

The topic of this work is “animal rights and conservation.” Why, or why not, are animal rights and conservation important? Initially, I explored multiple viewpoints, focusing primarily on the “consequentialist” and “utilitarian” perspectives. To the consequentialist, protecting the environment and other species is actually an investment for the well-being of the human race. While to the utilitarian, it is crucial to promote happiness and avoid as much suffering as possible. Animals feel complex emotions and have the capacity for joy and suffering; their interests should be just as valued as human interests. We have an obligation to humanely treat animals and preserve their environments.

These oil paintings attempt to convey the utilitarian perspective, drawing a parallel between the emotions of animals and the emotions of humans. I chose to paint moments of innocence and emotion among various species and found these instances in relationships between friends and family. Even animals infamous for ferocity often display joy and love when interacting with members of their own family. I selected each species to display animals affected by many different types of human activity, from habitat destruction to the meat industry. The painting of people highlights the similarity between human and animal affection for loved ones. I hope that my work provokes the viewer to consider the inhumanity of how society treats other species as commodities, rather than as living beings.

Isabel

Throughout my life, I have always had an inexplicable fascination with animals. Perhaps it stemmed from my close bond with a childhood puppy, from the breathtaking sights of orcas near the San Juan Islands and bald eagles in my neighborhood, or through simply owning a fish tank. Whatever the origin, this fascination inspired me to volunteer for the Seattle Aquarium to learn more in-depth about Washington wildlife and share my love for animals with others. This position taught me just how connected human activity is to the wellbeing of animals, from farms to oceans. Through volunteering, I watched otters and seals express their unique personalities every day and witnessed the amazing complex relationships among marine species, all while learning about the hardships many animals face because of the inconsideration of humans. Animals are sentient beings that inherently deserve a livable environment; protecting their habitats now is a crucial investment for the wellbeing of the human race.

Although it may be convenient to believe otherwise, animals are indeed conscious and, therefore, have a natural right to cruelty-free lives in a habitable environment. Despite the common assumption that morality and complex emotions are exclusively human characteristics, scientific observation and studies prove otherwise. Primatologist and author, Frans De Waal, states that there are two pillars of morality: reciprocity, and empathy (*Moral Behavior in Animals*). Extensive research and experimentation confirms that chimpanzees and other primates consistently display both. A video of an experiment conducted by the Yerkes Primate Center in 1937 displays chimpanzees working together cooperatively to pull a heavy box with rope to receive a prize of food. Even in trials when one chimpanzee was fed and uninterested in the reward, the chimp helped the other pull in the box and then gave his/her prize to the hungrier one (*Moral Behavior in Animals*), proving that chimpanzees are empathetic to the desires and feelings of others. Primates have the other pillar of morality, reciprocity, as well. In another experiment by primatologists Frans De Waal and Dr. Sarah Brosnan, two capuchin monkeys were trained to hand a pebble to the researcher. As a reward, both capuchins initially received a piece of cucumber. Each capuchin willingly repeated the task multiple times in return for the cucumber. However, when one capuchin received a higher value reward, a grape, the other immediately showed frustration with the cucumber and rejected it as a prize (*Moral Behavior in Animals*). This reaction indicates that the capuchin monkey has a clear idea that when two monkeys perform the same task, they should receive equal rewards, displaying a sense of fairness. The study has since been replicated with chimpanzees, dogs, and birds. Through these experiments, chimpanzees and other primates have been proven to contain both “pillars of morality,” and therefore have some degree of moral compass (*Moral Behavior in Animals*). Clear-cut results of numerous studies like these consistently display that many animals have characteristics previously assumed to be uniquely human.

Nonetheless, many disregard this evidence as anecdotal as it is based largely on observations of animal behavior rather than concrete knowledge regarding the animal's brain functions. However, if a fact cannot be cleanly quantified with numerical values, it is not necessarily invalid. Environmental writer and visiting professor at the Stony Brooke University, Carl Safina stated in a National Geographic interview that scientists' reluctance to accept animal consciousness has “hardened into a straightjacket assumption that if we can't know anything about their minds, we can't confirm consciousness” (Worrall). Nonetheless, “it's very obvious that animals are conscious to those who observe them. They have to be in order to do the things they do and make the choices that they do, and use the judgments that they use” (Worrall). At this point in time, scientists do not have the capability to read a monkey's mind, but this does not

mean that the consistent results of observational experiments are impossible to interpret or at all unreliable.

Now that it is established that many animals have a conscience, what does this mean ethically? Children are constantly taught the “golden rule”, to “treat others the way you want to be treated” from as early as preschool. Now that scientists have definitively proven that many animals are indeed sentient and moral, this societal rule should naturally extend beyond the human race. This is not to be mistaken with granting human rights to animals, as humans are indeed very unique from other species. However, with a society that widely accepts the rapid destruction of wildlife habitats and torture of domesticated livestock, our unethical treatment of animals and their environments needs to change. Also known as the “ethic of reciprocity”, the “golden rule” is far more than a saying for children, as it is grounded in every major world religion (“Golden Rule”) as well as in our legal system. Professor of English law at the London School of Economics and Political Science, Neil Duxbury, believes that “with a little imagination, most legal rules and doctrines can be connected to the Golden Rule” and “the Rule provides us with a standard according to which we might usefully test our intuitions regarding the moral quality and implications of particular legal principles and initiatives” (Duxbury). In other words, this rule is the backbone to many laws regarding human rights, and it can be a means of distinguishing right from wrong in legal matters. The ethic of reciprocity can be used similarly with animal rights, to test the moral quality and implications in cases of animal cruelty. Clearly, no person would enjoy the horrific treatment many animals undergo as a result of human activity; therefore humans should alter these activities in the interest of animals.

According to renowned moral philosopher, Peter Singer, the matter comes down to quantifying suffering. As a utilitarian¹, Singer judges the morality of actions based on how much happiness is derived from the outcome (“Utilitarianism”). Therefore, any being capable of joy or suffering deserves equal consideration of interests (Singer. “Equality for Animals?”). Abuse to animals undoubtedly causes immense suffering to the affected animals and “[i]f a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration” (Singer. “Equality for Animals?”). In some cases, suffering of a human may be much worse than to other animals due to humans’ unique awareness and mental capacity. However, in the event of most animal exploitation cases, the suffering of animals outweighs the temporary benefits to humans. While it is impossible to precisely compare the suffering and joy of two separate species, precision is not necessary when a great disparity is apparent. For instance, a lifetime of pain and suffering of a cow in a factory farm does not even compare to the brief and unnecessary satisfaction a human may gain from eating a fast food burger, or wearing leather shoes. In contrast, if a rat dies in a lab for cancer research, but potentially saves humans from an equal cancerous fate, the suffering of the rat may be justified.

Skeptics of animal rights often contest that even though animals may be sentient, they do not have the same degree of empathy and intelligence and therefore inhumane exploitation of animals is justifiable when apparently beneficial to humans. However, this argument is not only unsubstantial, but also immoral. Suggesting that the interest of animals can be discounted due to their lesser intelligence or empathy insinuates that humans with less intelligence or empathy should have fewer rights than others. Singer stated in his book, *Practical Ethics*, that to determine a being’s worth “by some characteristic like intelligence or rationality would be to mark it in an arbitrary way. Why not choose some other characteristic, like skin colour” (Singer.

¹ Utilitarian: a philosophy according to which actions are right if they promote happiness and wrong if they promote suffering (“Utilitarianism”)

“Equality for Animals?”)? Society’s judgment is fogged by the outdated assumptions that animals are somehow less conscious than humans, but the reality is that animals are indeed sentient living beings, and to treat them as otherwise is simply unethical.

Moreover, valuing the interests of other species is actually advantageous to the human race. This is exemplified in the conservation of keystone² species. For instance, sharks are a keystone species in a reef ecosystem and their population decline directly impacts dwindling coral reefs when their food chains become unbalanced by an absence of apex predators (“CORAL Works to Protect Sharks”). Consequently, shark conservation is important not only to the sharks, but also for millions of people who rely on coral reefs as a source of food and income. Particularly in the Indo-Pacific region and in developing countries, as much as 50% of fish harvested by near shore fisheries depend directly on coral reefs for survival (Berg). Reefs are invaluable economic resources in the United States, as well, as the reefs of the Florida Keys are estimated at an asset value of \$7.6 billion due to their benefits to the tourist industry (“The Importance of Coral Reefs”). Therefore, by supporting shark conservation, one is indirectly investing in the long-term health of the fishing and tourism industries, supplying jobs and food to millions all over the world.

One of the most common and flawed arguments regarding conservation is that humans have no obligation to conservation or animal rights because other animals do not care for different species in nature; predatory animals eat other animals, so it cannot be wrong for humans to eat other animals. However, this comparison is entirely unfounded, as the majority of predators in nature are integral parts of balanced ecosystems so their carnivorous diets actually save more animal lives than they cost. International conservation director at Conservation Northwest, Joe Scott, describes predators as “a necessary and beneficial part of natural systems” (Scott) as they “provide ecological stability by regulating the impacts of grazing and browsing animals, thus ensuring the overall productivity of the habitat” (Scott). For instance, without sea otters on the Washington coast to prey on sea urchins, the urchins over populate. In turn, the urchins consume kelp forests and hundreds of species that rely on kelp forests for survival become vulnerable to extinction. In contrast, when humans eat poultry, the animals were bred in factory farms specifically for human consumption, so the consumption of the chicken does not prevent suffering of other species, as do otters when consuming sea urchins. Furthermore, when predators in nature actually cause habitat destruction, humans act by controlling populations of those species. For example, the crown of thorns starfish is a predator native to the Indo-Pacific that consumes coral polyps and accounts for more than 36 percent of coral damage in the Great Barrier Reef (“Great Barrier Reef Dying Beneath Its Crown Of Thorns”). In response, the Australian government budgets about \$3 million annually for the extermination of the starfish, which has been effective in slowing the deterioration of coral reefs (“Great Barrier Reef Dying Beneath Its Crown Of Thorns”). Since humans have successfully interfered when certain species create unbalanced ecosystems, it is time for humans to focus on our own environmental impact and challenge the systematic exploitation of animals and their environments.

Fighting for the rights of domesticated species is also incredibly beneficial for humans, because practices involving cruelty to farm animals are similarly harmful to the environment. Industrial farming harms the environment primarily through pollution. Because of the low-quality diets of livestock, cows and other animals are prone to chronic indigestion, leading to high methane emissions. The Environmental Protection Agency estimated in 2004 that twenty percent of man-made methane production is caused by livestock (“Environmental Effects of

² Keystone species: a species that is necessary for the wellbeing of an entire ecosystem

Factory Farming”). As a greenhouse gas, methane contributes to global climate change by retaining more heat in the atmosphere. Global warming by greenhouse gasses causes unprecedented changes in the earth’s temperature, threatening millions of species and their ecosystems. The World Wildlife Fund states that climate change may push as much as 38 percent of birds in Europe and 72 percent of birds in northeastern Australia to extinction if global warming increases just 1.2 °C more above pre-industrial levels (“Climate Change Impact on Bird Species”). Birds play important roles as predators and food sources to both land and marine ecosystems, and their decline would inevitably affect humans who rely on these ecosystems as sources of food or income. Factory farming also pollutes valuable water sources. When factory farms produce massive amounts of animal waste, this waste accumulates in lagoons, inevitably seeping into and contaminating groundwater. Poor management of this waste has led to pollution of more than 35,000 miles of river in the U.S. alone (“Environmental Effects of Factory Farming”). Marine invertebrates are particularly sensitive to water pollution and many species of mollusks and crustaceans have declined rapidly in population as consequence. Former biologist Dr. Marc Imlay describes mussels and crustaceans as an “indispensible part of the living world” (Regenstein), and not only through their importance to the food chain. Many species are able to produce poisons, antibiotics, tranquilizers, antispasmodics, and antiseptic chemicals that could be used as models for synthetic drug development (Regenstein). The high usage of antibiotics in livestock feed passes through the waste, as well, contributing to antibiotic resistant bacteria. The Center for Disease Control estimates that more than two million Americans fall ill to antibiotic resistant pathogens annually (Anderson).

Large-scale farming additionally requires vast deforestation for feed production. An astonishing twenty six percent of land is used for the cultivation of livestock feed. Between 2000 and 2008 alone, approximately 16.9 million hectares of Legal Amazon were demolished for cattle ranching (“The Impact of Animal Agriculture on the Environment and Climate Change in Brazil”). This rainforest harbors millions of species, including plants that are potential sources of both food and medicine to mankind (Regenstein). Deforestation is particularly catastrophic to indigenous peoples who depend on the rainforest for survival. In 1500, approximately six to nine million indigenous people inhabited Brazilian rainforests; this population has declined to less than 250,000 today, largely as a result such rapid deforestation (“Rainforest Preservation Benefits”). It is clear that factory farming not only harms the abused and slaughtered, but also the earth’s inhabitants as a whole, including the species that created them.

One of the most prominent difficulties of conservation lies within the general public’s mindset. Primarily, people tend to be in denial to their own impact on animal injustices, as if it is enough to believe in animal rights and conservation, but then not act on that value because of convenience. For instance, if asked whether or not they would eat a dog for dinner, the average American would invariably say “no”. Yet fewer than six percent of Americans actually act sensibly on this belief and adopt a vegetarian diet (Walters). Logically, farm animals are just as living and conscious as dogs, so consumption of such livestock is no more humane than killing and eating a puppy. Likewise, when asked if unnecessary habitat destruction is acceptable, the average American would likely answer “no”, yet less than thirty-five percent of American households and ten percent of American businesses recycle (“Recycling Facts”). Recycling reduces the need for further production of goods, particularly paper products, which require extensive deforestation. Society must understand that even though they themselves may not be slaughtering the cow or cutting down the tree, they are still the driving force behind the entire operation. It is all a matter of supply and demand. One of the most common justifications for

eating meat is that the animal is already dead. In actuality, it was killed because the meat industry breeds and slaughters animals in response to how many people purchase meat at the supermarket. By choosing to omit meat from a diet, the industry will respond accordingly and supply less meat, sparing countless animals from lives of torture each year³. The same logic applies to situations regarding wildlife, as when consumers purchase fewer wasteful items such as plastic bottles, fewer are produced and, in turn, less plastic will bio-accumulate into the stomachs of the ocean's keystone species, whose health is essential to the wellbeing of entire ecosystems. The solution to saving other species in the interests of both animals and people lie not in the hands of major corporations, but in the hands of ordinary individuals.

Fortunately, this dilemma is rooted in a flexible mentality. The first essential step toward a new societal mindset on conservation is simply education. This does not require valuable time or money, but rather a stronger emphasis on environmentally friendly habits during school. Because instances of animal cruelty stem from actions of individuals, if small habits form, animal abuse and environmental destruction can be greatly reduced with only minor inconveniences to the average person's life. For instance, by adopting a vegetarian diet or sourcing meat from local sustainable farmers, one can cease to contribute to the environmental harm and animal exploitation of factory farming. By using only reusable bags and bottles, one can reduce the risk of a bird digesting harmful plastic particles. By utilizing public transportation, biking, or walking more often, one can slow the rate of climate change that threatens so many species. In every aspect of everyday life, there are opportunities to better the treatment of both animals and the environment. All that needs to happen is for individuals to recognize these opportunities, and take them.

³ It is true that many animals would have never been born if not for factory farms, yet this is no justification for their inhumane treatment and consumption. The case can be compared to child abuse; without the parents, the child would have never been born, but this does not give either parent the right to abuse the child.

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