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William S. Lynn
Clark University, wlynn@clarku.edu

John Hadidian
johnhadidian@gmail.com

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Feb 24, 2020 Bridging The Divide Between Animal Protection And Traditional Conservation Biology

By William Lynn, PhD and John Hadidian, PhD

Wildlife conservation had its beginning in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, largely in response to the widespread destruction of wildlife through market hunting. Notable among its early supporters was our 26th president, Theodore Roosevelt (TR), who was almost solely responsible for setting aside vast swaths of land that would become our first wildlife refuges. Teddy's passion was for birds, and fittingly his first set asides were aimed at the shore birds, herons and egrets being devastated for the millinery trade where their plumes were used to decorate ladies' hats.

Of all the bird reserves he created, TR visited only one, this in 1915, well after his presidency was over. He was filmed carefully treading his way through the nesting colony in his stocking feet lest he tramples nests and eggs. Then he stops to dig up a nest of turtle eggs, which became part of the group's next meal. He later argued that the government should exterminate raccoons on the reserve to help preserve the nests of both birds and turtles. This was conservation as enacted in TR's time.

It would still be some time before wildlife conservation came to be defined as a science, and then with an almost exclusive focus on the regulation of game species through hunting seasons. There was an ethic to that, of course, but it was not the ethic that came with the rise of Conservation Biology, which took form during the environmental

revolution of the 1970s. Inheriting a foundational underpinning from the existing “consumptive use” model, Conservation Biology then and now focused on the preservation of species, with little to no focus placed on individuals. However, a major philosophical debate then formed around concerns about the interests and rights of individual animals as opposed to populations and species. This division created a point of demarcation that led conservationists and animal welfare advocates to regard each other with suspicion and distrust for years, even when there was so much they should have been working on together.

That division is now being challenged with the rise of alternative paradigms of conservation. One of these is called Compassionate Conservation. In a nutshell, this emerging field is an attempt to bridge the gap between conservation and animal protection and bring them closer together, at least to try to define first principles and begin a dialogue. We believe the well-being of people, animals, and the environment can only be advanced through such dialogue.

Accordingly, we have asked a leading environmental ethicist, Dr. William Lynn of Clark University’s George Perkins Marsh Center, to share some thoughts about the ethical constructs involved. Specifically, three questions about Compassionate Conservation were posed to him, and here are his responses.

1. Why did Compassionate Conservation Arise?

Compassionate conservation is relatively new conservation and wildlife management paradigm. It arose as a critique of the traditional paradigm and its customary dismissal of the well-being of wildlife. This dismissal has two forms. The absolute form believes individual animals (as opposed to collectives like populations or species) do not count from a moral point of view. Individual animals are simply not a concern of conservation. The relative form believes that the well-being of individual animals may at times count, but as a distant priority behind resource management for human preferences or the protection of biodiversity.

Unless a species is so rare as to be near the point of extinction or extirpation, traditional conservation does not think the well-being of individual animals is important. Wildlife is considered state property and managed like an agricultural crop. Lethal management in the form of hunting, trapping, and poisoning is an accepted and often unquestioned method of population management. Culling predators and other target species to favor populations of game animals are common, as is habitat management for species used in sportfishing, hunting, and trapping. Management objectives may include biodiversity, ecotourism, wildlife watching, and endangered species protection, but these are subordinate to the main purposes of the traditional paradigm.

Traditional conservation is also undergirded by various cultural beliefs that marginalize the place of animals (and of nature more generally) in our moral vision. Dominionism holds that the earth was especially created for the use of human beings and that animals and nature are simply god-granted resources for our use. This view is reinforced by anthropocentrism, the claim that we are the only morally valuable creatures on earth.

While the social need for resources and preserving biodiversity are both important, neither is enough to justify the dismissal of animals from our moral concerns. Hence, compassionate conservation argues for a theory and practice of conservation that emphasizes the intrinsic moral value of wildlife and ending unthinking lethal management.

The term itself was coined by the cognitive ethologist Marc Bekoff. Bekoff borrows the Hippocratic framing of “first, do no harm” as an underlying principle of compassion. This means that we should allow wildlife to pursue their own lives free of intrusive human interference and reduce human-caused suffering amongst wild animals as much as we can. To the degree that we do interfere, we should only do so to protect the well-being of wildlife and their ecological communities for their own sake or to protect vital human needs of health and safety.

Other principles are “individuals matter,” the necessary inclusion of all wildlife (whether native or non-native), and “peaceful coexistence.” These principles hold that the well-being of individual wild animals should be a core concern of conservation, that animals should not be profiled and targeted for elimination simply because they are not native to an ecosystem, and that non-lethal means of managing human-wildlife conflicts should be emphasized.

The credo that individuals matter challenges the foundations of traditional conservation. The emphasis on inclusivity and coexistence means the compassionate conservationist is generally opposed to lethal management and wary of conservation schemes focused on exterminating non-native species. Compassionate conservation does acknowledge the indispensable importance of conservation science, but it also recognizes that conservation politics are often heavily influenced by human values and politics that traditionally privilege without question the human role and place alongside other (non-human) animals in a more-than-human world.

2. What are the Ethical Underpinnings of Compassionate Conservation?

While there is not a single moral theory that informs compassionate conservation, perhaps its two keystone concepts are intrinsic value and compassion.

The question of moral value raises the question of how and why someone or something

is of worth or of value. Intrinsic value means someone has worth in and of themselves, and not for their instrumental value to others (almost always human others). A hammer has no intrinsic value (worth) on its own, but the laborer who wields it does have intrinsic value and we say the hammer has extrinsic value or is instrumentally valued for the function it performs.

The same distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic value can be applied to wildlife and all other human and non-human animals. Wild animals are not simply biological machines, functional units of ecosystems, or resources for our use and abuse. They are not only or mainly of extrinsic value to human beings. They are instead intrinsically valuable in and of themselves. The reasoning behind this is that a great many wild beings are sentient (feeling), sapient (thinking), and social (relating) creatures with whom we share the earth.

Our own ability to feel, think, and be in relationships are touchstones for why we believe we humans, as individuals and communities, are intrinsically valuable and deserving of human rights and justice. To the degree that non-humans share these features, they, too, have a similar intrinsic value and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. Another way to say this is that both human and wild lives have the well-being of their own. The consequences of our actions on people, animals, and nature can be helpful or harmful, and these consequences are one reason why conservation is a particular focus of ethical critique.

Compassion emphasizes the central role of empathy in ethics. Compassion literally means to suffer with another. One reason humans and some other animals can act ethically is they can empathize with what happens to others. They can be moved by their grief or angered by their mistreatment. Your dog comforting you during a dark moment or protecting you from harm illustrates the empathetic capacity of some non-human animals. This is not the whole of ethics with its broader emphasis on reasons and evidence for moral judgments and actions. But it does draw our eye to how animal suffering, feeling, and emotion are key elements of wild lives. We generally recognize our obligation not to impose suffering on other human beings. So, too, this carries over to wildlife, especially as it is impacted by the unreflective use of lethal measures (e.g., hunting, trapping, poisoning) in wildlife management.

To be sure, there are real differences in how intrinsic value, compassion, and other moral concepts are understood by individuals espousing compassionate conservation. Some want to primarily emphasize individual animals. Others still see a hierarchy where individual animals come in second place behind the protection of biodiversity. And still, others try to balance both depending on the circumstances. This does not make compassionate conservation a cacophony of contentious voices. Rather the debate is a

rich conversation about how we ought to live with wildlife on shared landscapes in a globalizing world.

3. How does Compassionate Conservation think about animal and environmental well-being?

The concept of well-being is rooted in the Greek term *eudaimonia* meaning “flourishing.” It has been translated in many ways to mean health, wellness, happiness, personal accomplishment, social satisfaction, and the common good. Various academic disciplines (e.g., economics, psychology) have specialized ways of discussing what it might mean to “flourish.”

Still, the meaning of well-being has its source in ethics, a conversation of what is right, good, just, and of value. Well-being is one of the foundational concerns of ethics. It is why Socrates refers to ethics as a dialogue about “how we ought to live,” for in treating ourselves and others in the right ways we bring ourselves and our world closer to the good life – a life of meaning and fulfillment, a life where we and others can thrive, a life characterized by well-being.

From an ethical perspective, well-being involves the ability to thrive physically, psychologically, socially, ecologically, and, some would say, spiritually. Well-being is a characteristic of individuals (both humans and animals) as well as their social and ecological communities. Moreover, the two are often interrelated, as one’s individual well-being is affected by the wider community and vice versa.

The same linkage is true for the interrelationships between people, animals, and nature. All human individuals and communities are completely dependent upon and embedded in the natural world. Moreover, we share both cultural and natural landscapes with many wild and domestic animals. This is what British philosopher Mary Midgley meant when she referred to “mixed communities” of people, animals, and nature.

Well-being is also a dynamic state that can be helped or harmed by natural events, human actions, or both. For example, the outcomes of a natural disaster, such as a hurricane, can be made better or worse by how people prepare for and respond to the emergency. When we take individual precautions and support collective efforts to make our communities resilient, we protect our own and others’ well-being. When we do neither, or do it poorly, we end up magnifying the impact of a natural disaster.

Considering animal and environmental well-being requires us to consider how nature is faring, how our shared world is being harmed or helped by our actions today, and the downstream consequences of our actions tomorrow. Asking after animal and environmental well-being is a path of humility, a way of decentering ourselves, thinking

about the flourishing of others, and taking responsibility for how we impact the ability of animals to thrive and the sustainability of the environment. The power of human agency is now such that we have major impacts on other animals and nature – 96% of mammalian biomass is now composed of human beings and our domestic animals. People, animals, and the environment are all in crisis.

Compassionate conservation takes the well-being of wild lives as a core commitment. For the compassionate conservationist, forms of conservation that do not consider the well-being of other animals and their environments as an equal concern to other conservation goals are fundamentally unethical. Compassionate conservation is pressing for a new approach to wildlife, the environment and, indeed, human well-being, based on values that combine attention to individuals equally with attention to species and populations.

Dr. William Lynn, Clark University, The George Perkins Marsh Institute, 950 Main Street, Worcester, MA 01610. wlynn@clarku.edu

Dr. John Hadidian, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Center for Leadership in Global Sustainability, 900 N. Glebe Rd., Arlington, VA 22208.
johnhadidian@gmail.com