

Chapter 26

Comment: Sharing Our World with Wild Animals



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26.1 Wild Animals in the Anthropocene

The contributions of the authors in this section address some of the ethical, societal, philosophical, and ecological challenges of the Anthropocene with respect to wild animals. As explained in the introduction to this volume, animal habitats are becoming increasingly fragmented, polluted and disrupted by human activities such as transport, urbanization, agriculture, and overfishing. Climate warming is one of the most threatening aspects of the Anthropocene, as climate zones are moving towards the poles and up mountain slopes. Wild species that depend on the conditions in these zones must follow in order to survive. However, many cannot follow fast enough, or are hindered by agricultural lands, cities, industries, or roads. Some habitats may even disappear. For example, Clare Palmer describes in her contribution the sad case of the polar bear, a species that is threatened by melting ice sheets in the Arctic.

By contrast, some other species are doing relatively well, as they are able to adapt and exploit the opportunities of climate change, or to benefit from conservation and restoration efforts. For example, the wolf is recolonizing areas in Europe in which it has not been seen for hundreds of years. Martin Drenthen describes in his contribution the re-entrance of the wolf in the Netherlands. The beaver and the gray and common seal are also successful species in this country, as are storks and cormorants. A recent report lists nearly 40 mammal and bird species whose European populations are increasing, in particular in Northwestern Europe, due to successful nature conservation measures in recent decades (Deinet et al. 2013).

As well as reappearing native species, we are also seeing the establishment of new species in human landscapes. Some have come on their own, such as the Western

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Great Egret and the wildcat in the Netherlands, whereas others have been introduced deliberately or accidentally, such as the musk rat, the Egyptian goose, and more recently the raccoon dog. As argued by Ned Hettinger in his contribution, species introduced by humans have a much greater chance of threatening endemic species and disrupting existing ecosystems.

The appearance, or reappearance, of new animals in our landscapes, whether it is the result of successful conservation and restoration, the introduction by humans, or a consequence of climate warming, may meet resistance among the general public. This is described by Mateusz Tokarski and Martin Drenthen in their contributions. For example, Dutch sheep farmers fear the wolf, water managers are concerned about beavers disrupting watercourses, and garden owners get upset because wild boars plow their flower and vegetable beds. It is not just large mammals that cause unrest. Not so long ago, Dutch newspapers reported on field mice that were damaging farmer's grazing fields, and we have known of the problems caused by geese grazing the nutrient-rich grasslands of those same farmers for many years.

Not only vertebrate species concern us. The dramatic decline of some insect populations may disrupt ecosystems (Sanchez-Bayo and Wyckhuys 2019), while other insect species flourish and even turn into threatening invasive species, such as the oak processionary caterpillars that cause a severe skin irritation and asthma (Pieters 2019). Even more serious is the emergence of mosquito-borne infectious diseases such as Zika, malaria and dengue in moderate climate zones as a result of climate warming (Ryan et al. 2019).

The decline and emergence of populations of wild species have always played a role in human history, but this seems to be much more dramatic in the Anthropocene, a period that, according to most authors, began during the industrial revolution of the eighteenth century and accelerated in the middle of the twentieth century (Steffen et al. 2011). Charles Foster, however, argues in his contribution that the Anthropocene started as early as the Upper Paleocene, with the massive but unnecessary killing of large animals in Australia and America by our ancestors. His view implies that the Anthropocene, seen as the result of the human inclination to kill and take as much as possible from the earth's resources, is a *condition humaine*.

Charles Foster is right to stress the huge and early impact of modern man on biodiversity and its role in the irreversible loss of megafauna. However, we are currently crossing planetary limits within which humanity and countless other living creatures can safely exist (Steffen et al. 2018). According to some authors, we may have already gone beyond these limits (Rockström et al. 2009). These developments force us to answer a fundamental question: what kind of world do we want to live in, and how can we co-exist with other living creatures with whom we share the same earth?

26.2 Towards an Anthropocenic Animal Ethics

The contributions by the authors in this section may be regarded as attempts to address those questions, in particular by rethinking basic concepts relating to our relationships with wild animals. In this context, Clare Palmer demonstrates, using the case of the polar bear, that subjective welfare-oriented approaches fail to provide clear directions for coping with the challenge of climate warming with respect to wild animals. She therefore proposes conducting experiments to test intervention options such as supplementary food. These kinds of experiments are *wild experiments*, meaning that they are carried out in the real world to learn how to deal with actual challenges in the Anthropocene (see for example Lorrimer 2015).

Martin Drenthen's suggestion, which is to manage the human landscape and design artifacts such as fences so that they function as a means of communication to wolves, may also be considered a wild experiment. Of course, most species do not have the communicative skills of wolves, or they require quite different conditions for their subsistence, but his suggestion may be interpreted as a call to listen to what wild animals, as cohabitants of the world, are telling and asking us. These two cases also demonstrate the broad spectrum of anthropogenic effects in the Anthropocene, which range from threatening conditions for some wild species on the one hand, to favorable conditions for other species on the other.

The pleas for interventions to support threatened wild animals, and especially the appearance of wild animals in the human landscape, challenge the traditional vision of the nature-culture divide, between the human and the wild world, and between domesticated and wild animals. This calls into question the traditional view on animal ethics, which is that we should not interfere with the lives of wild animals, a view concisely worded by Tom Regan in 1983: "Let them be". Clare Palmer (2010) calls this "laissez faire intuition", which means that we do not have a duty to take care of animals in nature, unless we are responsible for their deteriorating circumstances. Similarly, it is argued that if we recognize the ethical value of wild animals and their populations in their natural habitats, we must provide these natural habitats (for example through nature protection measures) so that they can flourish as wild animals. This latter type of care is defined as non-specific care, to distinguish it from specific care, which relates to the individual needs of domestic animals that we keep in human society (Swart 2005; Keulartz and Swart 2012).

There are, however, a lot of wild animal species that do not fall into the categories of fully wild or domesticated animals, but instead somewhere in between (Klaver et al. 2002). We may think of hemerophiles (opportunistic human culture followers, e.g. many garden birds), feral animals (e.g. free roaming cats), and increasingly animals that appear in human landscapes as a consequence of the changing conditions in the Anthropocene. Such animals may be considered to be "semi-wild" (Swart 2005), as falling in the "contact zone" (Clare Palmer 2010), or as "liminal animals" (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011). The presence of wild animals in the human landscape, whether due to climate change or other anthropogenic phenomena, is not expected to be

temporary. We need animal ethics that recognize and explicate the moral standing of this group of animals.

In this context, Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011) have further elaborated the distinction between domestic, wild and liminal animals with the help of a political framework. Domestic animals are considered by them as fellow citizens in the human community with basically the same rights as humans. Wild animals, on the other hand, not being influenced by humans and living in the wild, are seen as members of sovereign communities that must be respected. People should in principle not be allowed to intervene in their communities, as if these communities were other nations. Liminal animals have a position in between. The authors compare them with denizens in human society such as refugees or immigrants who have certain basic rights but, for example, no voting rights in political matters. Similarly, liminal animals have a basic right not to be harmed or killed, but we do not have to feed them or provide housing as they are still wild animals. We should tolerate nuisance to a certain extent, but we may protect ourselves from serious damage, while still respecting their basic rights.

This approach is well-suited to the challenge of the Anthropocene, as it acknowledges the different relationships between humans and animals, ranging from domesticated animals in human society to wild animals living in their natural habitat, and it provides us with an underlying justification of different treatments of animals in different environments. It justifies the negative right of animals living in the wild not to be disturbed, but it also acknowledges positive rights, not only of domesticated animals kept by humans, but also of wild animals living in the human landscape. This is relevant because, as Donaldson and Kymlicka (2016) also indicate, countless wild species live in and are dependent on our rural and urban areas. This is especially true in the Netherlands and many other Western European countries with intensive agriculture and strong urbanization. For example, Dutch godwits breed in the spring on the Frisian meadows and spend the winter in West African rice fields, and barnacle geese overwinter in the humanized landscapes around the North Sea but breed around the Arctic Circle (Swart 2016).

26.3 A Heterogeneous, Coercive, Socioecological Network

However, we may wonder whether the concept of sovereign wild animal communities is an appropriate term to characterize animal communities in the wild. After all, it implies a human, sociological perspective of wild animals since it stems from a political theory. But, there are no sovereign rulers or institutions in the wild, nor shared objectives and values. As far as we can speak of a community, it is only “governed” by the behaviors of and interactions (e.g. predation, migration, reproduction) between members of multiple populations and species under particular biotic and abiotic circumstances such as climate, vegetation, soil composition, and so on. However, this is also the case for wild animal populations in man-dominated landscapes, where

people and their artifacts belong to the biotic and abiotic conditions that animals have to deal with.

Wild animals, whether living in natural or human landscapes, often make opportunistic use of available and accessible natural, agricultural or urban resources, based on their species' characteristics. If biotic and abiotic conditions change, whether by natural or man-made causes, animals must develop new interactions with the new situation, for example through a change in food sources or by migration to another area, including human landscapes. Animals that are able to cope with such a heterogeneous and dynamic environment, including man-dominated landscapes, have a greater chance of survival.

Therefore, instead of considering wild animals as members of autonomous, sovereign communities and liminal animals as denizens in the human society and human landscapes, I prefer to consider both of them as nodes in a dynamic, heterogeneous, coercive, socioecological network of dependency relationships between abiotic and biotic factors which, in the Anthropocene, increasingly includes human society and its institutions (see for example Coeckelbergh 2012). Despite the existence of animal agency, i.e. ability of the animal to act in accordance with its species-specific drives, desires or will (see Meijer and Bovenkerk, this volume) and animal autonomy, i.e. the ability to put that agency into practice, wild animals, will nevertheless be strongly affected in their choices by the compelling circumstances of the biotic and abiotic environments, regardless of whether they live in natural or human landscapes (Swart 2005, 2016).

Recognizing the presence of wild animals in the human or humanized natural landscape, whether we call them wild, semi-wild, liminal, or contact-zone animals, and recognizing that they have certain negative and positive rights, raises the question of how we can live together and what this means. This is a difficult question to answer, because these animals, as explained above, form a highly heterogeneous group due to differences between species and their niches, and due to varying levels of adaptation to the human environment. The concepts of specific and non-specific care are not only very general, but also not aimed at this group of animals, except that they may apply to them to some extent. Neither does the approach of Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011) offer us clear suggestions, except that liminal animals' basic rights must be taken into account.

A more categorizing characterization of these animals may help. In this context, Swart and Keulartz (2011) distinguish two dimensions that relate to biological and sociological approaches of domestication. The first dimension is *adaptability*. This refers to the extent to which an animal has adapted or is able to adapt to humans or their environment. This is often evidenced by certain biological and behavioral characteristics, as is most visible in pets. The second one is *dependency*, a sociological dimension which is related to the extent to which an animal is dependent on the human system for its subsistence. Most pets are both strongly adapted to and dependent on humans, while wild animals living in undisturbed nature are not. However, wild animals that live in a human or humanized landscape may be characterized by these two dimensions to a certain extent. For example, some zoo animals can still be considered wild according to the first dimension, but are nevertheless completely

Adaptation to the human system

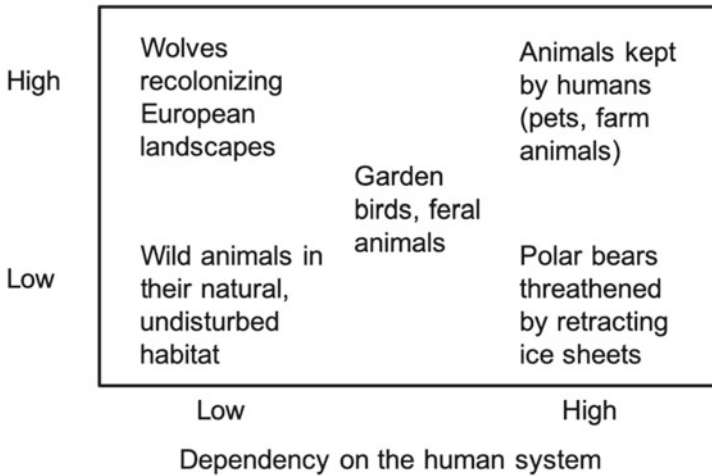


Fig. 26.1 A tentative scheme of adaptation to and dependency of animals on the human system

dependent on humans and domesticated in that sense. Many garden birds and feral animals often take an intermediate position in both dimensions (see Fig. 26.1).

Applying these dimensions to the case described by Clare Palmer suggests that the polar bear is in the lower right corner of Fig. 26.1. The population is seriously affected by receding ice sheets in the Arctic, a situation to which polar bears cannot adapt very well, so that they can become highly dependent on human interventions. On the other hand, the recolonizing wolf, as described by Martin Drenthen, can be placed in the upper left corner of Fig. 26.1 because these animals are well adapted to the human landscapes of Europe while they still exist quite independently of humans.

The dimensions in Fig. 26.1 are not completely independent of each other, as adaptation may lead to dependency and dependency may initiate a process of adaptation. Adaptation is anchored primarily in biology and is not easy to influence, or only very slowly. On the other hand, dependency is a social dimension that we have better control of. Most of the measures that we can take to influence the fate of endangered animals or animals that live in the human landscape are therefore in this dimension. For example, we should take measures to move animals from the lower right-hand position of Fig. 26.1, which is a particularly undesirable situation, to the left. On the other hand, if we want to prevent the further domestication of animals in the upper left corner, we must take measures that keep them on the left and therefore independent.

Ned Hettinger’s concept of native and non-native animals seems to fit into this gradual and two-dimensional perspective on wildness and domestication. He claims that being native, which is a matter of degree, means that a species “has significantly adapted to or interacted with the local biota and abiota (and vice versa). Non-natives

are species that have not significantly adapted to or interacted with the local inhabitants or abiotia”. His definition turns the concept of what a native species is from a historic into a contextual one, as whether or not a particular species can be considered native depends on the level of adaptation to the current set of biotic and abiotic conditions. Thus, from this perspective, the polar bear in the Arctic case has become less native as it is not well adapted to the new conditions, whereas the wolf in western Europe has become more native as it seems to be rather well adapted to that specific environment.

26.4 Non-Specific Care for Wild Animals in a Humanized World

In the Anthropocene, our expansive behavior means that human and animal worlds are increasingly merging and wild animals are becoming more and more dependent on human society. The contact zone is widening. Given this merging and our increasing dominance, we have strong obligations regarding the fate of wild animals, not only towards threatened animals in remote natural areas as the Arctic with its disappearing ice caps, but also towards wild animals that live in human landscapes.

We therefore need to adapt our basic attitudes to wild animals, as Mateusz Tokarski argues in his contribution. According to him, anxiety, fear, disgust or even hatred with regard to animals showing up in our humanized landscapes are actually “symptoms of a fundamentally misguided worldview, most commonly characterized as anthropocentrism”. Making use of the stoic tradition, he argues that we need an environmental philosophy to develop an impersonal and rationalized worldview that may function as a source of consolation to such discomforts, and that we need to consider these discomforts as inevitable and acceptable in the context of our co-existence with wild animals. However, I doubt whether such a universal and impersonal worldview is practically feasible in our current world and I also wonder whether a stoic way of thinking can lead to disinterest or even apathy with regard to the dramatic fate of wild animals in the Anthropocene. Nevertheless, I agree that we need to adjust our basic attitudes to wild animals, an adjustment that may enrich our existence through a better understanding of the interconnectedness and interdependencies of all forms of life, including ourselves. Charles Foster’s desire for an intimate connection with the natural world to acquire self-knowledge fits into this perspective, although in my opinion it contradicts his defense of hunting.

I believe that we do not have exclusive rights to the earth and that we should recognize and respect wild animals as fellow-earthlings. Because of our impact, this implies an empathic, nonspecific care perspective towards wild animals. I have previously described non-specific care as interventions focusing on the natural environment of animals so that they can live their natural lives. Unfortunately, this is no longer enough. In the Anthropocene, such non-specific care should also focus on the conditions for wild animals in the human world so that they can live there

according to their capabilities as much as possible. As the authors in this section show, this means giving space to the wild animals that appear in the human landscape, and taking measures to restore natural areas and adjust our landscapes and infrastructures to make their lives here possible. It requires wild experiments but also a reconsideration of our ethics, philosophies, culture, institutions, and politics.

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