

Animals in Need

The Problem of Wild Animal Suffering and Intervention in Nature

Editorial

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This special volume of *Relations. Beyond Anthropocentrism* is dedicated to examining a problem which has recently attracted a great deal of interest. This is the question about the harms that nonhuman animals suffer in the wild due to natural causes and the reasons to aid them whenever it is feasible for us to do so. This problem, although tremendously important, has traditionally received less attention relatively to others, such as the moral consideration of the nonhuman animals exploited by humans. The tide is changing, however, as more and more theorists start now to study it and as new publications addressing it appear.

The background assumption challenged by those who work on this topic is the widespread belief that life in the wild is idyllic for nonhuman animals. It is commonly thought that, in nature, when free from any kind of human interference, animals enjoy happy lives, and that any problem they may face in that regard is actually due to human action. The truth of the matter, however, is at odds with this common belief. Unfortunately, reality is utterly unlike this idyllic picture of life in the wild.

Animals living in nature undergo systematic harms on a daily basis. The ways in which this occurs are manifold. Animals are harmed by starvation and dehydration. They suffer from multiple diseases as well as from injuries caused by accident. They have to deal with harsh weather and climatic conditions. They suffer many intra and interspecific aggressions – including

predation, parasitism and other different forms of competition. Additionally, they often have to cope with great amounts of stress and other kinds of psychological suffering. This list could continue almost indefinitely. Interestingly, in fact most people are to some extent aware that this is so. However, the illusion cast by the idyllic view makes it difficult for them to realize the huge negative impact that these natural harms have in the lives of animals.

Indeed the amount of suffering and premature death present in nature could still be glimpsed were we only to consider the tiny number of animals that successfully reach maturity in comparison to those who die shortly after coming into existence. Population dynamics shows how this figure is very low because of the prevalent reproductive strategy in nature, which consists in producing very large numbers of offspring who have very little chance of survival.

In light of a situation such as this it only makes sense to ask whether there is anything we ought to do to remedy it. Nevertheless, it is usually claimed that we have no obligation to prevent or alleviate this harmful state of affairs. This is accepted because nature is often considered a “flat moral landscape”, that is, a place in the workings of which we must not intervene, since anything that happens there simply should be. Thus, it is said that we have no reason to help nonhuman animals and that, instead, they should be left to their own devices.

It must be stressed, however, that this view is held, in the first place, because the great amount of disvalue suffered by nonhuman animals remains, as we mentioned, commonly unnoticed. This phenomenon has many causes. For instance, most people are not familiar with the basic concepts of the science of ecology and, in particular, with population dynamics. In addition, wishful thinking may lead many of us to think that the world cannot be, for the majority of sentient beings, a place of utter misery. Also, the fact that nonhuman animals already suffer terrible harms at our hands may drive us to conclude that, by contrast, those who are not exploited by humans must lead reasonably good lives. Finally, and very importantly, most people have a misguided idea about which are the animals that live in nature. The notion of wild animals entertained in contemporary societies is restricted to big vertebrates, most notably some well-known mammals such as African elephants or lions. Yet the vast majority of animals that live in nature are actually invertebrates, who die in great numbers shortly after coming into existence. Indeed, when thinking about dying animals, it is adults that come to the mind of most people, rather than the young who perish a few hours after hatching out of their eggs, even though the latter is much more prevalent. All things considered, such a deeply distorted view

of life in the wild cannot provide a sound basis on which to examine the issue of animal suffering and death in nature.

Furthermore, the claim that we should intervene in nature to improve the situation of nonhuman animals clashes against the environmentalist discourse that is so widespread today, and which defends that we should simply let nature alone. Those in favor of helping animals have argued that, in fact, interventions in nature take place all the time, and not merely for anthropocentric reasons, but also to further environmentalist aims. Hence the question at issue is not really whether we should intervene or not, but rather what are the aims which we should pursue by intervening. Environmentalist views value entities such as ecosystems, biocenoses, species and landscapes and, so, by intervening in nature their purpose is to promote their conservation. Those who oppose speciesism and are concerned for the animals living in the wild argue that, on the contrary, we should care for the interests of sentient beings. They are the only ones who can feel suffering and experience joy and, so, intervention should be aimed at helping them.

In fact, it can be argued that if the interests of nonhuman animals are morally relevant at all, it follows that the interests of animals living in the wild should be taken into account in our moral deliberation just as human interests are. Those who reject the discrimination of nonhuman animals have argued that the similar interests of all sentient individuals should be equally considered. This implies that the species they belong to should be regarded as morally irrelevant. Defending the contrary would be an instance of speciesism, the discrimination against those who do not belong to a certain species. Certainly, the disregard for the suffering and death that occurs in nature when nonhuman animals are their victims is not the attitude expressed towards humans in similar circumstances who need our help. Consequently, the refusal to consider the interests of nonhuman animals living in nature can also be considered an instance of speciesism.

It is true that in many cases it is beyond our current powers to aid non-human animals in nature. However, there are many other cases in which it is perfectly feasible to assist them. Every year there is plenty of news about trapped animals, or animals who fall victim of natural disasters, who are rescued. On a more systematic level, there exist as well different initiatives which work to provide care to orphan wild animals, food to starving animals or medical assistance to injured or sick animals, among others. In addition, vaccination programs against different diseases that wild animals suffer (such as rabies or tuberculosis) have been successfully implemented for decades. Thus, there is still much that is in our power which we have not yet carried out, and even much more to research regarding how to

further develop these and new programs. Yet, as we previously pointed out, whether this is to be done or not depends on the position we actually endorse regarding whether we should be concerned with the harms which nonhuman animals suffer in the wild.

In order to address this problem, the first issue opens with an article by Oscar Horta, where he examines the problem of evil in nature, that is, whether, in nature, disvalue outweighs value. The author claims that due to an evolutionary process in a context of resource scarcity, disvalue is indeed largely prevalent in the wild. Most animals that come into existence die shortly after birth and lead miserable lives. This situation, he concludes, gives us reasons to intervene in order to reduce such disvalue.

Continuing with this discussion, Mikel Torres sets the moral case for intervening in nature to aid animals. He claims that once we reject speciesism and assume that we have a *prima facie* moral obligation to alleviate preventable and unjustified suffering, we are thereby committed to aiding animals in the wild harmed by natural phenomena. This conclusion, however, has been disputed from different perspectives, in particular, from within environmentalism.

In the next article, Luciano Cunha provides an answer to one of the main environmentalist objections to intervention on behalf of animals. That is, if non-sentient natural entities have intrinsic value, it seems that we should not intervene in nature or at least that our reasons to intervene are considerably weak. For example, it is often claimed that we should not interfere with natural processes if that threatens the value of biodiversity. Or alternatively, that we should promote biodiversity, even when doing so clashes with individual well-being.

In her paper, Julia M. Ramil rejects this conclusion. She examines the concept of diversity and assesses what kind of value diversity may have, if any. She concludes that even conceding that diversity has some value, in cases where actual harms exceed future benefits, that value is overridden by well-being.

The second part of the issue starts with an interview with Professor Jeff McMahan. Jeff McMahan belongs to a small group of ethicists who work with the aim of making the world a better place. This has led him throughout his academic career to address a variety of neglected topics in moral philosophy. Such is the case of wild animal suffering and intervention in nature. In this interview, Professor McMahan explains how he became acquainted with the topic and briefly explains why he believes it is quite clear that if animal suffering matters, then animal suffering caused by natural events matters to the same extent and should thus be prevented, whenever possible. This is indeed the argument that he develops on his

well know *New York Times* piece *The Meat Eaters*, where he addresses the suffering caused by carnivores on their prey. In the interview, McMahan extends his concern to other natural harms that affect animals living in the wild, such as disease or starvation. He also explains to us why he thinks environmentalist objections to benefiting animals in the wild are unsound and what can be done to increase awareness of this issue among philosophers and the general public.

Later, we present a debate between Stjin Bruers and Eze Paez. In his paper, Bruers aims at laying out an ethical principle that accounts for allegedly widespread moral intuitions about the permissibility of some harmful natural events, most notably predation and *r*-selection, the reproductive strategy that prevails in nature. These events are to be allowed even though they cause great amounts of suffering to animals that live in the wild. Bruers presents such principle, which he calls the 3-N principle (naturalness, normality and necessity), as related to the intrinsic value of biodiversity. It allows him to oppose intervention in the wild, even if great gains in terms of individual well-being could be achieved, whenever doing so would inflict a great loss in biodiversity. In his reply to Bruers, however, Eze Paez challenges this conclusion. Firstly he assesses the results of Bruers' account regarding the sacrifice of both human and nonhuman interests, finding them highly unacceptable. Secondly, he shows that rejecting Bruers' view on biodiversity has much more plausible consequences with respect to *r*-selection and the accidental killing of invertebrates.

This is followed by a report on *Animal Ethics*, a new organization dedicated to increasing awareness of speciesism and its impact in all animals, including those living in the wild. *Animal Ethics* shares the background motivation of this volume by focusing its activity on providing information on, as well as producing academic research about, under-addressed topics in animal ethics, such as the one we are dealing with here.

The issue ends with Adriano Maninno's review of *Zoopolis: a Political Theory of Animal Rights*, by Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka. As Maninno points out, *Zoopolis* has relocated the animal rights debate from the classic issue of the moral considerability of animals to the political discussion about our obligations towards the so called "sovereign communities" of animals living in the wild. The author argues that even though the main normative theses in *Zoopolis* are correct, it empirically underestimates the extent to which nature may actually work as a failed state and thus demand much more of us in terms of beneficial intervention.

The second issue of the volume opens with a paper from Brian Tomasik about the importance of wild animal suffering. The author claims that given the huge amount of animals that exist in nature, all of those concerned with

nonhuman animals should focus their efforts on reducing the harms that take place in the wild. In fact, Tomasik concludes, our utmost priority should be to ensure that human intelligence, along with the sciences and technologies available in the future, will be used to prevent wild animal suffering, rather than to multiply it.

The issue continues with David Pearce's article *A Welfare State for Elephants?*. He claims that future human beings will eventually have the power to change life on earth. Thus, it is our moral responsibility to use that power to achieve a compassionate stewardship of nonhuman animal wild populations, whenever that becomes feasible. The article proceeds by examining such stewardship could work, taking elephants that live in the wild as a case study. It ends by disputing the rationality of the two major obstacles to this project. These are speciesism and the typical arguments from appeal to nature, employed as objections against intervening to help animals.

Next, Eze Paez challenges the widespread belief according to which the aim of preserving organisms or ecosystems can justify the infliction of suffering to nonhuman sentient beings, or the failure to prevent it. Paez explains that one way how this might be true would be if the mere existence of non-sentient entities had telic value. Nonetheless, he concludes, there are strong reasons to doubt that.

In the last article of this section, Beril Sözmen offers us a relational account of our moral obligations towards animals living in the wild. The author claims that animal ethics, understood as a radical critique to anthropocentrism, can greatly benefit from the non-analytic tradition, especially in refining the debate about our relational duties towards other animals. According to the author, this is particularly true regarding the question of intervention in nature.

In the second part of this issue, Max Carpendale interviews Yew-Kwang Ng about his work on evolutionary economics of animal consciousness and suffering. Ng explains what welfare biology is and how evolutionary economics and population dynamics can help us to solve crucial problems when dealing with wild animal suffering. These include determining members of which species are sentient individuals capable of having a well-being of their own, ascertaining whether they enjoy positive or negative well-being or deciding how their well-being can be effectively increased, among many others. Ng also discusses the normative implications of the prevalence of wild animal suffering regarding what we have most reason to do.

Subsequently, we present a debate between Professor Clare Palmer and Catia Faria. Drawing on her arguments in *Animal Ethics in Context*,

Palmer claims that we do not have an obligation to intervene in order to assist animals living in the wild since we do not normally have with those animals the kind of relationships that generates such obligations. Palmer believes that there are many cases, though, in which we should intervene. For example, when there has been prior human harm. Palmer's position is then that intervention is permissible, but not normally required. In her reply, Catia Faria claims that Palmer's account, however supportive of commonly shared intuitions does not seem capable of escaping three major problems. Firstly, it has unacceptable consequences for the human case. Secondly, in order to avoid the previous concern, it necessarily falls prey of speciesism. Finally, it assigns too high a value to relations.

The volume ends with Daniel Dorado's review of the literature on wild animal suffering and intervention in nature, ranging from Stuart Mill's *On Nature* to the most relevant contemporary contributions to the topic.

The purpose of this volume is to address the vastly unexplored issue of wild animal suffering and intervention in nature, by challenging the belief that life in the wild is a "flat moral landscape" (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011). Though it is usually assumed that we have no obligations to prevent or reduce the natural harms that animals suffer in the wild, if nonhuman interests are relevant at all, it seems that the interests of wild animals should also be taken into account. There are a number of objections that might be put forward against this conclusion, though, the most relevant of which are discussed in detail throughout the volume.

We believe that these two issues provide a rigorous and comprehensive overview of the academic discussion on the topic. In addition, we hope that they will contribute to raising awareness of the situation of animals living in the wild. Ultimately, we expect that it will stimulate further academic research about the moral consideration of nonhuman animals (in particular, wild animals) and the reasons to reject speciesism.

REFERENCES

- Donaldson, Sue, and Will Kymlicka. 2011. *Zoopolis: a Political Theory of Animal Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.