

The Nonhuman Dimensions in Wildlife

Holmes Rolston III
Department of Philosophy
Colorado State University

Philosophy has recently gone wild. Philosophy is a sign of culture, among the humanities, not usually concerned with wildness. If anything, it is concerned with the opposite: the carefully examined, cultivated life. Lately, however, some philosophers have taken an environmental turn.

For centuries philosophers asked about the human place in the natural world, and the answer in modern centuries has been paradoxical. Philosophers became increasingly naturalistic or secular in their world outlook at the same time that they became increasingly humanistic in their understanding of value. Humans were a part of nature and apart from it. Nature is all there is, without value, except as humans, who have evolved out of nature, have established for themselves a culture superposed on nature. When humans work their will on nature, values appear as human preferences are satisfied.

That seemed objective about nature and humane toward persons, but it resulted in a value structure that was dogmatically anthropocentric. Until recently, and still by and large, philosophers have not been naturalistic enough. Even those who call themselves metaphysical and epistemological naturalists have not learned how to be axiological and ethical naturalists. To put it provocatively, philosophers, who love wisdom, by ignoring natural value, grew wise in their own conceits.

Now, across the last 2 decades of this century, to the surprise of many, philosophy is beginning to love nonhuman dimensions of value. I have witnessed and instigated part of this movement. My career in philosophy has been devoted to naturalizing its values, to making these more objective and less subjective. My effort still seems wild in the wayward sense to many philosophers and scientists. But the wildness is not in my confused head but rather lies in dimensions of value in nature. The wayward folk are those who have lost their way valuing nature.

Two movements have joined to launch the environmental turn. One is concerned for animal welfare. The twentieth century has not been a good one for animals. Whether in wildlife commerce, sport hunting, habitat destruction, threatened and endangered species, with laboratory experiments on test animals, or the factory farming of food animals, humans became increasingly callous about animal welfare. Philosophers of late have begun to join in protest over the exploitation of animals, over needless suffering, over disrespect for the dignity of animal life. In this, philosophers were not alone and not the first. But being especially sensitive about logic and ethics, philosophers have helped to wake humans up to ways in which nonhumans count—not just as resources but for what they are in themselves. Animals are not moral agents. But for human moral agents, counting them is 1 human dimension in wildlife.

The second movement is environmental ethics. Mammals, the principal concern above, are not the only wild life. Animals include insects and microbes. The flora is as wild as the fauna; the wilderness is as wild as the beasts. Wild animals are what they are where they are. Wildlife management is to some extent a contradiction in terms. We value natural systems by letting nature take its nonhuman course. The processes of nature are not those of culture but not less valuable. Even with rural and urban wildlife we value spontaneous nature. We want a land ethic, one for Earth and its community of life. Wild was a term once feared by philosophers, but, with the environmental turn, philosophers learned from ecologists and biologists that wildness too, not less than culture, forms a community deserving of loving respect. Wisdom is not all in the human mind. Wildness is being transformed from a term of disvalue to a term of value.

In understanding the human dimensions in wildlife, we want to learn social science, more of what Callicott calls "the sociological and sociol-psychological side of the management equation." We want to evaluate people's philosophy of nature, their beliefs and value systems. We want to be critical humanists. All this is relevant, but we will not get the focus right without "the wildlife ecology side." As Callicott also knows, we must get these human

dimensions superposed on the right natural facts and the right account of values carried by nature. What we want to know and value folds back onto the natural sciences. The human dimensions in wildlife are entwined with the nonhuman dimensions in wildlife.

What philosophy has to contribute is self-criticism that re-examines the human place in the world, how and what values are carried by nature. What is appropriate human conduct when encountering wild things? Philosophers must now examine the wild as well as the cultivated life.

Several years ago, I first encountered the title of this newsletter with some disappointment. I reacted similarly once to an Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife poster: "Support watchable wildlife." Well and good! Deemphasize game you can shoot and fish you can catch. But wait. What about the nonwatchable wildlife? Surely the newsletter title, like the slogan, was chosen to deemphasize the economic, exploitive, consumerist uses of wildlife, chosen to emphasize instead the humanistic, experiential side of wildlife encounters, the soft against the hard values. But wait. Is our concern only the human dimensions in wildlife? I'm for that only as a halfway house to more.

If someone made a large donation to the Desert Fishes Council and, asked what motivated his charity, replied that he was cultivating human dimensions in wildlife that he enjoyed, we might think that his concern for these nonhuman fishes was misfocused. Though the title goes deeper than a resource orientation, it is topsy-turvy, shallow unless more is said to expand beyond the human sector into a love for the wild other.

Asked what insight philosophy offers about the human dimensions in wildlife, I think the best reply is that some of us in philosophy are searching for a way to value the nonhuman dimensions in wildlife.