

The Evolution of Wildlife Management Ethics: From Human-Centered to Humane

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Since the advent of agriculture about 10,000 years ago, the human relationship to other animals has been a hegemonic one. From Aristotle to Aquinas to Descartes, leading western philosophers, clergymen, and scientists have imprinted society with the view that animals existed for human use.

Animals were mere human instrumentalities, to be killed for our palates, our profits, and our progress. They neither possessed nor should be accorded rights. Descartes, for instance, believed animals were merely automata, an assemblage of parts little different from clocks or carts. They could bleed and scream, but could not feel. According to Descartes, humans had no direct duties to these quasi-machines.

While some such as Erasmus, Sir Thomas More, and Leonardo Da Vinci had challenged the human-centered paradigm in the post-Middle Ages period, it was not until the late 18th and the 19th centuries that such alternative views gained anything more than passing ridicule. The British utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham was one of the first to advance a cogent line of argument that humans engaged in a form of tyranny over other animals. "The French," Bentham stated in 1780, "have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may come one day to be recognized that the number of legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the os sacrum are reason equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate." He added, "The question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?"

It was not, however, until the second half of the 19th century that Americans began to reassess their relations with the non-human world. I identify four happenings as crucial in catalyzing this ethical reexamination: Charles

Darwin's theory of evolution, the abolition of slavery, the birth of the organized humane and environmental movements, and the market-driven slaughter of wildlife.

Few people in western culture have had a more penetrating impact on societal values than Darwin. His theory of natural selection as the engine of species evolution served as an implicit challenge to the dominant world view of absolute human superiority over the natural world. In *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin asserted, "There is no fundamental difference between man the high mammals in their mental faculties.... Even the lower animals . . . manifestly feel pleasure and pain, happiness and misery. . . . Only a few persons now dispute that animals possess some power of reasoning." In that book and his previous one, *The Origin of Species*, Darwin pointed out that humans are not fallen angels, but risen apes; humans and the "higher" non-human animals were composed of the same constituent parts. In short, there was a unity and continuity of life. The implication: if humans and other animals shared physical and emotional characteristics, it would become increasingly difficult to justify radically different treatment of them.

While Darwin initiated a revolution in natural history, abolitionists throughout the western world completed a social revolution, by helping to eradicate slavery and stripping away a gross abuse of humans by humans. As society redressed a massive societal injustice—human bondage—Americans could more readily investigate and analyze other malignancies in their social relations with others. Animals and the environment were among the beneficiaries of the end of legal slavery.

In his book *The Rights of Nature*, American environmental historian Roderick Nash argues that western culture has seen an ever-expanding moral concern for others—a process

of ethical extensionism—beginning with the writing of the Magna Carta in 1215 and taking expression in such documents as the Declaration of Independence 1776 and the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. It is this inexorable expansion of ethical concern that has brought once disenfranchised or disregarded groups such as the non-propertied, women, people of color, and children into the sphere of moral concern. It is this same western tradition of liberalism that provides the basis for our examination of the rights of animals and the environment.

It follows then that the organized environmental and humane movements were born as human slavery was abolished. In 1864, George Perkins Marsh wrote *Man and Nature* and chronicled the devastating human impact on the environment. He, along with giants of American philosophy such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, provided a foundation upon which an environmental movement would be constructed. In 1872, Congress established the country's first national park, Yellowstone, and signaled a dramatic change in attitude; wilderness, long considered a hostile place to be conquered, was recognized as an invaluable national treasure to be preserved for the benefit of future generations.

Not long after Marsh's work was published and only one year after the end of the Civil War, Henry Bergh, a New York socialite, founded the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in New York. Dedicated to ending cruelty to animals, Bergh focused attention on society's reckless disregard for animals and worked to pass the nation's strongest anti-cruelty law in 1867, a law that would serve as the template for many succeeding anti-cruelty codes enacted in other states. Not long after the ASPCA was established, George Angell founded the

Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Interestingly, Angell, like so many humane leaders to follow, was provoked to take action by anger, after reading a news account of a horse race from Boston to Worcester in which no horse survived.

Finally, while humans had believed in their superiority over animals, they had been limits to their ability to tame nature and kill wildlife—although the Romans and many subsequent westerners proved adept at slaughter and spectacle. But by the second half of the 19th century—with the advent of repeating rifles and with the completion of the transcontinental railroad—humans had penetrated all parts of the country and unleashed their unbridled killing power. Motivated by profit, humans massacred wildlife, and drove even the most bountiful species, such as the bison and the passenger pigeon, to the very precipice of extinction. The recognition that humans possessed the ability to destroy whole species in a matter of a few years prompted some Americans to question the human prejudice against animals and nature.

As the 20th century dawned, the clamor over our appropriate relations with animals and the environment reached a new intensity. The debate over the divergent philosophies of preservation and “wise” or sustained use was crystallized in the conflict between naturalist and Sierra Club founder John Muir and U.S. Forest Service chief Gifford Pinchot over the construction of the Hetch Hetchy dam in the Yosemite Valley. An even more complicated debate, known as the “nature faker” controversy, arose over the behavioral attributes of wildlife and the ethics of sport hunting. The antagonists were none other than President Teddy Roosevelt, a self-proclaimed “Great White Hunter,” and two extraordinarily popular nature

writers, Ernest Thompson Seton and William Long, who were avowed opponents of sport hunting.

While the media controversies surrounding the debates between Pinchot and Muir and Roosevelt and the nature writers reached some sort of closure, the issues central to their debates remain hotly contested today. During the past few years, there has been a national controversy over the management of old-growth forests in the Pacific Northwest. Some advocate preservation, others “wise use.” Directly related to the old-growth forest controversy, there will be a pitched battle over the reauthorization of the Endangered Species Act in Congress this year or next. What type of balance should be struck between preserving species and habitat and saving jobs? Some believe that short-term economic considerations should take precedence over issues of species preservation.

But while the endangered species debate will reach a crescendo soon, it is all-but-assured that Congress will keep intact a strong Endangered Species Act. A large majority of the public supports the preservation of endangered species, according to recent polls sponsored by The Nature Conservancy and the National Audubon Society. Most people now believe in the credo of Aldo Leopold, who declared more than 50 years ago that “the first rule of intelligent tinkering is to preserve all the parts.” The question is not whether, but by what means, we should save species.

While Americans recognize a responsibility to the surviving members of endangered species, what are their responsibilities to non-imperiled animals? While every state has passed an anti-cruelty code, these laws, as applied, only prohibit the wanton neglect or intentional harm of certain animals, mainly domestics. Inflicting harm upon wild animals is perfectly legal, as long as it is

done within prescribed limits. Presently, sport hunting and commercial trapping of dozens of species remain legal in every state.

While the broad topic of wildlife management ethics includes a gamut of concerns, ranging from habitat protection and species preservation to predator control, no issue is more contentious or more socially relevant than the debate over sport hunting and trapping. For the most part, the state fish and game agencies have been procurers of game, not protectors of wildlife. Today, these agencies are principally engaged in activities to facilitate or regulate hunting and trapping, whether through game animal research, hunter education, game stocking, habitat manipulation, or law enforcement. In 1988, Defenders of Wildlife released a state-by-state survey indicating that fish and game agencies spend more than 90 percent of their funds on game animals, even though they constitute a small percentage of faunal species.

The state game agencies—long dependent on the revenue from the sale of hunting, trapping, and fishing licenses, along with federal revenue derived from excise taxes on guns, ammunition, fishing equipment, and motorboat fuel—have only recently, and somewhat grudgingly, accepted some responsibility for non-game species management. Even the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, though it also implements the Endangered Species Act, spends considerable time and money on devising annual framework regulations to facilitate the sport hunting of migratory birds and on opening national wildlife refuges to hunting, fishing, and trapping.

Hunting proponents—relying on the rationale of Roosevelt and, to some extent, the game management philosophies of Aldo Leopold—believe that animals can be sustainably used. In their eyes, sport hunting and trapping are not only justifiable,

but beneficial uses of animals that provide recreation, meat or fur, and cost-effective management of wildlife populations.

While the use of animals is a deeply imbedded social tradition in western culture, I believe that already established societal standards against animal cruelty will gradually, and appropriately, lead us in the direction of banning sport hunting and commercial trapping. In a society that has already granted legal protection to some animals, wild animals are the next logical beneficiaries.

Before delving into that argument, it is necessary to challenge a standard hunters' defense: that hunting is a form of essential population control. Without question, this practical defense of hunting is, in virtually all circumstances and with all species, utterly specious. Yet, it is an argument that many unquestionably accept.

Obviously, population control has never been a motive for hunters. They hunt for fun, for meat, for camaraderie, but not for population control purposes. It is hard to imagine hunters worrying about the need to control populations the night before opening day.

Beyond that, it is obvious that no responsible ecologist would argue that the vast majority of hunted animals are shot to control their numbers. Annual kill totals for several widely hunted species as estimated by state fish and game agencies are as follows:

Birds

- 50 million mourning doves
- 25 million quail
- 20 million ring-necked pheasants
- 10 million ducks
- 2 million geese
- 1 million ptarmigan

Mammals

- 25 million rabbits
- 25 million squirrels

4 million deer
150,000 elk
120,000 pronghorn
250,000 coyotes
20,000 black bears
1,500 mountain lions
1,000 grizzly bears
800 wolves

The states allow lengthy seasons and permissive kill limits for birds and small mammals, such as doves, ducks, quail, pheasants, rabbits, and squirrels, because the populations can sustain the impact, not because they must be hunted. Also, few would argue that top-line predator species, such as coyotes, mountain lions, wolves, and bears need to have their numbers regulated by hunters. These are low density species whose numbers are self-regulated by habitat conditions, densities of conspecifics, and prey availability.

If hunting had to be justified on the basis of population control, well more than 90 percent of hunting activity would be eliminated with little debate. The population-control defense only has some limited resonance when discussing the management of ungulates, such as elk and deer. It seems disingenuous, however, for the state fish and game agencies and hunters to claim that their activity is necessary to control ungulate numbers when they have been engaged in a variety of tactics to increase their numbers.

Since the 1930s, the states have attempted to inflate ungulate numbers to provide shooting opportunities for hunters by killing predators, by manipulating habitat to favor deer, and by altering the natural sex ratio of deer. In many parts of the country, because hunters disproportionately kill bucks, five to ten times more females than males inhabit the woods. In some regions, it's worse. In Michigan's northern lower peninsula, according to the June 14, 1991, *Detroit News*, "does outnumber bucks

by as much as 30-1." A population with a disproportionate number of females possesses a greater reproductive potential.

Though hunting proponents reflexively state that deer must be hunted, even some pro-hunting texts admit this is not the case. A standard game managers' text, *White-Tailed Deer Management and Ecology*, states, "Most wildlife biologists and managers can point to situations where deer populations have not been hunted yet do not fluctuate greatly nor cause damage to the vegetation. Certainly deer reach overpopulation in some park situations, but the surprising thing is how many parks containing deer populations have no problem."

Adds ungulate biologist Grahame Caughley, "I do not know of any system dislocated permanently by a bout of overpopulation. The phenomenon is temporary and its remission spontaneous. Most treatments of overpopulation are justified by a dire prediction of what might have happened had the treatment been withheld. A more convincing case would be made by demonstrating that the effects of untreated abundance are irreversible."

Indeed, the array of state parks and national parks throughout the country—which collectively represent millions of acres of non-hunted habitat—provide practical and virtually incontrovertible evidence that sport hunting is seldom, if ever, needed as a mechanism of population control for deer or any other species. From Acadia to Joshua Tree and Olympic to Everglades, the one dominant management motif of national parks and monuments is a prohibition on sport hunting; yet the health of animal populations and ecosystems remain intact in the absence of this form of human-caused mortality. In fact, of the country's 130 national parks and monuments, 128 prohibit hunting.

In short, the justification of hunting as a mechanism of population control rings hollow. Japan has recently adopted this argument in attempting to justify its resumption of commercial whaling. Rather than concede that the nation merely has a commercial and cultural interest in killing whales, Japan has tried to mask its rapacity under the guise of "scientific" whaling. The argument, in reality, is scientific fantasy whether it's applied to marine mammals, terrestrial mammals, or birds.

Thus, the perpetuation of hunting does not rest upon its biological necessity, but upon its consonance with existing societal standards toward the treatment of animals. In short, the question is, what is our appropriate relationship to other animals? Is it acceptable to pursue them and kill them for sport?

Indeed, the use of animals in western society, as pointed out earlier, is deeply imbedded. But over the past two centuries, society has begun to extend a legal mantle of protection to animals. While many uses of animals have been and are still widely tolerated, society increasingly recognizes that the deliberate infliction of unnecessary harm to animals is wrong.

As evidence of the growing intolerance for cruelty, we need only review the legal codes of the states. Today, there are anti-cruelty codes in 50 states, dog-fighting prohibitions in 50 states, and cock-fighting prohibitions in 44 states.

Cock-fighting and dog-fighting are not only seen as cruel, but unnecessary. In short, people do not need to fight dogs or cocks to survive. In a similar vein, hunting too is no longer necessary. This is not the 17th century when some people needed to hunt for food or cloth. Today, according to the 1991 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service National Survey of Hunting, Fishing and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, there

are 14.1 million hunters—or about seven percent of the U.S. population—above the age of 16 in the United States. The remainder—about 93 percent of the public—subsist without hunting. In fact, they obtain their food at a less expensive market value than an average deer hunter, who will probably invest about \$20 for every pound of deer flesh returned to the table (Cartmill 1993).

If standard taboos against cruelty are logically applied, sport hunting can no longer stand ethical scrutiny. For instance, in any state, a person who chooses to impale a domestic cat with a broadhead arrow could be prosecuted for cruelty; yet 11 states permit hunters to shoot the wild cousins of domestic cats—mountain lions—with broadhead arrows, usually after having been chased up a tree by a pack of radio-collared hounds. Similarly, if you shoot a domestic dog with a 30.06 rifle for mere fun, you are likely to be arrested; but the shooting of their wild cousins—the coyote—is legally sanctioned. These are severe inconsistencies.

If cock-fighting, dog-fighting, and bull-fighting are wrong, so too is sport hunting. As author Matt Cartmill points out, "If killing animals is wrong as a spectator sport, it should also be wrong as a participatory sport."

Some offer an economic defense of hunting: that the activity provides the financial backbone for the operations of this nation's wildlife agencies. Above, I pointed out that most the bulk of resources spent by these agencies are devoted to game-species projects. Thus, if the flow of hunters' dollars were cut off, it would be hunting programs, not conservation programs, that would suffer.

What's more, it is fallacious to think that hunter dollars support the operations of the vast majority of public lands in this country. The

five largest public land managers in United States are federal agencies: the Bureau of Land Management (271 million acres), the U.S. Forest Service (191 million acres), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (91 million acres), the National Park Service (80 million acres), and the Department of Defense (25 million acres); the operations for all of these agencies are provided through the appropriation of general tax dollars, not through specific expenditures of hunters.

But even the limited level of support that hunters self-servingly provide to state agencies is not sustainable. Hunting numbers are shrinking, from 17.5 million hunters in 1975 to 14.1 million today (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1993). In certain areas, like California, where hunter numbers have declined by 50 percent over the past 20 years, the drop has been precipitous.

While hunter numbers have been stable or decreasing, the number of non-hunters has increased dramatically. There are, for instance, more people who visit the nation's three most popular national parks than who hunt each year. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, there are about 80 million non-consumptive wildlife enthusiasts. If the resources of these people can be adequately tapped, this group, which is bound to increase further in number, can provide substantial, long-term support land and wildlife management in this country.

The programs of wildlife managers in the 21st century must be geared to this burgeoning constituency, not the fading legacy of hunting culture. A restructuring of wildlife management programs in this country not only makes ethical sense, but also economic sense. This new wildlife constituency will

demand, and will undoubtedly pay for, wildlife viewing programs, urban parks, wilderness parks, and threatened and endangered species survival plans.

Mistakenly, consumptive-use advocates have long attempted to equate sport hunting, fishing and trapping with management, and have all but flatly labeled consumptive-use critics as "anti-management." Nothing could be further from the truth. As the human population expands and encroaches on wildlife and their habitat, it will be more important than ever to have environmental planning and ecosystem management. There will also be a pressing need for agencies to provide active and humane solutions to human-wildlife conflicts; the old model of lethal control, especially predator control, will not be viewed as either humane or effective.

Managers will need to provide direct service or consultation to people interacting with wildlife. Mountain communities will need bear-proof dumpsters installed in bear-inhabited areas; municipalities may need to regulate the flow of water being released from beaver dams; and livestock operators will need technical advice on guard dogs or other deterrents to coyotes.

Indeed, a change in society's ethical standards will compel a serious change in wildlife management in America in the 21st century. Society will no longer unthinkingly accept a resourcist and entirely human-centered model of management. Not only will people demand that species and systems be safeguarded, but also that individual animals be treated humanely. There is nothing incompatible about preserving species and ecological systems and stopping the human-caused harming of sentient creatures.

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