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ENDANGERED SPECIES AND ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES

Few persons doubt that humans have obligations to endangered species. People are helped or hurt by the condition of their environment, which includes a wealth of wild species, many of which are currently under threat of extinction. Whether humans have duties directly to endangered species is a deeper question, part of the larger issue of biodiversity conservation, but many believe so. The United Nations World Charter for Nature states that, "Every form of life is unique, warranting respect regardless of its worth to man." The Biodiversity Convention affirms "the intrinsic value of biological diversity." Both are signed by over a hundred nations.

Many endangered species have no resource value, nor are they particularly important for the usual humanistic reasons: medical, industrial, agricultural resources, scientific study, recreation, ecosystem stability, and so on. Many environmental ethicists believe that species

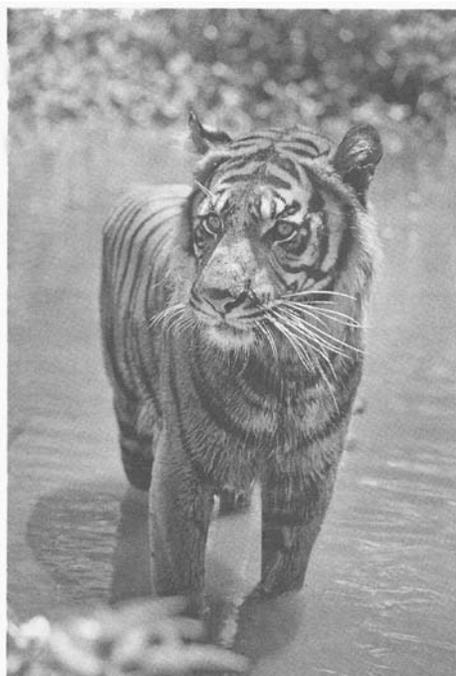
are good in their own right, whether or not they are good for anything. The duties-to-persons-only line of argument leaves deeper reasons untouched.

Questions are at two levels: (1) facts (a scientific issue, about species), and (2) values (an ethical issue, involving duties). Sometimes species can seem questionable, since some biologists regularly change their classifications as they attempt to understand and classify nature's complexity. From a more realist perspective, a biological species is a living historical form, an ongoing lineage expressed in organisms and encoded in the flow of genes. In this sense, species are objectively there—found, not made up.

Responsibility to species differs from that to individuals, although species are always exemplified in individuals. When an individual dies, another replaces it. As it tracks its environment, the species is conserved and modified. Extinction shuts down the generative processes, as a kind of superkilling. This kills forms (*species*) beyond individuals, and kills collectively, not just distributively. To kill a particular animal is to stop a life of a few years or decades, while other lives of such kind continue unabated; to superkill a particular species is to shut down a story of many millennia, and leave no future possibilities.

A species lacks moral agency, reflective self-awareness, sentience, or organic individuality. An ethic that features humans or sentient animals may hold that specific-level processes cannot count morally. But each ongoing species defends a form of life, and these forms are, on the whole, good.

The wrong that humans are doing, or allowing to happen through carelessness, is shutting down the life stream, in the most destructive event possible. One argument is that humans ought not play



Sumatran tigers, unique to the Indonesian island Sumatra, are smaller than Indian tigers. Because some forms of Asian medicine prize tiger body parts, the species, despite being endangered, continues to be hunted. (Photos.com)

the role of murderers or superkillers. The duty to species can be overridden, for example, by pests or disease organisms. Increasingly, humans have a vital role in whether these species continue. The duties that such power generates no longer attach simply to individuals, but are duties to the species lines, kept in ecosystems, because these are the more fundamental living systems, the wholes of which individual organisms are the essential parts. In this view, the appropriate survival unit is the appropriate level of moral concern.

It might seem that for humans to terminate species now and again is quite natural. Species go extinct all the time. But there are important theoretical and practical differences between natural and

anthropogenic (human-generated) extinctions. In natural extinction, a species dies when it has become unfit for its habitat, and other species appear in its place; this is a normal turnover. By contrast, artificial extinction shuts down speciation. One opens doors, the other closes them. Humans generate and regenerate nothing in this extinction; they dead-end these lines. Relevant differences make the two as morally distinct as death by natural causes and murder.

Humans appear late in the scale of evolutionary time. Even more suddenly, they have increased the extinction rate dramatically. What is wrong with such conduct is the maelstrom of killing and the insensitivity to forms of life that it creates. What may be required is not just prudent preservation of resources, but principled responsibility to the Earth.

Further Reading

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