

RETHINKING THE RELATIONSHIP OF MAN AND WILD: A CALL FOR WILDLIFE ETHICS

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Abstract:

This paper explores the evolving relationship between humans and wildlife, highlighting the detrimental impacts of human expansion, industrialization, and habitat destruction on biodiversity. As human activities continue to destabilize ecosystems and drive species toward extinction, an ethical crisis has emerged regarding the treatment and preservation of wildlife. While current conservation efforts are critical, this paper argues that they are insufficient without a corresponding ethical shift in how humans perceive their role in relation to the natural world. Advocating for a move beyond the traditional anthropocentric view, the paper contends that wildlife, irrespective of their categorization as endangered, possesses intrinsic value across the board, deserving of moral consideration independent of their utility to humans. It proposes a wildlife ethic that balances human needs with the rights and well-being of other species by emphasizing on the necessity of adopting an outlook that promotes coexistence and aims at preserving biodiversity, i.e. an eco-centric attitude. This ethical framework is essential for addressing current environmental crises and developing a more sustainable, respectful relationship between humans and wildlife.

Keywords:

Anthropocentrism, Conservation, Ecocentrism, Environment, Ethics, Nature, Wildlife.

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Introduction

What does ‘nature’ mean to you? Close your eyes and picture it- maybe mountains, valleys, forests, or beaches. Perhaps it’s a peaceful getaway from city life with greenery, chirping birds, and fresh earth. Now, did you imagine humans in that scene? Most likely, the answer is ‘No’. We typically don’t envision humans, except for ourselves or loved ones, when picturing nature.

This reveals that our perception of nature is one of separation, viewing it as ecosystems of plants and animals untouched by humans. This duality between humans and the natural world of wildlife is a key factor in the current environmental crisis. This faulty distinction has contributed to the environmental issues we face today. The very idea of ‘I’ and ‘other’ and the evolutionary timeline have led humans to dominate and restructure the environment for their ‘better living, progress and growth’. The premise that underlies this is that- Human beings have needs and anything that is non-human exists out there in order to satisfy these needs. In the pursuit of a ‘better’ lifestyle, humans have pushed activities like mining and cattle rearing to extremes, surpassing the environment’s capacity to sustain them and disrupting natural cycles. This has led to consequences for both present and future generations. The line between ‘need’ and ‘greed’ has blurred, turning nature into an object of exploitation rather than a source of genuine need. Isn’t it time we rethink our bond with nature, accept we’re part of it, and take responsibility for the harm we’ve caused to life and the environment?

The paper *Rethinking the Relationship of Man and Wild: A Call for Wildlife Ethics* argues for a fundamental shift in how humans view and engage with wildlife, emphasizing our moral obligation to its preservation and well-being. Since wildlife is inseparable from the abiotic elements that affect it, wildlife ethics is closely linked to environmental ethics.

A Historical Overview

Wildlife refers to all living organisms—animals, plants, fungi, and microorganisms- that exist in natural habitats without direct human intervention. While often associated only with wild animals, it includes all undomesticated and uncultivated species across various ecosystems. Since the dawn of civilization, humans have relied on animals and plants for survival, with the human-wildlife relationship evolving from early coexistence to modern exploitation.

In hunter-gatherer societies, humans maintained a balanced, respectful relationship with wildlife, relying on animals for food, tools, and clothing while minimizing ecological impact. These communities often revered animals spiritually and took only what they needed, allowing ecosystems to remain largely intact. Small

populations and limited technology helped sustain this balance. However, as hunting tools and techniques advanced, human impact on wildlife, especially large game, began to grow, marking the start of more significant ecological disruption.

The shift from hunting and gathering to agriculture marked a turning point in human-wildlife relations. With the rise of agriculture and domestication, humans shifted from being part of the ecosystem to actively managing and altering it. Forests and grasslands were cleared for farming, disrupting habitats and displacing wildlife. This period also saw the domestication of animals for labour, food, and other resources, further distancing humans from wild species.

As agriculture spread and cities emerged, urbanization intensified human impact on nature, fragmenting ecosystems and heightening conflicts with wildlife. Predators were seen as threats and often persecuted or eradicated, while wildlife in general was increasingly viewed as either a resource to exploit or a nuisance to remove. According to Favre, some animals were tamed and domesticated, some were kept as pets living a fulfilling life and many are raised for commercial purposes. Although we are aware of the issues faced by our pets because they are right in front of us, we tend to overlook the plight of wildlife, which is less visible.¹

As human populations have expanded, natural habitats have been increasingly encroached upon, leading to profound changes in the ecosystems that sustain both human life and wildlife. Industrialization, urbanization, and deforestation have contributed to the loss of biodiversity, pushing numerous species toward extinction. Wildlife is now often viewed either as a resource for human use or as a threat to be managed.

Understanding The Relationship

When these attitudes are coupled with the rapid degradation of natural environments, an ethical crisis concerning the treatment and preservation of wildlife is generated. We need to rethink our relationship with the planet and its non-human inhabitants. The Earth is our only home, and there is an urgent need to care for all living beings. For those who are concerned about these issues, finding a way forward involves both personal responsibility and collective action to address the root causes of this environmental and ethical crisis.

But the question arises: Why are we treating wildlife in this manner? Are we not aware that what we are doing or the way we are treating is wrong? Do we not have a moral obligation towards the wild? Many argue that our environmental crisis is not simply a result of technological failures or poor resource management, but a reflection of deeper moral and philosophical issues.² The worldview that has dominated modern society sees humans as separate from, and superior to, the natural

world, treating nature as something to be controlled and used for human benefit. Traditional moral theories have focused mainly on human-to-human relationships, assuming that only humans are morally significant. Though differing in their views—from Socratic, Aristotelian, and Kantian to utilitarian ethics- they share this anthropocentric assumption. Today, however, ethics must expand to include our obligations to nature, ecosystems, and future life on Earth.³

Excluding non-humans from the subject matter of various major ethical theories promotes an ignorance regarding the relation and obligation a human has towards non-humans. Congruent with this ignorance, some religious views emphasize on the instrumental value of non-humans for humans. This ethical or metaphysical view that centralises human beings and others surrounding them exist for the sake of him is known as anthropocentrism. Peter Singer goes to the extent of claiming that this attitude in the West grew out of the blend of religion (Hebrew view) and the philosophy of ancient Greece, particularly that of Aristotle.⁴

The religious expression of the superiority of humans is first posited by the biblical story of creation *Genesis* [1:26-28]. According to this, humans are created in the image of God, *Imago Dei*, which grants them a special place and responsibility in the world. They are commanded to “be masters” over all living creatures and to ‘fill the earth and conquer it’. These extracts have been interpreted as giving humans authority or ‘dominion’ over the natural world, suggesting that humans are distinct from and superior to other forms of life.

Independent of the religious view, many Western philosophical traditions have reinforced anthropocentrism, viewing nature as existing to serve human needs. Aristotle’s Great Chain of Being places humans above animals and plants, which he saw as serving human purposes like food and labour. Thomas Aquinas, blending Aristotle with theology, argued that nature was created by God for human benefit, reinforcing the idea that its purpose is tied to human flourishing. “In his classification of sins, Aquinas has room only for sins against God, ourselves or our neighbours. There is no possibility of sinning against non-human animals or against the natural world.”⁵

In his *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant presents a clear anthropocentric view, arguing that animals lack self-consciousness and moral standing. Kant argues that animals exist “merely as a means to an end,” with that end being the benefit and needs of humans. To Kant, questioning the purpose of human existence is seen as meaningless because, in his framework, human beings are the only creatures capable of rational thought, moral deliberation, and autonomy. While Kant encourages humane treatment of animals, it is only to prevent the development of cruel habits in humans, not because animals have intrinsic moral value.⁶

In the light of an anthropocentric attitude, we find that humans' harsh treatment of nature is justified if it fulfils their needs. Only human beings have moral worth. The non-human beings have an instrumental value; their existence and preservation will be considered as long as it is for human well-being.⁷

Current Challenges

Whether it is Western or Indian, the treatment towards wildlife or we can say the environment as a whole lies in the overshadowed moral faculty for immediate or mediate reasons. Moral obligation towards the non-humans is considered to be shallow or even none. This moral negligence has led to many challenges that wildlife is facing today. Today wildlife faces problems like exploitation, habitat destruction, encroachment, biodiversity loss, extinction of species, growth and spread of invasive (exotic) species, illegal hunting, poaching and over-fishing along with deforestation, pollution, climate change, etc. in the name of development. "Wildlife is exploited in many different ways. Wild creatures are shot for sport by people with guns as well as bows and arrows, trapped for their skins, fur, feathers, captured for zoos and aquariums, forced to perform in circuses, imported as "exotic pets," sometimes used in the research laboratories, killed for their meat served in gourmet restaurants, driven out of their habitat by an ever-increasing human population, poisoned by farmers, harmed by industrial chemicals and insecticides, killed by oil spills, slaughtered on our roads, and so forth."⁸

Even in India we have rising issues of human-wildlife conflict. Wild animals entering into human settlements has become quite a frequent occurrence. It has gone to the extent of killing them for no reason at all. To state here, there is a case from May 27th, 2020, Kerala, India: "Pregnant elephant dies after consuming pineapple stuffed with crackers" thus goes the headline from The Economic Times.⁹ We have many protection acts and laws enforced today. Many conservation and preservation policies have been outlined, yet such devastating cases are increasing day by day.

Although there are many organisations that claim to be concerned for 'wildlife', they are mostly concerned primarily with endangered species, rather than wildlife in general. Conservation of wildlife has become a better system where wildlife has to pay for being conserved- through ecotourism, photography or entertainment. Exploitation still continues in the name of conservation too. Even the animals that are conserved in zoos or parks and sanctuaries where they are artificially fed and cared for, do they remain 'wild' after all? When the proponent of Animal rights, Peter Singer published *Animal Liberation* in 1975, he mainly focused his discussion on the animals used in research and food. We cannot say he ignored wild animals but he did not discuss about them profoundly.¹⁰

To wrap up the discussion wildlife suffers greatly at human hands and is often only appreciated from a distance. Yet, whether near or far, visible or not, wildlife deserves our respect, protection, and care. They are not mere means to our ends. Laws alone are not enough—ethical reflection is needed to recognize their intrinsic value and rights. Humans must expand their moral scope to include non-humans and ensure future generations value the wild. This calls for an ethic beyond human-centred thinking, one that acknowledges the worth of all life.

Recognizing Moral Obligation

Is there any intrinsic value beyond human beings? In 1933, Albert Schweitzer's ideas challenged anthropocentric ethics, and instead advocated for a biocentric approach, recognizing the intrinsic value of all living beings. Schweitzer's *Reverence for Life* asserts that all living beings have intrinsic value simply by existing. He believed that all life shares a fundamental 'will to live', creating an ethical duty for humans to respect and preserve life, regardless of its utility to us. He rejected the idea that life's value depends on human use, insisting that every being deserves respect for its own sake.

Schweitzer's principle goes beyond human-centred ethics, embracing a biocentric worldview that values all life. He argues humans have a moral obligation to avoid harm to other beings, acknowledging that survival may require consuming plants or animals but emphasizing the need to minimize harm. Ethical living, for Schweitzer, means striving to inflict the least harm and preserving life whenever possible, forming the foundation of his environmental and animal ethics.

We have a moral obligation toward wildlife based on several ethical principles. Extending human moral concern to wild animals aligns with our existing duties to others and reflects moral consistency. Since wild animals are sentient and capable of suffering, utilitarian ethics supports reducing their harm. As moral agents who impact ecosystems, humans bear responsibility for stewardship and mitigating harm. Nature also holds intrinsic value beyond human use, as emphasized by biocentric and ecocentric views. Furthermore, human well-being is tied to ecological balance, and caring for wildlife reflects virtues like compassion and respect for life, essential to moral character. Therefore, we have a moral obligation to alleviate suffering and promote the well-being of all life, recognizing that each life deserves respect and care. Protecting wildlife supports ecological stability, which ultimately benefits humanity.

'Will' in plants and animals along with the idea that they 'feel' is quite controversial equally among some life scientists and philosophers. Not getting into that discussion let me point out another problem in the biocentric egalitarian prospect.

“Rejecting the idea that the natural world exists as a pure resource for human use, many argue that human beings are obligated, to the greatest extent possible, to refrain from using nature as a resource at all.”¹¹ The fallacy of the approach is that it neglects the abiotic components that contribute to the natural habitat of the biotic world. These components are not just passive backdrops but active participants in complex web of life. For instance, the health of plants and animals is directly tied to soil quality, water availability and air composition. Without fertile soil or clean water, the ecosystem would collapse, regardless of the moral status we assign to its living inhabitants. Abiotic factors shape the climate, topography, and the availability of resources, which in turn dictate the distribution and survival of species. In other words, the biotic community is inseparable from the abiotic environment, and a holistic ethical framework should recognise this interdependence.

The Solution

An ethic that excludes the abiotic is not only ecologically inadequate but also philosophically inconsistent. If we assign intrinsic value to all living beings based on their role in the ecosystem, then logically, the same value should be extended to the abiotic components which are equally crucial in sustaining life.

There is a need for an ethical paradigm that thinks beyond anthropocentric and biocentric approaches. It has to encompass not only the life elements but also the elements that help to sustain the life on this planet, an ethic that has respect for biodiversity, acknowledgement of wildlife rights, ethical coexistence, and responsible stewardship of nature. Wildlife ethics would thus be co-related to environmental ethics. Ecocentrism is one such paradigm whose ‘fundamental premise is to grant moral status to ecosystems that constitute the Earth’s biosphere.’¹² The biosphere encompasses all ecosystems and their relationships with Earth’s physical components- lithosphere, hydrosphere and atmosphere. An ecosystem, defined as the ‘basic unit of nature’, refers to the interactions between living organisms and their environment, where energy and matter continuously circulate. Then, ecocentrism surrounds the vast organic and physical space in this respect.

In ecocentrism, there is no prioritization of different elements based on their instrumental value, as in ecosystem emphasis is given on the relationships and dependencies between different organisms, and not on hierarchy in terms of value. The core idea is that ecosystems function as interdependent networks, not as ranked systems, where all components play vital roles. Hence, every element of the planet ought to get equal importance, respect, care and concern. Unlike other ethical theories, which emphasize the rights of individuals- whether solely humans or humans alongside other living beings- ecocentrism takes a different stance. It views all

members of the biotic community as essential components of an interconnected system. This holistic approach focuses on the relationships between individuals and communities, emphasizing the broader consequences of their actions within ecosystem.

In his essay collection *A Sand County Almanac*, the American ecologist Aldo Leopold also seems to advocate this holistic view. He proposed that ‘there was a need for a ‘new ethic’, an ‘ethic dealing with man’s relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it.’¹³ “Leopold places the relationship between humans and the natural environment at the center of his focus, emphasizing the need to protect wild areas and biodiversity.”¹⁴ Leopold’s ethical holism is grounded in recognizing the land as a living interconnected system. And in order to treat the environment ethically well, land must be seen as a living entity and not just as a commodity to be manipulated. “Land, therefore, is not only ground; it is a source of energy that flows through the circuit of the ground, plants and animals.”¹⁵

Ecocentrism, proposed by Leopold, faces several criticisms. One key issue is the metaphorical use of terms like ‘health’ and ‘death’ when applied to ecosystems, which critics argue are only appropriate for individual organisms and cannot be literally extended to ecosystems. Another criticism challenges the concept of natural equilibrium in ecosystems, questioning its practicality given their complexity and dynamism. Additionally, our incomplete understanding of the processes needed to maintain ecosystem stability raises doubts about the viability of ecocentrism’s claims. Finally, the ethics’ justification for sacrificing individual organisms for the broader health of ecosystems conflicts with ethical principles that prioritize the intrinsic value of individuals.

However, it cannot be denied that ecocentrism stands out better and is preferable to any other ethic we have discussed in this paper. Ecocentrism challenges human-centred views by seeing nature as a complex system that deserves respect, rather than a resource for exploitation. A potential compromise is to conduct research on ecosystems to understand species roles and relationships, helping us predict the impact of interference. This approach could lead to an ethical system that balances ecosystem stability with the protection of individual rights. Ecologists like Naess and Goldsmith also argue for a fundamental revision of how we view the ontological status of nature, not just improving environmental laws but changing our mindset to see nature as more than just a resource.

Conclusion

Modern civilization is overpowered by the anthropocentric beliefs, prioritizing human needs and desires above all other forms of life. This mindset has

led to widespread environmental degradation, exploitation of wildlife, and an extreme disconnection from nature. Despite growing conservation efforts, a fundamental ethical shift is necessary to address the ongoing destruction of ecosystems and biodiversity. The traditional human-centred approach must be replaced with a more ecocentric perspective that recognizes the intrinsic value of all life forms, whether human or non-human, and includes the abiotic elements essential for sustaining life. By embracing an ethical framework that promotes such coexistence and respect for all living and non-living components of the environment, we can begin to restore balance to our planet.

An ecocentric ethic which views ecosystems as interdependent networks where every organism and element plays a crucial role would offer a holistic solution. While challenges remain including criticisms of ecocentrism's practicality and the ethical tension between individual rights and ecosystem stability, this paradigm offers the most promising path forward. By shifting our moral focus beyond human utility, we can cultivate a more sustainable and respectful relationship with the natural world, ensuring that wildlife and ecosystems are preserved for future generations. By redefining the relationship between man and wild and most importantly realising our position in and obligation towards wildlife, actions can be taken accordingly. Preservation and protection laws can be formulated based on this approach. In doing so, it will be ensured that wildlife or the environment as a whole will be protected and sustained.

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