

Wild animal ethics
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Introduction

Wild animal ethics occupies a strange place in ethical theory. There are many more wild animals than humans or domesticated animals, and many wild animals are much worse off than many humans and domesticated animals. Yet very few academics and advocates work on wild animal ethics or advocacy. This is true even within animal and environmental ethics and advocacy. For the most part, animal ethicists and advocates focus on domesticated animals, such as companion animals and farmed animals. And, for the most part, environmental ethicists and advocates focus on species and ecosystems. As a result, both groups have tended to neglect wild animals, whose needs are importantly different from the needs of domesticated animals, as well as from the needs of species and ecosystems of which wild animals are part.

Fortunately, this trend is starting to change. Increasingly, people are starting to recognize that wild animals have moral standing, and that our treatment of wild animals matters morally. For consequentialists (who think that morality is about consequences), this tends to lead to the idea that we should improve wild animal welfare where possible. Wild animal suffering is a massive and neglected problem. Thus, reducing wild animal suffering should be a top moral priority for consequentialists, all else equal. However, the main question for consequentialists is whether wild animal suffering is *tractable*. Do we know and care enough about wild animals, and about interactions between animals, species, and ecosystems, to be able to intervene in wild animal suffering in effective, achievable, and sustainable ways?

For non-consequentialists (who think that morality is about more than consequences), this recognition of wild animal moral standing tends to lead in a different direction. Instead of thinking that we should improve wild animal welfare where possible, non-consequentialists tend to think that we should leave wild animals alone, out of respect for wild animal autonomy. However, the main question for non-consequentialists is whether the source, scale, or complexity of wild animal suffering changes this duty at all. For example, when human activity is the source of wild animal suffering, do we have a duty to intervene? And, when wild animals are suffering a lot, and we have the power to prevent that suffering without violating rights, cultivating vice, or cultivating oppression, do we have a duty to intervene?

I will start this chapter with a discussion of wild animal welfare. Which wild animals have welfare, how much do they have, and what do they enjoy and prefer? I will then discuss wild animals in the Anthropocene. How are humans impacting wild animals, both directly (through, say, destruction of natural habitats) and indirectly (through, say, human-caused climate change)? Finally, I will consider the ethical implications for consequentialists and non-consequentialists. Throughout, I will try to motivate the idea that, even if consequentialists and non-consequentialists accept different approaches to wild animal ethics in theory, they should accept a similar approach in practice, according to which we should attempt to reduce human-caused wild animal suffering provided that we can do so respectfully and effectively.

Wild animal welfare

Wild animals are more than parts of a whole, like drops of water or grains of sand. They are thinking, feeling individuals, and what they need individually can differ from what they need collectively. Thus, the first step in developing wild animal ethics is learning more about what wild animals are like as individuals. For example, we need to ask:

Which wild animals have welfare? How much welfare do they have? What makes things good or bad for them? What makes *life* good or bad for them? These questions are partly scientific and partly philosophical, since they require asking about what animal lives are like as well as about how to evaluate these lives. We need to make progress on all these questions to know how we should treat wild animals. With that in mind, consider what we currently know about some of these questions.

First, which wild animals have welfare? That is, which wild animals have lives that can be good or bad for them? Many people agree that, if animals have both sentience (i.e., the ability to feel pleasure and pain) and agency (i.e., the ability to set and pursue goals), then they have welfare. So, which animals have these features? We know at least this much. All vertebrates (i.e., animals with a central nervous system) have a strong chance of having both sentience and agency, given our evidence. Meanwhile, many invertebrates, such as mollusks, have at least a moderate chance of having both features, and other invertebrates, such as arthropods, have at least a weak chance of having both features, given our evidence. However, since we can never experience other minds directly, we might never know for sure which animals have these features (Sebo 2018).

Second, how much welfare do wild animals have, if they have any at all? Plausibly, some animals have a higher capacity for welfare than others, in that they can

have more complex experiences and motivations. For example, we might think that humans have a higher capacity for welfare than mice and that mice have a higher capacity for welfare than ants. How can we tell how much capacity for welfare a particular kind of animal has in practice? Some people think that we should use physical proxies, such as neuron counts, to answer this question. For example, if humans have 40 times as many neurons as mice, then, we might think, humans have 40 times as much welfare as mice at any given time. But of course, these estimates are only as reliable as these proxies, and these proxies might not be very reliable (Budolfson and Spears forthcoming).

Third, what makes things good or bad for wild animals? To answer this question, we need to know what causes wild animals to experience pleasure and pain, satisfies and frustrates their desires, and, perhaps, affects their lives in other ways. For example, we know that many wild animals have interest not only in pleasure and the absence of pain, but also in family, friendship, mental and physical stimulation, and more. As a result, we might think that, in order to flourish in life, many wild animals require access to many of these goods (which is part of why captivity can be bad for animals). With that said, there are millions of species and enormous variation within and across species. So, while we know that many wild animals have complex needs, it would take decades, if not longer, to learn what those needs are (Bekoff 2008).

Fourth, do wild animals have lives worth living, on average or in total? Many people assume that the answer is yes. However, this is far from clear. Granted, many wild animals have lives that are full of pleasure and desire-satisfaction. But many also have lives pain and desire-frustration, as a result of hunger, thirst, illness, injury, predation,

and other natural threats. Indeed, the vast majority of wild animals die within days of being born, because many species employ a reproductive strategy that involves having hundreds or thousands of babies and leaving them to fend for themselves (Horta 2010). So, as much as we want to think that wild animals have good lives in nature, we need to take seriously the possibility that many wild animals would be better off in captivity, and that some might even be better off not existing at all.

When asking and answering these questions, it is important to be mindful of the possibility of bias. On one hand, excessive anthropomorphism – the tendency to see nonhumans as similar to humans – might lead us to underestimate how good nature can be for nonhumans. On the other hand, excessive anthropodenial – the tendency to see nonhumans as different from humans – might lead us to overestimate how good nature can be for nonhumans. Meanwhile, a refusal to ask these questions at all can lead us to maintain the status quo, where we either neglect wild animals or evaluate their lives intuitively rather than critically. As long as we are careful and humble when evaluating the lives of wild animals, it seems likely that the results of these efforts will at the very least be better than this speciesist status quo (Andrews 2020).

As I have been emphasizing, we are still early in our understanding of wild animal welfare. However, we can draw two general conclusions now. First, there are *a lot* of wild animals with *a lot* of welfare in the world. There are billions of humans and domesticated animals at any given time. Meanwhile, there are quintillions of wild animals at any given time. Even if we assumed for the sake of argument that only, say, one percent of wild animals have welfare at all, as well as that wild animals have only, say, one percent as much welfare as humans and domesticated animals on average, wild

animals would still have many orders of magnitude more welfare in total. Plausibly, the sheer number of wild animals and amount of wild animal welfare in the world is enough to make wild animal ethics vitally important (Tomasik 2015).

Second, there are likely no universal answers about whether wild animals have lives worth living, and about what kind of environment is best for wild animals. Some wild animals might have lives worth living and others might not. And, some might flourish more in relatively captive environments (such as sanctuaries) whereas others might flourish more in relatively wild environments (such as reserves). Plausibly, many wild animals will flourish more in such “middle ground” environments than in fully captive or wild environments (such as a zoo or aquarium, on one hand, and a state of nature without any human support at all, on the other hand), though even this is unclear. So, we can safely say that wild animal ethics is complex. The problems that wild animals face are simple and clear. But the solutions, if there are any, are anything but.

The Anthropocene

We are now living in the Anthropocene, a geological epoch where human activity is the dominant force on the planet. This complicates wild animal ethics in several ways. How is human activity impacting wild animals, individually and collectively? How will attempts to mitigate and adapt to human-caused environmental change impact wild animals, individually and collectively? How, if at all, can we effectively promote wild animal welfare as part of these efforts? More generally, how does the Anthropocene change the nature of wild animals, and of our relationships with wild animals? For

example, in a world reshaped by human activity, are any animals fully wild, or are all animals at least partly captive and domesticated? Similarly, are any harms fully natural, or are all harms at least partly human-caused?

We know that human activity is killing countless wild animals directly. For example, we are killing trillions of animals per year through deforestation, development, and industrial fishing and agriculture. We are also killing millions of animals per year through the wildlife trade and collisions with buildings and vehicles. We know that human activity is killing countless animals per year indirectly as well. For example, human-caused climate change will result in melting ice caps, rising sea levels, an increase in ocean acidification, flooding coastal regions, an increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events such as fires and floods, and an increase in conflict over land, water, and food. As a result, it will not only introduce new threats for animals but also amplify existing threats for wild animals, such as resource scarcity (Sebo 2020).

This activity is already causing extinction rates to rise. Historically, about one species per year went extinct. Currently, about 10,000 species per year are going extinct. By the end of the century, about 100,000 species per year could be going extinct, and we could have lost anywhere from one quarter to one half of all species. Of course, this biodiversity loss is harmful in many ways. Not only does it represent the loss of countless inherently valuable nonhuman lives, but it also disrupts natural cycles on which many human and nonhuman animals depend, and it disrupts natural systems that have profound aesthetic, cultural, and historical value for human and nonhuman communities. In light of these impacts, many people believe that preserving biodiversity should be a top moral priority for humans and nonhumans alike (De Vos et al 2014).

However, when we consider wild animal welfare, our assessments of human-caused environmental changes become more complex. First, for each population that decreases, another population might increase to take its place. Thus, less biodiversity might not mean fewer animals. Second, individuals and species can have different needs. For example, if wild animals have bad lives, then increased populations can benefit the species but harm the individuals (and vice versa for decreased populations). Moreover, even if wild animals have good lives, increased populations can have positive welfare impacts *in total* but negative welfare impacts *on average* (and vice versa for decreased populations). Thus, assessing our impacts on nature requires considering and evaluating our impacts on individuals, species, and ecosystems holistically.

At present, we know very little about how human activity is impacting individual wild animals. We can make guesses. For example, it might be that animals who are lower on the food chain will do better than animals who are higher on the food chain. It might be that r-strategists (animals with relatively small bodies and short lifespans) will do better than K-strategists (animals with relatively large bodies and long lifespans). It might be that adaptive generalists (animals who can survive in a wider range of environments) will do better than niche specialists (animals who can survive in a narrower range of environments). And so on. But these are only guesses. And even if these guesses are correct, we would need to know more about the welfare of these animals in order to know if these changes are good or bad for animals overall.

We also know very little about how our attempts to mitigate and adapt to human-caused environmental changes will impact individual wild animals. In particular, whether particular mitigation or adaptation strategies are good or bad for wild animals depends on

the details of these strategies, as well as on whether the relevant environmental changes are good or bad for wild animals in the first place. If we consider the needs of humans and nonhumans holistically, we might be able to make at least some choices that are mutually beneficial. For example, if we install animal-friendly windows on cars and buildings and animal overpasses on roads and tracks, then we can reduce collisions with wild animals, thereby benefiting many. But even these changes can have unpredictable long-term effects, and many other choices will involve clear trade-offs.

Relatedly, we know very little about how to effectively improve wild animal welfare in general. Nature is staggeringly complex. For example, suppose that you save an animal from dying. Is it possible that you did more harm than good for this animal by subjecting them to an even worse death later on? Is it possible that you did more harm than good in general by turning other animals into a meal or depriving them of a meal? And of course, if the effects of saving *one* animal are uncertain, then the effects of saving *many* animals are even more uncertain. For example, suppose that we attempt to reduce predation through population control (e.g., providing contraceptives to carnivores) or genetic control (e.g., turning carnivores into herbivores). In this case, it would be *incredibly* difficult to predict and control the trophic cascades that might result.

More fundamentally, the Anthropocene might change the nature of wild animals, and of our relationships with them. Thirty years ago, Bill McKibben famously declared the end of nature (McKibben 1919). We might likewise declare the end of wildness. When human activity impacts everything, we might think that no animals are fully wild. Instead, we might think that all animals are at least partly captive (insofar as we impact their behavior) and at least partly domesticated (insofar as we impact their evolution).

Similarly, when human activity impacts everything, we might think that no harms are fully natural. Instead, we might think that all harms, including harms associated with hunger, thirst, illness, injury, and predation, are at least partly human-caused. This raises challenging questions about complicity that we must now consider.

Consequentialism and wild animals

With that in mind, consider how consequentialists might think about wild animal ethics. Consequentialism holds that morality is entirely a matter of consequences. For example, according to utilitarianism (the kind of consequentialism that, for simplicity, I will focus on here), we are morally required to maximize aggregate well-being in the world. Some utilitarians interpret well-being in terms of pleasure and the absence of pain, and so they think that we should maximize net pleasure in the world. Others interpret well-being in terms of desire-satisfaction and the absence of desire-frustration, and so they think that we should maximize net desire-satisfaction in the world. While there are important differences between these interpretations, we can ignore them for present purposes. (See Singer 1975 for a characteristically utilitarian approach to animal ethics.)

At least in theory, consequentialism is highly demanding. It holds that we should maximize well-being not only for, say, our family, our nation, or our generation, but also for all sentient beings from now until the end of time. Thus, for example, consequentialism implies that you morally ought to devote yourself to the projects that allow you to do the most good possible whether or not you personally care about them. At least in theory, consequentialism is also not at all restrictive about how we maximize

well-being. It holds that we should maximize well-being by any means necessary. Thus, for example, suppose that you have to choose between killing one person and letting five people die. Consequentialism implies that you morally ought to kill one person instead of letting five people die, all else equal.

Given these features of consequentialism, many people see consequentialism as requiring that we attempt to improve wild animal welfare. As we have seen, wild animal suffering is an important, neglected, and at least potentially tractable problem. Wild animals experience more than 99 percent of suffering yet receive fewer than one percent of social support. Thus, consequentialism implies that we morally ought to intervene in wild animal suffering whether or not human activity is responsible. It also implies that we morally ought to *prioritize* intervening in wild animal suffering over many other good causes. After all, if we can do more good with our time, energy, and money by supporting wild animal welfare than by supporting other good causes, then we have a moral duty to do so, all else equal (Johannsen forthcoming).

Many people also see consequentialism as requiring that we attempt to improve wild animal welfare *by any means necessary*. For example, suppose that we can reduce wild animal suffering by killing carnivores to reduce suffering associated with predation, as well as by killing herbivores to reduce suffering associated with overpopulation and resource scarcity. In this case, consequentialism would imply that we morally ought to kill these animals, all else equal (McMahan 2010). Moreover, suppose that wild animals experience more suffering than happiness, and that nothing that we can do can change that fact. In that case, consequentialism might imply that we morally ought to, say, pave

much more of nature than we already are, so that we can reduce the number of wild animals who have to suffer in future generations.

However, consequentialism is more complex in practice. First, many consequentialists believe that, even if we have a moral duty to maximize well-being *in theory*, it would be a mistake to always attempt to maximize well-being *in practice*. For example, you might find that you need to spend at least *some* of your spare time and money on self-care, in order to make altruism sustainable for you. If so, then consequentialism implies that you are not only morally permitted but morally required to spend at least some of your spare time and money on self-care. Granted, you might still need to spend more of your time and money on altruism than many of us do. Still, nobody is morally required to do the impossible. Thus, nobody is required to maintain a level of altruism that, given our motivational limitations, is not realistically possible.

Second, many consequentialists believe that, even if we have a moral duty to attempt to maximize well-being by any means necessary *in theory*, it would be a mistake to always do so *in practice*. First, even if killing one to save five is net positive in the short term, it might not be net positive in the long run, because of indirect effects that are difficult to predict or control. For example, the act of killing someone might make you less empathetic, which might cause you to harm people unnecessarily in the future. It might also make *observers* less empathetic, which might cause *them* to harm people unnecessarily in the future (Gruen 2014). Thus, given how valuable norms of respect and compassion are, consequentialism sets a relatively high bar for performing actions that might erode these norms in practice, both for the agent and for observers.

Given these complications, consequentialism has more nuanced implications for wild animal ethics than many people assume. First, we need to consider how much support for wild animals is achievable and sustainable in practice. For example, even if it would be ideal in theory for us to allocate 99 percent of social benefits to wild animals, we might find that we need to substantially limit our support for wild animals in order to make support for them possible in practice. If so, then consequentialism implies that we are not only morally permitted but morally required to substantially limit our support for wild animals, as we do with our support for other nations and future generations. Granted, we should support wild animals much more than we are. But we do not need to aspire to a level of support that would be clearly impossible.

Similarly, we need to consider not only the direct but also the indirect impacts of interventions such as killing wild animals for the greater good. Is it possible that these interventions might do more harm than good, by bringing about trophic cascades that are difficult to control, or by eroding norms of respect and compassion for wild animals? Given how complex these social and ecological dynamics are, we might not be able to answer these questions with much confidence. In that case, we might think that we should err on the side of caution by focusing on *non-invasive* support for wild animals (while being willing to take invasive action too, in cases where doing so is clearly necessary). This approach would balance the benefits of supporting wild animals with the benefits of promoting norms of respect and compassion for wild animals in practice.

Non-consequentialism and wild animals

Now consider how non-consequentialists might think about wild animal ethics. Non-consequentialism holds that morality is about more than consequences. For example, according to rights theory (a standard kind of non-consequentialism, and the kind that I will focus on here), we are not morally required to pursue any particular goal, much less the most good possible. Instead, we are morally permitted to set and pursue our own goals in life. However, we are morally required to set and pursue goals in ways that allow others to do the same. Thus, for example, you might not have a duty to devote your life to helping others. But you do have a duty not to harm others unnecessarily. And if you do harm others unnecessarily, then you should attempt to reduce or repair that harm. (See Regan 1983 for a characteristically rights theoretic approach to animal ethics.)

At least in theory, non-consequentialism tends to be less demanding than consequentialism. Whereas consequentialist theories require us to do the most good possible, non-consequentialist theories permit us to pursue our own goals in life, provided that we follow rules, respect rights, cultivate virtues, cultivate relationships of care, and so on along the way. Similarly, at least in theory, non-consequentialist theories tend to be more restrictive than consequentialist theories. Even if our goals are altruistic, we are not morally permitted to pursue those goals by any means necessary. Instead, we are morally permitted to pursue them only in morally permissible ways. Thus, for instance, if you have to kill one to save five, most non-consequentialists would say that you are morally required to let the five die rather than kill the one.

Given these features of non-consequentialism, many people deny that non-consequentialism requires us to attempt to improve wild animal welfare. First, we are not morally required to intervene in wild animal suffering, since we are not required to

intervene in suffering in general. Sure, we might be morally required to help others *sometimes*. But even if we are, we are morally permitted to choose when, whom, and how to help (within certain limits that I will mention in a moment). Thus, for example, if you *want* to donate to charities that promote wild animal welfare, then you can do that, provided that these charities respect the rights of human and nonhuman animals. But if you would rather spend your money by, say, collecting comic books and donating to your favorite human rights causes, then you can do that as well.

Many people also deny that non-consequentialism permits (much less requires) us to attempt to improve wild animal welfare *by any means necessary*. For example, even if killing some wild animals can reduce suffering associated with predation or overpopulation, it might still be morally wrong according to non-consequentialism. After all, we might think, killing these wild animals treats them merely as a means to further ends, and is therefore morally wrong. Similarly, even if wild animals experience more suffering than happiness overall, and nothing we can do can change that, paving nature might still be morally wrong according to non-consequentialism. After all, we might think, even if paving nature reduces wild animal suffering, it still interferes with wild animal autonomy, and is therefore morally wrong.

However, like consequentialism, non-consequentialism is more complex in practice, for at least two reasons. First, many non-consequentialists believe that we morally ought to attempt to reduce and repair harms that we cause. On this view, while we might not be required to address problems that we have nothing to do with, we *are* morally required to address problems that we have something to do with. For example, you might not be required to save people from drowning in ponds in general (though it

would, of course, be nice for you to do so). But if you push someone into a pond (intentionally or accidentally), then you *are* required to save them. In this case, saving them is not a matter of your *preventing* something bad from happening. It is instead a matter of your *causing* something bad to happen, and then attempting to reduce or repair this harm.

Second, many non-consequentialists believe that there can be at least *some* cases where, say, harming or killing someone is morally permissible. For example, while we might not be permitted to kill one as a *means* to saving five, we might be permitted to kill one as an *unavoidable side effect* of saving five. We might also be morally permitted to kill someone in *self-defense*, *other-defense*, or *for their own sake*. Moreover, many non-consequentialists accept that there can be “harm thresholds” above which we can be permitted to kill people for the greater good. For instance, while we might not be permitted to kill one to save *five*, we might be permitted to kill one to save, say, one thousand, or one million. We might hope that such cases are rare. But if and when they occur, we can make choices that would normally be wrong (Kagan 2019).

Given these complications, non-consequentialism has more nuanced implications for wild animal ethics than many people assume as well. First, we need to consider how much the Anthropocene changes our moral relationship with wild animals. For example, when deforestation harms wild animals directly (through violence) and indirectly (through habitat destruction), are we at all responsible for these harms? Similarly, when human-caused climate change contributes to fires and floods, and then fires and floods harm wild animals directly (by causing them to burn or drown) or indirectly (by destroying natural habitats), are we at all responsible for these harms? Insofar as we are,

we might have a moral duty to help increasingly many wild animals after all, since helping them would be a matter of reducing or repairing increasingly systematic human-caused harms.

Similarly, we need to consider how the scale and complexity of wild animal suffering changes our moral relationship with wild animals. For example, if we are already interfering with wild animal autonomy, then the question is not *whether* to interfere but rather *how* to interfere as respectfully as possible. Moreover, given how many wild animals there are and how complex their interactions are, we might find that we regularly need to kill some animals as an unavoidable side effect of saving others; kill animals in self-defense, other-defense, or for their own sake; or kill animals in order to save, say, one thousand or million times as many. As much as we might like to think of such cases as exceptional, that might not be true in this area of ethics. In wild animal ethics, these normally “exceptional” tragic cases might, in fact, be the rule.

Conclusion

If this is right, then ethicists might be able to agree on wild animal ethics than we might have thought. On one hand, consequentialists might think that we should intervene in wild animal suffering by any means necessary in theory. But they might accept a less demanding, and more restricted, interventionist view in practice, given our cognitive and motivational limitations. On the other hand, non-consequentialists might think that we should *not* intervene in wild animal suffering in theory. But they might also accept a more demanding, and less restricted, interventionist view in practice, given the source,

scale, and complexity of some wild animal suffering. If so, then perhaps we can at least agree on the moral importance of reducing human-caused wild animal suffering, provided that we can do so respectfully and effectively.

If we accept roughly this view, a good first step in treating wild animals better would be to reduce the activities that harm them, and to increase support for research and advocacy around wild animal welfare. This will give us the knowledge and political will that we need to act effectively when the time comes. We can also pursue moderate interventions that benefit humans and nonhumans alike. For example, we can vaccinate wild animals to reduce the spread of zoonotic diseases. And we can install animal-friendly windows on buildings and vehicles, and animal overpasses and underpasses on transportation systems. These interventions, if implemented thoughtfully, would help many wild animals in the short term, and might also build momentum around the idea of helping wild animals even more in the long run.

It is hard to say what our next steps should be, since it all depends on answers to questions that we should currently treat as open. But, as suggested above, we can make some general predictions. For example, I think that we will need to extend political standing to wild animals (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011). I also think that we will need to allocate a substantial percentage of social benefits to wild animals (Sebo 2020). Relatedly, I think that we will need to develop many more spaces for wild animals, ranging from relatively captive spaces like sanctuaries to relatively wild spaces like reserves. And, I think that we will need to build many more accommodations for wild animals in our own communities, to the point that we stop regarding them as human communities and start regarding them as multi-species communities.

When we look even farther into the future, we might see wild animal ethics as important for a further reason. In the far future, we might share the world not only with wild animals but also with new kinds of beings, such as artificial intelligences. In the same way that there are many more wild animals than humans and domesticated animals, there might be many more artificial beings than biological beings. And, in the same way that wild animals are much more diverse than humans and domesticated animals, artificial beings might be much more diverse than biological beings. Given this possibility, wild animal ethics is not only an invitation to expand our moral and political circle now. It is also an invitation to expand our moral and political imaginations, so that we can be prepared to expand our moral and political circle even more in the future.

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