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REVIEW ARTICLE

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The paradox of sustainable development and environmental conservation in contemporary English fiction: Challenges of the coming era

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Sustainable development promises continuity: economies may expand, technologies may advance, and human wants may be met without exhausting the living systems on which those ambitions depend. Contemporary English-language fiction repeatedly tests that promise against damaged places and vulnerable lives. This article offers a comparative ecocritical reading of Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010), Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* (2012), Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), and Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018). Bringing postcolonial ecocriticism, environmental justice, econarratology, material ecocriticism, and climate-fiction scholarship into conversation, it asks how narrative form exposes the contradiction between growth-centred development and ecological conservation. The comparison shows that the paradox is not an inevitable conflict between human welfare and nature. It is produced when development externalises damage across class, geography, species, and time, while conservation is reduced to spectacle, technical management, or a compensatory gesture. Habila's disrupted river journey renders petrodevelopment as slow, recursive violence; Kingsolver's focalised realism reveals climate knowledge to be inseparable from poverty and cultural mistrust; Atwood's dystopian retrospection turns the ecological "solution" into corporate biopower; and Powers's arboreal architecture contests the human tempo of property, profit, and plot. Across their differences, the novels convert remote processes into sensuous, ethical, and formal pressure. They also resist easy consolation. Their most credible ecological alternatives arise not from frictionless green growth, but from restraint, distributive justice, situated knowledge, multispecies responsibility, and institutions answerable to long temporal horizons. Fiction's contribution, therefore, lies less in supplying policy than in changing what counts as a consequence, a stakeholder, and a future.

KEYWORDS: contemporary English fiction, ecocriticism, sustainable development, environmental conservation, climate fiction, environmental justice, narrative form, ecological imagination

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1. Introduction: The Green Promise and Its Shadow

Development arrives in modern public language as a promise cast in the future tense. A road, dam, laboratory, plantation, mine, housing estate, or oil field is said to create tomorrow: jobs, mobility, security, health, national strength. Conservation speaks in another future tense, asking that forests, rivers, species, climates, and the material conditions of collective life remain inhabitable. The two aspirations need not be enemies. Yet contemporary fiction written in English is crowded with scenes in which the promise of improvement darkens as soon as the narrative turns its gaze toward the places from which improvement draws its energy. Prosperity in one location appears as poisoned water elsewhere; convenience in the present becomes extinction in a later generation; a technical cure conceals a new market; a protected landscape is valued only after the people who depended on it have been made disposable.

This article uses “contemporary English fiction” to mean contemporary literary fiction written in English, not fiction limited to England. That distinction is important because environmental risk travels through colonial histories, global commodity chains, atmospheric systems, and corporate networks that exceed a single national tradition. The four novels examined here—Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* (2010), Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behavior* (2012), Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003), and Richard Powers’s *The Overstory* (2018)—were chosen not as an inventory of well-known environmental novels, but as a deliberately varied comparative corpus. Habila writes petrodevelopment from the scarred waterways of the Niger Delta; Kingsolver makes climate displacement legible within Appalachian poverty; Atwood imagines biotechnology, consumerism, and species design under corporate sovereignty; Powers reorganises the novel around the time and agency of forests. Realist, postcolonial, speculative, and formally expansive modes thus confront the same question from different narrative positions: what becomes visible when development is measured not by its declared intentions but by the lives, bodies, places, and futures that bear its costs?

The phrase “paradox of sustainable development” can itself mislead. It may imply an unavoidable choice between alleviating human deprivation and protecting a pristine nature located outside society. The novels challenge both halves of that binary. They show, first, that environmental conservation without social justice can become exclusionary, sentimental, or politically hollow. They also show that development organised around indefinite accumulation repeatedly destroys the ecological foundations of human welfare. The paradox is therefore historically produced rather than metaphysically given. It arises when economic expansion remains the unquestioned noun and “sustainable” functions as a reassuring adjective; when nature is treated as a stock of resources, an amenity, or a sink for delayed harm; and when the people most exposed to ecological loss possess the least authority over the decisions made in their name (Banerjee, 2003; Redclift, 2005).

Existing ecocritical scholarship has richly examined climate fiction, petrofiction, postcolonial environments, material agency, and the challenges of representing planetary scale (Buell et al., 2011; Heise, 2006; Johns-Putra, 2016; Nixon, 2011). Studies of the four selected novels have illuminated their specific engagements with sustainability, extraction, climate knowledge, and arboreal life. Less attention, however, has been paid to what emerges when these works are read together as formal critiques of the development–conservation settlement. The comparison reveals that each novel corrects a characteristic failure of public environmental language. *Oil on Water* restores residue and recurrence to narratives of energy progress. *Flight Behavior* places climate communication inside unequal material worlds. *Oryx and Crake* exposes the violence concealed by technocratic efficiency. *The Overstory* enlarges narrative time and redistributes agency beyond the human.

Four questions guide the discussion. How do the novels dramatise the tension between growth-centred development and environmental conservation? Which formal strategies make dispersed damage and unequal vulnerability perceptible? How do their representations of expertise, technology, and nonhuman agency challenge familiar accounts of progress? Finally, what ecological ethics do they leave available for the coming era? The article argues that these texts do not simply oppose development to preservation. They distinguish life-enhancing change from extractive growth, and they test conservation against justice. Their shared intervention is formal as much as thematic: by altering scale, chronology, focalisation, genre, and agency, they make it harder to place ecological damage outside the story of prosperity.

2. Sustainable Development and the Literary Imagination

The canonical formulation of sustainable development joins present need to intergenerational responsibility

(World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Its durable appeal lies in refusing the idea that environmental protection must be purchased through permanent poverty. Yet the term has accumulated incompatible political meanings. Hopwood et al. (2005) map positions ranging from status-quo reform to transformative change, while Sneddon et al. (2006) defend a plural account attentive to ecological economics, freedom, and political struggle. Purvis et al. (2019) show that the familiar economic, social, and environmental “pillars” do not possess the stable conceptual origin often attributed to them. Such debates matter because the language of balance can conceal asymmetry. A minor efficiency gain may be presented as equivalent to the loss of a forest, or aggregate growth may be treated as compensation for concentrated harm.

Banerjee (2003) argues that much sustainable-development discourse remains governed by economic rationality, reinventing nature as something to be administered for continued accumulation. Redclift (2005) similarly observes that sustainability has become increasingly detached from its material ecological content. Literature is especially suited to investigating this detachment because fiction can hold declared purpose and lived consequence in the same frame. A corporate report may count barrels, hectares, offsets, or jobs; a novel can follow the oily sheen into drinking water, the displaced insect into a household already close to insolvency, the engineered organism beyond the laboratory, or the centuries compressed into a timber price.

Fiction does not possess automatic moral authority. Environmental narratives can romanticise wilderness, simplify science, turn poverty into scenery, or offer catastrophe as a pleasurable spectacle. Nor should a novel be judged only by whether it persuades readers to adopt approved behaviour. Schneider-Mayerson’s (2018) study of climate-fiction readers indicates that literary works can intensify concern and awareness of environmental injustice, but it also cautions against assuming uniform effects. The literary contribution is subtler. Narrative permits environmental conflict to appear as a collision among tempos, vocabularies, and forms of value. It can place a quarterly return beside the lifespan of a tree, scientific probability beside religious interpretation, or national revenue beside a village that no longer has clean soil.

The four novels considered here repeatedly stage such collisions. Their concern is not merely that development produces unintended environmental “side effects.” The phrase itself is exposed as morally inadequate, because the side effect may be the central experience of those living downstream, outside the corporate compound, below the logging concession, or after the engineered cure. Fiction relocates the margin at the centre. In doing so, it reveals that the decisive question is not whether development and conservation can be balanced in the abstract, but who defines development, who receives its benefits, what forms of life enter the calculation, and how long the accounting remains open.

3. Reading Across Scales: Critical Framework and Previous Scholarship

Ecocriticism began by insisting that the physical environment is not an inert backdrop to human drama (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). Its subsequent development has complicated the early emphasis on nature writing and wilderness by attending to cities, bodies, empire, risk, environmental racism, animals, plants, and planetary systems (Buell, 2005; Garrard, 2012). Buell et al. (2011) describe a field that has become necessarily transnational and interdisciplinary, while Heise (2006) warns that local attachment alone cannot grasp ecological processes whose causes and effects cross borders. Her account of eco-cosmopolitanism joins situated responsibility to a “sense of planet,” a useful tension for novels that move between damaged locality and global system (Heise, 2008).

This article combines five related approaches. First, postcolonial ecocriticism clarifies how ecological damage is distributed through histories of conquest, racial capitalism, and uneven development. Huggan and Tiffin (2015) reject the separation of environmental questions from colonial power, while Nixon’s (2011) concept of slow violence identifies attritional destruction that unfolds gradually, often beyond the dramatic conventions through which violence becomes publicly recognisable. These ideas are central to *Oil on Water*, where the Niger Delta is neither remote scenery nor a generic example of pollution. Its ruin belongs to a global energy order and a national petrostate whose benefits and injuries travel along radically different routes.

Second, energy humanities provides a vocabulary for reading the cultural invisibility of fuel. Yaeger (2011) calls attention to literature’s relation to successive energy regimes; Szeman (2007) analyses the difficulty of imagining social futures beyond oil; and Wenzel (2006) shows how Nigerian writing renders petroleum’s political ecology. Energy is ordinarily apprehended at the point of use, as mobility or power, not at the sites of

extraction. Petrofiction reverses that perspective. Habila's river is the underside of modern speed.

Third, climate-fiction scholarship examines how narrative gives shape to a diffuse, probabilistic, and temporally uneven crisis. Trexler and Johns-Putra (2011) and Johns-Putra (2016) trace climate change's emergence as a literary concern, while Goodbody and Johns-Putra (2019) emphasise the formal and ethical diversity of climate fiction. Johns-Putra (2019) argues that contemporary novels do not merely represent climate change as content; they test established forms of responsibility, intimacy, and futurity. *Flight Behavior* is particularly instructive because it refuses the distant apocalypse. Climate disruption arrives as beauty, confusion, labour, debt, media attention, and contested expertise.

Fourth, material ecocriticism and econarratology help analyse nonhuman agency without pretending that a tree, river, butterfly colony, or engineered animal "speaks" exactly as a human character does. Iovino and Oppermann (2012, 2014) understand matter as storied and agentic, while James (2015) brings narratology to postcolonial environmental worlds. These approaches direct attention to the formal distribution of agency: what causes events, what resists use, what carries memory, and what exceeds human intention. They are especially relevant to *The Overstory*, whose forests alter character, plot, syntax, and scale, and to *Oryx and Crake*, where designed organisms escape the purposes assigned to them.

Finally, Anthropocene criticism supplies a necessary caution about scale. Chakrabarty (2009) observes that climate change places human history in contact with species history, but "humanity" cannot become an alibi that erases unequal responsibility. A planetary crisis is shared without being equally caused or suffered. The selected novels preserve this tension. They widen the frame toward species and deep time while retaining the differences between a corporate scientist and a precarious farmer, an oil executive and a displaced villager, a logger and a tree-sitter.

Scholarship on the individual novels provides a strong foundation for comparison. Bergthaller (2010), Canavan (2012), Ingersoll (2004), and Crane (2012) read Atwood's speculative world through sustainability, apocalypse, survival, and constructed wilderness. Feldner (2018), Olaoluwa (2020), Pirzadeh (2021), and Hand (2021) examine Habila's neocolonial extraction, urban-petroleum relation, aquatic resistance, and environmental agency. Houser (2017), Mohajeri (2024), and Toivonen (2024) show how Kingsolver joins knowledge, class, uncanny weather, and constrained agency. Archer (2024), Schoene (2022), Marquis (2021), and Day (2022) analyse Powers's biocentric strategies, arboreal form, plant communication, and metaphor. The present study builds on these insights but changes the unit of analysis. Rather than asking only what each novel says about its own environmental crisis, it asks how their contrasting forms diagnose recurring defects in sustainable-development discourse.

4. Corpus and Method

The study employs comparative, theoretically informed close reading. The corpus spans fifteen years and four modes of contemporary English-language fiction: Nigerian petrofiction, American social realism, Canadian speculative dystopia, and a polyphonic American forest novel. The selection allows comparison across geographic and generic difference without treating all environmental crises as interchangeable.

Analysis concentrates on five formal features: focalisation, narrative chronology, spatial organisation, figurative language, and the distribution of agency among human and nonhuman actors. It also follows four recurrent conceptual tensions: visible benefit versus displaced cost; short economic time versus ecological duration; expert knowledge versus situated experience; and technological solution versus political responsibility. The method does not claim that fictional worlds are transparent sociological evidence. It treats them as crafted arrangements of perception whose ethical force depends on selection, sequence, voice, genre, and ambiguity. Close reading therefore attends not only to represented damage, but to how each novel makes that damage difficult—or newly possible—to see.

5. Petrodevelopment and Ruined Perception in *Oil on Water*

Oil on Water follows the young journalist Rufus and the disillusioned Zaq through the Niger Delta in search of Isabel Floode, the kidnapped wife of a British oil engineer. Yet the rescue plot continually loses its privilege: routes double back, testimony conflicts, settlements appear abandoned, and the hostage recedes behind the damaged landscape (Habila, 2010). Habila converts suspense into epistemological disturbance. Extraction has

damaged not only soil and water but the conditions under which stories become coherent.

This formal instability is the novel's first critique of development. Petroleum modernity depends on smooth narratives: crude is discovered, extracted, transported, converted into revenue, and consumed elsewhere as energy. Habila interrupts that sequence at the point where oil enters water. The title joins two substances that do not mix, yet the novel's world is defined by their forced proximity. Water should sustain movement, fishing, drinking, memory, and community. Oil coats those functions without becoming part of them. The result is not synthesis but contamination. Development and conservation are not represented as two abstract policy preferences. They occupy the same river, one as official promise, the other as a damaged capacity for life.

Nixon's (2011) slow violence is visible here not as a single catastrophe but as repetition: leaking pipes, fouled creeks, dead or absent animals, flares, illness, migration, and villages made unliveable over time. Feldner (2018) persuasively locates this destruction within neocolonial relations that survive formal independence. The novel reinforces that diagnosis by making the foreign hostage intensely newsworthy while the Delta's routine devastation remains structurally unreported. Rufus and Zaq's assignment carries an implicit hierarchy of attention. One abducted European woman can organise journalists, soldiers, militants, money, and international concern; poisoned communities struggle to become a story at all.

Habila does not resolve this inequality by turning local people into a single virtuous collective. Militants, soldiers, chiefs, oil interests, journalists, and villagers inhabit compromised positions. Violence circulates, and ecological grievance can be appropriated by armed actors. This refusal of innocence is politically significant. A weaker environmental novel might oppose pure nature and pure community to external industry. *Oil on Water* instead shows how prolonged extraction enters social relations, creating incentives, fears, dependencies, and forms of betrayal. Petrodevelopment is not merely imposed from outside; it reorganises the field within which choices are made.

The fractured chronology deepens that argument. Rufus's memories of an earlier oil-related explosion and his family's suffering interrupt the present search. The past is not safely behind him; it returns through bodily injury, guilt, and narrative delay. Olaoluwa (2020) links the novel's petroleum geography to the relation between city and Delta, showing that the Anthropocene cannot be understood from a universal vantage detached from uneven urban and extractive histories. Rufus's movement between Port Harcourt and the waterways exposes a similar relation. The city gathers opportunity and media authority; the Delta supplies the substance and absorbs the waste. What looks like spatial separation is a material circuit.

The river also exceeds its status as victim. Pirzadeh (2021) reads water as a medium of resistance to neoliberal extraction, and Hand (2021) argues that the brutalised landscape functions as an actor in the novel's ecodrama. Such agency should not be romanticised: contaminated water does not liberate the communities that depend upon it. Its resistance lies in refusing complete conversion into infrastructure. It corrodes the fantasy that oil can be cleanly separated from place. Boats are slowed, vision is obscured, bodies are exposed, and the journey's direction remains uncertain. Matter keeps returning what economic language attempts to externalise. From the perspective of sustainability, *Oil on Water* rejects compensatory arithmetic. Revenue cannot simply be set against poisoned land as though the two belonged to a common scale. Nor does conservation mean restoring a scenic Delta while leaving political dispossession untouched. The novel's damaged waterways are inhabited histories. Any credible future would require ecological repair, democratic control over resources, material redistribution, and accountability across the full commodity chain. Habila offers no administrative blueprint, but his form establishes a demanding principle: there can be no sustainable development while the people who live at the point of extraction remain narratively and politically peripheral.

6. Climate, Class, and Contested Knowledge in *Flight Behavior*

Where Habila darkens discovery, Kingsolver begins with a vision mistaken for revelation. Dellarobia Turnbow, a young Appalachian woman moving toward an adulterous encounter, sees a mountainside filled with monarch butterflies, an apparent fire without heat. The sight interrupts her escape and is quickly absorbed into competing stories: miracle, tourist attraction, scientific anomaly, media spectacle, and possible income (Kingsolver, 2012). Climate change enters first as misrecognised beauty.

That misrecognition is neither simple ignorance nor a joke at the expense of rural belief. Kingsolver focalises much of the novel through Dellarobia, whose intelligence has been constrained by early motherhood,

poverty, limited education, and a marriage with little imaginative space. The narrative makes climate knowledge a problem of access and social position. Ovid Byron, the entomologist who comes to study the displaced monarchs, possesses scientific expertise, but expertise does not float free of class, race, language, or institutional authority. Facts must cross a field crowded with distrust, religious interpretation, television performance, and immediate economic need.

The proposed logging of the Turnbow family's mountain gives the sustainability paradox a precise local shape. Forest conservation may protect the butterflies' temporary refuge, yet timber represents urgently needed money for a struggling household. An environmental appeal that ignores debt asks the poor to finance a public good through private sacrifice. Houser (2017) shows how Kingsolver places knowledge work in relation to the Appalachian commons; the novel similarly insists that environmental responsibility cannot be distributed as though all subjects possess equal room to choose. Dellarobia's family lives within narrow margins. The ecological future is vast, but the bill is due now.

This conflict complicates a common narrative in which science enlightens a benighted community. Ovid's explanations matter, and the novel does not equivocate about anthropogenic climate disruption. Nevertheless, scientific truth does not by itself settle questions of justice, trust, or action. A well-meaning environmental visitor who recommends lower consumption confronts people whose consumption is already shaped by scarcity. The scene exposes the moral absurdity of addressing structural crisis through a generic lifestyle script. Climate politics fails when it mistakes unequal lives for interchangeable carbon subjects.

Mohajeri (2024) interprets the novel's strange weather through the Anthropocene uncanny: familiar seasons, species, and places become unsettling because they no longer obey inherited expectations. Kingsolver's realism is built from this disturbance. The butterflies are visually magnificent and ecologically alarming. Warmth that appears benign in one place records disaster in another. The monarch colony's arrival is therefore a displaced event, carrying the absent Mexican habitat and altered continental climate into an Appalachian valley. Heise's (2008) relation between place and planet becomes narrative experience: the local is not dissolved by the global but revealed as one node within it.

The butterflies' mobility also destabilises the language of conservation. What does it mean to conserve a species whose migratory route has been disordered? A protected patch cannot by itself preserve the climatic relations on which movement depends. The novel shifts conservation from the defence of a bounded site toward the maintenance of connectivity across habitats, seasons, and political borders. This is why the monarchs function as more than symbols. Their collective movement is a material argument against property-bound environmental thinking. They make the Turnbow mountain temporarily planetary.

Dellarobia's own transformation parallels but does not merely allegorise the insects' flight. Toivonen (2024) emphasises the constrained and relational nature of agency in climate fiction. Dellarobia gains knowledge, confidence, and a possible educational future, yet the novel avoids the fantasy that personal awakening solves climate change. Her changing self-understanding occurs amid forces she cannot command. The ending, marked by flood and movement, offers neither domestic restoration nor secure ecological rescue. Agency means learning to act within dependency and uncertainty, not becoming sovereign.

Flight Behavior ultimately challenges both anti-environmental denial and socially indifferent conservation. It asks affluent environmentalism to recognise poverty not as an obstacle to ecological virtue but as part of climate injustice. It also refuses the reassurance that adaptation will preserve familiar worlds with minor adjustment. The monarchs' beauty cannot cancel the broken route that brought them north. Sustainable development, from this perspective, must mean more than adding green choices to an unequal economy. It requires public forms of security that enlarge people's capacity to choose, institutions able to translate knowledge without contempt, and conservation organised across the mobile systems on which species and communities depend.

7. Designed Life and the False Paradise of Sustainability in *Oryx and Crake*

Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* carries managerial sustainability into speculative extremity. Its pre-apocalyptic world divides fortified corporate Compounds from impoverished pleeblands, while scientific labour produces transgenic animals, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, and reproductive technologies for markets that manufacture the needs they claim to meet (Atwood, 2003). After a human-made pandemic, Snowman moves through the ruins among the Crakers, a designed posthuman species. Alternating present and flashback turn catastrophe

into an inquiry into the ordinary habits that made the ending imaginable.

The Compounds present themselves as enclaves of health, security, efficiency, and innovation. Their apparent order depends, however, on aggressive separation. Environmental decline, poverty, crime, and political disorder are displaced beyond walls, while CorpSeCorps protects corporate knowledge and personnel. This spatial design resembles a corrupted version of conservation: privileged life is preserved in controlled zones, but the larger ecology and public realm are abandoned. The Compound is sustainable only by narrowing the community whose future counts.

Atwood's satirical product names intensify the critique. Pigeons grow human-compatible organs; ChickieNobs convert animals into efficient meat-producing tissue; pharmaceutical and cosmetic commodities promise improvement while multiplying appetite. The grotesque humour matters because it reveals a language in which violence is concealed by convenience. Organisms are redesigned as platforms, and ethical unease is neutralised through branding. Crane (2012) shows how the novel unsettles received ideas of wilderness and future nature; indeed, almost nothing in Atwood's world remains outside technological mediation. The relevant distinction is not natural versus artificial, but accountable care versus proprietary manipulation.

Crake appears to recognise the unsustainability of human desire. He designs the Crakers to consume little, reproduce seasonally, resist hierarchy, and avoid many traits associated with violence and possessiveness. On one level, they embody a fantasy of ecological fit: a low-impact humanity freed from destructive drives. Bergthaller (2010) demonstrates that the novel's sustainability problem is inseparable from its interrogation of humanism. Crake's solution, however, is anti-political. Instead of changing institutions, ownership, inequality, or culture, he changes the species and removes existing humanity. Sustainability becomes optimisation imposed by a designer who has granted himself absolute authority.

This is the novel's most severe warning about technocratic environmentalism. A system that defines the ecological problem as defective human behaviour may slide toward the management of bodies rather than the transformation of power. Crake treats contradiction as an engineering fault. He does not ask whose consumption is excessive, whose labour supports it, or how desire is organised by corporations. He universalises the pathology and reserves the cure for himself. The result is a biopolitical endpoint in which the future is protected from people by eliminating their capacity to contest its design.

The retrospective narration prevents Crake's solution from appearing clean. Snowman's memories are fragmentary, self-protective, and saturated with loss. The reader encounters extinction through leftovers: deserted buildings, obsolete slogans, feral hybrids, recorded images, and words whose referents are disappearing. Ingersoll (2004) links the novel to Atwood's long engagement with survival, but survival here is semantically unstable. Snowman remains alive while the cultural world that made him intelligible has vanished. The Crakers flourish, yet their existence begins in deception and mass death. Biological persistence cannot by itself define a sustainable future.

Canavan (2012) reads Atwood's ecological science fiction as offering hope that may no longer belong to existing humanity. That formulation captures the novel's refusal of easy redemption, yet the Crakers' future is not wholly determined by Crake. Snowman gives them stories, and they begin creating rituals and questions he did not design. Narrative itself becomes a breach in the closed programme. Human cultural inheritance returns in compromised form, suggesting that unpredictability is not only a danger but also a condition of ethical life. A perfectly sustainable system designed to eliminate conflict would eliminate freedom, interpretation, and responsibility as well.

Oryx and Crake therefore sharpens the paradox beyond the opposition of development and conservation. Corporate development destroys ecological limits by converting life into product; Crake's radical conservation destroys political and cultural plurality by converting life into design. Both share the same managerial dream: a world made fully legible to expert control. The novel's alternative is fragile and incomplete, located in care without mastery, in stories that exceed their author, and in the recognition that ecological restraint must be negotiated rather than engineered through domination. It warns the coming era that a green technology remains politically dangerous when ownership, accountability, and the right to refuse are left untouched.

8. Forest Time and Narrative Reorientation in *The Overstory*

If Atwood imagines a designer trying to end contingency, Powers writes a novel that grows through it. *The*

Overstory begins with separate histories shaped by encounters with trees, draws its characters into conservation activism, and disperses them again. Its four sections—“Roots,” “Trunk,” “Crown,” and “Seeds”—use arboreal anatomy as narrative architecture (Powers, 2018), making plot answerable to branching, interdependence, latency, damage, and regeneration.

The opening “Roots” stories initially resemble autonomous biographies. Nick Hoel inherits a photographic record of an American chestnut; Mimi Ma’s family history is carried through mulberry trees; Douglas Pavlicek survives a fall because a banyan arrests it; Patricia Westerford learns to perceive trees as communicative communities; Neelay Mehta turns an altered body and childhood tree-climbing into a career in virtual worlds. The characters’ later convergence resembles a forest whose apparent individuals are joined by less visible systems. Archer (2024) identifies biocentric narrative strategies in contemporary ecofiction, and Powers’s most consequential strategy is precisely this redistribution of centrality. No single protagonist can contain the story.

The plural form contests a development regime built on simplification. Industrial forestry translates diverse, temporally layered ecosystems into board feet, harvest cycles, property units, and replaceable stands. The novel repeatedly distinguishes a forest from a collection of timber objects. A plantation may contain trees while lacking the relationships through which an old forest becomes a living community. Conservation, accordingly, cannot be reduced to planting a compensatory number of seedlings after clear-cutting. The arithmetic ignores age, soil, fungi, water, habitat, memory, and the long co-creation of place.

Powers makes temporal scale central to this critique. Human institutions are organised around election cycles, mortgages, careers, and quarterly earnings; trees may live for centuries, storing the consequences of decisions whose makers will not remain to witness them. Schoene (2022) describes “arborealism” as the challenge of making trees matter within a form historically centred on human action. *The Overstory* responds by slowing attention and accelerating decades, repeatedly showing human lives as brief episodes within arboreal duration. The effect is not to declare people insignificant, but to expose the temporal provincialism of decisions that treat a century-old organism as an immediately realisable asset.

Patricia Westerford’s research gives the novel a scientific vocabulary for forest communication and cooperation. Yet Powers does not simply insert botanical facts into a conventional plot. Marquis (2021) argues that the novel’s dendrography attempts to listen to trees, while Day (2022) reads its metaphors through umwelt and the holobiont. The distinction matters: a novel cannot transparently reproduce plant experience, and anthropomorphic language may recapture the nonhuman within familiar human categories. Powers turns this limitation into a formal tension. His trees are never fully translated. They alter characters and narrative patterns while retaining an opacity that resists possession.

The activists’ campaigns against logging give conservation urgency but not purity. Tree-sits, blockades, sabotage, surveillance, injury, and death move the novel from wonder toward political conflict. The law recognises corporate property more readily than ecological continuity; ancient trees must be defended through bodies placed in the path of machines. Yet the activists are not idealised as an uncomplicated moral vanguard. Their commitment strains relationships, narrows perception, and culminates in fatal violence. The novel refuses to let ecological ends erase the ethics of means.

Nonhuman agency complicates this interval. Trees save, injure, feed, shelter, outlast, and redirect the characters, but not as intentional moral agents rewarding virtue. Their agency is ecological and relational. Seeds travel; roots collaborate and compete; diseases transform species; fallen trunks become habitat; forest succession remakes disturbance. Iovino and Oppermann’s (2014) material ecocriticism is useful here because it allows agency without human-style intention. The novel’s world acts back. Development projects encounter not passive matter but systems whose responses may be delayed, distributed, and difficult to attribute.

The final movement toward “Seeds” resists both apocalypse and restoration. Some characters continue through diminished lives; some redirect technical skill; some preserve knowledge; some make art or code capable of carrying ecological patterns elsewhere. These gestures do not repair the old-growth forests already lost. Their modesty is their credibility. Unlike the corporate promise of replacement, a seed is not an instant equivalent of a mature tree. It is a wager on conditions, time, care, and futures beyond the planter’s control.

The Overstory thus recasts sustainable development as a crisis of narrative proportion. A society cannot conserve what its dominant stories render slow, plural, or nonhuman to the point of invisibility. Powers’s

response is to reshape plot itself. By branching, converging, and dispersing, the novel teaches that continuity does not mean keeping the present economy intact. It means preserving the relational conditions under which unforeseen forms of life can continue. Conservation becomes less the freezing of nature than the defence of ecological time against premature conversion into profit.

9. Comparative Discussion: From Green Growth to Ecological Restraint

The four novels represent different histories rather than one universal crisis: Niger Delta oil extraction, Appalachian climate displacement, corporate biotechnology, and industrial forestry. Comparison is useful only when it preserves those differences. Their common ground is a formal suspicion of development narratives that foreground benefit and push consequence out of frame.

Each text corrects that framing through a distinct narrative operation. Habila uses recursive movement and fractured testimony to show that the extraction zone is not a temporary sacrifice on the road to national prosperity. Damage accumulates and returns. Kingsolver uses intimate focalisation to place climate science within the classed conditions of reception, revealing that knowledge cannot become action without material capacity and social trust. Atwood uses dystopian retrospection to expose continuity between familiar consumer promises and genocidal ecological management. Powers uses polyphony and arboreal structure to challenge the temporal and ontological assumptions through which forests become inventory.

These operations can be understood as four scales of accountability. *Oil on Water* asks development to account spatially for the places where commodities originate and waste remains. *Flight Behavior* asks it to account socially for unequal vulnerability and unequal freedom to act. *Oryx and Crake* asks it to account institutionally for who controls technology and defines the future. *The Overstory* asks it to account temporally and multispecifically for lives beyond the usual horizon of policy and property. Sustainable development fails when any of these scales is omitted.

This combined perspective modifies the original paradox. Human development and environmental conservation are not inherently incompatible. Clean water, secure housing, education, public health, democratic voice, and freedom from toxic exposure are simultaneously developmental and ecological goods. The contradiction intensifies when development is equated with aggregate growth and conservation is assigned the task of mitigating its aftermath. Under that arrangement, “sustainability” can become a temporal deferral: innovation will solve scarcity later, restoration will replace destruction later, vulnerable communities will benefit later, and future generations will inherit improved efficiency rather than diminished worlds.

The fiction studied here refuses that deferral by making the future present as form. Habila’s repetitions show the past persisting in bodies and water. Kingsolver’s displaced butterflies carry climatic elsewhere into a household economy. Atwood’s post-apocalyptic present converts ordinary consumption into remembered prehistory. Powers’s forest time places current logging inside centuries of growth and centuries of absence. Narrative time becomes an ethics of consequence.

What, then, do these works offer for the coming era? Not a unified programme, and not the reassurance that empathy alone will produce political change. Their alternatives are dispersed but compatible. First is ecological restraint: some acts should not proceed merely because they are profitable or technically possible. Second is distributive justice: transition costs cannot be assigned to those with the fewest resources while benefits remain concentrated. Third is epistemic plurality: scientific expertise is essential, but it must meet local knowledge, historical memory, and public deliberation without contempt. Fourth is multispecies responsibility: nonhuman life is not valuable only when it serves human welfare. Fifth is temporal humility: a seedling, an offset, or an engineered substitute cannot be assumed to replace a mature ecological relation.

These principles also identify fiction’s distinctive work. Policy must decide, quantify, and implement. Fiction can dwell in consequences that policy language compresses. It can render a statistical externality as atmosphere, memory, shame, hunger, beauty, or fear. It can make a river obstruct a rescue plot, a butterfly colony disturb a marriage, a pig grown for organs become a predator, or a tree reorganise the architecture of a novel. Such transformations do not make literature superior to science or politics. They make it a different practice of attention, one that tests whether the categories used to govern the future are capacious enough to include what those futures will contain.

10. Conclusion

The selected novels dramatise the development–conservation paradox by refusing to accept its conventional accounting. *Oil on Water* shows that energy prosperity cannot be separated from the extraction zone that pays for it in poisoned water and political abandonment. *Flight Behavior* demonstrates that climate responsibility is inseparable from class, culture, mobility, and the unequal capacity to absorb sacrifice. *Oryx and Crake* reveals how corporate innovation and authoritarian ecological design can share a desire to manage life without democratic restraint. *The Overstory* exposes the inadequacy of human-centred time and property for understanding forests as communities rather than inventories.

Their formal strategies answer the study's central questions. Fractured chronology makes slow violence recur; focalised realism turns climate communication into an encounter among unequal worlds; dystopian retrospection traces catastrophe back to ordinary systems of consumption and expertise; arboreal polyphony redistributes agency and duration. Through these forms, environmental damage ceases to be a remote theme and becomes a pressure exerted on plot, voice, scale, and genre.

The comparison also shows that the paradox is neither inevitable nor solved by attaching “green” to continued extraction. Development becomes ecologically credible when it enlarges substantive human freedom without liquidating the conditions of life, while conservation becomes ethically credible when it includes justice, participation, and the histories of inhabited places. The novels are most sceptical when sustainability promises frictionless continuity. Their guarded hope lies elsewhere: in limits accepted before catastrophe, knowledge made answerable to communities, technologies opened to public judgment, and care extended beyond the human present.

This study is limited to four English-language novels and cannot represent the full generic, regional, or linguistic range of contemporary environmental fiction. Further work could compare these forms with Indigenous futurisms, African and Asian climate narratives, translated fiction, and novels centred on oceans, food systems, or climate migration. Even within its limited corpus, however, one conclusion is clear. Fiction does not preserve the future by imagining it as a greener version of the present. It preserves the possibility of a future by teaching readers to recognise what the present has trained them not to count.

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Declarations

Data availability: The article analyses public institutional webpages. The source register and representative Romanized excerpts are included. A reusable corpus should be archived only after checking institutional copyright, webpage changes, and journal data-sharing requirements.

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