

For a common environmental ethic

Let's understand that species have both aesthetic and utilitarian values



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In general, when I tell people that I am an ecologist, I am invariably asked if I am a vegetarian. People are generally shocked to hear that I am not, and that not only do I eat domestic animals, I have no compunctions about consuming wild creatures as long as the harvest is sustainable. This is a lot less shocking than most people might imagine. In fact, a significant proportion of non-vegetarians do consume wild creatures: fish.

Clearly there is a disjunct here. There are those who are against the killing of whales because these magnificent animals face extinction, and there are those who are against such killings because they believe that humans should not kill animals. The former are called conservationists, the latter animal rights activists. Though the lines often blur because animal rights activists often use conservation arguments as part of their rhetoric (and sometimes vice versa), philosophers of science have argued that these two movements are based on very different principles.

The contrasts

There are several weaknesses with the animal rights approach to conservation. Firstly, recognising the right of every individual animal is neither practical nor feasible as a conservation approach. Secondly, it does not distinguish between domestic and wild species, between the endangered and non-endangered ones, or even between the common and rare ones. In contrast, conservation is concerned with species and their survival but with a very different purpose: the maintenance of genetic and ecological diversity.



Animal rights essentially oppose the utilisation of animals, thus negating reasons that a vast majority of people have for conserving animals. This culturally insensitive approach imposes a narrow version of the human relationship with animals on the rest of society. In India, the conservation of many animals is based on a strong cultural identification with a range of animals — from elephants to tigers and turtles. While most groups working for their conservation firmly believe that they have a scientific conservation agenda, their actions belie this. More often than not, indirect threats which pose the greatest long term threat to these populations are given scant attention, while direct killing receives the most press and action. Much of wild populations are resilient: tigers, for example, can breed like rabbits given the right conditions. As conservationists, one should be less concerned about poaching and seriously concerned about habitat loss, especially to large corporations. One should also be seriously concerned about the livelihoods of communities. Environmental and social justice are linked far more intricately than wildlife activists would currently care to accept.

Critically, animal rights philosophies or undercurrents lead to knee-jerk reactions to conservation issues, which prevent implementation of long-term solutions. For example, the sea turtle conservation movement in Orissa has focused around the incidental mortality of Olive Ridleys in fishing nets. The short-term stratagem of anti-trawling patrols and media blitzes has failed to reduce mortality, and polarised fishing communities and many turtle right activists. While ignoring the possibility of a negotiated settlement (which takes time), this approach has also ignored (at its peril and that of the turtles), the threat from impending development on the coast, which in the form of large ports and oil exploration, has just begun to bite.

Not well served

Thus, animal liberation and environmental conservation are served by very different approaches and actions. Animal rights, being by definition less concerned with human welfare, alienates at least some proportion of the public, and its association with biological conservation in media and in the minds of the public does not help the cause of the latter. While media attention to environmental issues does raise awareness, such attention can have both positive and negative impacts. In fact, misrepresenting an issue could lead to loss of credibility, which would affect the environmental movement as a whole.

As a compromise between the extreme positions of bio- and anthropocentrism, the philosopher Brian Norton suggested “weak anthropocentrism”, which stresses the cultural value of nature in human society, in addition to its utilitarian value. For example, shells can be appreciated both because they are beautiful and because they are useful. ■

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