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LETTER TO THE EDITOR . . .

Ethical Considerations in Research on Wildlife Diseases

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There is probably no quicker way to polarize wildlife biologists than to bring up the issue of animal rights. This question of our responsibilities (or lack of them) in our treatment of animals is increasingly being addressed by the public, often in confrontive and even belligerent ways. Clearly these issues are felt deeply by members of society. As professionals, we believe that it is our responsibility, as well as in our interest, to deal directly and openly with these issues.

There are a variety of attitudes in our western society toward wildlife and their use. It seems that the majority of ideas broadly fall into three major positions.

The first position is that ethics is strictly an intrahuman phenomenon and that humans have no moral responsibility toward other creatures. This has sometimes been called ethical humanism (Callicott, 1980, Env. Ethics 2: 311–338). Often implicit in this first position is what might be called the "Reciprocity Requirement"; this says that people are obligated to respect the interests of others because the others are also willing to respect their interests. Thus, ethical consideration extends only to those able to play by the rules—that is to understand and participate in moral choices.

For example, Immanuel Kant, the influential eighteenth century German philosopher, argued that only humans deserved moral consideration because only humans were fully rational, and thus only humans could give themselves the moral law—the Categorical Imperative. Since other animals lacked rationality, they were excluded from moral concern.

More recent arguments from this position have come from a variety of writers (Guthrie, 1967, Perspec. Biol. Med. 11: 52–62; Frey, 1980, Interests and Rights: The Case Against the Animals, Clarendon Press, Oxford, England, 176 pp.) who attack the extension of moral concern to nonhumans on the basis of both logic and feasibility. One argument based on logical inconsistency is that animals such as predators and pests commonly do destructive things to each other and to humans. Yet, we don't assign moral values to their behavior. But when we make moral judgments concerning our treatment of the same animals, we in fact give them status as moral beings. Thus these animals illogically are simultaneously outside of, and within, the arena of moral concern. The further illogic of extending moral concern to animals is argued through "Schweitzer's Dilemma": to protect the lives of predators is to increase the suffering and death they cause to other creatures.

The infeasibility of extending moral consideration to animals has been argued from at least three standpoints. First, we cannot adequately deal with all the problems of human variation such as moral concerns associated with our treatment of senile people, infants, terminally ill, emotionally disturbed people, etc. It would be far more difficult to deal with all of the variations found between the many species, let alone the variation within any one species.

Further, where does one draw the line

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for including animals within moral consideration? Are all organisms included, even bacteria and algae? This would practically paralyze human behavior. Are only the phylogenetically "higher" creatures considered? But what is higher: hybrid wheat? bumble bees? inbred pets? Any line drawn to include or exclude organisms would seem, at best, quite arbitrary, and could not be easily defended. Finally, the infeasibility of extending moral consideration to nonhumans is argued from the standpoint that moral codes change with time. We can't even effectively keep up with changes regarding humans. How much more difficult it would be with a far more complex code encompassing nonhumans.

A second, contrasting position is that humans do have responsibilities toward other animals (Rollin, 1981, Animal Rights and Human Morality, Prometheus Books, Buffalo, New York, 182 pp.; Regan, 1982, All that Dwelt Therein, Univ. Calif. Press, Berkeley, California, 259 pp.; Singer, 1975, Animal Liberation, Random House, New York, 301 pp.). This position, which has been called humane moralism (Callicott, 1980, op. cit.), is often argued from the following standpoints. First, the distinction between humans and nonhumans is, at best, vague. There are no characteristics found among humans that are not found also to some degree among other animals (rationality, self-awareness, intelligence, etc.), and thus it is not justified to draw hard and fast lines such that *all* humans have moral value, and *no* nonhumans have moral value, as argued by ethical humanists.

Moreover, granting that clearly there are general differences between humans and other animals, it is argued that these differences are not morally relevant to the question of who deserves moral concern, because these differences are not related to the criteria normally used to evaluate the ethical nature of our actions, such as their impact on the pain, freedom of action, pleasure, etc., of the recipient. Rather, it is argued that nonhumans have a definite interest in not dying or suffering, and in maximizing their genetic fitness by living out their lives according to their natures. It is these interests that can and must be considered in evaluating the right or wrong of human behavior toward them. It is also the possession and expression of these interests that can serve as valuable bases to separate the animals most benefitting from moral consideration, from other animals, plants, microorganisms, etc.

Philosophers of this second position also disagree with the "Reciprocity Requirement." They argue that this Requirement confuses the conditions necessary for having moral obligations with the conditions necessary for being the beneficiary of moral concern. Only beings that can make moral choices have moral obligations. Thus most humans would be expected to have moral obligations, while nonhumans would not. But this is quite different from the criteria necessary to be the beneficiary of moral consideration. To be a beneficiary, what is required is having interests or desires that can be met or frustrated.

These philosophers also point out that arguments of infeasibility for the inclusion of nonhumans into moral consideration are the same that frequently have been offered in response to other proposals for moral reform, such as the inclusion of children, women, Blacks and other minorities into the circle of moral concern. Despite the differences between humans and nonhumans that might affect our respective treatment of them, it remains true that feasibility or "convenience" alone has never been a good criterion for evaluating right and wrong.

While there are many who argue that humans ought to give consideration to animals, there has been disagreement on how far that consideration extends. Some philosophers, such as Albert Schweitzer (1947:

244, Civilization and Ethics, A. & C. Black, London, England, 284 pp.), have argued that human responsibility to other living things is absolute—the truly ethical person has reverence for *all* life. Others, however, have limited human moral responsibility to only some creatures, based on such criteria as the organism's sentience (the capacity to feel pleasure and pain) (Bentham, 1789, The Principles of Morals and Legislation, Russell & Russell, New York, 580 pp.; Singer, 1975, op. cit.; Singer, 1979, Practical Ethics, Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge, England, 233 pp.), self-consciousness (Watson, 1979, Env. Ethics 1: 99–129), or other, often human-centered values.

One major approach for determining which animals should be included in our moral consideration, and how their interests should be ranked, is adapted from the Aristotelian idea of *telos*. Each animal has a nature, a function, a set of purposes and perspectives intrinsic to it, evolutionarily based that make up its *telos* (Rollin, 1981, op. cit.). Its life consists of a struggle to live out this *telos*. It is argued that the *telos* of each individual has intrinsic value and can be used as the basis of respect for the nonhuman world by allowing us to evaluate the right or wrong of human behavior (Rollin, 1981, op. cit.; Rodman, 1983, *In* Ethics and the Environment, Scherer and Attig (eds.), Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, pp. 82–92).Those things which permit an animal to live out its *telos* are good, whereas those which prevent it are not.

The third position concerning human obligations agrees with the second in maintaining that humans have responsibilities to nonhumans, but expands these responsibilities primarily to communities and ecosystems. The best known spokesman for this position is Aldo Leopold (1966, A Sand County Almanac, Ballantine Books, New York, 295 pp.) who introduced the notion of the Land Ethic:

> A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise. (Leopold, 1966: 262, op. cit.)

In the past, most philosophers have assessed human responsibility toward only individual animals. Leopold argued that human responsibility must be directed toward whole communities and ecosystems—the Land. This ethic also included plants and even the inanimate objects that make up the land. Leopold did not object to the use of the plants and animals of the land for food, hunting, research, etc., but affirmed their right to a continued existence, including in a natural state. This systems (or holistic) view also removed the Schweitzerian Dilemma noted by many.

Certainly Leopold's ethic still is confronted with problems. For example, he never gave a clear philosophical basis for his assertion of human responsibility to the land. He also left few practical guidelines on implementing his philosophy, such as for evaluating biotic systems, or in resolving conflicting values within or between these communities. But he offered an insightful and valuable basis from which to address problems of our moral obligations to nonhumans. And he also used features inherent to the biotic communities (i.e., their *telos*, as measured by such things as stability, complexity, integrity, soil fertility, etc.) to judge our impact on the land. Most wildlife biologists probably share many of the values in Leopold's ethic. And we propose that Leopold's concern for the health of communities and ecosystems have the prime consideration when assessing human responsibilities to other living things.

It is important to note that Leopold also expressed appreciation for individual creatures:

> In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the

> land community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow members, and also respect for the community as such. (Leopold, 1966: 240, op. cit.)

Thus his position includes some overlap with the second philosphical position we presented. We too believe that the *telos* of individual animals should be acknowledged, and that we approach them as subjects rather than objects, as beings deserving moral consideration. Therefore, we further propose that where it does not conflict with community and ecosystem values, individual animals would have a right to life and a right to the kind of life their nature (*telos*) dictates.

Thus we believe that use of the concept of *telos* is both scientifically based and morally sensitive. And it can be applied at the level of both the ecosystem and the individual.

How might these ideas affect research in the area of wildlife diseases? Certainly research has been, and will continue to be, vital for sound resource management. We humans have developed a long litany of mistakes and even idiocies in our relationship to wildlife and the environment as a whole. Research is vital for acquiring information necessary to understand and intelligently function in our environment, to prevent further abuses in our technological age, and to solve problems already here. Understanding the role of diseases in wildlife populations is an integral part of this effort. Further, wildlife and their diseases play an important role in our understanding of human and veterinary health problems.

However, we propose a more critical evaluation of our use of animals by means of two general principles. One is that the information or benefits of the research should outweigh the negative aspects, as measured by both the effects on the biotic communities, and the suffering or death of individual animals. Simply put: Is the hypothesis worth testing? Value judgments such a these can be difficult to make. Yet most of our management decisions already force us to compare highly diverse criteria. What a combination of biological and sociological values come into play for the simple question of whether to hold an elk hunt. While comparing these sorts of diverse values is not always easy, all of us do this kind of evaluation regularly using widely accepted and traditional principles of fairness and consideration that help us deal with diverse values. We believe it is the responsibility of each researcher to determine whether a proposed research study merits the effects it will have on the environment and its inhabitants.

Some suggestions may help implement this first principle. Most are no more than good research techniques.

1. First, define hypotheses clearly, and evaluate the materials and methods in light of the goals. General surveys, particularly those involving animal "collections" ought to be critically evaluated to determine that questions of significance are being asked, and will be answered, by the study. Casual curiosity is generally a poor basis for implementing a project that will have an impact on a community and its members.
2. Clearly define the sample sizes and confidence limits needed to adequately answer the study objectives. Will a sample size of 300 give three times as much information as a sample of 100? Or even 30? There are some simple statistical techniques available to estimate sample sizes required for various confidence limits, based on small preliminary samples.
3. Peer review. This is rarely a problem for funded research. It is commonly a problem for nonfunded research. Critical review of research objectives and

methods is often least done at the level where it would have its greatest impact. An example would be students, particularly undergraduates, who often conduct research for course work, who have a lot of enthusiasm for research, but to whom often little time is devoted in a constructive, critical evaluation of their objectives. Peer review, at any level, is needed *before* the actual work begins.

4. Finally, are there alternatives to animal collections involving less impact on a community or its members?
   a. Hunter check stations, as well as animals collected by government and private trappers are all sources that are greatly underutilized, and could be a means to reduce animal collections.
   b. Joint studies using the same (presumably dead) animals is another alternative to reduce our impact on a community.
   c. Computer modelling has often been suggested as a solution. The use of computers, of course, provides no new data. It only allows a more sophisticated evaluation of data already collected. Yet, within these limits computer modelling may hold some promise.

The second general principle we offer is that research should be conducted in a way which maximizes each animal's potential for living its life according to its *telos*. This is particularly applicable to animals in laboratories or game pens. Within the logic of the research being done, certain considerations ought to be preserved, such as: (1) freedom from pain; (2) food and housing in a manner suitable to its *natural* life; (3) opportunity for exercise; and (4) companionship, if a social being.

Often it is primarily human convenience that determines the laboratory or game pen conditions of the research. Yet, letting convenience dictate conditions may serve neither the animals nor the integrity of the research results.

In summary, we propose that as concerned biologists, we accept Leopold's assertion that moral consideration should be extended to the environment, and that the primary level of ethical concern should be for the health of biotic communities and ecosystems. Within that framework, we further propose to recognize that the individual animals we use also have intrinsic value and that we are obligated to make responsible choices in our use of them in research.

Often the attitude of research biologists has been to relegate issues of an ethical nature to a "back burner" until we are confronted with them, and then assume a defensive posture. But if we biologists who spend our lives studying these living creatures cannot take leadership in assessing our relationships and responsibilities to them, then who can? The Wildlife Disease Association is a diverse group composed of wildlife biologists, with an appreciation of community ecology, as well as veterinarians with a great deal of understanding about individual animals. We believe that there are few groups better able to provide professional leadership on these ethical issues than the people in this association.

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