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WILD ANIMALS AND ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES

Few ethicists today doubt that humans have duties toward domestic animals, but the question of duties to wild animals is more vexing. Some of the leading issues are hunting and trapping, animal

suffering, appropriate levels of management intervention, poisoning, habitat degradation, feral animals, restoration, and endangered species.

Duties to wild animals, if they involve care, also involve noninterference, sometimes called hands-off management. In 1988, with the world watching on news media over a two-week period, two gray whales were rescued from winter ice off Point Barrow Alaska. A Russian icebreaker opened a path to the sea; considerable time and expense was required. But perhaps there is no duty to save stranded whales; human compassion may have become exaggerated.

In February 1983, a bison fell through the ice into the Yellowstone River and struggled to get out. Snowmobilers looped a rope around the animal's horns and attempted a rescue. They failed, and the park authorities ordered them to let the animal die, and refused even to mercy-kill it. "Let nature take its course," is the park ethic.

In 1981-82, bighorn sheep in Yellowstone developed conjunctivitis or pinkeye. Partial blindness often proves fatal on craggy slopes. More than 300 bighorns perished, over 60 percent of the herd. Wildlife veterinarians might have treated the disease, as they would have with any domestic herd, but the Yellowstone ethicists claimed that the disease should be left to run its natural course. Humane caring was not a criterion for decision. Rather, the sheep were left to be naturally selected for a better adapted fit

If suffering is a bad thing for humans, who seek to eliminate it, then suffering is also a bad thing for wild animals. Some respond that here human nature urges compassion, and why not let human nature take its course? Do unto others as

you would have them do unto you. But compassion is not the only consideration, and in environmental ethics it plays a different role than in a humanist ethics. Animals live in the wild, subject to natural selection, and the integrity of the species is a result of these selective pressures. To intervene artificially is not to produce any benefit for the good of the kind, although it may benefit an individual bison or whale. Human beings, by contrast, live in a culture where the forces of natural selection are relaxed, and a different ethic is appropriate.

Wild animals are often impacted by human-introduced changes, which can change the ethic. Colorado wildlife veterinarians have made extensive efforts to rid the Colorado bighorns of a lungworm disease, in contrast to the Yellowstone authorities who refused to treat their bighorns with pinkeye. Arguments were that the lungworm parasite was contracted, some think, from imported domestic sheep, or that, even if it is a native parasite, the bighorns' natural resistance 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.

The difference is that with the introduced parasite, or the disrupted winter range, or both, natural selection is not taking place. Letting the lungworm disease run its course would not be an instance of letting nature take its course and, both in concern for the species and in concern for suffering individuals, treatment was required.

The ethic changes again where an endangered species is involved. In the spring of 1984, a sow grizzly and her three cubs walked across the ice of Yellowstone Lake



A gray wolf, also known as a timber wolf, remains alert. The habitat of wolves throughout Eurasia and North America continues to dwindle for these predators. (Photos.com)

to Frank Island, two miles from shore. They stayed several days to feed on two elk carcasses, when the ice bridge melted. Soon afterward, they were starving on an island too small to support them. This time park authorities rescued the mother and her cubs and released them on the mainland.

The relevant difference was a consideration for an endangered species, much interrupted by humans who have long persecuted grizzlies. The bears were saved lest the species be imperiled. Duties to wildlife are not simply at the level of individuals; the ethic is that one ought to rescue individual animals in trouble where they are the last tokens of a type.

Wolves have recently been reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park, having been exterminated there early in this century. The restoration earned protests from some in the ranching community.

Such restoration arises, according to most advocates, from a duty to the wolf as a species, coupled with the fact that the wolf was historically, and ought to be again, the top predator in the Yellowstone ecosystem. Conservationists also realize that problem wolves will have to be relocated, sometimes killed, and believe this is an acceptable killing of individuals in order to have the wolf species present. It removes wolves who turn to killing sheep or cattle, not their natural prey; it also protects ranchers against losses. In the recommended mix of nature and culture, if we are to have wolves, we must kill wolves.

Duties to animals can conflict with concern for endangered animal or plant species. In a 1996 case, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service moved to poison 6,000 gulls at Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge off Cape Cod, in order to save

35 piping plovers, an endangered species. A U.S. District Court rejected an appeal by the Humane Society of the United States to stop the killing.

San Clemente Island, off the coast of California, has both endemic plant species and a population of feral goats, introduced by Spanish sailors two centuries ago. To protect plants numbering in the few hundreds, the Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Navy have shot tens of thousands of feral goats. The Fund for Animals protested that it is inhumane to count a few plant species more than many mammal lives. But again the ethic of species triumphed.

Further Reading

- Armstrong, Susan, and Botzler, Richard G. , eds. 2008. *The animal ethics reader*, 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.
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