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Philosophy, ecology and elephant equality

Commentary on [Baker & Winkler](#) on *Elephant Rewilding*

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Abstract: The considerable conservation research on environmental problems and climate change tends to focus on species “biodiversity” rather than individuals. Individuals of the same species get categorized as “wild” or “captive”, with the latter often omitted from conservationists’ concerns. But wild and captive animals, although they may require different treatment, have comparable interests as individuals. Equity requires taking this into account in conservation efforts.

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Ecological problems are social and moral as well as scientific and technological. They result from human interactions with the natural environment that have negative effects on humans, nonhuman animals, and ecological systems (Attfield, 2014).

In philosophical approaches to environmental problems, there are tensions among normative stances (Callicott, 1998) advocating different policies and practices for environmental and animal welfare concerns. Ecocentrists advocate preserving ecosystems, species, habitats, and biodiversity (Warren et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2009; Colwell et al., 2008) but ignore the problems of animal suffering and welfare stressed by animal liberationists like Singer (1995, on a utilitarian basis) and Regan (1976, on a rights basis). Ecological research tends to focus on species loss and dwindling refuges, not the individual animals (Humphreys, 2020), whose interests only count if they are members of a species under threat. This is the case in Thailand for elephants: as if there were an ontological distinction between wild elephants (an endangered species, hence protected to a certain extent), and domesticated or captive elephants (not considered “wild” and thus not afforded the same level of protection).

Taking animals’ interests seriously obliges us to be concerned about the individual welfare of both domestic and wild nonhuman animals. In the case of wild elephants and their “domesticated” counterparts, it would behoove us to recognize individuals in both categories as individuals with the same biological imperatives — imperatives grossly undermined by various forms of captivity (Humphreys, 2016).

Ecocentrists hold that normative approaches concerned primarily with the good of individuals (such as biocentrism and sentientism) neglect the good of species and ecosystems (Rolston, 1998). This focus on species may be what has led conservationists to avoid rehabilitating

and rewilding of animals, as Baker & Winkler (2020) (B&W) explain in their target articles, citing Aitken (2004). A species is a general term for an interbreeding population of individuals with common traits — individuals who have intrinsic value irrespective of the value they contribute to the ecosystem of which they are a part. Sentientists and biocentrists hold that it is individuals, rather than species, that have intrinsic value.

Taylor (2011) (a biocentrist) argues for the moral standing of all living creatures, and for their equal worth. This form of biocentrism, however, does not allow us to take into account differences between species, or between individuals of the same species. Such differences could indicate differences in moral significance when interests conflict. Other forms of biocentrism recognize that in practice, equality does not mean equal treatment. For example, the life of a plant has less value than the life of an elephant. Singer argues that we should apply the principle of equal consideration to all animals capable of suffering, nonhuman as well as human; failure to do so amounts to unfair discrimination or speciesism.

The principle would apply to both wild and captive elephants so their interests would deserve equal consideration. Such interests include exercising their biological dispositions and their complex cognitive abilities, foraging over diverse and vast areas, as well as forming social groups and having families (Holdrege, 2003). These interests are significantly more restricted in captive elephants (Snijders, 2020). In the case of wild elephants, much more effort is needed to protect their dwindling habitats.

Applying the principle to captive elephants would certainly involve rehabilitating and returning to a wild or at least a semi-wild environment, but also recognising the human interests that stand to be affected. Ecological problems are partly social problems; some human and animal interests are intertwined today to the point of codependency. This is the case with elephants (wild and captive) in Thailand (Pauketat, 2020). There are also significant conflicts of interests (Blumstein and Lynch, 2020). But proposals to rewild elephants by working in collaboration with relevant human groups, including Karen communities, present plausible and innovative solutions for elephant conservation efforts in Thailand. In our era of environmental crisis, the interests of humans and elephants cannot be met if they are pitted against one another. A codependency needs to be recognized. Rehabilitation and rewilding practices can take this into account, enabling elephants to live a life natural for their own kind and enabling human communities to flourish in the process.

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