

Ethical responsibilities toward wildlife

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Save the whales!—The world cheered in the fall of 1988 when we rescued 2 gray whales from the winter ice off Point Barrow Alaska. The whales were stranded for 3 weeks, several miles from open water, rising to breathe through small, and shrinking holes in the ice. Chainsaws cut pathways through the ice and a Russian icebreaker broke open a path to the sea. We spent more than a million dollars to save them; they drew the sympathy of millions of people. A polar bear, coming in to eat the whales, was chased away. Television confronted the nation with the plight of the suffering whales. Seeing them sticking their heads out of the ice and trying to breathe, everybody wanted to help. We saved the whales. People felt good about it.¹

But was that really the right thing to do? Maybe it was too much money spent, money that could have been used better to save the whales—or to save people. Maybe money is not the only or even the principal consideration. Maybe our compassion overwhelmed us, and we let these 2 whales become a symbol of survival, but they do not really symbolize our duties in conservation and animal welfare. The whales needed help; maybe we need help thinking through our duties to wildlife. Consider a less expensive case, no big media event.

Let the bison drown!—In February of 1983, a bison fell through the ice into the Yellowstone River, and, struggling to escape, succeeded only in enlarging the hole. Toward dusk, a party of snowmobilers looped a rope around the animal's horns and, pulling, nearly saved it, but not quite. It grew dark and the rescuers abandoned their attempt. Temperatures fell to -20 F that night; in the morning the bison was dead. The ice refroze around the dead bison. Coyotes and ravens ate the exposed part of the carcass. After the spring thaw, a grizzly bear was seen feeding on the rest, a bit of rope still attached to the horns.²

The snowmobilers were disobeying park authorities, who had ordered them not to rescue the bison. One of the snowmobilers was troubled by the callous attitude. A drowning human being

would have been saved at once; so would a drowning horse. It was as vital to the struggling bison as to any person to get out; it was freezing to death. A park ranger replied that the incident was natural and the bison should be left to its fate.

A snowmobiler protested, "If you're not going to help it, then why don't you put it out of its misery?" But mercy-killing too was contrary to the park ethic, which was, in effect: "Let it suffer!" That seems so inhumane, contrary to everything we are taught about being kind, doing to others as we would have them do to us, or respecting the right to life. Isn't it cruel to let nature take its course?

The snowmobilers thought so. But was the Yellowstone ethic too callous, inhumane? This ethic seems rather to have concluded that a simple extension of compassion from human ethics or humane society ethics to wildlife is too nondiscriminating. To treat wild animals with compassion learned in culture does not appreciate their wildness. Perhaps we are beginning to see the trouble with rescuing those whales. Or maybe we are carrying this let-nature-take-its-course ethic to extremes.

Let the lame deer suffer!—In April 1989 in Glacier National Park, a wolverine attacked a deer in deep snow but did not finish the attack, possibly interrupted by 2 workmen who saw the event from a distance, a rare sighting of an endangered species. The injured deer struggled out onto the ice of Lake McDonald, but, hamstrung, could move no further. Many visitors saw it; a photograph appeared in the local newspaper. Park officials declined to end the deer's suffering. Possibly the wolverine would return. So the lame deer suffered throughout the day, the night, and died the following morning.³ Can this be the right ethics for a wild animal, so inhumane and indifferent? Or has ethics here somehow gone wild in the bad sense, blinded by a philosophy of false respect for cruel nature? Park officials can sometimes be compassionate. The same spring that the lame deer was left to its fate a bear was injured when hit by a truck, and Glacier Park officials mercy-killed the bear.

Leave them to the coyotes!—On Christmas Day

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1987 in Theodore Roosevelt National Park in North Dakota, park visitors found 2 bucks with entangled antlers. One buck had already died and coyotes had eaten the hind parts, also nipping the rear of the live buck, emaciated from the ordeal. Taking compassion, the visitors sought the park ranger on duty, who did return to help them photograph the unusual event, but explained en route the park ethic. Wild animals should be left to their fates; human beings should not interfere. The would-be rescuers seemed to agree. But that night they sneaked back to saw off the antlers of the dead buck. The freed buck trotted away; the rescuers left, with coyotes howling nearby, thwarted from their kill, "We're glad we had the opportunity to save his life," one of them said, although he faces a park citation and a \$50 to \$100 fine.^{4,5}

The rescue of individual animals—a couple of whales, a bison, a few deer—is humane enough and does not seem to have any detrimental effects, but that may not be the end of moral considerations, which ought to act on principles that can be universalized. It will help to consider populations, herds with hundreds of animals. Perhaps that will bring our duties toward the welfare of wild animals into clearer focus.

Let the blinded bighorns starve!—The bighorn sheep of Yellowstone caught pinkeye (infectious keratoconjunctivitis) in the winter of 1981 to 1982. On craggy slopes, partial blindness can be fatal. A sheep misses a jump, feeds poorly, and is soon injured and starving in result. More than 300 sheep (more than 60% of the herd) perished.^{6,a} Wildlife veterinarians wanted to treat the disease, as they would have in any domestic herd, but the Yellowstone ethicists left the sheep to suffer, seemingly not respecting their life. The decision was based on the fact that the disease was natural, and should be left to run its course. Had they no mercy? Was this inhumane?

But perhaps mercy and humanity are not the criteria for decision here. The ethic of compassion must be set in a bigger picture of animal welfare, recognizing the function of pain in the wild. The Yellowstone ethicists knew that, although intrinsic pain is a bad thing whether in human beings or in sheep, pain in ecosystems is instrumental pain, through which the sheep are naturally selected for a more satisfactory adaptive fit. Pain in a medically skilled culture is pointless, once the alarm to health is sounded, but pain operates functionally in bighorn sheep in their niche, even after it is no longer in the interests of the pained individual. To have interfered in the interests of the blinded sheep would have weakened the species. Simply to ask whether they suffer is not enough. We must ask whether they suffer with a beneficial effect on the wild population.

^aMeagher, M. Yellowstone National Park, Wyo: Personal communication, 1984.

Of course we treat our children who catch pinkeye. We put them to bed and draw the curtains, and physicians prescribe eyedrops with sodium sulfacetamide. The Chlamydia organisms are destroyed and the children are back outside playing in a few days. But they are not genetically any different than before the disease, nor will the next generation be different. When the grandchildren catch pinkeye, they will be treated with eye-drops too. But that is an ethic for culture, for which human beings interrupt and relax natural selection. The welfare of the sheep still lies under the rigors of natural selection. As a result of the park ethic, only those sheep that were genetically more fit and able to cope with the disease survived; and this coping ability is now coded in the survivors. What we **ought** to do depends on what **is**. The **is** of nature differs significantly from the **is** of culture, even when similar suffering is present in both.

Wildness overrides compassion!—A human being in a frozen river would be rescued at once; a human being attacked by a wolverine would be flown by helicopter to the hospital. Bison and deer are not human beings and we cannot give them identical treatment. Still, if suffering is a bad thing for human beings, who seek to eliminate it, why is suffering not also a bad thing for bison? After all, the poor bison was struggling to get out of the ice. We cannot give medical treatment to all wild animals; we should not interrupt a predator killing its prey. But when we happen upon an opportunity to rescue an animal with the pull of a rope, or mercy-kill it lest it suffer, why not? If we can treat a herd of blinded sheep, why not? That seems to be what human nature urges, and why not let human nature take its course? That seems to be doing to others as you would have them do to you.

But compassion is not the only consideration in ethics, and in environmental ethics, it has a different role than in humanist ethics. Animals live in the wild, where they are still subject to the forces of natural selection, and the integrity of the species is a result of these selective pressures. To intervene artificially in the processes of natural selection is not to do wild animals any benefit at the level of the good of the kind, although it would benefit an individual bison or deer. Human beings, by contrast, are no longer subject to the forces of natural selection. They live in culture, where these forces are relaxed, and the integrity of *Homo sapiens* does not depend on wild nature.

In that sense, our innate compassionate feelings and the imperatives urged by our moral education are misplaced when they are transferred to wild animals. We ought not to treat the bison as we would a person, because a bison in a wild ecosystem is not a person in a culture. Pain in any culture ought to be compassionately relieved when it can be with an interest in the welfare of the sufferers. But pain in the wild ought not to be relieved if and

when it interrupts the ecosystemic processes on which the welfare of the animals involved depends. Having said this, we must also recognize that suffering in natural systems is often contingent. We do not have any evidence that the drowning bison or the two bucks entangled were genetically inferior. We might suppose that the lame deer was weaker than others, but we do not know that. These animals could have just been unlucky. In the zig-zag of chance and mischance, each zigged when a zag would have saved it, the bison crossing the river, the stags in their fight, the deer with its tendons severed by a wolverine claw. Have we any duty to respect that rotten luck? This is wildness once again, not so much the survival of the fittest, a process that we can respect, but the death of the unfortunate, whose carcasses will be exploited by opportunist scavengers. Ethics can really seem to have gone wild when it respects even this contingent element in nature and refuses to end fortuitous pain. Sometimes it seems that environmental ethics take us nearer than we wish toward a tragic view of life.

Treat the bighorn with lungworm!—Colorado wildlife veterinarians have made extensive efforts to rid the Colorado bighorn sheep of lungworm (*Protostrongylus* sp), concerned about the welfare of the sheep, respecting their right to life. We let the blinded bighorn sheep starve in Wyoming, but we fed the Colorado bighorn sheep apples laced with fenbendazole.^{7,8} Were the Colorado veterinarians more moral than the Wyoming ones? We have to consider that the lungworm parasite was contracted (most think) from imported domestic sheep and that such human interruption yields a duty to promote welfare not present in the Yellowstone case. Others say that the parasite is native but that, the bighorns' natural resistance to it is weakened because human settlements in the foothills deprive sheep of their winter forage and force them to winter at higher elevations. There, undernourished, they contract the lungworm first and later die of pneumonia, caused by bacteria, generally *Pasteurella* spp. Also, the lungworm is passed to the lambs, which die of pneumonia when they are a few months old.

The difference is this. The introduced parasite, the disrupted winter range, or both, mean that natural selection is not taking place. We were running the risk of human interferences, causing a species to become extinct. Letting the lungworm disease run its course really was not letting nature take its course; and, both in concern for the species and in concern for suffering individuals, treatment was required.

If we move this principle with populations back down to the individual level, we see why the lame deer should not be mercy-killed but why the bear hit by a truck was. The logic is that an encounter with a truck is no part of the forces of

natural selection that have operated historically on bears. When human beings cause pain, they are under obligation to minimize it. If we had thought that the wolverine failed to kill the deer because human beings interrupted the attack, that might have been cause to dispatch it, although even here consideration for the wolverine, as an endangered species, would probably have meant that the deer should be left in case the wolverine returned.

Rescue the sow grizzly!—In the spring of 1984, a sow grizzly and her 3 cubs walked across the ice of Yellowstone Lake to Frank Island, two miles from shore. They stayed several days to feast on two elk carcasses, when the ice bridge melted. Soon afterward, they were starving on an island too small to support them. The stranded bears were left to starve, if nature took its course. The mother could swim to the mainland, but she is not going to without her cubs. This time, park authorities rescued the mother and her cubs.⁶ The relevant difference was a consideration for an endangered species in an ecosystem, much interrupted by human beings who have too long persecuted the grizzlies. A breeding mother and 3 cubs was a substantial portion of the breeding population. The bears were not saved lest they suffer, but lest the species be imperiled.

It might seem now that, inconsistently, we refuse to let nature take its course. The Yellowstone ethicists let the bison drown, callous to its suffering; they let the blinded bighorn sheep die. But this time, the Yellowstone ethicists promptly rescued the grizzlies and released them on the mainland, to protect an endangered species. They were not rescuing individual bears so much as saving the species. They thought that human beings had already and elsewhere imperiled the grizzly, and that they ought to save this species.

Duties to wildlife are not simply at the level of individuals; they are also to species. Nor are they simply at the level of species; they are to these species in their ecosystems. Sometimes that means, as with the sow grizzly and her cubs, that we rescue individual animals in trouble, when they are the last tokens of a type. But sometimes it means that the good of individuals must be sacrificed for the good of the species, or for the good of other endangered species, or for the good of ecosystems.

Kill the defective tigers!—The handsome Siberian tiger, top predator in its ecosystem, is almost extinct in the wild, because of hunting for its skins. But we now have international agreements that prevent the sale of such skins, and the Chinese have expressed an interest in restoring tigers to the wild. They need animals to release. There are tigers in zoos, but there is a problem, All the Siberian tigers in zoos in North America are descendants of 7 animals; they have been through a generic

Yellowstone National Park, Wyo, Case Incident Record No. 843601, filed August 18, 1984 by Pat Ozment.

bottleneck. A few tigers are available that are genetically competent. If the defective tigers were replaced by others nearer to the wild type and with more genetic variability, bred, and released, the species could be saved in the wild. Some have asked about killing genetically inbred, inferior cats, presently held in zoos, to make space available for the cats needed to reconstruct and maintain a population genetically more likely to survive upon release.^c

At present this is not being done, partly out of misgivings whether it ought to be done, partly because the zoos fear adverse public relations. But I argue that it ought to be done, assuming that no other alternative can be found. A top predator free in the wild is of more value than defective tigers imprisoned in zoos. A tiger is a "real" tiger only when in the wild; a tiger in a zoo is a tiger no more, and the defective tigers illustrate this. When we move to the level of species, we may kill individuals for the good of their kind.

Species are what they are because of where they are. Our human nature shapes us for culture, not a wild but an "unnatural" environment, that is, an environment in which the creative evolutionary and ecological forces are superimposed by emergent, humane forces. Conscience evolves to generate that respect for persons without which there can be no high quality of human life. But when conscience turns to address the high quality of wildlife, our human instincts and the imperatives of our ethical traditions need to be rethought. We have a duty to conserve all the wildness, species in their wild ecosystems, not just welfare of individual animals.

Shoot *the feral goats!*—Sensitivity to animal welfare at the level of species, however, can sometimes make an environmental ethicist seem callous. San Clemente Island is far enough off the coast of California for endemic species to have evolved in isolation there; some species of plants and animals are found there and nowhere else on Earth. The island also has a population of feral goats, introduced by the Spanish a couple of centuries ago. After the passage of the Endangered Species Act, botanists resurveyed the island and found some additional populations of endangered plants. But goats do not much care whether they are eating endangered species. So the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the US Navy, which owns the island, planned to shoot thousands of feral goats to save 3 endangered plant species, *Malacothamnus clementinus*, *Castilleja grisea*, *Delphinium kinkiense*, of which the surviving individuals numbered only a few dozens.

Some goats were shot. Then the Fund for Animals took the case to court to stop the shooting, and the court allowed the Fund to live-trap and relocate what animals they could. However, relo-

cated animals survive poorly; most die within 6 months. Trapping is difficult; the goats reproduce about as fast as they are trapped. So the shooting has continued. Even shooting the last of them has been difficult. Altogether, about 14,000 live goats have been removed from the island and 15,000 shot. At last report, there were believed to remain only 6 feral goats on the island, 5 pregnant females and 1 billy goat.^d

Is it inhumane to value plant species more than mammal lives, a few plants compared with thousands of goats? Veterinarians especially may incline to say that animals count but plants do not. If asked why, the reply is likely to be that the goats can enjoy life and suffer when shot, but that the plants are insentient and do not feel anything at all. But that slips back into the compassionate, humane ethic, and we have been arguing that duties to species override duties to individuals. That principle holds even when the endangered species are plants. Plants are, if we must phrase it so, wildlife too; and a population of plants, evolved as an adapted fit in an ecosystem, is of more value than a population of feral goats, which are misfits in their ecosystem.

Sterilize the mustangs!—There are about 50,000 mustangs, also some burros, on public lands in the West, a population greatly expanded from perhaps 2,000, 20 years ago. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has spent over \$50 million rounding up the horses and offering them for adoption. But there are not enough people who want to adopt the horses, and the BLM has proposed killing 10,000 mustangs. It also has a research program to discover ways to sterilize the mustangs on the range, all with the goal of removing mustangs from the landscape.⁹ These horses, of course, are not native to the West; they are feral. Nevertheless, to many they seem to belong on the western landscape.

No endangered species is at stake here; the danger is to range ecosystems. The mustangs are mostly in the arid lands of Nevada and Utah, and BLM ecologists and environmentalists agree that the quality of public lands is in serious decline because of overgrazing. When the overgrazing is attributable to the mustangs, environmental ethics prefers the integrity of ecosystems to the welfare of feral animals. The mustangs ought to be removed, preferably by sterilizing, if necessary by killing. But we also have to notice that the overgrazing problem is often more a result of too many cattle, sheep, and goats, which outnumber the mustangs 98 to one on public lands. Remember also that this is subsidized grazing, much below comparable costs on private land. Surely it would be better to reduce cattle grazing on these public lands, which might be done simply by charging market costs. That would give the mustangs enough space in which to

^cHargrove E, in consultation with officials at the Chicago Zoological Park, University of North Texas, Demon, Tex: Personal communication, 1988.

^dLarson J. Winchell C, Natural Resources Office, Naval Air Station, North Island, San Diego, Calif: Personal communication, 1984, 1989, 1991.

live, while we continue to perfect the sterilizing techniques. Perhaps there is not enough need for a little more cheap beef to justify the killing of these mustangs. But both cows and mustangs ought to yield to the integrity of ecosystems.

Restore the wolves!—The top carnivore is missing from most of our American landscapes, and we are wondering whether we can, and whether we ought to restore that majestic animal, the grey wolf. One place the wolf does remain is in Minnesota, where there are about 1,200 wolves. That respects the integrity of this species in that ecosystem, which is what we ought to do. But there is a problem. There are also 12,000 livestock ranches scattered through the wolves' territory, or, to phrase it the other way, the wolves are scattered through the properties of thousands of ranchers. That works unexpectedly well, but each year, wolves begin to kill livestock on forty to fifty of these ranches. A controller inspects the carcass, and if a wolf is guilty, it is trapped and killed. About thirty to forty wolves each year are killed in this mitigation.^e

In the mix of nature and culture on our landscape, if we are to have wolves, we must kill wolves. We ought to do both. This time the problem is cattle again, now on private lands, and we have to consider the interests of the ranchers. But the integrity of the wolf population too is served by removing those animals that turn from their natural prey to domestic animals. Aldo Leopold wrote that in his trigger-happy youth he thought that the only good wolf was a dead wolf, until he shot one once and reached it in time "to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes."¹⁰ But here, to keep that fire going in the species, we have, sadly, to put it out in individuals that lose that wildness and turn to killing cattle. We ought to restore that fierce green gaze on our landscape, where and as we can, even if in the resulting confrontation of people and wildlife, we sometimes have to kill. Sometimes in environmental ethics, there are no easy choices.

Respect wild life!—We have direct encounters with life that has eyes, at least when our gaze is returned by something that itself has a concerned outlook. The relation is two place: I-thou, subject to subject. When we meet higher animals, there is somebody there behind the fur and feathers. They live as species, historical lines, fitted into ecosystems, and their welfare is entwined with that of their biotic communities. We ought not, with misguided compassion, to sever them from their wild worlds. These wild animals defend their own lives because they have a good of their own. Animals hunt and howl, seek shelter, care for their young, flee from threats, grow hungry, thirsty, hot, tired, excited, sleepy, seek out their habitats and mates. They suffer injury and lick their wounds. They can know security and fear, endurance and fatigue, comfort and pain. When they figure out their helps and hurts in the environment, they do not make

^eMech LD, North Central Forest and Range Experiment Station, St Paul, Minn: Personal communication, 1991.

people the measure of things at all. More, man is not the only measurer of things, and there is no better evidence of this than spontaneous wild life, born free.

Still, people are the only moral measurers, and how should we count these wild, nonmoral things? Only in human beings does conscience arise; perhaps such a conscience ought not to be used simply to defend our human interests, those of the species *Homo sapiens*, any more than it ought to be used to defend our individual self-interests. We ought to be conscious of other consciousness. Whatever matters to animals, matters morally.

Life in the wild is not, as we have insisted, life in culture, and different moral rules can apply. Something about treating whales, bison, deer, or even feral goats and mustangs with the compassion we ought to give other human beings seems to elevate them unnaturally, unable to value them for what they are. There is something insufficiently discriminating in such judgments—species blind in a bad sense, blind to the real differences between species, valuational differences that do count morally.

But neither should we forget that, in other ways, recent scientific progress has increasingly smeared the human/nonhuman boundary line. Animal anatomy, biochemistry, perception, cognition, experience, behavior, and evolutionary history are kin to our own. Animals have no immortal souls, but then persons may not either, or beings with souls may not be the only kind that count morally. Ethical progress has further smeared the boundary. Sensual pleasures are a good thing, ethics should be egalitarian, nonarbitrary, nondiscriminatory. There are ample scientific grounds that animals enjoy pleasures and suffer pains; and ethically no grounds to value these in human beings and not in animals. Once we can discriminate the differences between wild nature and human culture, the *is* in nature and the *ought* in ethics are not so far apart after all.

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