Brown et al. (1) outline an approach to biodiversity conservation that will not protect it. The “most species for the buck” strategy is mathematically elegant. It may sometimes achieve progress. More often, it confuses the biological priorities for conservation with the obstacles we must overcome to protect them. Many existing protected areas in the United States were so designated because they were inexpensive, expedient, or had impressive scenery, and not because of their biological importance (2). Brown et al. (1) formalize a mindset that produced a system of protected areas with nearly the opposite pattern of biodiversity priorities. We aim to reverse that.

We initiate a process for prioritization based on species needing greater protection, a basic and fundamental tenet of conservation (3, 4). Our metrics are determined from biodiversity priorities. We do not shy from protecting places because they might be more difficult or expensive to protect. Rather, we call to action those responsible for designating and protecting areas for biodiversity. Ours is a necessary step, but not a sufficient one. Those who save species by conserving land must decide the local tactics. We intentionally avoid recommending specific conservation strategies within priority regions. Doing so would be naïve, as conservation must take account of local situations and opportunities. Appropriate decision-making skills and knowledge lie with local conservation actors in the priority areas. We identify and locate those priorities and so empower those actors.

In sum, we oppose a strategy of placing cost and convenience above a species’ risk of extinction. Simply minimizing cost will continue the current race to the bottom and not stem the mass extinction currently underway (5).

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Author contributions: C.N.J., K.S.V.H., S.L.P., and J.O.S. wrote the paper.

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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