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Preserving nature for the benefit of all sentient individuals

Commentary on [Treves et al.](#) on *Just Preservation*

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Abstract: I agree with Treves et al.'s proposal for a preservation ethics based on the principle that nonhuman well-being is a matter of justice and compassion. In this commentary, I advance two objections. First, only sentient beings, rather than all life, belong in the moral community. Second, given that nature is probably harmful overall for sentient individuals, preserving it for the benefit of future human and nonhuman generations requires us to modify it as far as practicable.

[Eze Paez](#) conducts research on what we owe to nonhuman animals from a variety of moral perspectives, including act- and rule-consequentialism, as well as Kantian ethics. He is especially interested in the wrongness of killing animals and our reasons for alleviating wild animal suffering. [Website](#)



The target article by Treves et al. (2019) is commendable for raising the key question of “the ethics and justice of preserving nature” within a robust anti-speciesist framework. The authors also understand preservation, and rightly so in my view, as saving nature for posterity, rather than as guaranteeing an ‘untouched’ and ‘permanent’ natural status quo. Thus, they set themselves the task of identifying the axiological and normative principles that should govern our preservation efforts. However, any such account should include, first, a criterion for identifying the future entities for whose benefit nature is to be saved; and second, a criterion for identifying what is beneficial and what is detrimental to such entities. In what follows, I shall endeavor to explain the problems I see in Treves et al.’s proposals regarding these issues. I will also suggest how I think they should be addressed.

Nature is to be preserved for all sentient beings. The first problem is that the authors do not distinguish between the *object* of our preservation efforts — what is to be preserved — and the *subjects* whom that preservation should benefit. On the one hand, they seem to embrace ethical individualism as opposed to the holism espoused by commentators Washington (2019) and Bergstrom (2019). Thus, Treves et al. concede that individuals are ‘the actual selves (not objects) with claims’. It is to these selves that we directly owe duties of justice. If their ‘collectives (populations, species, habitats, ecosystems)’ matter, it is only derivatively. That is, they do not matter in themselves, but simply because they are composed of morally considerable individuals.

Yet, on the other hand, Treves et al. endorse too broad a concept of who merits moral consideration. They of course include all human and nonhuman animals within the moral community; but they also suggest that our moral concern ought to be extended to other natural

entities they classify ‘as individuals’, who, they believe, possess interests and a well-being of their own. All these individuals — human, animal and natural — would form the ‘community of life’ that is both the object and the beneficiary of preservation.

I think it is misguided to include individual natural entities within the moral community. This would be in tension with the grounds for Treves et al.’s individualism and their rejection of moral holism. They claim that individuals matter because they are *selves*. But it is possible for an entity to be an individual without being a self. For instance, we have criteria that allow us to distinguish between individual molecules, diamonds, asteroids, bicycles and cars, but none of these individual entities is a ‘self’ except if it is *conscious*: or, in Nagel’s (1974) famous words, ‘if there is something that it is like to be’ that entity.

Furthermore, only conscious entities can be sentient, i.e., have the capacity for feeling states with positive and negative valences, such as pleasure and suffering. Being sentient is necessary for having interests in attaining the one and avoiding the other — for having a well-being which can be increased or reduced by the actions of other sentient beings or by natural events. Sentient beings are the only kinds of individuals who have moral claims and to whom we can owe moral obligations.

It must be further noted that, as far as we know, not all individual natural entities are sentient. Not even all individual organisms are. We have convincing evidence for the sentience of all vertebrate animals, as well as some invertebrates like octopuses (Low et al. 2012; Mather 2019). We have strong but inconclusive evidence for the sentience of other invertebrate taxa, like honeybees or ants (Klein & Barron 2016). We have scant physiological and behavioral evidence, or none at all, for the sentience of jellyfishes, plants and unicellular organisms (Waldhorn 2019).

Thus, we must distinguish between insentient nature and the community of sentient beings. It is for the benefit of future generations of human and nonhuman sentient individuals that other organisms, ecosystems and the planet must be preserved.

Compassionate preservation requires us to intervene in nature. A second problem in Treves et al.’s account of the ethics of preservation is that it seems to assume that nature does a good job of promoting the interests of nonhuman sentients. On this assumption, the main issue that an ethics of preservation should address is how to balance competing human and nonhuman interests in the planet’s resources in a non-anthropocentric way. Past human interference in the natural environment has undeniably been harmful for many nonhuman animals, as well as for other humans. So, in this sense, Treves et al.’s proposal is a step in the right direction. If, as the authors suggest, we should see nonhuman well-being ‘as a matter of justice as well as of compassion’, harmful interventions in nature must be regarded as morally impermissible.

Nature itself, however, is likely to be harmful overall for wild nonhuman animals, who constitute more than 99% of all sentient beings (Tomasik 2009). Suffering probably predominates in their lives due to natural events. These include diseases, parasites, starvation, thirst, extreme weather conditions and attacks by other animals (Faria 2016; Horta 2010; Ng 1995; Tomasik 2015). Nature is a moral catastrophe. Suppose we had the risk-free means and competence to make nonhuman animals more resistant to illness, more efficient in processing nutrients and water, as well as the means to control their populations in an ethical way. Suppose, in other words, that we could successfully redesign nature and living organisms so as to ensure that as many sentient beings as possible had good lives. Would we not be morally required to do so?

The ethical question Treves et al. pose is: what kind of nature do we want to preserve for future generations of sentient human and nonhuman individuals? I believe that when we observe the facts, it becomes clear that we should not try to preserve nature as it would be were it not for human intervention. Based on the compassionate preservation ethics the authors advocate, if nature, as it is, is harmful overall for sentient beings, we should try to improve it, inasmuch as we can.

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