Conservation, Animal Welfare and Animal Rights:

Tensions & Synergies

IUCN WCC 2016 Knowledge Cafe

September 2016

This Knowledge Cafe explored the relationship between concepts of animal rights, animal welfare, and wildlife conservation. Four focal areas of conservation were explored, where these values sometimes conflict and sometimes align: management of invasive species, zoos and aquaria, reintroductions, and sustainable use of wild species. The discussion built on a short background paper made available to participants.

Knowledge café convenors

This session was presented at the IUCN WCC 2016 1st-10th September, Honolulu, Hawai’i and was convened by IUCN CEESP/SSC Sustainable Use and Livelihoods Specialist Group, AsiaCat, Earthmind, Association of Zoos and Aquariums, Conservation Council for Hawai’i, European Association of Zoos and Aquaria, International Institute for Environment and Development, World Association of Zoos and Aquariums, IUCN Species Programme and the SSC Invasive Species Specialist Group. Kirsten Conrad (AsiaCat), Mike ‘t Sas-Rolfes (Earthmind) and Dr Rosie Cooney (IUCN CEESP/SSC Sustainable Use and Livelihoods Specialist Group, SULi) led the discussion.

Background

It is important to note that animal welfare, animal rights, and wildlife conservation are distinct motivations and approaches, with some overlap in practice and policy. Sometimes their objectives align, and sometimes they do not. The animal welfare and animal rights movements are increasingly influential globally, boosted by the rise of social media. New fields of thinking and activism are emerging - particularly in law and policy - that emphasise the rights and wellbeing of individual animals over achieving broader conservation priorities (and even, sometimes, over human rights).
What does this mean for conserving nature and achieving equitable and effective governance?

This Knowledge Cafe aimed to explore the divergences between the conservation, animal welfare and animal rights agendas, examine where they may be harmonious and mutually supportive, and where and how they conflict. The session examined areas of actual and potential conflict across zoos and aquaria, reintroductions, sustainable use and trade of wild resources, and control of invasive or hyperabundant species.

The discussion aimed to provide:

- Greater understanding of recent developments in - and the influence of - the animal rights and animal welfare agendas
- Increased understanding of the different points of view among conservationists, animal welfare proponents and animal rights proponents
- Clarity on where we can positively inform the actions and activities of each other
- Increased awareness of where conflicting values mean it will not be possible for these organisations to work together
- Practical actions to ensure conservation decisions reflect appropriate conservation priorities and evidence
- The basis of a peer-reviewed paper setting forward key ideas and issues on these relationships, possibly including a conceptual framework for understanding the relationship (currently in progress).

Framing the discussion

The discussion was opened by Mike ‘t Sas-Rolfes who outlined the conceptual underpinnings of animal welfare and animal rights approaches. While animal welfare concerns are compatible with both anthropocentric and biocentric paradigms, potentially encompassing sustainable use, notions of animal rights are firmly grounded in biocentrism. Mike also highlighted the difference between consequentialist and deontological approaches to animal ethics; whereas animal welfare and conservation are typically more concerned with the consequences and outcomes for animals, the animal rights approach in principle takes a deontological approach, typically rejecting use of animals as intrinsically wrong regardless of the circumstances and seeking to grant legal rights to animals. Approaches to animal use often distinguish sentient vs non-sentient beings, with the latter being more acceptable to use. However, this line is very blurred and hard to delineate with any confidence.

When it comes to wildlife conservation, its difference from animal welfare and animal rights can either be very clear, involving obvious tensions, or there may be synergies involved. Few conservationists would dispute that animal welfare matters, and there are instances where conservation goals and animal welfare or animal rights goals are obviously synergistic, such as preventing unsustainable harvesting and illegal trade of live wild animals (with its conservation impacts, generally poor welfare standards and high mortality). However, there are also instances in which contemporary species conservation practices and the welfare and/or rights of individual animals come into conflict, particularly relating to the sustainable use of wildlife, management of invasive alien species,
reintroduction, and keeping of animals in zoos/aquariums. In such cases, policy-makers and conservation practitioners may need to negotiate and accept tensions and trade-offs. The nature of such trade-offs is a contested space. However, clearly understanding and recognising the basis for differences in values and perspectives and the nature of potential conflicts will assist such processes.

To discuss these differences, four case studies were introduced: the management of invasive species (grey squirrel control in Italy), zoos and aquaria (rehabilitation of manatees, US), reintroductions (grey-footed ferret, US) and sustainable use of wildlife (rhinoceros trophy hunting in Namibia). Participants shared perspectives and views on how different groups would approach these issues and their bases for making decisions.

Summary of the discussion

Key general points raised

(Note these is a just a record of points raised – these do not represent consensus statements from the event.)

- Definitions of what constitutes as animal welfare and how this differs from animal rights varies across different advocacy groups.
- Animal welfare is about individual animals, whereas wildlife conservation focusses on populations and ecosystems.
- Does a population have moral standing, as (some argue) individuals do?
- Some argue that we need contact with animals as it generates empathy, which ultimately benefits conservation.
- Animal rights approaches often conflict with conservation approaches for larger, more charismatic animals in particular.
- Conservation and welfare don’t need to be mutually exclusive, but sometimes welfare objectives can contradict conservation objectives and vice versa.
- From a conservationist’s perspective, typically what matters is what is best for the wildlife – what is practical and what will work. This is particularly the case for threatened species (which are in “ICU” – intensive care unit). Conservationists tend not to think about whether certain actions are “right” or “wrong” in themselves.
- However, there are questions about whether this “what works” question is viewed over the long term or short term, and on an individual or an aggregate basis.
- We should be concerned with the conservation of the entire species, but also need to take the welfare of individuals into account.

Management of invasives

- Species outside of their natural range have the potential to displace and replace other species.
- Invasive management raises questions of ethics and morality: to kill or not to kill? And how to kill?
- The underlying question is: which species has the higher moral right to live?
- Just because a species is invasive does not mean we should have no concern for its welfare: if species are to be controlled and killed, this should be done in the most humane and cost-effective way.
- Animal welfare proponents often focus on the alien species (being removed/culled), but overlook the welfare of the native animals who are being killed or displaced.
- Mechanisms of control, removal, and culling require animal welfare guidelines.
- But time is often of the essence – the longer you wait (e.g. to develop welfare guidelines), the more animals will need to be killed and the lower the chances of eradicating the invasive population.

Zoos and aquaria – rehabilitation and release

- Should we keep animals in an aquarium, if releasing them may mean they die?
• The issue of intent is relevant – what is the aim of keeping them in captivity?
• It is relevant to ask who benefits from the interaction? Will it benefit the animal if they are released into the wild? Is it only benefiting the aquarium to keep them in captivity? It can come down to tickets sales vs animal health.
• Zoos and aquaria have breeding programmes to increase populations of endangered species, and these programmes produce surplus animals. Should these animals be culled, should these institutions keep these animals backstage, or should the animals be released into the wild?
• We need to move beyond “live storage”, and need more reintroductions from zoos and aquaria. Otherwise the conservation view is apocalyptic, and conservation of animals in zoos/aquaria becomes equivalent to a seed bank.
• However, conservation has a cost, and who will pay?

Reintroductions and translocations

• While reintroductions and translocations involve a certain degree of stress which is inflicted upon animals, all animals go through stress, whether in captivity or in the wild. Stress is a natural part of life. Some people may have a utopian view of animal life. The distinction between chronic and acute stress is also significant. Conservationists believe that we have a moral obligation to save species, so some stress to and death of individuals is justified in pursuit of this.
• The black-footed ferret is a poster-child of conservation worldwide, as it would be extinct without intervention. Should it have been allowed to go extinct by focussing only on individual animal rights and avoiding causing death or stress? Should other species be allowed to go extinct in the future if saving them would involve stress or mortality of some individuals?
• Indigenous perspectives are important – for example, for Inuit it can be more ‘right’ to shoot a polar bear respectfully for food than to put a radio collar on it, due to the additional stress this puts on an animal. We should seek other ways of monitoring animals without causing suffering.

Sustainable use and trophy hunting

• In this case, there are concerns from the animal welfare/rights proponents about ‘intent’ of the hunting operation, regardless of conservation outcome.
• Animal advocacy groups would not want animals ‘farmed’ for hunting — they want them to remain wild. They also typically find community conservation benefits more persuasive than commercial gains.
• However, in countries such as Namibia, conservation is heavily reliant on revenue generated through trophy hunting. Resources are not available from other sources to protect wildlife and habitat. There is a need to weigh the costs and the benefits of this type of conservation and animal use.
• There is a need to ensure that revenue raised from trophy hunting goes back to local communities (if there are any local communities).
• The hunt has to be a multi-faceted moral decision: trophy hunting has to have a spatial and temporal framework that is suited to different countries’ contexts and has appropriate timescales – ‘what is right today may not be tomorrow’.
• Sustainable harvesting is not poaching. As a result of trophy hunting Black Rhino numbers in Namibia have doubled in the last 15yrs, and it has also been a very successful strategy in Pakistan’s conservation of Markhor. There is a need to collect and disseminate scientific data to counteract popular ideals based on lack of knowledge.
• As in the invasive species case study, a key question for animal welfare advocates is which animals’ welfare is being considered? In Namibia, some Black Rhino males kill calves - what about the welfare of those calves?
• Economies and poor governance structures are also relevant – we are not rectifying these problems by selling natural resources. We need governments to not become dependent on trophy hunting - we need them to look at other strategies for conservation.
• Arguments for hunting are typically consequentialist, while those against are deontological - hunting is seen as inherently wrong.
• There are different perspectives as to whether people have the ‘right’ to hunt, i.e. for some it is acceptable for an Indigenous person to hunt, but not a non-Indigenous person.

Next steps
The intent to develop a multi-author paper outlining these issues was presented, led by Kirsten Conrad and Michael ‘t Sas-Rolfes, and those who wished put their names down to be involved. This paper is currently under development.

Partners
IUCN CEESP/SSC Sustainable Use and Livelihoods Specialist Group
Earthmind (Switzerland)
AsiaCat (Singapore)
Association of Zoos and Aquariums (United States of America)
Conservation Council for Hawai‘i (United States of America)
European Association of Zoos and Aquaria (The Netherlands)
International Institute for Environment and Development (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland)
World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (Switzerland)
IUCN Species Programme
SSC Invasive Species Specialist Group