that is a part of bigger structure that exists prior to and independently of the singular “charisma-temporary-bearers”. The gifts of grace are in principle shared (and/or sharable) by all, in a non-hierarchical and collective way; their concrete allocation in this or that person is due to contingent circumstances⁵⁵.

I argue that this ecological-functional perspective can be fruitfully applied to biological charisma as well. Properly speaking, what is charismatic is not any single species in isolation, but rather the living, dynamic network that connects all beings – what Darwin once described with the words “we may be all netted together”, human beings of course included. Charisma, in this sense, is the latent potentiality of this structural, dynamic web that becomes perceptible (i.e. passes into act) at particular nodes – i.e., *in* this or that specific “charismatic” species – under contingent conditions and by means of discursive social constructions⁵⁶. Charisma is not an exclusive property of a substance (i.e. a single species), but rather the outcome of a sophisticated discursive architecture and cultural stratification that rely on a web of latent ecological interconnections – a discursive architecture that, as we have seen, may over time be incorporated and internalized by human beings and thus appear spontaneous or “natural”. My point, with these observations, is not to discredit charismatic “appearances” (such as those of lions, tigers, jaguars, etc., as featured in Albert et al.’s list of charismatic animals), but rather to advocate for a more dynamic understanding of them. Within this framework, every instance of charisma is inseparable from others, as each

⁵⁴ See F. Desideri, *La percezione riflessa. Estetica e filosofia della mente*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2011; Id., *Origine dell'estetico. Dalle emozioni al giudizio*, Carocci, Roma 2018; in this direction, G. Matteucci, *Estetica e natura umana. La mente estesa tra percezione, emozione ed espressione*, Carocci, Roma 2019; N. Perullo, *Aesthetics Without Objects and Subjects. Relational Thinking for Global Challenges*, Bloomsbury, London 2025.

⁵⁵ On this point, see P. Napoli, *Le charisme et la loi*, cit.

⁵⁶ On the issue of the dialectic between surface and depth, with specific reference to ecological topics and the contemporary discussion on the Anthropocene, see the recent publication by N. Scaffai, *Sotto l'inesauribile superficie delle cose. Il paradigma della profondità nell'immaginario dell'Antropocene*, Aboca, Sansepolcro 2025.

contributes to the living body we call Nature (and which include ourselves as human beings).

In concluding this paper, I want to stress again that – considering the critiques regarding the use of the concept of charisma within conservation biology – the appropriate response to the questions and issues I have raised so far is not to get rid of the notion of charismatic species altogether, thereby risking discarding valuable insights along with problematic aspects. Rather, I suggest that we reconsider and rethink of the concept of charisma and reformulate its narratives, (1) by embracing the dialectic between surface and depth; (2) by approaching charisma in its multi-modal facets, not just visual but also olfactory, gustatory, tactual etc.; (3) by emphasizing, on the one hand, the relevance of story-telling and cultural mediation in the production of charisma and, on the other hand, the importance of direct, embodied experience with/ of the non-human multispecies world to support nature conservation, first of all through engagement with the urban biodiversity that surrounds us and, secondly, through art-based, aesthetically experiences of contact; finally, by (4) bringing even more decisively to the fore the political role of charisma in shaping biodiversity conservation strategies, which is an intriguing specific application of the more general intertwining of aesthetics and politics. Here some questions that remain open: How can the networks of ecological relationships and processes, in biodiversity, effectively be made perceptible/sensible, once we have suggested that *truly* charismatic is the relation and not its nodes (alone)? Where, if anywhere, can we reasonably draw the line in analyzing interspecies interdependence and interconnectedness, assuming that a relational value framework provides the most coherent foundation for conservation theory⁵⁷ and that, in principle, everything is connected to everything else? How can the complex, multidimensional nature of ecological systems be integrated with the (largely) two-dimensional and representational appeal of today's charismatic species imaginary? A re-conception of the notion of charisma should address these and many other similar questions. Ultimately, it seems that from the perspective of charismatic species as well, the ecological crisis and the Anthropocene confront us with challenges that are, in large part, challenges of/ for (aesthetic) perception.

⁵⁷ See K. Jax, *Conservation Concepts. Rethinking Human-Nature Relationships*, Routledge, London-New York 2024, p. 234 ff. (“The relational imperative: embracing relations as a crucial category for conservation”).

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