

# Animals in International Relations: a research agenda

International Relations  
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DOI: [10.1177/00471178231191294](https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178231191294)

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## Abstract

Animals are integral to world politics, yet largely neglected in International Relations (IR). This Special Issue (SI) aims to address this gap and offers a collection of original research articles that investigate issues pertaining to sovereignty, power, diplomacy, the ethics of war, justice and emancipation, environmental governance, activism and international law. The articles make animals visible within those realms, raise novel questions and develop approaches through which the specific role(s) of animals and human-animal relations in international politics may be theoretically understood and empirically explored. They open a conversation between IR and Critical Animal Studies (CAS). The SI contributes to a broader understanding of the complex and interconnected nature of human-animal relations, and therefore to the reorientation of IR towards a post-anthropocentric perspective of world politics that renders the field better equipped to understand and address our current Anthropocene predicament. To introduce the SI, this article starts by addressing the invisibility of animals in IR and why this is problematic. It then provides an overview of the articles included in the SI and concludes by outlining a research agenda for the study of animals in IR.

## Keywords

animals, Anthropocene, Critical Animal Studies, IR, research agenda

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## **The invisibility of animals in IR**

International Relations (IR) has so far largely neglected animals as relevant parts and participants of world politics. In contrast to related fields such as International Law,<sup>1</sup> Comparative Politics<sup>2</sup> or Political Theory,<sup>3</sup> there is no considerable body of IR literature that investigates animals as objects of inquiry in their own right. Whereas specific animal protection initiatives (the protection of whales being a prominent example) have been used as illustrative case studies in IR research inquiring into the success or failure of international norms,<sup>4</sup> the emergence and power of international regimes,<sup>5</sup> the power of international discourses<sup>6</sup> or the making of international environmental law,<sup>7</sup> animals themselves as a general concern and a relevant part of world politics have hardly ever been examined in depth. Animals have remained largely invisible in IR, despite Andrew Linklater's warning, as early as 1999, that '[n]o contemporary account of order and justice in international relations w[ould] be complete unless it addresse[d] the issue of justice between different species'.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, in recent years the field has faced increasing criticism by scholars who call on IR research to take animals seriously and illustrate how they are and have always been an important empirical aspect of central domains of IR, including diplomacy, war and international political economy.<sup>9</sup> The Special Issue (SI) 'Animals in International Relations: A Research Agenda' takes these initiatives seriously and offers an overdue response to a clear and increasingly criticised research gap in the discipline. It presents the first systematic collection of original research on animals in different fields of world politics and offers both a synthesis of current academic thinking about the topic and a roadmap for future research. Specifically, the SI accomplishes two things. First, it brings in animals as relevant objects of IR inquiry. Second, it develops a research agenda for addressing the topic of animals in IR that maps the areas in which animals are important and suggests ways in which the role(s) of animals in IR and human-animal relations can be theoretically understood and empirically explored.

The SI contributes to a recent, growing body of literature that seeks to reorient IR as a discipline and a field of practice towards a post-anthropocentric perspective of world politics. This reorientation renders the field better equipped to understand and address our current planetary predicament, offering a perspective that both recognises and theorises the ubiquitous entanglement between human and non-human nature. Instigated by the recognition that humans are now geological agents, which is implicit in the concept of the Anthropocene, and aiming to understand the inherent intertwinement between world politics and the Earth system, this new scholarship builds across disciplines and debates to foreground new conceptions of ontology, ethics and politics. Assuming that 'every manifestation of world politics is necessarily entangled with non-human processes and species',<sup>10</sup> this literature is both destabilising the anthropocentric foundations of IR, unearthing their harmful consequences upon human and non-human beings, and exploring the analytical, normative and political openings that are provoked by less anthropocentric ways of thinking and being.<sup>11</sup>

As the debate on how to reinvent IR in the Anthropocene is in its early stages, much remains to be explored in future work. In her comprehensive literature review on how the new geological epoch has been addressed in IR, Dahlia Simangan<sup>12</sup> identified the need

for more research that could bolster our understanding of the more-than-human entanglements that compose planetary life. This SI thus makes a significant contribution to filling a knowledge gap in the field's engagement with the Anthropocene and advancing the research agenda of 'post-anthropocentric IR'.<sup>13</sup>

The SI also seeks to establish a conversation between IR and Critical Animal Studies (CAS). Similar to the post-anthropocentric perspective, CAS starts from a radical critique of anthropocentrism and diagnoses a deep ecological crisis of the planet which encompasses extreme environmental threats and is most evident in the vast dimensions of species extinction and the dramatic intensification of animal slaughter and exploitation.<sup>14</sup> Based on this assessment, CAS focuses on analysing and deconstructing the relations between humans and non-human animals with an emphasis on challenging the human-animal dichotomy and investigating the multiple forms of power and oppression involved therein.<sup>15</sup> CAS is explicitly political and takes a stance against animal oppression and exploitation. By questioning and rethinking the ways in which humans relate to, understand and use animals and, thereby, constitute themselves, CAS develops novel concepts, perspectives and theoretical frameworks which also promise to be fruitful when investigating specifically the ways in which international political practices shape and are shaped by constructions of human superiority, human-animal entanglements and animal exploitation. By investigating in depth the multiple dimensions of international entanglements between humans and non-human animals and focusing on questions concerning human exceptionalism, and the possible roles, ways of participation and consideration of animals in IR, the contributions of this SI open a conversation between the two research traditions and offer fruitful avenues for mutual research.

This SI will be relevant not only for scholars but also for practitioners, as it provides important insights on a number of critical areas where animals need to be considered in decision-making processes, identifies shortcomings in international agreements and policies that preclude them from addressing the multiple planetary crises we currently face, and offers a set of suggestions for including animal rights into international policy programmes. As such, the SI has significant potential for becoming an important tool to inform the action of non-governmental organisations and social movements.

## **Animals in IR**

The contributions to this SI seek to make animals visible within different realms of IR, raise novel questions, develop approaches through which the specific role(s) of animals and human-animal relations may be grasped and conduct in-depth empirical studies.

In 'Animalising International Relations', Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden emphasise the importance of incorporating an animal perspective when studying world politics and argue that the practice of international relations should be approached with a recognition of its inherent animal nature. While it is important to acknowledge that international relations extend beyond the realm of humans, students of the discipline often overlook the fact that humans are also animals. According to the authors, understanding humans as animals is a critical starting point. Cudworth and Hobden explore the origins and significance of the division between humans and the natural world, and illuminate the potential dangers associated with this divide. They proceed by examining the

impact of the COVID-19 virus and illustrate how human susceptibility to a virus underscores our animal nature. The pandemic is also an example of how human interactions with the natural world, even at a basic level, can have global implications, and its lessons suggest the need to consider agency beyond the human realm. Cudworth and Hobden conclude by both discussing the implications of ‘animalising’ IR and proposing potential trajectories for future research in the field.

Josh Milburn and Sara Van Goozen’s article, ‘Animals and the Ethics of War: A Call for an Inclusive Just-War Theory’, is the first comprehensive examination of the ethical considerations regarding animals in warfare. While previous discussions on animals and just-war theory (JWT) exist, they have been fragmented across different academic contexts. These discussions often limit themselves to applying certain aspects of JWT to specific cases involving animals, without delving into the broader implications for the JWT framework or systematically integrating animals into JWT. By taking a holistic view of the existing literature, Milburn and Van Goozen establish the groundwork for an inclusive JWT that takes into account the interests of animals themselves, distinct from a solely anthropocentric perspective that may offer indirect protection to animals as human property. However, significant questions remain unanswered and extensive areas within this field are yet to be explored. Therefore, the authors identify crucial avenues for future research in this emerging and potentially significant field. While these questions are relevant for JWT theorists and animal ethicists, they are also essential for the broader objective of integrating animals into IR, particularly if assessing the impact of war on animals is a goal for IR scholars.

In ‘Animals and Diplomacy: On the Prospect for Interspecies Diplomacy’, Tore Fougner questions the anthropocentric nature of Diplomatic Studies (DS) and considers what it would mean to engage in diplomatic interactions with non-human animals. Given the multiple ecological crises our planet faces and the significant violence observed in contemporary human-animal relations, doing so seems both ethically sound and in line with the call for ‘sustainable diplomacy’. The author sheds light on the limitations of existing work on the topic and delves into critical efforts within DS to reimagine the nature and purpose of diplomacy. He conceptualises diplomacy as the mediation of estrangement and as a practice that addresses the challenge of coexisting in difference, and engages with various ideas and perspectives that can stimulate our diplomatic imagination and contribute to the establishment of less violent human-animal relations through interspecies diplomacy. Fougner considers the concept of wild animal communities being treated as sovereign entities, the idea of human and animal communities having treaties with each other, the role of individual animals as ambassadors representing larger groups, the production of diplomatic knowledge by ethologists as heterology and the practice of everyday human-animal diplomacy.

Steven Tauber’s article, ‘The Global Animal Advocacy Movement in International Relations: Toward an Animal-Inclusive IR’, contributes to the de-anthropocentrism of the field and the development of an animal-inclusive perspective by demonstrating the relevance of the Global Animal Advocacy Movement (GAAM) to IR. The author argues that GAAM exemplifies a Global Social Movement (GSM) and should thus be recognised as a significant factor in global politics. He outlines the transnational and diverse nature of the movement, emphasising the shared identity among GAAM activists.

Furthermore, Tauber suggests that animals are not mere passive subjects within GAAM but active participants, as they can share collective identities with humans and engage in their own struggle for liberation, similar to oppressed humans. An anthropocentric perspective only acknowledges human activists and dismisses animal resistance to human oppression as mere instinctual behaviour. The author shows that a broad range of research on GAAM can offer promising prospects for gaining a deeper understanding of GSMs and the involvement of animals in IR.

In her article, 'Global Injustice and Animals: Developing a Multispecies Social Connection Model', Eva Meijer leverages insights from political animal agency, multispecies politics and non-anthropocentric approaches to international relations to outline a model of multispecies social connection. According to the author, by shifting the emphasis from multispecies global justice to structural injustice, we gain a new lens through which to examine global relations involving multiple species. This type of analysis can complement existing theoretical frameworks or serve as a starting point for developing new political institutions, practices and structures. Meijer argues that social connection approaches should extend beyond the human realm; an anthropocentric focus is problematic because non-human animals also endure structural injustice at the hands of humans on a global scale. Moreover, structures of injustice often affect both humans and other animals simultaneously, making them inherently multispecies in nature; therefore, investigating parallels between different forms of injustice towards human and non-human animals is critical.

Andrea Schapper and Cebuan Bliss, in 'Transforming Our World? Strengthening Animal Rights and Animal Welfare at the United Nations', examine the United Nations (UN) Sustainability Agenda and its failure to bring about transformative measures towards sustainability. The authors argue that the agenda falls short primarily because it does not redefine the relationship between human beings, non-human animals and other elements of nature in a fundamental way. Without this redefinition, the UN's action plan will only provide short-term benefits to human beings, primarily of an economic nature; from a long-term perspective, it will harm 'people, planet and prosperity'. Schapper and Bliss draw attention to the fact that the agenda largely neglects animal rights and welfare, despite the established links between human health and well-being and the welfare of animals. They propose that animals should be represented by UN institutions and have the ability to participate in decision-making processes that directly affect them, possibly through the involvement of guardians and scientific experts. To enhance animal rights and welfare within the framework of the UN, the authors put forward a set of recommendations for changes to current UN practices.

Finally, in 'The International Politics of Animal Protection', Judith Renner adopts a genealogical perspective to argue that animal protection can be understood as a field shaped by specific strategies, particularly anti-cruelty and animal welfare. These strategies contribute to our understanding of what animal protection entails, how it can be accomplished and how humans can establish more holistic relationships with animals. According to the author, by considering these strategies, the analysis of individual animal protection policies can provide new insights into how human-animal relations are constructed and regulated in the realm of international politics. Empirically, Renner investigates the implementation of these animal protection strategies within the context

of the European Union's (EU) ban on the trade in seal products. She shows that, against the EU's usual practices, anti-cruelty emerged as the dominant framing of the EU's policies on the seal hunt, guiding the EU's actions towards prohibition rather than standardisation.

## **A new research agenda**

To conclude, we build on the contributions to the SI to outline a four-fold research agenda for the study of animals in IR.

First, the contributions help strengthen the efforts, already underway in recent IR research,<sup>16</sup> to interrogate human exceptionality and the nature/culture dualism underpinning many IR concepts and theories. Specifically, the articles of this SI contribute to reimagining IR by focusing specifically on animals and animality as a foil against which hierarchies of differences that exist in the present are constructed and strengthened, and by means of which they might, as well, be challenged. Animals serve and have historically served as a primary means to construct and legitimate human supremacy and to justify differences, exclusions and social hierarchies. A focus on the specific relationships between animals and humans, the animalisation of humans and of IR more generally, is thus a promising way by which human privilege and supremacy can be examined, given IR concepts and theories interrogated and reframed in less anthropocentric ways, and a more radical understanding of relationality embraced (Cudworth and Hobden, this SI).

Second, IR should more comprehensively consider the relevance and role of animals in ethical issues and theories of IR. The contributions to this SI raise interesting research questions in regard to animals and the ethics of war (Milburn and Van Goozen, this SI), and to the place of animals in theories of global justice (Meijer, this SI). While, on the one hand, more theoretical research and discussion is needed in regard to specific ethical questions of IR, for instance global animal rights or animal protection, there is also a lack of empirical research which is necessary to map the structures of multispecies injustice in the first place. This includes investigating the impact of different industries on the environment, their contribution to the climate crisis and loss of biodiversity as well as their effects on human and animal lives, habitats, cultures and opportunities for thriving as communities (Meijer, this SI).

Third, future work in the field needs to consider and theorise animal agency and animal participation in international practices. Here, Fougner's and Tauber's articles provide useful insights by discussing and illustrating how animals may be grasped as participants in international practices as diverse as diplomacy and political activism in global social movements. In regard to animal agency and participation, more research is needed which interrogates other fields of international politics (e.g. global political economy or war and conflict) and theoretically frames and empirically examines the forms of animal participation here.

Fourth, the contributions to this SI suggest that IR research should examine and re-examine empirical cases of international politics with a specific focus on how animals are constructed and dealt with here. On the one hand, such re-examinations are necessary in order to uncover the hitherto largely overlooked role of animals in these cases and to understand the specific ways in which human-animal relations are constructed and

governed in mundane instances of international relations (Renner, this SI). On the other hand, empirical research on the role of animals in programmes such as the UN Sustainability Agenda, and the impact of such programmes on the governance of human-animal relations, would represent an important contribution to debates on transformative governance,<sup>17</sup> aiming to bring about profound societal changes necessary for genuine sustainable development (Schapper and Bliss, this SI).

With this SI and research agenda, we aim to inspire scholars in IR and related fields to embrace a post-anthropocentric perspective and engage with animals in the study of world politics. This will, we hope, help illuminate the invisible, better understand the more-than-human entanglements of the Anthropocene and ultimately forge a future of justice and harmonious coexistence for all the planet's species.


### Acknowledgements

We thank all authors of this SI for their valuable contributions and the fruitful collaboration, and express our gratitude to all reviewers for their feedback. We are also grateful to *International Relations* editor Milja Kurki for her generous support and guidance.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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### Notes

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