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# ANIMAL RIGHTS AND THE NEED TO UNDERSTAND NATURE; A DEBATE

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As various societies, especially in the developed countries of the world, acquired a better life-style and standard of living, a common trend developed toward treating animals more humanely, especially the domestic ones. But the movement was too slow, and the animal rights movement captured this void and established a new ethic. Unfortunately, this was done without a full appreciation of the laws of nature. Even though this movement was clearly needed, some people have carried it too far.

Tonight, hopefully, we can have some good constructive discussions from the audience on this subject after Dr. Steve Sapontzis and I first present our introductory remarks. I respect Steve's views and his moral integrity. We are both professionally qualified persons who have the right to discover, teach and publish the truth as we see it in our fields of competence. From my point of view, I do not agree with animal rightists who claim it is morally wrong to use animals, no matter how humanely and responsibly they are handled. Examples include the dissection of animals in class rooms, or using animals in research, as game, or as food or for materials. But I do admit that most perspectives about animal welfare have both strengths and weaknesses, so during the discussion do not hesitate to express your own ethic about these issues and make Steve and me defend our beliefs.

One point that concerns me is that many animal rightists seem to ignore nature's life-death ethic. They do not agree that nature requires many animals to die prematurely. They seem to think that every pine nut and acorn will grow into a tree. They overlook that living in the wild is not a suffering-free existence. Nature does not have pain pills, tranquilizers, euthanasia, conscientious hunters, or humane slaughter. Compared to a natural death, being killed with euthanasia, in a slaughter house, or by a gun, arrow or trapped and then shot can be considered a relatively humane death. Sportsmen play a significant role in helping nature maintain healthy population densities of wildlife in human-modified environments, and do so much more humanely than can nature.

What is nature's life-death ethic? I think it is wonderful that so many domestic birds and mammals have a chance to be born. They would not exist if they were not wanted. Of course, many die prematurely if they are wanted for food or materials, but, in contrast to nature, they die quite humanely. If not harvested prematurely, domestic animals usually greatly outlive their wild counterparts, who generally die at a much younger age due to nature's death ethic.

Domestic animals usually do not have to suffer life-threatening competition, inclement weather, starvation, cruel diseases, parasitism, infections,

territoriality, sexual battles, cannibalism, or other ugly natural stresses that wild animals frequently encounter. Only domestic and game animals die relatively humanely, as nothing in nature dies a humane death.

Animal rights activists move from state to state attempting, with lobbying, public protests and political activity, to try to have animals like bobcats, bears and mountain lions listed as endangered species, when obviously their goal is to prohibit hunting, trapping, eating, or otherwise utilizing game species. They will not accept the fact that the main reason game animals are plentiful and not endangered is because it is the sportsmen's funds that provide the financial support for hiring biologists to determine how to maximize the welfare of the fauna and flora, enable wardens to protect them, and provide the necessary funds that preserve suitable habitat for game and associated non-game species.

The laws of nature require all species to have a death ethic to prevent them from obtaining devastating population densities. Look at what happened to the human population when science, technology, public health, and medicine controlled their natural death rate. Another close to home example is what has happened to mountain lions since subdominant lions can no longer escape from the dominant lions without conflicting with people.

Nature's life-death ethic requires that over time the rate of mortality equals the number of births. The fact that so many young animals are eaten before they reproduce is necessary to prevent the development of environmentally damaging excessive population densities of species. All organisms live by eating others. This high premature mortality rate of animals is what provides the energy needed to ensure that the balance of nature functions properly.

A common assertion is that animals have legal rights. Do they? Of course, animals have a right to do whatever is necessary for them to survive, no matter how brutal they may be to other animals, even if it means killing and eating their parents, offspring or siblings. However, animals do not have a right that guarantees how other animals treat them. Consequently, nearly all animals that die "naturally" suffer a great deal more than when people hunt or trap them.

People, on the other hand, establish legal rights on how other people can treat non-human animals. This is why the amount of suffering experienced by an animal dying from the hands of people is usually minimal.

There is not time to fully defend the right to use animals responsibly in agriculture, research or as pets, so I will put my main emphasis on just one area, hunting.

It is easy for me to understand why many people oppose hunting of birds and mammals, for most of these

people also would NOT want to be the person responsible for slaughtering livestock, chickens, turkeys, fish, or even clams. Without understanding nature, and, since such people obtain all their food from grocery stores, it is not surprising that they do not relish dropping crayfish or crabs into a pot of boiling water, yet still consider these animals a real delicacy in a restaurant.

It is no wonder that many people do not grasp the morality and pride they should have when animals are exploited responsibly, i.e., treated as humanely as is possible. In nature all animals must exploit others, and people are part of nature. In contrast to the predatory behavior of other species, hunters are a unique predator. They conscientiously avoid inflicting pain. Today's hunters actually show compassion and mercy toward their prey, which is indeed unusual for a predator, as natural predators are usually very brutal.

Since all environments of the world have been modified by people, a desirable harmony between people and the faunas only can be established if the animal populations are managed. However, in some wilderness areas, the best management scheme may be a hands-off policy. For an ecosystem to be balanced on a sustained basis, the surplus individuals of all species must be cropped each year one way or another, and in most environments, where natural predation is no longer effective, this can usually best be done by people.

Both hunting and trapping are long-standing American traditions and heritage, and can be a sound wildlife husbandry practice. Regulations governing these activities came about because sportsmen recognized the need to protect mammal and bird game species from market hunters and unrestricted hunting. Today, hunters and trappers are highly regulated, licensed predators, and this is at their choice.

In contrast to the killing by natural predators, hunters and trappers operate under many regulations designed to make the way animals are taken as humane as is feasible. How does one equate the suffering of animals that are shot or trapped with being eaten alive or dying of starvation or diseases? There are no biological bases for opposing regulated hunting and trapping, only religious ones, and religions also support the use of animals.

Nature cannot crop the annual surplus of animals as humanely as sportsmen. Also, hunting and trapping are the most effective and humane tools available for removing surplus animals of a population without damaging the capital. Why people like to hunt may be inexplicable, but these pursuits are as much conservation as they are recreation.

One is morally justified, in a modified environment, to hunt or kill surplus wildlife that can no longer be supported, because this can prevent unnecessary population die-offs from starvation, disease, fighting, cannibalism, territoriality, and other species self-limiting factors.

People have a moral obligation to manage nature once they have disrupted it. Animals which are pursued by hunters and trappers literally never had it so good on this overcrowded, human-dominated earth.

Hunters are the ones responsible for the dramatic recovery of species such as the wild turkey, wood duck, pronghorned antelope, whitetailed deer, and elk. If the endangered whooping crane had been declared a game animal 50 years ago, with hunting season closed until the population recovered, they would be common today.

Most of the funds for hiring wildlife biologists, game wardens and preserving wildlife habitats and biological diversity comes from sportsmen and excise taxes they pay on equipment they use. No other group, certainly not animal rightists, shows any inclination or preparation to pay for the protection of habitats now preserved by support from hunters, fishermen and trappers.

Animals are born to die, and the great majority of wild and domestic animals die prematurely. What is right or wrong concerning the rights of animals largely depends on one's personal ethics. People occupy a dominant position in nature, but I believe that, by conforming to the laws of nature, society clearly has the ethical and moral right to use animals in research, dissections in teaching, agriculture, hunting, trapping, fishing, and as pets as long as one does not inflict unnecessary pain and suffering. Responsible use of animals is biologically sound and fits well into the natural scheme of life.