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# The Importance of Ethics in Conservation Biology: Let's Be Ethicists not Ostriches

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## Am I preaching to the choir?

There can be no question that ethics is an essential component in animal conservation biology. For that matter, ethics is very important in *all* conservation projects, including those that deal with botanical, aquatic, atmospheric, and inanimate environs. As I write this short piece I find myself asking isn't this so obvious that you're merely preaching to the choir? Well, yes and no. Some people seem (perhaps unintentionally) to ignore ethical issues and hope they will disappear if they play "ostrich." The origin of this essay stems from a recent issue of this journal (July/August 2001) that dealt with carnivore conservation. I wrote the editor to mention my surprise that there was no essay devoted to ethical issues among the excellent contributions on this very important topic.

Here, I am concerned solely with projects that center on animals, beings who also are stakeholders in conservation efforts. The multi-dimensional, multi-level, and interdisciplinary problems with which most conservation projects are faced are very difficult, serious, and contentious, and often demand immediate attention and quick solutions. In our haste and in the frenzy of trying to put out fires before they spread (rarely before they start), and some would correctly claim that the fires spread metastatically as do many cancers, we often overlook the basic ethical principles by which most of us operate daily. These ideals include principles such as:

- ◆ do no intentional harm,
- ◆ respect all life,

◆ treat all individuals with compassion, and

◆ step lightly into the lives of other beings, bodies of water, air, and landscapes.

Surely, these principles are politically correct, but they are also ethically and ecologically correct. They demand deep reflection and should be the foundation from which all conservation projects begin. They also raise very difficult issues that easily cause people to get angry and insult one another, and mandate that we ultimately develop guidelines for adjudicating competing and conflicting agendas, even if all parties really do have the best interests of animals in mind. There clearly is no universal agreement on just what are the "best interests."

Very few people cause intentional harm in their efforts to restore or recreate ecosystems and to maintain or to increase biodiversity. The other three ideals are easily overridden either because they get lost in the shuffle or because they are too difficult to adhere to with any degree of consistency. Indeed, in some cases while it clearly is *not* one's intention to cause harm to other animal beings, the very design of some studies, or perhaps the very reality of some conservation efforts, means that inevitably some animals will die or suffer. So, for example, is it permissible to begin a reintroduction project when it is estimated and accepted that 50% of the translocated animals will die? This was the acceptable standard for attempts to reintroduce Canadian lynx into southwestern Colorado (Kloor 1999; Scott et al. 1999; Bekoff 2001). Is it permissible to subject

naive prey to introduced novel predators? Is it acceptable to do a project in which a non-prey species (e.g., coyotes in Yellowstone) will be killed by the reintroduction of a competitor (e.g., gray wolves)?

What happens in *both* locations when individuals are moved from one place to another? To my knowledge, there have been no follow-up studies in areas from which individuals have been removed to determine the effects on the remaining animals — the integrity of their social system — and on the integrity of the ecological community that remains. Are we violating one ecosystem to restore or recreate another? Is there any net gain?

While we recognize the fragility of the complex webs in most ecosystems, in many instances we do not try to understand just how delicate they are. The assumption is that we are doing no harm in the areas from which animals are removed, but we really do not know this. I fully realize that these are difficult questions with many implications about what we value. But, the questions will not disappear if we ignore them. Surely, we can do better in providing solid answers.

## What ought we do?

So, what are we to do? While people may disagree about which ethical principles should guide conservation efforts, it seems that no one would disagree that ethics *must* be factored into all conservation projects. This might mean that a project would go more slowly than some prefer, or that it might be delayed, or not done at all — at least not until more ethical

methods are developed. This might be frustrating, but perhaps having patience, especially when the "problem" at hand does not demand an immediate solution, will make for better and more effective solutions in the long term. By showing wisdom and restraint, we learn more about nature's complexities. We also need to ask if a quick-fix is the best way to proceed, especially when we lack a solid comprehension of details that could make or break a project. Prematurely implementing a multidimensional, interdisciplinary project can simply be disastrous.

In a recent series of essays (Bekoff 2000a, 2000b, 2001), I outlined some of the questions with which conservation (and other) biologists must be concerned. These included, for example, do animals have rights and if so, what responsibilities does this entail? How *should* humans treat other animals? What *ought* we do? Can we do whatever we please to other animals? Should we interfere in animals' lives when we have spoiled their habitats or when they are sick, provide food when there is not enough food to go around, or translocate them? Should our interests trump theirs? Should we be concerned with individuals, populations, species, or ecosystems? Should we let animals be and not intentionally interfere in their lives except on very rare occasions?

As big-brained, omnipresent, powerful, and supposedly omniscient mammals, we are mandated to give these questions the consideration that they demand. This requires us to develop a detailed understanding and appreciation of the behavioral and social ecology of the animals with whom we are concerned (e.g., Miller et al. 1996; Clemmons and Bucholz 1997; Caro 1998; Sutherland 1998; Berger 1999; Gosling and Sutherland 2000; Berger et al. 2001). Our understanding should also include their

cognitive capacities (Berger 1998; Berger et al. 2001), emotional lives, and also their ecosystems. These efforts will lead to more relevant, appropriate approaches and solutions. To do less is to shirk our responsibilities to ourselves, other animals, and to Earth as a whole. We all love being out there in the field. Thus, doing arduous, tedious field work should be an activity to which we look forward.

There are no right or wrong answers to many questions about how humans should treat animals. However, there are better and worse answers. Perhaps in some cases what we think is the right action is not, when the big picture is carefully analyzed. A major goal of mine is to stimulate discussion about pertinent issues among all parties so that competing agendas are given due consideration. Those who hold opposing views need to cooperate and engage in open discussion with well-reasoned dissent (Ehrlich 1997). Positions should be criticized, not the people who hold them. Personal attacks are infantile and preclude compromise. The basic question remains, *what constitutes acceptable treatment of animals?*

The editors of the volume in which my 2001 essay appeared recognized the importance of ethics. They wanted an essay that would highlight just how complex and multidimensional these issues are. However, they faced the dilemma of personal bias — whoever they selected to write an essay would likely be biased. However, one person's opinion does not render another's invalid. In fact, only two of the volume's four editors shared my views. What is important is a universal agreement that ethics is an essential element of conservation biology, as it is in any other sphere of science.

Others have realized the importance of ethical discourse. An essay that I co-wrote with the philosopher, Dale Jamieson (Bekoff and Jamieson

1996), was favorably reviewed in the journal *Ecology*. It was referred to as "a well-written and impelling plea for scientists to evaluate their experimental design and be sensitive, with respect to techniques and disturbances, to the species they are studying... [T]his paper should be 'must reading' for all biologists, conservationists, and people interested in environmental issues" (Geidt 1997). I mention this not to blow my own horn but rather to call attention to the fact that no matter what the problem at hand, ethical concerns must be an essential part of all proposed solutions. Ethics is as important as experimental techniques and statistical analyses. All scientists are responsible for maintaining the highest of ethical standards. When humans intervene into the lives of other animals we must do so by stepping lightly with humility, grace, respect, and compassion. We must accept that ethics might dictate the demise of certain projects. Thomas Berry cautions that we must have a "benign presence" when we go out into nature (Berry 1999). I agree.

Animals depend on our goodwill and mercy. Each person chooses to be intrusive, abusive, or compassionate, and each is responsible for her or his choices. Science, including conservation biology, is not value-free. Ultimately, we are all human beings with personal views of the world that drive our actions. Complicating the situation is the fact that values and sentiments change with time and are sensitive to demographic, political, and socio-economic variation, along with personal whims. And, some issues are so emotionally volatile that expecting rational discourse is less likely than winning the power ball lottery.

### **Ethical enrichment: would we do it again?**

It is in the best traditions of science to ask questions about ethics; it is not anti-science nor should it be threat-

ening to question our methods of studying animals. Ethics can enrich our knowledge of other animals and the worlds they live in and help us gain respect for them. Ethics also can broaden our range of interaction with other animals without compromising their lives. Ethical discussion can help us find alternatives to methods that do not serve us or other animals well. If we perceive ethical deliberations as unnecessary hurdles, then we lose rich opportunities to learn more about animals and ourselves. The application of ethical enrichment is a two-way street. Great discoveries come when our ethical relationship with animals is respectful and not exploitive. While animals are unable to consent to or refuse our intrusions into their lives, it is useful to ask what they might say if they could do so. We should also ask ourselves if we would do what we did again, given what we learned.

Animal rights advocates often place priority on individuals, whereas animal welfare advocates take a utilitarian position. Welfare advocates favor decisions where the presumed costs to animals are less than the benefits to humans. In conservation biology, often the interests of individuals are traded off against perceived benefits that accrue to higher levels of organization, such as populations, species, and ecosystems (Estes 1998). Biocentrists and anthropocentrists often clash because the issues are highly driven by social and personal views. These issues also are fueled by how one views man's place in nature and by what is considered to be natural (Bekoff 2001, 2002).

### **Having fun, saving the world, and educating students**

In the end, all approaches and all levels of organization need to be considered in our deliberations about human interference in nature. It is our social responsibility to do the best

we can and use all "ways of knowing" (Berkes 1999; Bradshaw and Bekoff 2001). I hope that we will all convey this message to our students, a point emphasized by the eminent ecologist, Paul Ehrlich (Ehrlich 1997). In his wonderful and bold book, *A World of Wounds*, Ehrlich wrote: "Many of the students who have crossed my path in the last decade or so have wanted to do much, much more. They were drawn to ecology because they were brought up in a 'world of wounds,' and want to help heal it. But the current structure of ecology tends to dissuade them... Now we need to incorporate the idea that it is every scientist's obligation to communicate pertinent portions of her or his results to decision-makers and the general public." And our work should be fun. Having fun, being sentimental, and doing solid science are not mutually exclusive activities (Bekoff 2002). Once again, to quote Ehrlich (1997): "In my view, no area of science can be successful (or much fun!) without a mutually supportive interaction between theory and empiricism... So let's stop arguing about theory versus empiricism and worrying about the end of our science. Instead, let's cooperate more, change some of our priorities, and have fun while we're trying to save the world."

### **Minding animals**

"The earth is, to a certain extent, our mother. She is so kind, because whatever we do, she tolerates it. But now, the time has come when our power to destroy is so extreme that Mother Earth is compelled to tell us to be careful. The population explosion and many other indicators make that clear, don't they? Nature has its own natural limitations" (His Holiness The Dalai Lama 1999).

*Achieving win-win situations for humans and animals involved in conservation efforts will be very difficult*

*but we should never stop trying.* If we fail to do so I fear that everyone — including our children and theirs — will lose, and much of the spark and spirit that sustain our attempts to make this a better world will be extinguished. Fortunately, many students are now interested in ethical issues, and there is a progressive trend toward caring more, not less, about the fate of individual animals in conservation biology. How we sense and feel the presence of individual animals directly influences how we interact with them (Abram 1996; Sewall 1999).

There is much to gain and little to lose if we move forward with grace, humility, respect, compassion and love. Surely, we will be more fulfilled if we know deep in our hearts that we did the best we could and took into account the well-being of the magnificent animals with whom we share the Earth — the awesome beings who selflessly make our lives richer, more challenging, and more enjoyable than they would be in the animals' absence. By "minding animals" (Bekoff 2002) we mind ourselves. *The power we potentially wield to do anything we want to do to animals and to nature as a whole is inextricably tied with responsibilities to be ethical human beings.* We can be no less.

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