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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

17 GOALS TO TRANSFORM OUR WORLD



Sep 14, 2019 Animal Welfare and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

By Beth Allgood

Since 2015, the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have served as a framework for a holistic approach to development that recognizes the need to incorporate non-economic measures of growth and human well-being. The SDG guidelines are a bold attempt to accomplish some of the most comprehensive global goals ever proclaimed—ending poverty, protecting the planet, and ensuring that all people enjoy peace and prosperity.

However, with the exception of SDG 14 (Life Below Water) and SDG 15 (Life on Land), the majority of the seventeen SDGs lack a key aspect: weaving animal welfare and conservation into the development of each goal. Though this expectation may seem unrealistic at first, all living things are connected—humanity is undeniably linked with our fellow species and the relationship among humans, animals, and nature remains as critical as ever. The International Fund for Animal Welfare's (IFAW) report "Thriving Together" (see below) examines how the inclusion of animal welfare and conservation is vital to successful achievement of the SDGs.

IFAW, alongside many conservationists and scientists around the world, recognizes that animals and their habitats possess intrinsic value above that which can be defined by conventional economics. From supporting communities through ecotourism to anchoring key ecosystem services such as pest control and pollination, animals are critical to human well-being. Conservation-led efforts are intertwined with human development and sustained economic

growth, and thus, a world of peaceful coexistence cannot be fulfilled unless human development, wildlife conservation, and animal welfare agendas overlap.

Taking into consideration all of the above, it is equally important for policy makers to start integrating well-being indicators that go beyond the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) into assessments of sustainability and welfare. This is because the GDP only measures the monetary value of all finished goods and services and thus does not assess well-being, which also includes the states of comfort, health, and happiness. With its emphasis on short-term economic activity and its exclusion of social and environmental well-being, the GDP cannot be relied upon as the sole measure to guide holistic and effective policy development or the SDGs set out by the United Nations.

The many sociological, psychological and other values that animals provide to human society are either completely ignored or considered an afterthought to human-focused development concerns. In order to achieve sustainable human development that works for both people and our planet, intergovernmental development initiatives must recognize the relevance of animal issues to their “well-being” mission. As we continue to rely on the services provided by healthy natural systems (which include animals since they affect critical issues such as food security, employment, public health, and climate mitigation), the critical relationship between humans and nature is a fundamental element of global well-being.

For example, healthy and well cared-for animals and their ecosystems support both the agricultural and natural processes that promote food security and mitigate global hunger. Seventy-five percent of global crop species are pollinated by animals (mostly insects) and, without this pollination, human food supplies would be impoverished. The global loss of pollinators thus severely hampers agricultural production, proving that conservation-led initiatives are an essential component to contributing to meeting several targets in SDG 2 (Zero Hunger). Understanding the role of animals in agriculture, as well as improving animal welfare and conserving wildlife, are critical to efforts to reduce global hunger.

Another example is the impact of wildlife species on the natural infrastructure of all the ecosystems they inhabit, particularly in the case of water resources. For instance, beavers create wetlands in an otherwise dry forest by building dams and felling trees. The wetlands recharge groundwater aquifers and provide nutrients to plants that filter and store freshwater. These ecosystem services support a major source of freshwater and play a fundamental role in ensuring water security. Beavers – and other wildlife – act as ‘seeds’ that germinate into better access to clean water and other key ecosystem services for the broader community.

Animals also support the livelihoods of many of the world’s poorest people. More than 650 million people (many of the poorest on the planet) rely entirely on animals for subsistence, and animals often represent the single biggest store of wealth they own. Animal welfare measures not only ensure that working animals are treated humanely, they also create more value for the poor and surrounding communities who rely on them. For example, donkeys that are used in the brick industry in south Asia have a life expectancy of eighteen months when they are not well cared for. But, when simple animal welfare practices are introduced, they can support the

business for up to eight years before being sold as a healthy animal. This is important for the people and also leads to a better life for the animals involved.

No city or community exists without animals, both wild and domestic. In order to ensure that those cities and communities are sustainable, it is imperative that both the benefits and drawbacks of animal populations in and around such areas are fully addressed. Through tourism, agriculture, and other industries, animals naturally form the backbone of economic growth and livelihoods in many communities.

Safeguarding the welfare of animals leads to positive human outcomes, such as companion animals contributing to physical and mental health, healthy farm animals linked to higher productivity and quality of life, and nature and wildlife strengthening the vitality and resilience of communities.

As the world faces increasingly complex global challenges, our relationship to the natural world is more important than ever. Animals, both domestic and wild, contribute significantly to sustainable human development and their welfare supports human well-being in all its forms. As a link between people and the environment, animals play a key role in achieving a sustainable future. Humanity's historic reliance on animals has not ended – it has only evolved and in many cases, become stronger. It is time to recognize and accept that purely economic activity does not measure individual well-being and that development policies cannot be fully achieved without explicitly weaving animal welfare and conservation into our strategies. Failure to do so not only ignores the intrinsic value of animals, but also endangers the prospect of a healthy future for coming generations. Conservation is about more than animals and landscapes; it is also about taking care of our ecosystems in order to improve people's livelihoods and to foster community well-being. In that, conservation is the ultimate insurance policy against individual and large-scale disasters. When animals and their habitats are healthy and cared for, every one of us benefits.

[Thriving Together](#). An IFAW Report on Well-being and the Sustainable Development Goals.