

Painlessly Killing Predators

BEN BRAMBLE 

ABSTRACT *Animals suffer harms not only in human captivity but in the wild as well. Some of these latter harms are due to humans, but many of them are not. Consider, for example, the harms of predation, i.e. of being hunted, killed, and eaten by other animals. Should we intervene in nature to prevent these harms? In this article, I consider two possible ways in which we might do so: (1) by herbivorising predators (i.e. genetically modify them so that their offspring gradually evolve into herbivores) and (2) by painlessly killing predators. I argue that, among these options, painlessly killing predators would be preferable to herbivorising them. I then argue that painlessly killing predators, despite its costs to predators, might under certain circumstances be justifiable.*

1. Introduction

Animals suffer harms not only in human captivity but in the wild as well. Some of these latter harms are due to humans, but many of them are not. Consider, for example, the harms of *predation*, i.e. of being hunted, killed, and eaten by other animals. These harms include anxiety from being hunted, as well as pains of being attacked and eaten.¹ They include also the loss of pleasures that these animals would have felt had they not been hunted or killed prematurely. These harms are substantial. Should we intervene in nature to prevent them?²

Before we can answer this question, we need to consider *how* we might prevent such harms. The most obvious way would be to *painlessly kill predators* (PKP). But while PKP would prevent the harms of predation, it would come at a big cost, for it would harm *predators*. It would shorten their lives and so rob them of pleasures they would otherwise feel.³

A further cost of PKP might be to humans. While predation is horrific, predators themselves are beautiful in countless ways. Consider their eyes, faces, fur coats or feathers, sense of curiosity, movement through the air, water, or forest, playfulness with each other, concern and affection for their young, perseverance under difficult conditions, and so on. The loss of predators on this planet, you might think, would be a tremendous loss to humanity.

However, there is an alternative to PKP that has been proposed that seems not to have such costs. This is to *herbivorise predators* (HP)—i.e. to genetically modify them so that their offspring gradually evolve into herbivores.⁴ If HP were carried out, predators would get to live out their natural lifespans, and we humans could continue to enjoy the presence on this planet of animals very like them, animals with all their beauty, but without their appetite for flesh.

In this article, I will argue for two surprising claims:

First, PKP is in fact preferable to HP.

Second, PKP, despite its costs to predators, might one day be justifiable (i.e. compared with doing nothing).

In Section 2, I will argue that PKP would benefit many more prey than HP would. In Section 3, I will argue that HP would greatly harm predators, perhaps more than PKP would. In Section 4, I will argue that PKP would be no worse, on balance, for humans than HP would be. In Section 5, I will summarise my case for the claim that PKP is preferable to HP. Finally, in Section 6, I will argue that PKP, despite its costs to predators, might one day be justifiable.

2. Prey and Nonidentity

Any genetic modification of predators would take at least some time to carry out on them. For this reason, it would change, if only slightly, the times at which individual predators next go hunting, or at least the precise ways in which they do so. This, in turn, would affect, if only slightly, the lives of prey who thereafter encounter them (as well as those who *would* have encountered them had these predators not been genetically modified). These prey—or at least, those who survive and go on to have offspring—would, as a result of such changes to their lives, conceive their future offspring at slightly different times than they otherwise would have (i.e. had these predators not been modified). These differences in conception times would, in turn, affect the sperm-egg combinations involved in the conceptions, thereby affecting their offspring's identities.

The upshot? While the offspring of these prey (and their descendants) might not have to contend with predators, *they would not have been made any better off than they would have been had HP not been carried out*. This is because, had HP not been carried out, these particular individuals would not have existed at all. These individuals would owe their lives to HP. Without HP, different individuals would have existed in their place (or, in some cases, none at all). HP, then, would not benefit any of these future prey.⁵

There are some future prey, admittedly, who might benefit from HP—namely, those who have already been conceived when HP is carried out and those whose time of conception would not change as a result of HP (say, because it would happen before their parents next encounter the genetically modified predators). These future prey might be benefited by coming to live in a world without, or with many fewer, predators. There might also be some existing prey who, by living a long time, would benefit by facing, in their later years, a reduced threat of predation or else witnessing their offspring face a reduced threat of predation.

By contrast, PKP would benefit *all existing prey and offspring of theirs whose conception times were unaffected by PKP*, since all of these animals would immediately be spared from the dire threat of predation.

3. Harms to Predators

While HP would not cut short the lives of predators, might it harm them in other ways? It might be suggested that HP would harm *future generations* of predators by depriving them of various benefits associated with being a predator—say, pleasures of hunting prey or eating meat. But again, this ignores the identity-affecting nature of HP. Not only would HP change the identities of future prey (for the reasons described above), it would (for even more obvious reasons) change the identities of future *predators*. As a result of this, while it is true that future predators would not get to experience the pleasures of hunting or of eating meat, HP would not have made these individuals any worse off than they would otherwise have been. This is because, without HP, they would *not* otherwise have been.

Still, I do think that HP would significantly harm some predators—namely, *existing* ones. It would deprive them of various benefits of raising offspring who are carnivorous like themselves—for example, pleasures of teaching their offspring how to hunt, eating meals with them, and so on. Moreover, without such bonding activities, their relationships with their offspring might suffer in all kinds of ways. This in turn might lead them to becoming deeply confused or even depressed.⁶ In this way, HP might be worse for these predators than PKP would be.

4. Effects on Humans

Turn now to the effects on humans. Is it really true that HP would be much better for humans than PKP would? There is reason to doubt this. This is again due to the identity-affecting nature of large policy decisions. If we carried out either HP or PKP, most humans would quickly find out about it. This change in our lives would change, if only slightly, the times at which we reproduce and so the identities of our future children. Future humans, then, even if they were without the pleasures of beholding and interacting with predators, would not have been made any worse off *than they (these humans) would otherwise have been* (since these particular individuals would *not* otherwise have been).

What about *existing* humans (i.e. those who exist at the time that HP or PKP is carried out)? Wouldn't they be far less harmed by HP than by PKP, given that if HP were carried out, these humans would at least get to continue to behold and interact with predators for the duration of these predators' natural lives and then get to behold and interact with their herbivorised offspring?

I'm not so sure. If we carried out PKP, nature would still be teeming with many species of beautiful and fascinating herbivores—more than enough to greatly enrich our lives.⁷ Moreover, without predators, we might come to take a greater interest in herbivores that have played second fiddle to some fiercer animals. Also, new species of herbivores might emerge without predators there to immediately cut them down.

In any case, most of the benefits humans receive from the existence of predators come, not from encountering them in person, but from reading about them, studying them, watching them in nature documentaries, and making up and telling stories about them. All these benefits could remain if we carried out PKP. We could keep a detailed scientific record of predators. And there would be no need to erase, say, the

Attenborough programs. Indeed, with VR technology, we would likely be able to retain the ability to experience at first hand what it is like to be in close proximity to these animals. Equally, predators could remain in our art and literature. Dinosaurs no longer exist, but we still benefit from our records of them. Dragons *never* existed, but it doesn't follow that they cannot figure in our stories. Do we really need there to *be* ferocious beasts in order for us to dream up and tell stories to each other about them?

It might be objected that all this ignores the pleasures of encountering predators in the wild. Holmes Rolston III, for example, speaks of 'tingling in awe' at the sight of predators such as wolves.⁸ Isn't it exciting just to know that there are predators in our midst? If we carried out PKP, our trips to the wilderness—say, to national parks—might be greatly diminished.

Perhaps some of us would suffer a loss here. But many of us would benefit greatly by coming to know that the wilderness around us is no longer home to so much horror and suffering. For many of us, it would be far more enjoyable, on balance, to hike through Yellowstone knowing that the woods around us were not a bloodbath of suffering, but a place where animals were cohabiting peacefully and flourishing together.

Other worries remain. Could the bald eagle remain as the emblem of the United States or the lion as the symbol of the United Kingdom? I don't see why not. But it might set a better example to our children if we came to lionise animals known not for their 'supreme power and authority'⁹ or lofty positions in the food chain, but for more admirable traits like industriousness, intelligence, and perseverance.

A final point: It might be possible one day to carry out PKP while *bringing into existence new, herbivorised versions of predators or perhaps new kinds of herbivores of our own invention*.¹⁰ In this case, there might be no way in which HP would be better for humans than PKP would be.

5. Summing Up

We can sum up the foregoing as follows:

- (1) PKP would immediately save all existing prey from the threat of predation, whereas HP would benefit many fewer prey (only (a) some who have already been conceived when HP is carried out, (b) some whose time of conception would not change as a result of HP, and (c) existing prey who would live long enough to experience reduced predation).
- (2) While PKP would harm predators by shortening their lives, HP would deprive them of many valuable pleasures, damage their relationships with their offspring, and possibly induce depression.
- (3) PKP would change the identities of future humans and so not deprive them of benefits of beholding or interacting with prey. And while it is true that PKP would deprive some existing humans of benefits of encountering predators, many humans would benefit by coming to know that the wilderness was no longer a bloodbath.

In light of these points, it is plausible that PKP is preferable to HP.

6. Could PKP Itself Be Justifiable?

Suppose what I've had to say so far is right. Could PKP itself one day be justifiable (compared with doing nothing)?

It is vital to note that interventions in nature can have unforeseen and often disastrous consequences. If we painlessly killed predators, but did nothing else, this would result in overpopulation of various prey, which would be bad for many of these prey, not to mention other animals who rely on the vegetation that would disappear if these prey exploded in numbers. This could be prevented by sterilising some of these prey. But this in turn would likely have some bad effects on ecosystems. One thing is for sure: we should not consider carrying out PKP unless we were *extremely* confident, or certain, that its effects on ecosystems could be adequately controlled. It is possible that, in practice, we could never have such confidence.¹¹ But in what follows, I will assume that we could.

With this big assumption in place, might PKP one day be justifiable? Here, it seems to me, is a powerful argument in favour of this claim:

PKP could be justifiable given its massive benefits to prey. While it has costs for predators, *its benefits to prey far outweigh these*. Not only is a painless death less bad for an animal than years of anxiety and a nightmarish death in the jaws of a predator, but for every predator killed, many prey would be saved.

I want now to consider a number of objections to this argument.

The first objection is that while PKP benefits prey in one respect, it harms them in another, so much so that it is unclear whether its *net* benefits to prey outweigh its harms to predators. In what respect might PKP harm prey? It might be suggested that it would do so by causing them to 'devolve' over time—i.e. lose their intelligence or refined sensory capacities they have evolved over thousands of years in response to the threat of predation. With this threat removed, there would be no selective pressure for these highly valuable traits to remain in these species.

But once again considerations of identity show this to be false. Future prey, even if their species have reduced capacities as a result of PKP, would have different identities to the prey that would have existed had PKP not been carried out, and so they could not plausibly count as harmed by PKP.

Still, there does seem to be a way in which PKP might harm some prey. Consider again the capacities prey have evolved in response to the threat of predation. These capacities include not only intelligence and refined senses, but also capacities to flee, fight, and so on. If PKP were carried out, some of these capacities would go unused—some prey would have much less opportunity to exercise them. This might cause these prey to feel, at certain times, pent-up, jittery, or confused. Furthermore, many prey have evolved dispositions to be concerned about (the threat posed to them by) predators, to be wary of or watchful for them, to organise their lives around them, etc. Without predators, some prey might come to feel unfulfilled or even depressed, as if their lives had become less meaningful, as if they had been built not for this world but for some other.¹²

But while there is a real risk of harm here, it seems small compared with the benefits to prey of no longer having to face predators. For this reason, I believe this objection fails. PKP would be on balance hugely good for prey.

The second objection I want to consider is that even though the benefits to prey might far exceed the costs to predators, the costs to predators here include death, one of the greatest harms one can inflict on a being. We cannot justify killing some beings even to save the lives of others.

But it is not merely that we would be saving the lives of these prey, we would be doing so by *preventing these predators themselves from killing them*. As Tyler Cowen writes in ‘Policing Nature’,

We do not hesitate to stop a human killer of other humans, even if we must kill him in the process. . . . Stopping a human killer does not rest on whether or not we consider the killer to be a ‘moral agent,’ mentally retarded, totally insane, or a vampire, locked in inevitable struggle with human beings. The argument for policing nature is simply the same argument that we use to stop the human killer in these alternative contexts. Carnivorous animals are aggressing against other animals and in principle they are no different from the insane human killer.¹³

Now, it might be objected that there is a morally relevant difference here. When the police (legitimately) preemptively kill a mentally ill assailant, this is a single isolated action. By contrast, PKP involves a policy of *widespread preemptive killings*. This difference is significant.

But consider the following, more clearly analogous case:

Brainwashed. A very large group of humans, selected at random, has been brainwashed by an evil scientist to gradually, over time, seek out and kill members of some other group of humans. These brainwashed humans are expert at doing so and cannot be ‘cured’ or deprogrammed. Moreover, to discourage the authorities from apprehending and imprisoning these humans, the scientist has programmed these humans to feel intense pain on being locked up or prevented from carrying out the killings.

Suppose we could immediately and painlessly kill all these brainwashed humans, in order to prevent them from continuing to carry out the killings they have been programmed to perform, and in this way save the lives of all their future victims (and suppose there is no alternative—if we don’t intervene to do this, then the brainwashed humans *will* carry out many more killings). Should we intervene? Here, it seems to me, the answer is still clearly ‘yes’, even though what we would be doing is carrying out a policy of widespread preemptive killings.

If you feel there is some morally relevant difference between the Brainwashed case and that of predation, in virtue of which only the former is justified, it might be that you are thinking that the loss of all predators on this planet would be a huge loss to *humanity*. But remember my arguments from Section 4. Humanity’s loss from the loss of all predators would be far smaller than might be imagined.

An alternative source of resistance might be a sense that even if the loss of all predators would be a relatively small loss to humanity, still *the act of carrying it out* could greatly harm us, in a number of different ways. First, it might harm those humans who had to carry it out—say, by traumatising them or desensitising them to suffering. Second, if it were carried out flippantly or without due solemnity or respect for predators, then it could contribute to some people’s having a shallow or superficial view of

animals, or a troubling attitude toward nature. Third, it might lead, via a slippery slope, to a more cavalier attitude toward killing in general, which could have disastrous effects. Fourth, and finally, the loss of these creatures (especially at our own hands) might just be extremely *sad* to contemplate. Such feelings of sadness would be bad for us indeed.

These are significant worries. But there might be ways of acceptably mitigating these harmful effects on humanity. In any case, they must be taken into account if ever we were in a position to contemplate carrying out PKP. They might ultimately prove too great.

7. Conclusion

It is important to emphasise the provisional nature of my conclusions in this article. My arguments for these conclusions have relied on a number of contentious claims, some analytical,¹⁴ others empirical.¹⁵

I want to end by asking you to consider how predators themselves might feel about their lives were they somehow to come to understand the true nature of the harms they inflict on prey. Many of these predators, I suspect, would feel deeply sad, or even horrified, at what they are involved in—indeed, at what they *are*. I could even imagine them forgiving or excusing us for painlessly killing them. If *my* existence depended on my stalking, tearing apart, and eating the flesh of many other beings, beings whose lives involved or produced no less value than my own, I, at least, would not want to keep on living.

Ben Bramble, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, USA; Australian National University, Canberra, ACT, Australia. b.e.bramble@gmail.com

NOTES

- Christine Korsgaard evocatively describes some of these pains in the following: ‘Predation... is the cause of great suffering. Whatever the adults may have assured you when you were a child, it is not always a quick bite to the neck followed immediately by death or a merciful unconsciousness due to shock. Bears and wolves will sometimes start eating an animal who is still alive and conscious. Hyenas disembowel their living prey. Pythons squeeze their prey to death. Shrews paralyze their prey with venom, so that they can eat them alive and fresh at their leisure. Orcas will chase mother whales with calves until the mother collapses from exhaustion, so that she can no longer protect her calf, whose tongue they like to eat. Chimpanzees tear live monkeys and bushbabies apart. Crocodiles dismember their prey while rotating them underwater in a “death roll.” Tapeworms starve their hosts to death.’ *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals* (Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 173.
- For recent relevant literature, see Jeff McMahan, ‘The moral problem of predation’, in Andrew Chignell, Terence Cuneo, and Matthew C. Halteman (eds.), *Philosophy Comes to Dinner* (New York: Routledge, 2016), Steve Sapontzis, *Morals, Reason, and Animals* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987); Oscar Horta, ‘The ethics of the ecology of fear against the nonspeciesist paradigm: a shift in the aims of intervention in nature’, *Between the Species* 13 (10) (2010):163–187; Brian Tomasik, ‘The importance of wild animal suffering’, *Relations*, 3 (2015): 133–152; Kyle Johannsen, ‘Animal rights and the problem of r-strategists’, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 20(2) (2017): 333–345; David Pearce, ‘Reprogramming predators.’ Published Online. <https://www.hedweb.com/abolitionistproject/reprogramming-predators.html>. (2009) Last updated 2015. Accessed January 25, 2019; Tyler Cowen, ‘Policing nature’, *Environmental*

- Ethics*, 25 (2003): 169–182; Clare Palmer, ‘What (if anything) do we owe wild animals?’, *Between the Species* 13 (1) (2013).
- 3 A related option would be to sterilise predators out of existence. I won’t consider this option here, as it would be even worse for predators than PKP would be. Sterilising predators out of existence would cause many of them to feel unbearable pains—pains, for example, of being unable to reproduce and then of watching their species slowly die out.
 - 4 For discussion, see especially McMahan (2016).
 - 5 I am here assuming a *comparativist* account of benefiting, on which to be benefited is to be made better off in some respect than one otherwise would have been. This, to be sure, is a controversial assumption. For useful discussion, see Ben Bradley, ‘Doing Away With Harm’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 85 (2) (2012): 390–412. For further discussion of the relevance of the identity-affecting nature of our actions for what we have reason to do, see the literature on the *nonidentity problem*. The classic work here is Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984). For an excellent recent survey, see Melinda Roberts, ‘The Nonidentity Problem’, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). A possible objection to my argument in this section is that even if HP does not benefit *individual* future prey (i.e. prey understood in a *de re* sense), it nonetheless benefits ‘future prey’ understood *de dicto* rather than *de re*. For an analogous move in the literature on the nonidentity problem, see Caspar Hare, ‘Voices from another world: must we respect the interests of people who do not, and will never, exist?’, *Ethics*, 117 (2007): 498–523. A different objection to my argument is that even if there is no sense in which HP benefits future prey, HP nonetheless *reduces the amount of harm in the world*. It seems doubtful to me, however, that benefiting beings *de dicto*, or reducing the amount of harm in the world, has value or provides normative reasons for action in the absence of any beings being benefited *de re*. For the sake of brevity, I will not further explore these important issues here.
 - 6 These are empirical claims that await confirmation by science. Moreover, they are likely to be true only of the more cognitively sophisticated predators.
 - 7 A vital question here is which animals count as predators for the purposes of this argument? Do insect-eating birds count? This should depend on the mental lives of *insects*. If insects aren’t capable of lives worth living, there would be no reason to prevent birds eating them. For what it’s worth, I’m not here thinking of insect-eating birds as predators in the relevant sense.
 - 8 Holmes Rolston III, *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), p. 129.
 - 9 William Barton, quoted here: https://blogs.loc.gov/inside_adams/2019/06/the-bald-eagle-creature-of-nature-and-an-american-symbol/.
 - 10 Or bringing back extinct herbivores, along the lines proposed by, among others, George Monbiot. See George Monbiot, *Feral* (Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 2013).
 - 11 In an important recent article, Nicholas Delon and Duncan Purves argue that ‘the indeterministic nature of ecosystems leaves us, at present and for the foreseeable future, with no reason to believe that large scale interventions in the wild would reduce, rather than exacerbate, suffering.’ (Nicholas Delon and Duncan Purves, ‘Wild animal suffering is intractable’, *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 31: 239–60.) Nonetheless, as McMahan says, ‘Since we can’t be certain that we’ll never be able to reduce or eliminate predation without disastrous side effects, it’s important to think in advance about how we might wisely employ a more refined and discriminating power of intervention if we were ever to acquire it’. (Jeff McMahan, ‘Predators: A response’, *The New York Times* (2010, September 28).) McMahan notes that even today we face choices about whether to intervene in nature to save various predatory species from extinction, such as the Siberian tiger. In the case of this tiger, McMahan says, ‘Any ecological disruption occasioned by their dwindling numbers has largely already occurred or is already occurring. If their number in the wild declines from several hundred to zero, the impact of their disappearance on the ecology of the region will be almost negligible.’ Tyler Cowen makes a similar point: ‘Many human policies affect carnivorous mammals, whether we like it or not. So we inevitably perform implicit police actions in one form or another, and must then weigh the costs and benefits of various interventionist alternatives. We clear land for economic development, drive coyotes off the land, and help or harm many other carnivores. We must in any case decide whether the restriction (and assistance) of carnivorous activity should count as a benefit or a cost of a given policy’. (Cowen (2003): 173)
 - 12 These, again, are empirical claims that await scientific confirmation. Note also that they are unlikely to apply to all species whose members are victims of predation.

- 13 See Cowen (2013), p. 176. For related literature on the permissibility of killing a nonresponsible threat in self-defense, see Jeff McMahan, 'Self-defense and the problem of the innocent attacker', *Ethics*, 104(2) (1994): 252–290, Judith Thomson, 'Self-defense', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 20(4) (1991): 283–310, and Michael Otsuka, 'Killing the innocent in self-defense', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 23(1) (1994): 74–94.
- 14 For example, comparativism about benefiting.
- 15 For example, my claim that HP might result in some existing predators becoming confused or depressed.