

Suffering in the Wild

Throughout most of human history, we have lacked the capacity to significantly reduce wild animal suffering. Recently this has changed. In some countries, wild animal populations are currently being vaccinated against diseases, such as rabies, that threaten domesticated animals or humans. In the future, larger-scale interventions may become feasible, as there are ongoing research efforts to explore effective ways of reducing the suffering of wild animals.¹ Potential methods to reduce wild animal suffering include birth control and more extensive disease management. Even more ambitiously, some argue that gene editing technologies could be used to reduce the ability of wild animals to feel pain, change the reproductive strategies of animals so they have fewer offspring, or turn carnivores into herbivores.²

In recent years, some philosophers, zoologists, and animal rights activists have argued that when it is in our power to reduce the suffering of wild animals without significant unintended negative consequences, we ought to do so. Since wild animal suffering is bad, we ought to prevent it if we can, as long as we don't thereby sacrifice anything of comparable moral importance. At the very least, some argue, we should invest more resources in researching potential interventions and their possible ecological effects. And others reason that since human actions already have massive effects on wild animals (via climate change and habitat destruction, for example), we should do our best to make our overall impact on wild animals a more positive one.

However, some critics worry that disrupting complex, dynamic ecosystems may, despite our best efforts, produce significant negative unintended consequences. Relatedly, some feel that by intervening, we are meddling with the natural order, or coercively interfering with the lives of wild animals in an objectionable way. Others argue that rather than devoting our attention to the suffering of wild animals not caused by human activity, we should focus on the suffering of non-human animals for which humans are responsible (such as the suffering of factory-farmed animals). Moreover, some critics argue that the scale of wild animal suffering is so large that there is unlikely to be a feasible, cost-effective way to address it. And others object that more radical proposals to reduce wild animal suffering—such as eliminating carnivores—require the mass extinction of species which bear sacred, irreplaceable, or intrinsic value.

Discussion Questions

1. Should we intervene to reduce the suffering of wild animals if we can safely and effectively do so?
2. When is intervening to help others morally permissible or morally required, and when is it objectionably coercive or paternalistic?
3. Does being “natural” make something more valuable or worth preserving?

¹ Organizations promoting this research include Animal Ethics, Wild Animal Initiative, and Rethink Priorities.

² <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/09/19/the-meat-eaters>

