Earlier this year I wrote critically about a New York Times op-ed that proposed making the restrictions on development in wilderness areas more flexible in order to allow for adaptation to climate change.

This week the Times published what I think is a much more helpful op-ed on the topic of how we should address the challenges of climate change's impacts on the protection, preservation, and conservation of protected areas and endangered species and ecosystems. The authors note that the growing human dominance of the planet – of which climate change is only one example – poses serious challenges to our traditional vision of conservation as protecting "pristine" nature that was present "before humans." There were, of course, serious problems with that vision to begin with – but climate change arguably makes using historic baselines as the measure of what it means to conserve natural areas much, much more difficult.

The question is what to do instead? Do we stay hands-off even as ecosystems change in response to climate change? Do we seek to take active efforts to help resist climate change – like watering giant sequoias that are threatened by warming climates and changing precipitation patterns? Or do we seek to help facilitate the transition to a new normal, for instance by assisting the migration of species to new habitat that is more suitable in a hotter world?

The op-ed authors' answer is – I think sensibly – all of the above. In some places facilitation of adaptation will make the most sense; in others resistance; in others a hands-off approach. Facilitation of adaptation might make sense in areas heavily disturbed by human activity. Resistance might make sense in areas where we have natural resources whose location in a particular place matters much to us for cultural or economic reasons (think sequoias in Yosemite), or where there are few palatable options for adaptation to a future location (think a restricted range species with few options for migration). The authors suggest that in designated wilderness areas, a hands-off approach makes the most sense, a position that I generally agree with.

But the op-ed authors have left a more fundamental question to be answered.

What, exactly, are we managing for if historical baselines are less and less appropriate for our conservation goals? Whatever our management choices are – facilitation, resistance, or hands-off – we still need to have a sense of what we are trying to achieve with each of them, and also when we might want to resort to one or the other in a particular context.

That is a hard question. But it is a question that we have to answer to help make the law and policy of protected areas and endangered species management function in the next century.