

## Les ateliers de l'éthique

# NATURALNESS, WILD-ANIMAL SUFFERING, AND PALMER ON LAISSEZ-FAIRE

NED HETTINGER

---

Volume 13, numéro 1, hiver 2018

URI : [id.erudit.org/iderudit/1055118ar](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1055118ar)  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1055118ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

---

Éditeur(s)

Centre de recherche en éthique de l'Université de Montréal

[Découvrir la revue](#)

---

Citer cet article

HETTINGER, N. (2018). NATURALNESS, WILD-ANIMAL SUFFERING, AND PALMER ON LAISSEZ-FAIRE. *Les ateliers de l'éthique*, 13(1), 65–84. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1055118ar>

### Résumé de l'article

Le présent essai examine la tension entre la préoccupation pour la souffrance des animaux sauvages et celle concernant l'influence massive des humains sur la nature. Il examine l'éthique animale de Clare Palmer, notamment sa tentative d'atteindre un équilibre entre la politique de non-intervention dans la nature dite du « laissez-faire » et nos engagements envers les animaux. L'article propose une approche alternative à celle de Palmer qui, tout en défendant cette intuition du « laissez-faire », se fonde cette fois sur une valeur environnementale significative de plus en plus importante : le Respect pour une Nature Indépendante (RNI). Le texte articule et défend la valeur de naturalité (naturalness) et examine les implications de celle-ci pour l'intuition du « laissez-faire » ainsi que pour le souci envers la souffrance des animaux sauvages.

---

Tous droits réservés © Centre de recherche en éthique de l'Université de Montréal, 2019

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne. [<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>]

---



Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche. [www.erudit.org](http://www.erudit.org)

# NATURALNESS, WILD-ANIMAL SUFFERING, AND PALMER ON LAISSEZ-FAIRE

NED HETTINGER

PHILOSOPHY, COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON

## ABSTRACT:

This essay explores the tension between concern for the suffering of wild animals and concern about massive human influence on nature. It examines Clare Palmer's animal ethics and its attempt to balance a commitment to the laissez-faire policy of nonintervention in nature with our obligations to animals. The paper contrasts her approach with an alternative defence of this laissez-faire intuition based on a significant and increasingly important environmental value: Respect for an Independent Nature (RIN). The paper articulates and defends naturalness value and explores its implications for the laissez-faire intuition and for concern about wild-animal suffering.

## RÉSUMÉ :

Le présent essai examine la tension entre la préoccupation pour la souffrance des animaux sauvages et celle concernant l'influence massive des humains sur la nature. Il examine l'éthique animale de Clare Palmer, notamment sa tentative d'atteindre un équilibre entre la politique de non-intervention dans la nature dite du « laissez-faire » et nos engagements envers les animaux. L'article propose une approche alternative à celle de Palmer qui, tout en défendant cette intuition du « laissez-faire », se fonde cette fois sur une valeur environnementale significative de plus en plus importante : le Respect pour une Nature Indépendante (RNI). Le texte articule et défend la valeur de naturalité (naturalness) et examine les implications de celle-ci pour l'intuition du « laissez-faire » ainsi que pour le souci envers la souffrance des animaux sauvages.

*The total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation. During the minute that it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are being eaten alive; others are running for their lives, whimpering with fear; others are being slowly devoured from within by rasping parasites; thousands of all kinds are dying of starvation, thirst and disease (Dawkins 1995, 131-132).*

*Nature no longer runs the Earth. We do. It is our choice what happens from here (Lynas 2011, 8).*

## INTRODUCTION

This essay explores the tension between two values: concern for the suffering of wild animals and concern about massive human influence on nature. Over thirty years ago, philosophical provocateur Mark Sagoff helped bring to light the tension between animal ethics and environmental ethics (Sagoff, 1984). He suggested that the union against the dominant anthropocentric ethic between animal advocates and environmentalists should end in a divorce. He argued that consistent concern for the well-being of animals would lead to policies that sacrifice the authenticity, integrity, and wildness of natural systems and claimed, therefore, that animal advocates cannot consistently be environmentalists and vice versa.

Some have argued that Sagoff's diagnosis was aimed at straw-men opponents (Comstock, 1988), but recent writings by those who have taken animal suffering in nature seriously suggest Sagoff identified a real, fundamental, and ongoing tension. Consider the following examples. Martha Nussbaum has argued that, because species in nature do not enjoy "cooperative and mutually supportive relations," we need "a gradual supplanting of the natural with the just" (2006, p. 400). Reflecting on what he describes as the "unceasing slaughter" in wild nature, Jeff McMahan concludes that "we have reason to desire the extinction of all carnivorous species" (2010). In theory, at least, he supports arranging "the gradual extinction of carnivorous species... [or intervening] genetically, so that currently carnivorous species would gradually evolve into herbivorous ones" (2010, brackets inserted). Oscar Horta has argued that there is immense suffering in nature and that it vastly outweighs the happiness experienced. He concludes that "concern for nonhuman animals entails that we should try to intervene in nature to reduce the enormous amount of harm they suffer" (2010, p. 73). These suggested interventions in nature are anathema to environmentalists.

With the advent of the planetary-management ethic fuelled by the recent hype about our living in a new geologic epoch named after us ("the Anthropocene"), the tension between respect for independent nature and the alleviation of wild-animal suffering has become acute: shall we manage the biosphere for the well-being of sentient wild animals? Imagine a future of compassionate human

stewardship of planet Earth where, armed with knowledge from the new field of welfare biology, we manage the sentient wild-animal kingdom to create a “pan-species welfare state” (Pearce, 2009). Implementation might involve phasing out or reprogramming predator species as McMahan suggests, regulating wild-animal fertility, and providing food and medical care for wild animals in need. Eventually we may be able to use genetic engineering and nanotechnology to replace the pain-motivational system in nature “with heritable gradients of bliss” (Pearce, 2015b). Human gains in scientific knowledge about nature’s workings and our increasing technical prowess will continue to bring this imagined future closer to human capability. As one proponent of a “compassionately run global ecosystem” puts it:

Technological advances over the next few decades will mean that every cubic meter of the planet will be computationally accessible to surveillance, micromanagement and control. Such unprecedented power places an immense burden of responsibility on the planet’s cognitively dominant species—*Homo sapiens* (Pearce, 2015a).

While bringing about a just nature devoid of carnivores and putting an end to animal suffering are mere future possibilities, the conflict between minimizing animal suffering and respecting the autonomy of nature is manifest in numerous current practices. Consider our treatment of predators. Environmentalists strongly support the efforts to restore them in cases where humans have brought about their decline. Animal advocates are more circumspect: Might predator restoration lead to relatively quick deaths that reduce suffering of overpopulated prey who might otherwise die slowly and painfully due to injuries, disease, cold, starvation, or parasitism? Or do predators overall add to the violence, fear, stress, and suffering a prey population experiences? Nussbaum endorses sterilization rather than predator restoration to control prey overpopulation (2006, p. 396), and this does seem the best in terms of limiting animal suffering. Environmentalists would object to this as too much intervention in nature and would urge the restoration of the prey population’s natural predator. Consider, also, medical treatment for wild animals. Many groups rescue and treat injured wild animals (including predators such as raptors and sea turtles), even when the injury was not caused by humans. In contrast, US national park policy is to let nature take its course in such circumstances. Another example is endangered species programmes favoured by environmentalists that often involve capture, captive breeding, and/or relocation of sentient individuals. Animal advocates object to such treatment because it harms individuals who are often thrown into more difficult and dangerous new lives. An additional important policy supported by many environmentalists is the eradication of human-introduced exotic species, as in the poisoning of nonnative fish populations, a practice that animal advocates clearly oppose.

The tensions between animal advocates and environmentalists are not mere fabrications, but instead are theoretically and practically real. However, neither environmentalists nor animal advocates are uniform groups, and so, the extent

to which conflicts exist between them depends on the particulars of the values they embrace. Environmentalists embrace a plurality of values, including the value of sentient and nonsentient life, the values of biodiversity and ecosystem functioning and health, and the value of an autonomous nature. Some of these conflict with the concerns of animal advocates and some do not. As we have seen, some animal advocates readily embrace human involvement in nature for the sake of animal well-being. But many others structure their support of animals to try to avoid this implication. I will focus particular attention on Clare Palmer's articulation of an animal ethics that defends what she calls "the laissez-faire intuition" (2010, p. 2). Hers is a particularly sophisticated and insightful defence of our obligations to animals, and one that strives to avoid the implication that we must alleviate wild-animal suffering. I will contrast her approach with an alternative defence of this laissez-faire intuition, one based on a significant and increasingly important environmental value: Respect for an Independent Nature (RIN). I will articulate and defend this naturalness value from its critics and explore its implications for the laissez-faire intuition and for our concern about wild-animal suffering.

## NATURALNESS VALUE

Something is natural to the extent it is not influenced by humans.<sup>1</sup> An entity's naturalness thus comes in degrees—for example, wilderness areas are more natural than are city parks and wolves are more natural than dogs. Naturalness involves an overall judgment of the degree of independence of an entity from humans, that is, of the extent to which a being is autonomous vis-à-vis humanity.

Human influence can be intentional or unintentional, managed or unmanaged. It can involve control or not. Putting too much emphasis on particular types of human influence can lead one astray. For example, Emma Marris has argued that, while national parks are managed, urban weed lots are not. From this she concludes that the weed lots are wilder than are the parks (2016). But if we think of human influence overall, it is clear that we exert much more influence over the urban weed lot than over the national park and that the latter is far more natural as a consequence.

A similar caution should be exercised concerning the importance of intention in human influence. According to Christopher Preston (2011), it is intentional human action that is of particular concern because such action creates artifacts. He suggests that geoengineering as a response to climate change would make the climate a human artifact, while unintentional human-caused climate change has not created an artifact. I am not convinced that human artifacts must be intentionally created (consider the pile of roadside litter a mile from a McDonald's). But the real problem is that a sole focus on the intentional dimension of human impact ignores the importance of the overall *amount* of human impact. Unintended human effects on nature can be far greater than intentional ones and can undermine naturalness much more.

Consider Clare Palmer's suggestion that genetically altering pikas to withstand higher temperatures "smears human intention out over the entire landscape" (2016, p. 245). She writes: "Humans *intended* the existence of these pika, with a specific genetic profile, in this place at this time; they are present by human plan . . . making aspects of a place the product of human intention" (p. 245). Notice, however, that if we did not rescue the pika and continued business as usual, this would unintentionally drive pikas in the American West extinct. While this would not smear human intention over the landscape, it is arguable that it would give us a much greater impact on nature than we would have with our rescue attempt. Some intentional human influence on nature can lessen human impact overall, as when we remove the first few members of a human-introduced invasive species before it has time to spread.

Relatedly, influence over nature that amounts to control would seem to be especially problematic in terms of undermining naturalness and its associated value, as it seems clearly to compromise nature's autonomy. But, here again, minor control over nature can undermine naturalness far less than uncontrolled massive human influence, as is evidenced by climate change. Lack of human control is no guarantee of naturalness, as can be seen additionally in wild parties and traffic jams.

It should be noted that naturalness is not solely (or mainly) an invariant historical property that, once lost due to human intervention, can never be regained, a position that some have attributed to Robert Elliot (1982;1997) in his important faking-nature writings. The loss of degrees of naturalness—what I will call *humanization* of an entity—can washout over time, like boot prints in the spring snow. As the effects of humanization recede and natural forces regain their relative strength, naturalness returns. Nature can rewild itself. Old mining roads in the North American Rocky Mountains are often difficult to identify after hundreds of years of nature carrying on and taking control. As Clare Palmer and Brenton Larson helpfully put it, naturalness is an "*ongoing state* of independence from human beings," as opposed to simply a historical, human-independence origin property (2014, p. 654). While it will always be true that humans built roads in a wild area, it is also true that the human influence these roads embody will eventually be gone. As noted above, naturalness can also be enhanced via additional human activity, as when humans pick up trash, remove a dam, or restore an ecosystem or species. Sometimes human activity can undo previous human impacts, while failure to intervene amounts to "shackling" a natural entity to continued "human-induced trauma" (Light, 2002, p. 181).

A popular and frequent critique of this emphasis on naturalness is that the focus on human-independent nature ignores that humans are part of nature and sets up an unhealthy dichotomy between humans and nature. As Baird Callicott once put it, "We are animals ourselves... very precocious to be sure, but just big monkeys, nevertheless. We are therefore a part of nature, not set apart from it. Chicago is no less a phenomenon of nature than is the Great Barrier Reef" (1992, p. 17). While it is crucially important to realize the ways in which humans are

part of nature (e.g., we evolved on the planet like all other living things and, with them, deeply depend on its natural processes, including those that work within us), it is equally important to emphasize our differences, including our moral responsibilities and more generally the vast extent to which social, political, economic, aesthetic, and technical considerations shape our lives. Failure to separate our understanding of human activity from that of nonhumans is tantamount to insisting that the social sciences should be reduced to the natural sciences. While a human/nature apartheid is clearly problematic, so too is the failure to distinguish between human- and nonhuman-caused phenomenon, as when people try to justify human hunting as just another predator-prey relationship or argue that building roads into wilderness areas does not compromise those areas because humans are part of nature too.<sup>2</sup>

Naturalness is a type of (negative) causal relation between humans and nonhumans. Why should we value that relation? Many do value naturalness and in a variety of different circumstances. Our admiration of the Old Faithful geyser in the Yellowstone National Park would be lost were we to discover that the size and periodicity of its eruptions are due to the well-timed placement of baking soda in its underground plumbing by park personnel. We are admiring an amazing, unplanned natural phenomenon, not the ability of people to keep to a schedule or to mix the right chemicals. Picking mushrooms for dinner from a supermarket bin does not compare to discovering wild mushrooms on the forest floor (and this is not just because of the beauty of the setting). Leaving aside the (likely erroneous) health concerns, much of the objection to genetically modified foods comes from a desire to eat more natural foods. Our respect for an athletic performance is often due in part to our appreciation of the native ability of the athlete, not just the individual's hard work, and it would be severely diminished were it the product of steroids. Or consider how we differentially evaluate the suffering caused by predators and the suffering caused by humans, or natural death versus murder. Such examples of preferentially evaluating more natural entities and events permeate our lives. Those who deny the value of the natural will have to consider such evaluations as delusional. An ethic of respect for independent nature explains and provides theoretical support for such widespread value judgments.

Naturalness has not always had the acute value it has today. When humans first emerged on the planet, their initial acts of humanization did not entail any—or, at least, any serious—loss of value. When we humans were a small and helpless species, our increasing control of nature was both important for us and no great loss for nature. But in today's world, where humans' massive alteration of the planet continues to accelerate unabated, the loss is significant and the value of the remaining relatively untouched nature is substantial and ever increasing. In many respects, our increased influence on and control of natural events is not good even for us.

Part of the defence of the value of naturalness is belief that there should be limits to the extent of the human enterprise. Human freedom to act on and control the

world around us should not be unlimited. Humans should not be responsible for everything. Imagine a world where humans determine the weather and the seasons—when spring comes, when it rains, whether it is sunny or cloudy, whence and how fast the wind blows. Imagine a world in which humans have decided which species exist, in what places, and at what concentrations. Imagine a world where every tree has been planted by us, the path of every river shaped by our plans (or from unintended results of our activities), and where natural beauty has been replaced with landscaped aesthetics. Think of a world where every characteristic of our children is engineered in detail. A world where everywhere we look we see human fingerprints and where human responsibility is omnipresent is a seriously impoverished world. It is also in important ways a lonely world, with just us, our projects, and our by-products. Only a narcissistic species would appreciate such a world of human overreaching. We are not masters of the earth. We are not the “God species,” as some have suggested (Lynas, 2011).

Nor should we even attempt to become “planetary managers” who try to “manage planet earth” (Scientific American, 1989). We are not boss. We are not in charge of this place. We should not try to take control and handle the planet. A proper human relation with nature should be based on proper humility, not grandiosity. Our massive impact on the planet is arrogant and hubristic. A virtuous human species would do much more to accommodate itself to the world and back off from the limitless imposition of its will on it. Such a species would manifest greater acceptance of, and gratitude for, the given, gifted character of the natural world. It would gladly share the earth with others—namely, with the rivers, otters, spiders, glaciers, and forests—instead of taking more and more for itself. In short, it would respect the integrity and independence of the nonhuman other. Valuing and promoting naturalness respects that autonomy and manifests the virtues of humility, gratitude, accommodation, fairness, and self-control.<sup>3</sup>

In short, the rationale for naturalness value and for the ethic of respect for independent nature is based on an understanding of the proper place of humans in the world, an embrace and prioritization of certain human virtues, a theoretical explanation and accommodation of widespread value judgments, and the promotion of human and nonhuman flourishing.

Although naturalness value is a critically important value, it is, of course, not the only value worthy of promotion and it will have to compete with other, sometimes conflicting, values. While naturalness is typically value enhancing, it is by no means invariably a trumping value. Nor does naturalness guarantee that the entity with this property is good, all things considered. While a natural earthquake is less bad than the same earthquake caused by fracking, it is still likely to be of negative value overall. Although it is an increasingly important and powerful value in this supposed “age of man,” naturalness value can be overridden by other important values.

All life has value, although to differing degrees, depending on sophistication and context. Animals are especially important and particularly animals with an inner life. Insofar as a creature has positive and negative experiential states such as pleasure and pain and caring and fearing, I believe that gives that being a special claim to our moral attention. While the pain and fear experienced by vast numbers of the animals that are within human culture are much greater reasons for moral concern, such experiential states of animals living in nature are also morally relevant. While it is often suggested that suffering in nature is neither good nor bad, this view is not plausible. While it is true that such suffering is neither right nor wrong, this does not show that it is evaluatively neutral. While pain in nature is instrumentally valuable—warning animals of danger or protecting them from further injury, for example—this fails to show that, considered in itself (i.e., intrinsically), it is not bad. If we believe our suffering or our pets' suffering is intrinsically bad, then wild-animal suffering too is intrinsically bad. And its badness does give us a moral reason to consider alleviating or preventing it.

This sets up a tension between respect for independent nature and moral concern for potentially preventable animal suffering in nature. In deciding how we should act concerning such cases, we must weigh these two moral reasons against each other. I will defend the noninterventionist ethic by arguing that preserving naturalness value typically outweighs the importance of alleviating animal suffering. This is especially true of large-scale intervention, such as predator elimination programmes or massive contraceptive control for predator and prey populations. General attempts to remake nature in the image of compassionate welfare biology or to make nature fair extend human influence and responsibility into nature much too far. Small-scale and individual assistance that alleviates suffering (such as shooting a dying and suffering elk) and causes relatively little loss of naturalness may often be advisable.

### **CLARE PALMER'S NO-ENTANGLEMENT DEFENCE OF LAISSEZ-FAIRE**

It will be helpful to compare this naturalness defence of nonintervention with the careful and insightful animal ethic that Clare Palmer has articulated in a recent series of papers and a book. Palmer (2010) promotes the nonintervention ethic by defending what she calls the "laissez-faire intuition" concerning our treatment of animals in the wild. Her analysis of our obligations towards animals in general is constructed in such a way that we have no duty to rescue wild animals from their fates in nature.

Palmer's position is based on the distinction between positive duties to assist and negative duties to avoid causing harm. She accepts the idea that there is a significant moral difference between failing to assist someone and harming someone. As she puts it, "One is peculiarly responsible for what one does, in a way one is not for what one fails to prevent" (2010, p. 74). For example, drowning a wildebeest is morally different from letting it drown. While the duty not to harm applies to all sentient creatures, assistance is obligatory only when it involves those with whom we are "entangled."

These distinctions allow Palmer to embrace a set of attractive views concerning our treatment of animals, both domestic and wild. Because of rich entanglements with pets, animals used for food or kept in zoos, and other animals that are part of human culture, not only must we not harm them, but we also have obligations to take care of them, provide for their needs, and assist them when they are in trouble. This is in large part because we made them unable to take care of themselves, but more generally because our entanglements with them generate obligations. You have an obligation to rescue your dog who is drowning, or even the neighbour's dog, because you are entangled with those animals. In general, our duties to animals in the wild are limited to the negative duty not to harm; assistance when they are in need is not required unless of course we have somehow entangled ourselves with them in relevant ways.

What engagement involves is a tricky and crucial part of her theory. In the simplest case, I have a duty to assist you from drowning if I have agreed to be your life guard or if I have harmed you by pushing you into the water. I also have a duty to assist you if I have made you vulnerable or dependent. Furthermore, I have a duty to assist you if I have somehow *benefitted* from an injustice you have suffered (even if I did not cause it) or if I *share attitudes* whose existence supports and helps explain why you are in an unfortunate situation. Palmer (2010, p. 110-113) here relies on analogous arguments for global assistance developed by Thomas Pogge and arguments for group responsibility due to attitudinal climate developed by Virginia Held. Pogge argues that because of shared institutions shaped by the well off to the detriment of the worse off (resulting in, for example, uncompensated exclusion from natural resources), global assistance from the rich to the poor is required. Held argues that shared attitudes about a group's inferiority or other attitudes that lead to a group's vulnerability can give one responsibility for harm caused to that group, even if one did not directly cause it.

So, when animals are disadvantaged due to shared institutions from which humans benefit or due to shared attitudes that create vulnerability, assistance is required. For example, if a squirrel has been hit by a car, one has a duty to assist it, and this is true even if one was not driving the car, for we are "entangled" with the squirrel: we participate in and benefit from the car culture that led to the squirrel's injury. We share attitudes about the relative unimportance of animal pain and death when those conflict with our desires and with prominent institutions in our lives. As Palmer puts it: This "altitudinal climate" creates situations where, although "only some are directly responsible for harms to individual animals, many others contribute to creating the world in a way that such harms are institutionalized (as in the meat industry), encouraged, or at least tolerated" (2010, p. 114).

Palmer's account of what counts as sufficient entanglement to generate positive duties allows her to respond to an important problem for anyone who cares about animals, rejects the speciesist excuse, and yet shares the *laissez-faire* intuition that we should generally not assist wild animals. The problem is that, if we are

not obliged to assist animals with whom we have no relationships or other entanglements, it would seem that we also do not have any obligations to assist people with whom we have no relationships or entanglements—starving children in other countries, for example. Palmer, like most of us, wants to accommodate the intuition that we do have such obligations. So how is it that we have duties to assist unrelated humans or other people’s pets, when we have no duty to assist unrelated wild animals? Palmer’s response is to invoke the entanglements clause and claim that, unlike animals in nature, both cultural animals and humans are sufficiently entangled to undergird the duty to assist.

Palmer’s work in this area is insightful, sophisticated, and ground breaking. Nonetheless, I note several worries. For one thing, it seems as though, on Palmer’s account, a thousand years ago, before human societies became so entangled, there would have been no obligation to assist an unrelated human. So, back then, we did nothing wrong if we let people not related to us starve, even if we had plenty. And even today, there would be no obligation to assist a suffering ET on some other planet, for there would be no entanglements to generate that duty.<sup>4</sup>

A more pertinent problem concerns the obligations we have to wild animals as a result of entanglements we have with them in today’s world. Given recent massive human impact on nature, is it not plausible that even wild animals are entangled with human society in the ways that, according to Palmer, would bring about duties of assistance? Palmer is well aware of this problem. She writes:

What counts, in a time of globally pervasive human influence, as a “truly wild” animal, and a “morally relevant entanglement”? Wildlife management, human development of animal habitat, anthropogenic fires, and so on, have affected many wild animals’ lives; and anthropogenic climate change is already impacting many wild animals’ habitats. Do more diffuse anthropogenic phenomena such as climate change create special obligations to assist wild animals?<sup>5</sup> (2015, p. 208)

Climate change and other human influences have affected and will continue to affect wild animals in numerous ways, including via deforestation; ocean overfishing and acidification; coral reef destruction; desertification; alteration of rainfall, seasons, and migration patterns; and increase in extreme weather events and disease occurrence.

It looks as though climate change and other human impacts on nature are likely to have harmed many wild animals. Many of us have benefitted from policies resulting in such harms, and many people share in pro-development, business-as-usual attitudes that indirectly contributed to those harms. In Pogge’s language, humans and wild animals share “differential effects of a common and violent history,” and many wild animals suffer from “uncompensated exclusion from natural resources.” And, in Palmer’s language, we are “responsible for the generation of particular vulnerabilities” in wild animals, and there is a “history of domination” with respect to many of them.

Given that our entanglements with wild animals are fairly extensive, this would seem to significantly compromise the laissez-faire intuition. Palmer understands these entanglements and accepts the weakening of that intuition that results. She writes:

Accepting that anthropogenic environmental change does create special obligations to animals does not undermine the contextual argument; it just means that now *most* sentient animals have been drawn into relations with humans that generate special obligations, just as human societies now have entanglements that draw in virtually all people. This makes the position more demanding; but then, its objection to a requirement for humane wild intervention was not based on the over-demandingness of the requirement (2015, p. 208, italics added).

Palmer is overly sanguine about this consequence of her views. She is to a large extent abandoning the laissez-faire policy and joining the pro-interventionist, human-responsibility-for-nature camp of McMahan, Nussbaum, Horta, and Pearce. It is true that she disagrees with them about what generates our obligations to wild animals. It is also clear that the details of assistance required would be different and that the extent of assistance provided would be significantly less. Nevertheless, Palmer appears to be committed to substantial intervention on wild animals' behalf. When Palmer's entanglement view of obligation is conjoined with the belief in massive human impact on wildlife, we are approaching the view of the Anthropocene boosters who believe that human influence over the planet is now so great that we have responsibility and management authority for what happens on earth. In Palmer's case, we now have responsibilities concerning the majority of sentient wild animals. This amounts to significant human responsibility towards nature. I worry that her concessions might entail a commitment to welfare programmes for most sentient wild animals, analogous to welfare programmes for humans and cultural animals, including medical assistance, birth control, and food assistance. If sentient wild animals have become entangled with human society in the way in which distant humans and culturally embedded animals have been, then we would need to extend analogues of the assistance policies we have for these groups to the sentient wild-animal kingdom.

Palmer has several avenues of response to this worry that her views lead to such extensive assistance to wild animals. She points out that insofar as the impact we have on wild animals is significantly less than our impact on domesticated animals, our obligations would be less extensive. Furthermore, when that impact is unknowable or unrectifiable, no duties of assistance would be required. She writes:

Any special obligations flowing from climate change are likely to be weaker than those flowing from (say) deliberate selective breeding for dependence. The impacts of climate change on animals are harder to identify, less intentional and certainly less predictable than selective

breeding ... Over time, more vulnerable animals will shift geographical location (if they can) or else disappear ... And finally, there is no point offering assistance that is ineffective; given the degree of climate change to which we are now committed, there will be some cases where assistance would not constitute a benefit over time (2015, p. 208).

Palmer's defence here against large-scale obligations of assistance to wild animals relies in part on limitations of our knowledge and technical abilities. If we could know what our negative impacts are and on which sentient animals, and if we could rectify those impacts, we would have a duty to do so because of our entanglements with wild animals. This reliance on contingent matters—rather than on theoretical considerations—to support the *laissez-faire* policy is something that Palmer has suggested is a weakness in others' positions. She is right to be worried about such reliance. Defending the idea that we should not involve ourselves in relatively wild nature on the grounds that we don't know what our negative impacts have been or how successfully to provide reparations to animals we have harmed is an argument that becomes weaker and weaker as our knowledge grows and technology improves, as they surely will.

Palmer has an even more forceful response available that helps to salvage the *laissez-faire* intuition. She argues that much of our impact on wild animals is not harmful and is even beneficial. She writes:

There will be many animals, even in a world of anthropogenic climate change, who are not harmed or made vulnerable by climate change nor negatively affected by humans in other ways. Some sentient animals may benefit from climate changes; for others, such changes would make little difference. ... So even in a world of climate change, where human use of the Earth's atmosphere, land, and waters is constantly expanding, there will still be animals to whom humans do not have obligations of assistance (2010, p. 142-143).

Palmer even considers the possibility that climate change might constitute a net benefit for sentient animals. In a provocative paper questioning the common assumption among nonanthropocentrists that concern for nonhumans provides powerful moral objections to anthropogenic climate change, she writes: "But there's deep uncertainty here. We can't tell whether climate change will cause more suffering to non-humans than it will relieve" (2011, p. 290). Thus, insofar as our massive impact on sentient animals is beneficial or neutral, *laissez-faire* is not threatened, for such entanglements do not generate obligations to assist. Of course, even if climate change overall benefits sentient animals, it clearly harms great numbers of them as well, and they would require assistance.

Another worry Palmer's account must address concerns obligations to protect individuals from harms caused by natural events for which no one is responsible. Examples include avalanches, floods, and windstorms. Palmer wants to

come out on this issue as I would: we should protect humans and cultural animals from natural threats, but not wild animals. This concern differs from those raised above because causing harm, benefitting from that harm, and sharing in attitudes that help promote disadvantages all are entanglements that lead to duties of assistance based on considerations of justice. But justice does not come into play when wondering about obligations to assist those threatened by natural causes.

Tom Regan's theory of animal and human rights faltered on just this point. He claimed that, while we do have duties to assist in the prevention of rights violations, we have no obligation to assist animals threatened by natural causes. His argument was that only moral agents can violate rights, and since nature is not a moral agent, no rights are being violated when a predator or avalanche kills an animal. Thus, the duty to prevent rights violations does not apply in these cases (Regan 1983, p. 284-285). As Dale Jamieson (1990) and others have pointed out, given Regan's desire to parallel human and animal rights, this suggests that we have no obligation to assist humans threatened by natural causes either, a consequence clearly important to avoid.

Palmer addresses this problem by arguing that duties can arise out of "social relations" separate from relations involving injustices. She suggests that all humans and cultural animals are members of a global social community, in a way in which wild animals are not. She argues that the existence of these "strong social relations... provides a basis for maintaining that there are at least weak, community oriented obligations to assist" fellow humans and cultural animals in the mixed social community from natural threats (2010, p. 123).<sup>6</sup> I am not sure to what extent Palmer has finessed the obvious worries about social-relations-based duties justifying intrahuman discrimination, including against other races and sexes, as well as discrimination against humans with little ability to participate in social relations (so-called marginal cases).<sup>7</sup> I believe she has avoided the speciesism objection, though some disagree (Faria, 2015).

### **THE NATURALNESS VERSUS ENTANGLEMENT JUSTIFICATIONS FOR LAISSEZ-FAIRE**

I will now consider how the argument against human involvement in the lives of wild animals based on respect for independent nature compares in its implications to the consequences of Palmer's no-entanglement justification for laissez-faire.

One might think the respect-for-independent-nature proposal for laissez-faire is dead on arrival. Given massive human impact on the planet, including widespread disruptive effects on animals and other wildlife, perhaps there is no autonomous nature left to respect. Some claim that the Anthropocene is a time in which humans have influenced all of nature. An appeal to naturalness value therefore provides absolutely no block to assisting wild animals, as you cannot compromise something that no longer exists.

The dialogue concerning the Anthropocene is an important one, although also dangerous. Humans are so drastically affecting the planet that this has had, and will increasingly have, severely negative effects on both humans and wildlife. Framing human impacts in terms of the Anthropocene construct helps us take those impacts more seriously and can propel us to the realization that we need to better manage ourselves and our effects on nature, both for our own benefit and for the benefit of nature. But the idea is dangerous when, rather than encouraging a stepping back, it is promoted as a justification for the alleged inevitability of human management of nature and for our moral responsibility to do so. Loose talk of the “human domination of nature” and the “end of nature” is used to downplay or reject traditional environmental obligations to leave nature alone, to restore natural systems, and to help nature rewild. Here is a sample of this problematic perspective:

We are poised at an important time in human and Earth history. For the first time, we... are changing the way the entire planet functions. This is an amazing opportunity—humanity has now made the leap to an entirely new level of planetary importance. As Stewart Brand said in 1968: “We are as gods and might as well get good at it” (Ellis, 2011).

Such ideas are based on an egregious exaggeration of the extent of human influence over Earth and they manifest an anthropocentric narcissism that is blind to the ongoing agency of nature. They ignore that naturalness comes in degrees and that its relative rarity only increases its value. It is important to value naturalness in the Anthropocene, now more than ever (Hettinger, 2014). Respect for independent nature is still an absolutely crucial guiding value in our relationship with nature.

So, even in the Anthropocene, naturalness value continues to provide a powerful consideration against human intervention to assist wild animals. For example, that anthropogenic climate change has dramatically increased the rate of interbreeding between grizzly bears and polar bears does not mean there is no naturalness left to protect in our treatment of them or their ecosystems. This impact would not undermine the unnaturalness of relocating polar bears from the Arctic to Antarctica, even if we ignore the negative consequences this would have on penguins and other southern species.

Both Palmer’s entanglement view and naturalness value count against harming wild animals. For Palmer, this is because we have a *prima facie* duty not to harm others, while the naturalness defence grounds the proscription on a respect for independent nature. One clear difference between Palmer’s position and what respecting naturalness suggests is that, while anthropogenic impacts that harm wild animals lead Palmer immediately away from the *laissez-faire* intuition (because we are now entangled with them and justice requires making amends, if possible), on the naturalness account such harms typically do not. Palmer’s view would allow rectifying harms to wild animals even if it led to further loss of natural value, and of course RIN would oppose such a move. For example, if

humans introduced a disease into an animal population that caused herd members to suffer, her view would require rectifying that injustice even if doing so involved such actions as capturing the animals affected and inserting a chemical-releasing implant into them. RIN would oppose such a move as involving additional loss of naturalness value.

Another difference is that Palmer's position sanctions positive intervention on behalf of wild animals even without entanglement. While her theory implies we have no duty to assist unentangled wild animals, it allows that such assistance is permissible. Describing her theory, she says it

does not defend a non-interventionist view in the sense that intervention is *impermissible*... It defends, instead, a non-interventionist view in the sense that intervention in wild nature to relieve wild animal suffering, or otherwise to assist wild animals, is not *required*, although it may be *permissible* (2015, p. 206).

In contrast, respect for independent nature provides a reason to think such assistance is *prima facie* not permissible.

A further difference concerns what are allowable *prima facie* reasons for assisting wild animals in need even while embracing the *laissez-faire* policy. Palmer's defence of *laissez-faire* leads her to embrace counterintuitive ideas about the nature of these reasons. For Palmer, the mere fact that wild animals have rich experiences of suffering does not by itself generate obligations or even, it seems, direct reasons to assist them. She writes:

One implication is that—unlike on consequentialist views such as that proposed by McMahan (2010)—we have *no reason* to try to reduce overall suffering in nature by managing or shaping nature differently, trying to find ways to reduce predation, disease and the harshness of wild conditions, assuming we could do so successfully. This seems to me to be a helpful implication (2015, p. 207, italics added).

However, as noted above, Palmer does *allow* that assistance is (or may be) permissible. Furthermore, in cases of individual encounter with suffering wildlife, Palmer says assistance is “perhaps desirable” (2010, p. 149), although the “weak reason for approving of assistance” (2010, p. 150) comes out of a concern for the character of the agent assisting (that they not be “unsympathetic” or “insensitive”) rather than directly out of concern for the suffering animal.

In contrast, an advocate of RIN can accept the plausible ideas that wild-animal suffering does itself provide reasons to assist, that these reasons are directed at the animal (and not at one's own virtue), and that they are not necessarily weak. A defender of RIN would claim, however, that at least in cases of large-scale interventions to prevent animal suffering, those reasons are outweighed by the value of naturalness—that is, respect for independent nature. In cases of indi-

vidual encounter with suffering wildlife when no significant naturalness value is at stake, an advocate of RIN can insist that one ought to assist and that it would be wrong not to. In contrast, Palmer claims: “You could walk on by and ... you would have done nothing wrong” (2010, p. 148) (though you could be criticized for being insensitive).

One would be mistaken to think that RIN is totally noninterventionist. As noted earlier, degrees of naturalness can return both with and without human assistance. Human restoration and rewilding can constitute an undoing, a lessening of prior human impact, or a prevention of further ongoing human impact. The overall result in such cases is a lessening of the degree of humanization, despite the additional human intervention. Clearly, not all attempts at restoration or rewilding lessen humanization. An example would be trying to restore a biotic community to a geographical location whose soil and climate have been so drastically altered that continual and ongoing significant human intervention will be needed to sustain that community. Consider a recreated animal and plant community that requires constant human watering, yearly infusions of fertilizer, and ongoing poisoning of incoming species now more suited to that locale.

A clear example of (additional) human intervention that does lessen humanization is removing human-introduced, invasive animals before they have a chance to dramatically impact ecosystems. If the European rabbits introduced into Australia in the middle of the nineteenth century had been successfully eradicated early on, human impact on the Australian continent would have been greatly lessened. From a few dozen, the rabbit population swelled into the billions, covering most of the Australian continent. They harm native wildlife by, for example, grazing plants so severely that they cannot regenerate and taking over existing burrows of other small mammals. Rabbits have been implicated in the decline (and in some cases extinction) of both native animals and plants. While eradicating them would have involved additional human activity in nature beyond the original introduction, respect for independent nature clearly would have condoned the policy.

Palmer’s position seems to have more trouble with this conclusion, and I am not sure what her theory entails for this kind of case. By introducing those rabbits, we have entangled ourselves with them, and if the introduction has harmed them, we owe them duties of restitution. Eradicating these rabbits would clearly harm them and, if the original introduction was a harm, killing them would also involve a failure in our duties of restitution to them. On the other hand, those introduced rabbits are vectors by which humans will harm a far greater number of wild animals. Killing the introduced rabbits would be a way for us to harm fewer wild animals overall. If Palmer accepts eradicating the introduced rabbits, she is condoning killing animals who otherwise would survive and to whom we may have obligations of restitution, in order to avoid killing more animals.<sup>8</sup>

In certain circumstances RIN could be *more* interventionist than is Palmer’s view. In her discussion of climate change’s impact on animals she notes that

animals who have benefitted from climate change are not owed assistance. Entanglements that benefit animals do not need to be rectified, nor do entanglements that are neutral in their effects. RIN would equally oppose benefitting as well as harming wild animals and it may well condone the removal of benefits or neutral impacts if this were to enhance naturalness. For example, if anglers built a fish ladder to extend the range of mountain trout into a lake that had been devoid of fish, RIN would count in favour of their removal, while Palmer's view would suggest not. Or consider that many bird species have become smaller in size due to climate change (Palmer, 2011, p. 276). If we assume that making birds smaller does not harm them, Palmer's views suggest we need not respond to this impact, whereas RIN would consider interventionist policies trying to reverse and undo this human impact on birds.

## CONCLUSION

The suffering of wild animals is a reality not taken seriously by many, including many animal advocates and environmentalists. The massive human impact on the natural world is another reality that cries out for attention and response. Taking both concerns seriously puts animal advocates and environmentalists at loggerheads. RIN is so important in today's world that, in general, it justifies the laissez-faire approach, even while acknowledging the significance of wild-animal suffering. Relying on the value of naturalness as support for the laissez-faire policy has significant advantages over Palmer's non-entanglement justification. I think the laissez-faire intuition really is the naturalness intuition and that Palmer's attempt to justify it without appeal to naturalness value involves some significant shortcomings.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> A good deal of what I say below about the value of naturalness comes from ideas Bill Throop and I developed in an earlier article. There we used the term “wildness” rather than “naturalness.” See Hettinger and Throop (1999).
- <sup>2</sup> Compare Mark Woods’s response to the idea that valuing naturalness sets up an unhealthy dichotomy between humans and nature. See Woods (2017, chapter 2). Woods’s entire book is a valuable addition to the literature defending the value of naturalness.
- <sup>3</sup> Emma Marris (2015) has argued that a focus on naturalness is about us (it is anthropocentric), especially when it is to the detriment of biodiversity. While naturalness value (“wildness” is the term she uses) is a human value in the sense that all values we care about and act on, including biodiversity value and the value we see in animal life, are “human values,” it is a value that promotes the nonhuman and puts limits on the scope of humanity. I do not see how that could be anthropocentric in any pejorative sense.
- <sup>4</sup> Compare Faria (2015, p. 241).
- <sup>5</sup> In response to Palmer’s question, a reviewer for this paper points out that, rather than generating additional reasons to intervene in nature, anthropogenic climate change gives us greater reasons to “back off” from nature. There is certainly something right here from the perspective of respecting independent nature: great interference in nature (as represented by climate change) gives us greater reasons to interfere less. So, there is something peculiar about using climate change as a justification for even more human intervention. However, if we end the discussion there, this ignores that (1) when we harm others, this generates *prima facie* obligations to make it up to them, and these obligations need to be weighed against our duty to respect independent nature, and (2) as suggested above, sometimes additional human influence on nature can lessen human influence overall.
- <sup>6</sup> I worry about Palmer’s suggestion that our obligations in these cases are “weak.” It seems to me we have a strong duty to assist unrelated humans, who, for example, are buried in an avalanche or threatened by a flood. RIN can often provide a reason for assisting unrelated humans but not unrelated animals. Typically, rescuing humans does not involve a large loss of naturalness value, while rescuing wild animals does. For example, requiring that structures be elevated in flood zones does little to reduce naturalness value, while orchestrating the migration patterns for wild animals to avoid spring runoff would significantly lessen naturalness value.
- <sup>7</sup> While it is true that severely disadvantaged humans are typically part of family groups and have humans who care about them and thus participate in one-way social relations of that sort, it is also true that many wild animals have people who care about them, though typically not in the individual way in which disadvantaged humans are cared about. Would this mean we have duties to assist those wild animals whom people care a lot about, particularly when that care is directed at individuals (e.g., radio-collared, numbered, and named wolves)?
- <sup>8</sup> Palmer (2010, p. 146-148) allows killing some wild elk who have been infected with a human-introduced deadly disease in order to prevent the disease from spreading and killing more elk. This case is different from the introduced-rabbit case, as all the elk are at risk if we do nothing further. In contrast, the introduced rabbits are not at risk if we refrain from additional activity.

## REFERENCES

Callicott, J. Baird, “La Nature est morte, vive la nature !,” *Hastings Center Report*, vol. 22, no. 5 (September/October), 1992, p. 16-23.

Comstock, Gary, “How Not to Attack Animals Rights from an Environmental Perspective,” *Between the Species*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1988, p. 177-178). Available at <https://doi.org/10.15368/bts.1988v4n3.5>

Dawkins, Richard, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life*, New York, Basic Books, 1995.

Elliott, Robert, “Faking Nature,” *Inquiry*, vol. 25, 1982, p. 81-93.

———, *Faking Nature: The Ethics of Environmental Restoration*, London, Routledge, 1997.

Ellis, Erle, “The Age of Anthropocene: Should We Worry? Neither Good nor Bad,” *New York Times*, Opinion , Room for Debate, 2011. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/05/19/the-age-of-anthropocene-should-we-worry/neither-good-nor-bad>

Faria, Catia, “Disentangling Obligations of Assistance: A Reply to Clare Palmer’s ‘Against the View That We Are Usually Required to Assist Wild Animals,’” *Relations: Beyond Anthropocentrism*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2015, p. 211-218.

Hettinger, Ned, “Valuing Naturalness in the ‘Anthropocene’: Now More than Ever,” in G. Wuerthner, E. Crist and T. Butler (eds.), *Keeping the Wild: Against the Domestication of Earth*, Washington, DC, Island Press, 2014, p. 174-179.

Hettinger, Ned and William Throop, “Refocusing Ecocentrism: De-emphasizing Stability and Defending Wildness,” *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1999, p. 3-21.

Horta, Oscar, “Debunking the Idyllic View of Natural Processes: Population Dynamics and Suffering in the Wild,” *Τέλος: Revista Iberoamericana de Estudios Utilitaristas*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2010, p. 73-88.

Jamieson, Dale, “Rights, Justice, and Duties to Provide Assistance: A Critique of Regan’s Theory of Rights,” *Ethics*, vol. 100 (January), 1990, p. 349-362.

Light, Andrew, “Ecological Restoration and the Culture of Nature,” in David Schmitz and Elizabeth Willott (eds.), *Environmental Ethics: What Really Matters, What Really Works*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 178-187.

Lynas, Mark, *The God Species: Saving the Planet in the Age of Humans*, Washington, DC, National Geographical Society, 2011.

Marris, Emma, “Nature is Everywhere—We Just Need to Learn to See It,” TED talk, 2016, available at: [https://www.ted.com/talks/emma\\_marris\\_nature\\_is\\_everywhere\\_we\\_just\\_need\\_to\\_learn\\_to\\_see\\_it](https://www.ted.com/talks/emma_marris_nature_is_everywhere_we_just_need_to_learn_to_see_it)

———, “Humility in the Anthropocene,” in Ben Minteer and Stephen Pyne (eds.), *After Preservation: Saving American Nature in the Age of Humans*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2015, pp. 41-49.

McMahan, Jeff, "The Meat Eaters," *New York Times*, Sept. 19, 2010. Available at: <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/09/19/the-meat-eaters>

Nussbaum, Martha, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2006.

Palmer, Clare, "Saving Species but Losing Wildness: Should We Genetically Adapt Wild Animal Species to Help Them Respond to Climate Change?," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2016, p. 234-251.

———, "Against the View That We Are Normally Required to Assist Wild Animals," *Relations: Beyond Anthropocentrism*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2015, p. 203-210.

———, "Does Nature Matter? The Place of the Nonhuman in the Ethics of Climate Change," in Denis Arnold (ed.), *The Ethics of Global Climate Change*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 272-291.

———, *Animal Ethics in Context*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2010.

Palmer, Clare and Brendon Larson, "Should We Move the Whitebark Pine? Assisted Migration, Ethics and Global Environmental Change," *Environmental Values*, vol. 23, no. 6, 2014, p. 641-662.

Pearce, David, "Reprogramming Predators," *The Hedonistic Imperative*, 2009. Available at: <https://www.hedweb.com/abolitionist-project/reprogramming-predators.html>

———, "A Welfare State for Elephants? A Case Study of Compassionate Stewardship," *Relations: Beyond Anthropocentrism*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2015a, p. 153-164.

———, *The Hedonistic Imperative*, Los Gatos, CA, Smashwords, 2015b.

Preston, Christopher, "Re-Thinking the Unthinkable: Environmental Ethics and the Presumptive Argument Against Geoengineering," *Environmental Values*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2011, p. 457-479.

Regan, Tom, *The Case for Animal Rights*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.

Sagoff, Mark, "Animal Liberation and Environmental Ethics: Bad Marriage, Quick Divorce," *Osgoode Hall Law Journal*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1984, p. 297-307.

*Scientific American*, "Managing Planet Earth," vol. 261, no. 3, 1989.

Woods, Mark, *Rethinking Wilderness*, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada, Broadview Press, 2017.