

## **Positive Duties to Wild Animals: Introduction**

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Though we've always known that the wild is a nasty place where predators lethally attack prey, only recently have most animal ethicists come to realize that most wild animals fail to flourish. In fact, what we know about wild animal reproduction suggests that the majority of sentient beings born into the world may not even live lives worth living. After all, only some wild animals (K-Strategists) protect their genes by devoting considerable energy to each of their offspring. Many animals protect their genes by instead producing large numbers of offspring. This evolutionary reproductive strategy, normally referred to as the 'r-Strategy' (MacArthur and Wilson, 1967; and Pianka, 1970), is used by many lizards, amphibians, fish and small mammals. Since r-Strategists' offspring individually receive little energy and are too numerous for ecosystems to support, the majority of those offspring end up dying from disease, starvation, injury, exposure or predation, shortly after birth.

The r-Strategy is not the only source of suffering in nature. This seems obvious enough when we note that other causes, such as predation or food scarcity, must be present in order for r-Strategists' young to die prematurely, but it's also true that r-Strategist infants aren't the only wild animals who experience a low level of welfare. Most (sentient) K-Strategist animals and r-Strategist adults endure a considerable amount of suffering from a variety of sources. Consider the effects of predation. In addition to the painful deaths caused by predation, the threat of predation causes hunger by preventing prey animals from foraging in risky areas (McNamara and Houston, 1987; Anholt and Werner, 1995), it's a source of psychological stress for prey animals (Dwyer, 2004; Creel et al., 2007), and predation is a source of non-fatal injury for those who manage to escape predator attacks.

It's not unreasonable for one to initially respond to the above with a sense of depressed resignation, but a growing number of ethicists believe that we both can and should intervene.

Some interventions, specifically large-scale ones, will require research before they can be conducted safely and effectively, but the sheer scale of wild animal suffering means we have strong moral reasons to fund that research. According to a recent estimate, the world's population of wild, terrestrial vertebrates is about one trillion, give or take a 0, and the number of wild marine vertebrates is even larger (Tomasik, 2019). As large as the above estimate is, though, we should keep in mind that it specifically represents the total number of (wild, terrestrial) vertebrates alive at any given moment. As a result, it doesn't include the number of vertebrates who, over a period of time, e.g., 10 years, were born and then died shortly afterwards. Were we to include the many r-Strategist vertebrates who die a painful death only shortly after being born, our population number would be far higher than one trillion.

Though it seems 'natural' to think of intervention in the wild as a matter of humanitarian assistance (McMahan, 2010, 2015; Paez, 2015; Horta, 2017; Johannsen, 2020, 2021; Duclos, 2022; Faria, 2023), a number of different understandings have emerged in recent years. For example, a number of writers argue that cosmopolitan distributive justice militates in favor of intervention (Faria, 2014; Horta, 2016; Cochrane, 2018). After all, the core intuition driving cosmopolitanism is that the circumstances of one's birth, including one's nationality, are morally arbitrary. Accordingly, cosmopolitans maintain that it's unfair when one's nationality determines one's life prospects. But if we judge it unfair for the circumstances of birth to determine one's life prospects, doesn't that judgment include species membership, too? The species one happens to be born into is just as circumstantial as the nation one's born in. And if inequalities traceable to species membership are unfair, then wild animals are in a tremendously unfair situation. On average, wild animals are far worse off than human beings. In light of this inequality, do we not have reasons of distributive justice to intervene?

In addition, a number of authors have argued that we owe rectification to wild animals for anthropogenic harms (Pepper, 2019; Palmer, 2021; Sebo, 2021, 2022). Clare Palmer, for example, highlights various anthropogenic harms that she thinks ground duties of rectification, but among the most significant harms are those associated with anthropogenic climate change. In her words, “Changing precipitation patterns and intensity, rising temperatures, warming of the upper oceans, Arctic ice melt, sea level rise, heat waves, the shifting of habitat types, will all impact wild animal populations. While some populations will be able to take advantage of the changing conditions to expand and grow, others will be severely affected, including many already threatened and endangered species (Palmer, 2021, pp. 179-180).” Considering how pervasive the effects of climate change both are and will be, it seems that not only distributive, but also rectificatory justice, militates in favor of a considerable level of intervention in the wild. Forms of rectificatory intervention she considers are rescue and rehabilitation, habitat restoration, and assisted migration (Palmer, 2021, pp. 185-192).<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this special issue is to further develop the interventionist literature by bringing together authors who agree that we owe significant positive duties to wild animals, but who use different theoretical frameworks, or who disagree about the details, e.g., about the reasons that ground our positive obligations to wild animals, about how those positive obligations should be classified, about the content of our positive obligations, about the means we should use to fulfill our positive obligations, etc. Indeed, some of the papers in this collection use frameworks that have never previously been used to ground our positive duties to wild animals.

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the content in the above paragraphs was taken from Johannsen, 2021.

In “Wild Animal Ethics: A Freedom-based Approach”, Eze Paez claims that, contrary to what some have argued (Donaldson and Kymlicka, 2011), respect for wild animals’ freedom is not in tension with intervening to help wild animals. Quite the opposite: respect for wild animals’ freedom actually entails that we have an enforceable, political duty to provide them with assistance. According to Paez, there are two main dimensions, or components, of freedom. The first - security - is a matter of being secure against control-undermining interference. The second - richness - is a matter of how rich one’s choice situations are, i.e., the number and quality of options one has to choose from. At present, most wild animals’ options are quite limited: they can choose to fight or flee; to look for food and risk predation, or to hide and risk starvation; etc. In light of the limitations on wild animals’ options, Paez argues that respect for their freedom requires that we intervene to enrich their choice situations.

In “Vulnerability and the Ethics of Environmental Enhancement”, Catia Faria analyzes intervention through the lens of Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds’s (2014) work on vulnerability. Though some authors have rightly suggested that wild animals are vulnerable to harms caused by human beings, such as the harms associated with anthropogenic climate change (Palmer, 2021), Faria argues that wild animals are vulnerable to much more than just us. She notes that most wild animals die prematurely from natural causes, so even animals who live within well-functioning ecosystems are in a highly vulnerable situation. In other words, many wild animals within even well-functioning ecosystems are occurrently vulnerable – they’re presently unable to meet their basic needs. What’s more, the fact that, for the most part, we aren’t currently bothering to assist wild animals, means that they’re dispositionally vulnerable, too, i.e., that even those wild animals who are able to satisfy their needs are at high risk of being unable to do so in the future. Faria concludes that since we have a duty to assist vulnerable populations, we also have a duty to

assist wild animals. Of particular interest to Faria are interventions that assist sentient wild animals by modifying their environment, rather than by modifying sentient wild animals themselves.

In “Solidarity with Wild Animals”, Mara-Daria Cojocaru and Alasdair Cochrane approach wild animal ethics through the lens of Sally Scholz’s work on solidarity (Scholz, 2008). Though it seems clear enough (upon reflection) that solidarity obtains between us and domesticated animals, the possibility that it obtains between us and wild animals has thus far been largely unexplored. According to Cojocaru and Cochrane, there are both descriptive and normative senses of solidarity that obtain between us and wild animals. Descriptively speaking, it’s true that, as a matter of fact, we have social relationships with many wild animals, and that we feel a sense of community with those animals. It’s also true that wild animals are oppressed in various ways, whether it be in circuses and zoos, or via the harmful effects of anthropogenic climate change. Those who seek to liberate wild animals from circuses and zoos, or to rehabilitate animals harmed by the effects of climate change, are responding to a perfectly appropriate, normative conviction. Finally, it’s true that the sort of institutions we associate with the welfare state extend in certain (very limited) ways to wild animals, e.g., via public health initiatives like the One Health initiative, or via publicly funded conservation initiatives. In light of the fact that social relationships already exist between human beings and wild animals, and that some of the vulnerabilities wild animals possess are caused by us, Cojocaru and Cochrane argue that we have good reason to further develop and extend the institutional support we provide them (to further extend civic solidarity).

The collection’s remaining papers concern practical and theoretical questions that emerge when we begin to think seriously about our positive duties to wild animals. Perhaps the most

immediate practical question is: Which interventions will effectively improve wild animals' welfare? In "Reducing Wild Animal Suffering Effectively: Why Impracticability and Normative Objections Fail Against the Most Promising Ways of Helping Wild Animals", Oscar Horta and Dayrón Terán discuss a series of intervention strategies that they think are worthy of further development. Of particular interest are three areas of research that scientists consider to be especially promising (Animal Ethics, 2020): wild animal vaccination programs, interventions that aim to assist wild animals affected by extreme weather events, and interventions that aim to assist wild animals who live in urban and suburban environments. In addition, the authors claim that contraception programs, and incorporating wild animal welfare into conservation-related policies and initiatives, are promising as well. Though there are various objections to both the feasibility and desirability of assisting wild animals, Horta and Terán argue that these objections are ineffective against the above strategies for improving wild animal welfare.

In "Welcoming, Wild Animals, and Obligations to Assist", Josh Milburn investigates the issue of what we owe to wild animals who we've welcomed into our spaces, such as pigeons who are fed in urban spaces, or farmland animals who have become the focus of conservation efforts. Though Milburn is skeptical that we have a general duty to assist wild animals, he does think that we sometimes owe special duties of assistance to wild animals in cases where we've formed morally significant relationships with them. One such relationship, he notes, is the relationship we form with animals who we welcome into our spaces, and who in turn become dependent upon the resources we've made available. Milburn argues that an upshot of this relationship is that we have at least a *prima facie* reason to oppose the rewilding of some human spaces. For example, it may be the case that increased rates of veganism, and the development of vertical agriculture, will make some existing farmland unnecessary to us. If this happens, we

should keep in mind that the land may still be needed by the wild animals who live on it and who, if they were deliberately encouraged, we have a morally significant relationship with. Perhaps at least some human spaces should be ‘conserved’ for the sake of the wild animals we’ve invited into them, since those spaces have effectively become their habitat.

In “The Rebugnant Conclusion: Insects, Microbes, Aggregation, and Fanaticism”, Jeff Sebo applies two (arguably problematic) implications of utilitarianism to the context of wild animal population ethics. One is the well-known ‘Repugnant Conclusion’, i.e., the conclusion that we ought to increase the size of human populations, even when doing so decreases quality of life, because increasing the size of populations increases aggregate welfare (Parfit, 1984, pp. 381-390). Sebo notes that a similar ‘*Rebugnant Conclusion*’ applies to wild animals: given the choice between a small number of large animals who each possess a high amount of welfare, and a much larger numbers of small animals who each possess a low (but still net positive) amount of welfare, it seems that we should prefer the latter, since such populations have higher aggregate welfare. The second sort of implication Sebo discusses is associated with a thought experiment called ‘Pascal’s Mugging’ (Bostrom, 2009). The issue here is that maximizing expected value seems to require taking courses of action that, if successful, would yield astronomically large gains, even when the chances of success are astronomically low. Sebo notes that a similar ‘Pascal’s *Bugging*’ applies to wild animals: maximizing expected value seems to require prioritizing the interests of astronomically large populations (such as populations of microbes), even if those populations’ members have an incredibly low chance of being sentient, and even if each individual would possess an incredibly low capacity for welfare if they were sentient. Though Sebo argues that the *Rebugnant Conclusion* and Pascal’s *Bugging* should be accepted in theory, he also argues that these conclusions may be avoidable in practice.



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