

Animal Liberation and Environmental Ethics: Bad Marriage, Quick Divorce

"The land ethic," Aldo Leopold wrote in *A Sand County Almanac*, "simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively, the land." What kind of community does Leopold refer to? He might mean a *moral* community, a group of individuals who respect each other's right to treatment as equals or who regard one another's interests with equal respect and concern. Leopold may also mean an *ecological* community, a community tied together by biological relationships in interdependent webs of life.

Let us suppose, for a moment, that Leopold has a *moral* community in mind; he would expand our *moral* boundaries to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, as well as human beings. Leopold's view, then, might not differ in principle from that of Christopher Stone, who has suggested that animals and even trees be given legal standing, so that their interests may be represented in court. Stone sees the expansion of our moral consciousness in this way as part of a historical progress in which societies have recognized the equality of groups of oppressed people, notably blacks, women, and children.

Peter Singer, perhaps more than any other writer, has emphasized the analogy between human liberation movements (e.g., abolitionism and suffragism) and "animal liberation" or the "expansion of our moral horizons" to include members of other species in "the basic principle of equality." Singer differs from Stone in arguing that the question whether animals have *rights* is less important than it appears: "what matters is how we think animals ought to be treated, and not how we employ the concept of a right." He also confines membership in the moral community to beings with the "capacity for subjective experience, such as the experience of pleasure or the experience of pain." But Stone and Singer agree that we have a moral obligation to minimize the suffering of animals and to balance their interests against our own.

Mother Nature vs. Frank Perdue

What practical course of action should we take once we have climbed the spiral of moral evolution high enough to recognize our obligation to value the rights, interests, or welfare of animals equally with our own? In discussing the rights of human beings, Henry Shue describes two that are basic in the sense that "the enjoyment of them is essential to the enjoyment of all other rights." These are the right to physical security and the right to minimum subsistence. These, surely, are basic to animal rights as well. To allow

animals to be killed, to permit them to die of disease or starvation, when it is within our power to prevent it, surely seems not to balance their interests with our own.

Where, then, shall we begin to provide for the basic welfare — the security and subsistence — of animals? Plainly, where they most lack this security, where their basic rights, needs, or interests are most thwarted and where their suffering is the most intense. This is in nature. Ever since Darwin, we have been aware that few organisms survive to reach sexual maturity; most are quickly annihilated in the struggle for existence.

Consider this rough but reasonable statement of the facts, given by Fred Hapgood: "All species reproduce to excess, way past the carrying capacity of their niche. In her lifetime a lioness might have 20 cubs; a pigeon, 150 chicks; a mouse, 1,000 kits; a trout, 20,000 fry; a tuna or cod, a million fry or more; an elm tree, several million seeds; and an oyster, perhaps a hundred million spat. If one assumes that the population of each of these species is, from generation to generation, roughly equal, then on the average only one offspring will survive to replace each parent. All the other thousands and millions will die, one way or another."

The way creatures in nature die are typically violent: predation, starvation, disease, parasitism, cold. If the dying animal in the wild understood his condition, what would he think? Surely, he would prefer to be raised on a farm, where his chances of survival would be good and to escape from the wild, where they are negligible. Either way, the animal will be killed; few die of old age. The path from birth to slaughter, however, is nearly always longer and less painful in the barnyard than in the woods. The misery of animals in nature beggars by comparison every other form of suffering in the world. Mother Nature is so cruel to her children she makes Frank Perdue look like a saint.

I do not know how animal liberationists, such as Singer, propose to relieve animal suffering in nature, but there are many ways we could greatly improve the situation at little cost to ourselves. It may not be beyond the reach of science to attempt a broad program of contraceptive care for animals in nature so that fewer will fall victim to an early and horrible death. One may propose, with all modesty, the conversion of our national wilderness areas, especially our national parks, into farms in order to replace violent wild areas with humane, managed environments. Animals and trees would then benefit from the same effi-

cient and productive technology that benefits us.

My point in raising this argument is to suggest that the thesis that animals have important rights and interests that command our respect has little bearing on the policies it is supposed by some to support, in particular, policies intended to preserve and protect the natural environment. We must ask ourselves whether in fact the kind of policies environmentalists recommend would make animals better off in the long run. I see no reason at all to suppose that they would.

Can Environmentalists Be Hunters?

In a persuasive essay, J. Baird Callicott describes a number of differences between the ideas of Aldo Leopold and those of Peter Singer — differences which suggest Leopold's environmental ethic and Singer's humanitarianism lead in opposite directions. First, while Singer and other animal liberationists deplore the suffering of domestic animals, "Leopold manifests an attitude that can only be described as indifference." Second, while Leopold expresses an urgent concern about the disappearance of species, Singer, consistently with his premises, is concerned with the welfare of individual animals, without

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special regard to their status as endangered species.

Third, wilderness, according to Leopold, provides "a means of perpetuating, in sport form, the more virile and primitive skills. . . ." He had hunting in mind. Hunters, since top predators are gone, may serve an important ecological function. Leopold was himself an enthusiastic hunter and wrote unabashedly about his exploits pursuing game. The term "game" as applied to animals, Callicott wryly comments, "appears to be morally equivalent to referring to a sexually appealing young woman as a 'piece' or to a strong, young black man as a 'buck' — if animal rights, that is, are to be considered on a par with women's rights and the rights of formerly enslaved races."

Hunting is what disturbs animal liberationists as much as any other human activity. Singer expresses disdain and chagrin at what he calls "'environmentalist' organizations which actively support or refuse to oppose hunting, such as the Sierra Club and the World Wildlife Fund. I can appreciate Singer's aversion to hunting, but why does he place the word "environmentalist" in shudder quotes when he refers to organizations like the Sierra Club? Environmentalist and conservationist organizations traditionally have been concerned with ecological, not with humanitarian, issues. They make no pretense to improving the lot of individual animals; they attempt rather to maintain the diversity, integrity, beauty, and authenticity of

the natural environment. These goals are ecological, not eleemosynary. They are entirely consistent with licensing hunters to shoot animals whose populations exceed the carrying capacity of their habitats.

I do not in any way mean to support the practice of hunting; nor am I advocating environmentalism at this time. I merely want to point out that groups like the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society, and the World Wildlife Fund do not fail in their mission insofar as they devote themselves to causes other than the happiness or welfare

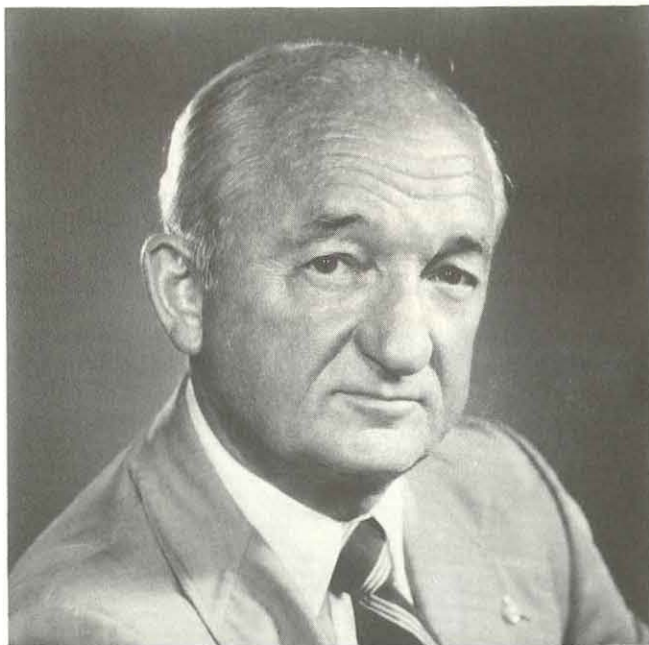


Photo credit Jessie Cohen, National Zoological Park

*Animals safe from the ravages of nature
enjoy life in the zoo.*

of individual creatures; that never was their mission. These organizations, which promote a love and respect for the functioning of natural ecosystems, differ ideologically from organizations that make the suffering of animals their primary concern — groups like the Fund for Animals, the Animal Protection Institute, Friends of Animals, the American Humane Association, and various single issue groups such as Friends of the Sea Otter, Beaver Defenders, Friends of the Earthworm, and Worldwide Fair Play for Frogs.

I proposed earlier that Aldo Leopold views the community of nature as a *moral* community — one in which



Chicken magnate Frank Perdue

we, as members, have obligations to all other animals, presumably to minimize their pain. I suggested that Leopold, like Singer, may be committed to the idea that we should preserve and respect the natural environment only insofar as that promotes the welfare of the individual animals nature contains. This is plainly not Leopold's view, however. The principle of natural selection is not a humanitarian principle; the predator-prey relation does not depend on moral empathy. Nature ruthlessly limits animal populations by doing violence to virtually every individual before it reaches maturity. These conditions respect animal equality only in the darkest sense. Yet these are precisely the ecological relationships which Leopold admires; they are the conditions which he would not interfere with, but protect. Leopold, apparently, does not think that an ecological system has to be a moral system in order to deserve our love. An ecological system has a beauty and an authenticity we can admire — but not on humanitarian grounds.

Animal Liberation and Environmental Law

Muckraking journalists, thank God for them, who depict the horrors that all too often occur in laboratories and on farms, appeal, quite properly, to our conviction that mankind should never inflict needless pain on animals, especially for the sake of profit. When we read stories about man's cruelty to domestic animals, we respond, as we should, with moral outrage and revulsion. When we read accounts of natural history, which reveal as much suffering and slaughter, we do not respond with outrage or indignation. Why not? The reason is plain. It is not suffering per se that concerns us. What outrages us is human responsibility for that suffering.

Moral obligations to animals may arise in either of two ways. Our duties to nonhuman animals may be based on

the principle that cruelty to animals is obnoxious, a principle nobody denies. These obligations, however, might rest instead on the stronger contention that we are obliged to prevent and to relieve animal suffering wherever it occurs and however it is caused; that we are obliged to protect the welfare of *all* animals just because they are sentient beings.

The liberationist must ask: how can I most efficiently relieve animal suffering? The answer must be: by getting animals out of the natural environment. . . . An environmentalist cannot be an animal liberationist; nor may animal liberationists be environmentalists.

Animal liberationists insist, as Singer does, that moral obligations to animals are justified by their distress and by our ability to relieve that distress. Accordingly, the liberationist must ask: how can I most efficiently relieve animal suffering? The answer must be: by getting animals out of the natural environment. Starving deer in the woods might be adopted as pets; they might be fed in kennels. Birds that now kill earthworms may repair instead to birdhouses stocked with food — including textured soybean protein that looks and smells like worms. And to protect the brutes from cold, we might heat their dens or provide shelter for the all too many who freeze.

Now, whether you believe that this harangue is a *reductio ad absurdum* of Singer's position or whether you think it should be taken seriously as an ideal is no concern to me. I merely wish to point out that an environmentalist must take what I have said as a *reductio* whereas an animal liberationist must regard it as stating a serious position. An environmentalist cannot be an animal liberationist; nor may animal liberationists be environmentalists. The environmentalist would sacrifice the welfare of individual creatures to preserve the authenticity, integrity, and complexity of ecological systems. The liberationist must be willing to sacrifice the authenticity, integrity, and complexity of ecosystems for the welfare of animals. A humanitarian ethic will not help us to understand or to justify an environmental ethic. It will not provide new foundations for environmental law.

— Mark Sagoff

This article is drawn from "Animal Liberation and Environmental Ethics: Bad Marriage, Quick Divorce," forthcoming in the Osgoode Hall Law Journal 22, no. 2 (Summer 1984). The sources cited in this article are: Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac (New York: Ballantine, 1949); Christopher Stone, Should Trees Have Standing? (Los Altos, Calif.: William Kaufmann, 1974); Peter Singer, "All Animals Are Equal," Philosophical Exchange 1 (Summer 1974); Peter Singer, "Not for Humans Only: The Place of Nonhumans in Environmental Issues," in Ethics and Problems of the 21st Century, edited by K. E. Goodpaster and K. M. Sayer (South Bend, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 1979); Henry Shue, Basic Rights (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Fred Haggood, Why Males Exist (New York: Mentor NAL, 1979); and J. Baird Callicott, "Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair," Environmental Ethics 4 (Winter 1980).