

Public Policy and Animals

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This article has five parts meant to introduce the field of animals and public policy. This first part opens the door to the field. The second and third parts ask straightforward questions about what we mean by the deceptively simple terms “animals” and “public policy.” The fourth part outlines a series of basic problems that one encounters often in this field. The conclusion explains why the study of “animals and public policy” is an important, groundbreaking field.

Studying “animals and public policy” not only encourages, but actually *requires*, one to address a surprising range of themes. One ends up asking, for example, what is *now* happening in our relationships with other living beings. To explain what is now happening, one has to inquire about what has happened *in the past*, as well as what can happen *in the future*. These questions may seem simple at first, but as one engages them more and more, a remarkable range of new questions constantly emerges. This field is thus characterized by an interdisciplinary approach, that is, an approach that calls upon many other fields in order to evaluate the place humans have given to Earth’s other animals in our formulations of “policies.”

Another set of challenging questions arises when one tries to figure out *national* policy in industrialized countries—what role, for example, might experts like veterinarians play in setting national policy on animals? Veterinarians are knowledgeable about many kinds of animals—are they and other science-based experts consulted when our society sets policy regarding particular animals?

When we go beyond national boundaries to policy worldwide, we stumble onto new levels of complexity. Complicated notions like “international law,” trade, and cross-border politics and justice arise.

Most importantly, the field raises the profound issue of precisely *who* makes our policies toward other living beings. Everyone knows that local, national and international governmental bodies make policy, but only a little exploration of the subject makes it clear that many others do so as well—consumers, researchers, corporations, unions and the professions are only a few of the non-governmental actors who develop policies regarding the living beings in and around our human communities.

With so many people contributing to policy formation, questions of consistency arise, as do questions of enforcement. The latter in particular are important in telling us what a society’s *real* policy is regarding animals—sometimes, for example, laws that have been enacted are not enforced. The American political pundit Will Rogers once said, “People who love sausage and respect the law should never watch either one being made.” In some ways, this tongue-in-cheek comment, which plays upon the messy and disorderly processes of making sausage and the law, applies just as fully to the chaotic world of policy formulation.

In this field, then, one studies our human communities’ interactions with the world’s other living beings. We begin with simple questions about this interaction, and as we try to answer these questions we encounter anything but simple answers. Answers must rely on many sciences, many academic fields, and, hopefully, commitments to both the truth and common sense.

Whatever answers we give to our basic questions about who makes policy and why, we will face important additional questions. How well do we now see other animals? Do those who set policy about animals know them well? How often have we hurt them because of our ignorance and arrogance? What kind of information about them should we have as we decide whether, as a matter of ethics and compassion, we should notice and take them seriously? Lastly, is it possible for us to live happy lives when they don't? Might it fulfill humans to care about other animals, or can we be fulfilled if we care only about ourselves?

The goal of the field of animals and public policy is to answer these and other similar questions.

Part Two—"Animals"

Perhaps the most fundamental question for this field is this—what and who are “animals”? This single, seemingly simple word describes, upon careful consideration, an astonishingly complicated group of living beings.

A convenient place to begin is the way that the notion “animals” is used in scientific circles. Such uses *clearly* include humans—virtually all of us now agree that humans are mammals and primates, all of which are clearly animals.

In other circles, though, our scientific convictions seem to waver. We use, for example, the phrase “humans and animals” as if somehow all of the *other* living beings, but not humans, should be included in the term “animals.” So at the very beginning of engaging “animals and public policy” we need to recognize that the most common uses of the term “animals” are not only *non*-scientific, but actively and decisively *anti*-scientific.

There is, of course, a risk in using decidedly un-scientific notions—will we be misled if we end up believing that such uses of the word “animals” are truly accurate? Whether or not one decides to honor the scientific insight that humans are animals, how we speak about the other living beings in this universe remains a politically charged issue because some people have *very* strong views about the appropriate terminology in this matter.

As one explores what people think about our animal cousins, it soon becomes obvious that most people bring to discussions about “animals” a surprisingly strong set of opinions. This is probably because, before any of us ever thinks about the other living beings on earth, we have *already* long been hearing about the world from our parents or others who raise us. In fact, by the time we begin speaking and thinking about animals, we already have in place an inherited set of ideas, words, and, sometimes, crazy notions about living beings from those who raised us.

Some of us break away from this inheritance, insisting that our obligation is not to advance what we have been taught, but, instead, to notice and take seriously those animals' actual realities. But, sadly, many simply take their inheritance in this area as an actual description of nature. This is tragic, because in many of our inherited stories and ideas about animals are remarkable ignorances and biases regarding our fellow creatures.

Pointing out such ignorances and biases may be consistent with the spirit of science, but it is not, it turns out, always a popular thing to do. Lots of people don't want to be associated with, let alone called, “animals.” So making the scientific argument “we

are animals” is sometimes seen as radical—it can also exemplify that, as the English author George Orwell once said, telling the truth during times of universal deceit will be viewed by some as a revolutionary act.

Another way to grasp why the word “animals” is so complicated is to listen carefully to those around you—just how much do they *really* know about the animals they talk about? If they deny “animals” have feelings, is that assertion based on careful exploration of other animals’ realities? Or are they merely passing along an inherited ignorance or bias? And when someone speaks of the birds that fly overhead, the deer and coyotes around your community, the whales and dolphins off the coasts of their country, or the dogs in our midst, do they really know these animals?

In scientific circles, much remains unknown about “animals” even if in policy circles people are not at all in doubt about what should be done. Consider the living beings that we are unable to see with our naked eyes—of them, the famous Harvard scientist E. O Wilson (1992, 5) says, “Five thousand kinds of bacteria might be found in a pinch of soil, and about them we know absolutely nothing.” Wilson adds (1992, 20) a description of how diverse unseen life can be—consider the “aeolian plankton”:

A rain of planktonic bacteria, fungus spores, small seeds, insects, spiders, and other small creatures falls continuously on most parts of the earth's land surface.

Beyond these invisible micro-creatures, what of the “macro” animals, that is, those we can see easily? How much more do we know about them? Consider another comment by Wilson (1992, 4):

Animals are masters of the chemical channel, where we are idiots. But we are geniuses of the audiovisual channel, equaled in this modality only by a few odd groups (whales, monkeys, birds).

About those who are “masters of the chemical channel, where we are idiots,” perhaps we (and our policies) should be humble. About the small group who, like us, are “geniuses of the audiovisual channel,” we might be able to say much more. They are, obviously, more like us than are, say, bats that use echolocation.

One thing we can assert with confidence about the other living beings in and near our homes is this—there are *lots* of animal “communities” out there in the world. Of these many communities, scientific literature speaks now readily about some as very complex—for example, there are now commonly scientific discussions about cultures among chimpanzees, complex communication and learning in dolphin societies, social and emotional realities in wolf pack interactions, and on and on.

When we factor in how many species are unknown—literally, tens of millions—there are lots of reasons to be humble about what “animals” are and experience. Another reason to be humble about how little *we* know of “animals” is this interesting feature about human interaction with “them”—some human cultures have been much more attentive to nonhuman animals than have the citizens of modern, scientific, industrialized cultures. This becomes clear when one asks certain groups (for example, many indigenous peoples) a simple question like “which living beings matter to you?” The list of animals that matter in “public policy” circles today usually includes those that we hold

to be valuable *resources* for our own benefit, such as food animals or charismatic megafauna that we think our children would like to enjoy in the future (whales, pandas, bald eagles and so on). In many other societies, people have a much longer list of valued animals than that held by, for example, modern economists who often are integral players in the realm of public policy formation.

Some parents, of course, have trained their children to see other animals carefully—such training reveals that, as a philosopher once said, your ethics will be determined by the entities you are prepared to notice and take seriously (Clark 1977, 7). Imagine what public policy would be like if those who framed it noticed other animals carefully, and took them seriously. Imagine what public policy is like when such an approach is *not* taken.

With only a little investigation, then, those who study human-animal relationships notice that there are many different *human* visions of how we can live and interact with nonhumans. Further, notice how often people who have a broad, bold vision about living with lots of other animals suggest that we not only *can* do this, but that we also *should* do so. In the area of “animals,” this kind of ethical discussion among ordinary people has become increasingly common even though this kind of talk is not yet that common in traditional policy making circles.

Given that we can live in many different ways with other living beings, just what should *our* “public policy” be? Might we, for the sake of our children, strive in the future to create policies that bequeath to our heirs a fuller world than that in which we live? Might we do this primarily because we value other animals in and of themselves?

Whatever one’s answer to the question about what we *should* do, consider how we go about getting enough information to have a robust, fair conversation about this issue. Does it make any sense to study only one culture’s view of other animals, say, that of Mexicans or Brazilians or Nigerians? This would narrow our understanding considerably.

What happens if we decide to study a number of different societies’ policy, but we confine our study to only *industrialized* countries? If we engage only a few versions of our relationships with other-than-human animals, we end up with only a partial list of our options. The study of animals and public policy helps us see that our options today remain remarkably diverse—some are kind to other animals, and some are obviously much more human-centered.

If we study many different human visions of what our relationships can be with other forms of life, we must take an approach that some call “interdisciplinary.” This is because our collective wisdom about “animals” is held in many different disciplines, among which are anthropology, cultural studies, ethology, religious studies, philosophy and ethics.

Consider that the most ancient view of animals is that nonhumans are the bringers of blessings, even divinities. A modern version of a similar insight was recently stated by a Catholic priest named Thomas Berry (2006, 5):

Indeed we cannot be truly ourselves in any adequate manner without all our companion beings throughout the earth. The larger community constitutes our greater self.

But consider a different story, namely, that which prevails in modern “policy” discussions about the appropriate relationship of humans and our cousin animals—this particular version is from the economist Leon Walras’ 1883 classic *Elements of Pure Economics or The Theory of Social Wealth* (p. 54): “Man alone is a person; minerals, plants and animals are things.”

This attitude is very prevalent today, but it can cause severe problems for any number of reasons. One is that life is interconnected—as Darwin suggested, life is in fact a dance of partners. Each form of life is involved in countless, inevitable actions and reactions to other forms of life. The tendency to see humans as separate from the rest of life fails to put us in our real context. Nonetheless, much policy is run as if humans can impact nonhuman lives in countless ways without risk to themselves or the general ecosystems in which all life must live.

Eliminating our “dance partners,” as it were, is something humans are now risking—currently, the rate of nonhuman species being extinguished because of human action is in the range of 1000 times the normal or “background” rate of naturally caused extinctions. It was reported in 2004 that 1 in 4 bird species is now “functionally extinct” (Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, Dec 2004). Nearly one-fourth of the world’s mammals, one-third of the amphibians, and close to half of all turtles and tortoises are threatened with extinction (November 2004 Global Species Assessment by the World Conservation Union (IUCN)).

Even worse off are primates species, where 1 in 2 is threatened with extinction, and large, oceanic fish, which in June 2003 were reported to have suffered a decline of 90% in last 50 years. Worst of all may be our closest evolutionary cousins, the nonhuman great apes, which have been reported to have lost 93% of their numbers during the 20th century.

At the same time we diminish these fellow citizens of the world and as our human communities increase the number of animals in our food production and for experiments, in other ways we exhibit the important ability to care about some other animals. With certain protected wildlife and, above all, with our companion animals, we’ve shown remarkable capacity to care. It is this peculiar dynamic of harm and protection that is explored by “animals and public policy” as it engages the many human relationships and possibilities with nonhumans.

Part Three—“Public Policy”

“Public policy” is taught in many places, and is for obvious reasons of great concern to many humans. But the notion of “public policy” is generally used in ways that are extremely inhospitable to concerns for any kind of nonhuman animals. This is because policy is taught at institutions that are relentlessly human-centered. Many individual academic subjects are also taught in this relentlessly human-centered way—economics, law, bioethics, religion, anthropology, and, of course, politics. Ironically, sometimes even those in the field of environmental studies assume that the real concern is what will happen to humans’ environment, as if we alone occupied ecological systems.

The vast majority of theorists and political scientists who describe what “public policy” is or ought to be exhibit in their work unabashedly human-centered values. Interestingly, though, such theories often ring hollow even for some humans because, as

most know, not *all* humans are beneficiaries of public policy decisions. Often, elite groups manipulate policy decisions to their own advantage.

Studying “animals and public policy” can help one see how biased past studies of public policy have been. Consider how narrow some simple descriptions of “public policy” are—sometimes people assert that “public policy is government action.” This is far too simple, for policy includes much more than government actions. The “public” in “public policy” often includes, as already noted, a diverse, every changing combination of consumers, corporations, unions, religious institutions, private landowners, and many other non-governmental groups.

Whether the net effect of “policies” put into place by the actions and decision of such a large and diverse collection of humans is good or bad for either humans or nonhumans is a complex subject. But generally one can say that the public policy, whatever its composition, needs to be informed about the Earth’s other forms of life if we are to have a chance of making reasonable choices about our shared world. Contemporary public policy programs are, on the whole, virtually autistic about this common sense, ecological insight. It is this shortcoming that can be addressed well by a careful study of “animals and public policy.”

For all of these reasons, it should be clear that public policy will not be well taught if it is taught in ways that are focused exclusively on human facts and interests.

An example of an extreme imbalance that harms both humans and nonhumans is current official national policy in the United States promoting industrial agriculture and its “animal cities” in ways that promote only “the industrial values of specialization, economies of scale, and mechanization” and thereby forego “ecological values of diversity, complexity, and symbiosis.” (Pollan 2006, 161) The results of such a policy favoring factory farming are, according to Pollan, numerous harms to both humans and nonhumans.

Animals and public policy also studies the ways in which poverty or affluence affects views of our possibilities with nonhumans. Poverty can, of course, overwhelm our sense of ethics in protecting humans, nonhumans, the natural world and its ecosystems. But, equally, affluence and arrogance can blunt our ethical sensibilities when consumerism becomes the dominant approach to the more-than-human world.

One who studies “animals and public policy,” then, must know well the *human* situation and predicament. A second reason one must study humans is the cultural diversity of views about animals—some human cultures have exhibited an extraordinary ability to live with nonhuman animals. This is one reason that loss of indigenous wisdom regarding possible lifestyles that are in balance with the earth and its surroundings is tragic in the extreme. All of us—humans and nonhumans alike—are disadvantaged when human cultures are forced out of existence by our insensitivities, arrogance and ignorance.

In general, then, the study of animals and public policy can make it clear why framing public policy only in human terms is *starkly inadequate* to the task of describing the world. As Frances Moore Lappe said, “Every choice we make can be a celebration of the world we want.” This simple insight, which invokes our ethical abilities and imaginations, is crucial to a recognition of all our possibilities in the realm of “public policies” toward Earth’s other living beings. If this broad approach is taken to “public policy,” and in particular if we notice and take other animals seriously as is done in the

study of “animals and public policy,” then we can experience “the power of grasping that the world could be other than it is.” (Orwell 1949, 211)

This field, then, begs a simple description of humans as ethical beings capable of answering our fundamental questions, “Who are the others?” and “what am I do to do with my finite abilities in regard to caring for such others?” The others can and do naturally include nonhuman animals and the larger ecosystems of which all of us are a vital part.

Part Four—Basic Dilemmas

As suggested above, there are many interesting facts about, and features of, the world around us that make the study of animals and public policy much more than a simple, minor subject. Two complications in particular are described here as one faces the challenges of studying “animals and public policy.”

First, there is “the complications dilemma”—studying any kind of animals is complicated, and sometimes studying *nonhuman* animals is *far* more complicated than studying humans. This is because while we obviously can understand some feature of some nonhumans’ lives, it is equally obvious (and a matter of experience) that we do not, maybe even *cannot*, understand them in every respect and often not well at all.

Consider what we might understand of the nonhuman animals that are not near us in any sense—for example, sperm whales. These are deep-ocean creatures who dive easily to depths that are completely inaccessible to us even when we are aided by our most sophisticated technology. How do we learn about these creatures, who happen to have the largest brains ever? These animals have fundamentally different sensory apparatus than we do—they can echolocate and make sounds that we cannot hear. They thus live with each other on the basis of entirely different skills than we use when we live with each other. How do we, eminently social primates dominated by vision, learn about animals that are dominated by different senses like sound or smell?

Animals with such different bodies and lives, though, are *in some ways* clearly *not* that different from us—some experience pain that is, physiologically, indistinguishable from our physical pains; many have families and live intensely social lives, and many have some of the forms of intelligence that we have. They bleed, they scream, they are curious and sometimes friendly. Thus, with regard to some living beings, we seem to understand some things about them. We even adopt some of them into our family, even though we might still hold them inscrutable (think of cats). Through all the differences and similarities, our shared creature-hood is an invitation to try to understand *some* features of their lives.

Second, there is the entirely different dilemma of trying to ask unpopular questions. One cannot engage the world around us honestly, or participate in policy discussions about animals of any kind (whether human or nonhuman), without asking about the animals themselves. Science, ethics, and every one of humans’ higher instincts (though not our more base instincts, to be sure) require us to inquire openly about the world around us. There are, literally, pieces of the “animals and public policy” puzzle *everywhere around us*—in the ever-present biological beings themselves, in our language, in our ecological realities, and, most relevant here, in our political risks.

But even if such “animal pieces” are everywhere around us, it is still a dilemma to talk openly about such things—this is because, frankly, discussions calling us to take other animals seriously are, in many circles, discouraged. In academic settings, insistence that harms to other living beings is an important *ethical* issue can be very harmful to one’s prospects for advancement.

What makes some discussion possible is that “animals” (or, to use the scientific phrasing, nonhuman animals) are now an increasingly popular topic. Thus, even if fundamentalisms denying the possibly importance of nonhumans abound in some circles—whether secular, religious, business, government or academic—a society-wide “ferment” now exists on “the animal issue.” More and more, people are studying animals, and more and more rigorously developed scientific findings are being announced regarding their actual lives and realities.

Part Five—Going Forward: Locating the Field of “Animals and Public Policy”

The study of “animals and public policy” is, then, for any number of reasons an important, groundbreaking field. The larger category of “human-animal studies” is growing, such that we have prospects of better understanding our history and possibilities with other animals. This surely requires many different approaches and disciplines, for our relationship with the rest of life on this planet is nothing short of extremely complicated and complex. But with emerging “think tanks” and academic programs studying “animals” more and more, and with the “ferment” on this subject increasing even as we continue with our environmentally destructive practices, the topic of “animals and public policy” will sit at the center of our attempt to understand ourselves. If, as Thomas Berry has said, “we cannot be truly ourselves in any adequate manner without all our companion beings throughout the earth,” then the study of animals and public policy is an essential part of human self-discovery.

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