

Naturalness, Wild Animal Suffering, and Palmer on Laissez-Faire

Ned Hettinger, Philosophy, College of Charleston

Draft, May 2017

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, 131–32).

Nature no longer runs the Earth. We do. It is our choice what happens from here (Lynas, *The God Species: Saving the Planet in the Age of Humans* 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 30 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 between animal advocates and environmentalists in opposition to the dominant anthropocentric ethic 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 can't consistently be environmentalists and vice-versa.

Some have argued that Sagoff's diagnosis was aimed at strawmen opponents (Comstock 1988), but recent writings by those who have taken seriously animal suffering in nature, including several well-regarded philosophers, 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 "a gradual supplanting of the natural with the just" (2006, 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). In a number of papers, 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, 1). These suggestions interventions in nature are anathema to environmentalists.

With the advent of the planetary management ethic fueled 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 alleviating 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 a “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 the 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 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 should be 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 prefers sterilization to control prey overpopulation rather than predator restoration (2006, 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 populations’ 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, U.S. National Park policy is to let nature take its course in such circumstances. Another example is endangered species programs favored by environmentalist 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—such as the poisoning of non-native fish populations—a policy that clearly is opposed by animal advocates.

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 to what extent 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 non-sentient life, the value 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 and 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, 2). Hers is a particularly sophisticated and insightful defense of our obligations to animals that strives to avoid the implication that we must alleviate wild animal suffering. I will contrast her approach with an alternative defense of this laissez-faire intuition based on what I think of as 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. An entity's naturalness thus comes in degrees: Wilderness areas are more natural than are city parks, wolves are more natural than dogs, and vaginal delivery is more natural than a c-section. Naturalness involves an overall judgment of the degree of independence of an entity from humans—to what extent is this being autonomous vis-a-vis humanity.

Human influence can be intentional or unintentional, managed or unmanaged. It can involve control or not. It is important not to put too much emphasis on particular types of human influence, for doing so 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 the latter is far more natural as a consequence.

A similar caution should be recognized 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 McDonalds). 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.

Another example is Clare Palmer's suggestion that genetically altering pika to withstand higher temperatures "smears human intention across an entire landscape" (2016, 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” (2016, 245). Notice, however, that if we did not rescue the pica and continue business as usual, this will unintentionally drive pica in the American West extinct. While not “smearing human intention over the landscape,” it is arguable that this would give us a much greater impact on nature than we would have with our rescue attempt. Notice that some intentional human influence on nature can lessen human impact overall: Consider removing the first few members of an 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 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. Over time, as the effects of humanization recede and natural forces regain their relative strength, naturalness returns. To use related language, nature can “rewild.” Old mining roads in the 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, 654). While it will always be true that humans built roads in this wilderness area, it is also true that the human influence these roads embody will eventually be gone. In addition, although it may seem paradoxical, 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, 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, 17). While it is not only true but 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, are 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 non-humans 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 predation or road building into wilderness areas on the grounds that “humans are part of nature too.”

As I understand it, naturalness is a type of (negative) causal relation between humans and non-humans. Why should we value that relation? It should be noted that many do value it and in many different circumstances. Our admiration of the Old Faithful geyser in Yellowstone would be lost were we to discover that the size and timing of its eruptions were due to the well-timed placement of baking soda by park personnel in its underground plumbing. Similarly, our admiration of an athletic performance is often due in part to our appreciation of the native ability of the athlete, not just her hard work, and it would be 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 distinguish between natural death and murder.

I do not think naturalness has always had the acute value I believe 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. But in today's world, where humans' massive alteration of the planet continues to accelerate unabated, the value of relatively untouched nature is substantial. Part of the defense 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--when spring comes, when it rains, whether it is sunny or cloudy, the direction and the speed of the wind. 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. In my view, a world where everywhere we look we see human fingerprints is a seriously impoverished world. In that world, we find human responsibility omnipresent. Only a narcissistic species would appreciate such a world of human overreaching. We should not be masters of the universe. We are already on this path and in many ways have gone too far already.

Humans should share the earth with others and it is arrogant and hubristic to impact the planet so massively. We need to respect the autonomy and independence of the nonhuman other. Valuing and promoting naturalness is a way to respect that autonomy and embrace humility. Relatedly, valuing naturalness is a way of respecting nature's authenticity and integrity, its ability to be true to itself.¹

¹ 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 of animal life, are “human values,” it is a value that promotes the non-human and puts limits on the scope of humanity. I don't see how that could be “anthropocentric” in any pejorative sense.

Although naturalness is typically a value enhancing property, it is by no means invariably a trumping value. Nor does it guarantee that the entity with this property is good all things considered. While an increasingly important and powerful value in this supposed “age of man,” naturalness value can be overridden by other important values, including the value of alleviating animal suffering.

While I believe that naturalness is a crucially important value in thinking about nonhuman (and human) nature, I also believe that all life matters, although to differing degrees depending on sophistication and contingent on context. Animals are especially important and particularly animals with an inner life. However, unless an animal has the potential for relatively sophisticated long term goals I do not think its death is a great loss, though it is not negligible. But in so far as positive and negative experiential attitudes such as pleasure and pain and caring and fear exist in a being, I believe that gives the being a special claim to our moral attention. While human-caused pain and fear as experienced by far too many of the animals that live with humans is a far greater reason for moral concern, such experiential states of animals in nature are also morally relevant. I reject the idea that suffering in nature is neither bad nor good. It clearly is intrinsically bad. And its badness does give us a 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 should weigh these two moral reasons against each other. I will defend the non-interventionist 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 eradication programs or massive contraceptive control for predator and prey populations. General attempts to remake nature in the image of compassionate welfare biology, or trying 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) that causes relatively little loss of naturalness may often be advisable.

Clare Palmer’s No-Entanglement Defense of Laissez-Faire

It will be helpful to compare this naturalness defense of non-intervention with the carefully and insightfully developed animal ethic that Clare Palmer has articulated in a recent series of papers and book. Palmer (2010) promotes the non-intervention 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, 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 only obligatory 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, as well as other animals that are part of human culture, not only must we not harm them, but we 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 neighbor’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 the 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’ve harmed you by pushing you into the water. I also have a duty to assist you if I have made you vulnerable or dependent. Further, 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 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 (Palmer, 2010, 110-13). 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 that humans benefit from 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 did not drive 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 attitudinal climate creates situation where although only some are directly responsible for harm to individual animals, many others create the world in which harms are institutionalized, encouraged, or tolerated” (2010, 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-fair” 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 don’t 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 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.

I think Palmer's work in this area is insightful, sophisticated and ground breaking. Nonetheless, I will note several worries. For one thing, it looks like 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 who we were not related to 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.

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, isn't it plausible to think that even wild animals are entangled with human society in the ways Palmer argues 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 animal's 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? (2015, 208)

Climate change and other human influences have affected and will continue to affect wild animals in numerous ways, including via 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. To use 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, to use some of Palmer's language, we are "responsible for 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-fair 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, 208, italics added).

I believe Palmer, at least in this passage, is overly sanguine about this consequence of her views. She is pretty much throwing the laissez-faire intuition out the window and this puts her in the pro-interventionists camp along with McMahan, Nussbaum, Horte, and Pearce. While she disagrees with them in terms of what generates our obligations to wild animals and also the details of what should be done to assist them, she nonetheless appears committed to substantial intervention on their behalf. When Palmer's entanglement view of obligation is conjoined with the belief in massive human impact on wildlife, we are not far from the view of the Anthropocene boosters who believe that human influence over the planet is now so great that we have responsibility and thus management authority for what happens on earth. In Palmer's case, we now have responsibilities concerning the majority of sentient wild animals on earth. I worry that her concessions might entail a commitment to compassionate stewardship of earth involving welfare programs for wild animals, analogous to welfare programs for humans and cultural animals, including medical assistance, birth control, and food assistance. If 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 analogs of the assistance policies we have for these groups to the so-called 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 un-rectifiable, 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, 208).

Palmer's defense here against large scale obligations of assistance to wild animals relies in part

on limitations in 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 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 already have been or how successfully to rectify them 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-fair 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 change; for others such changes would make little difference. . . . So even in a world of climate change, where humans 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, 142-43).

Palmer even considers the possibility that climate change might constitute a net benefit for sentient animals. In an 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 if climate change will cause more suffering to non-humans than it will relieve" (2011, 290). Thus in so far 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, windstorms and so on. Palmer wants to come out on this issue as I would: We have duties to 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, 284-85). 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, 123).² I am not sure to what extent Palmer has finessed the obvious worries about social relations based duties justifying intra-human 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).³ It believe she has avoided the speciesism objection, though some disagree (Catia Faria 2015).

The Naturalness vs 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 'man' has influenced all of nature. An appeal to naturalness

² I worry about Palmer's "weak duty" claim here. It seems to me we have a strong duty to assist an unrelated human, who, for examples, is buried in an avalanche. How would RIN explain why we should save unrelated humans and not unrelated animals? Perhaps one could argue that while assisting humans from natural threats typically does not involve a failure to respect independent nature, rescuing wild animals from such fates would. Rescuing humans is an inter-cultural affair and in so far as it does not involve large scale changes in nature does not lessen naturalness. Rescuing wild animals from nature involves an interaction between humans and nature and is much more of a threat to nature's autonomy. I am not totally confident about this argument.

³ 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 individualistic way disadvantaged humans are cared about. Would this mean we have duties to assist those wild animals that people care a lot about, particularly when that care is directed at individuals (e.g., radio collared, numbered, and named wolves)?

value therefore provides absolutely no block to assisting wild animals, as you can't 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 it has had, and will increasingly have, severely negative effects on both humans and wildlife. Highlighting human impacts with the age of man language 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 let nature alone, to restore natural systems, and 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. I argue that 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 ignoring the negative consequences this would have on penguins and other southern species.

Both Palmer's entanglement view and the naturalness view advocate that we do not harm wild animals. For Palmer, this is because we have a prima facie duty not to harm others, while the naturalness defense grounds the policy on a respect for independent nature. One clear difference between Palmer's position and the one I'm advancing 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 they 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 capture and insertion of a chemical releasing implant. 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 w/o entanglement. While her theory implies we have no duty to assist un-entangled wild animals, it allows that such assistance is permissible. Describing her theory she says it

Does not defend a noninterventionist 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, 206).

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

A related difference concerns how we conceive of the reasons for assisting wild animals in need. 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, 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, 148), although the “weak reasons for approving of assistance” (2010, 150) come out of a concern for the character of the agent assisting (that they not be “unsympathetic” or “insensitive”) rather than directly from concern for the suffering animal.

In contrast, RIN can allow that wild animal suffering does provide direct reasons to assist and that those reasons are not necessarily weak. It claims, 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 individual encounter with suffering wildlife when no significant naturalness value is at stake, an advocate of RIN can insist that one ought to assist and it would be wrong not to. In contrast, Palmer claims “You could walk on by and . . . you would have done nothing wrong” (2010, 148) (though you could be criticized for being insensitive).

One would be mistaken to think the RIN ethic is totally non-interventionist. 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 and 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 alien species now more suited to that locale.

A clear example of 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 mid 19th century had been eradicated early on, human impact on the Australian continent would have been significantly lessened. While this would have involved additional human activity in nature beyond the original introduction, it clearly is indicated by respect for independent nature. Palmer’s position seems to have more trouble with this conclusion and I’m 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, eradicating 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 special obligations of restitution, in order to avoid killing more animals.⁴

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 would not need to be assisted. 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 fisherman built a fish ladder to extend the range of mountain trout into a lake that had been devoid of fish, RIN would count in favor 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, 276). If we assume that making birds smaller does not harm them, Palmer’s views suggest we need not

⁴ Palmer (2010, 146-48) allows killing some wild elk, who have been infected with a human-introduced disease, in order to prevent the disease from spreading and killing more elk. This case is different from the introduced rabbit case if we assume all the elk are at risk if we do nothing. From my understanding of Regan’s “mini-ride principle” (1983, 305-07), it would apply in the elk case but not the introduced rabbits case.

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 of significant importance, one that is not taken seriously by many, including many animal advocates and environmentalists. Taking it seriously puts animal advocates and environmentalists at loggerheads. I have tried to develop a position that takes wild animal suffering seriously, while nonetheless generally supporting non-involvement. I have argued that RIN is a crucially important value in today's world and that, in general, it justifies the laissez-faire approach. I have tried to show some advantages naturalness value has in terms of supporting the laissez-faire approach when compared to Palmer's non-entanglement justification. I think the laissez-faire intuition really is the naturalness intuition and that Palmer's attempt to justify it w/o appeal to naturalness value involves some significant shortcomings.

References

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

Comstock, Gary (1988). "How Not to Attack Animals Rights From an Environmental Perspective," *Between the Species* Vol. 4, 3: 177-78). Available at <https://doi.org/10.15368/bts.1988v4n3.5>

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

Elliott, Robert (1982) "Faking Nature" *Inquiry* 25: 81-93.

Elliot, Robert (1997). *Faking Nature: The Ethics of Environmental Restoration* (London: Routledge).

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

Faria, Catia (2015). "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* 3.2 (November), pp. 213-218. Available at <http://www.ledonline.it/Relations/>

Hettinger, Ned (2014). "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, D.C.: Island Press), 174–179.

Horta, Oscar (2010). “Debunking the Idyllic View of Natural Processes: Population Dynamics and Suffering in the Wild,” *Télos* 17 (1): 73–88.

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

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

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

Marris, Emma (2016). “Nature is Everywhere—We Just Need to Learn to See It.” TED talk, available at:
https://www.ted.com/talks/emma_marris_nature_is_everywhere_we_just_need_to_learn_to_see_it

Marris, Emma (2015). “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), pp 41-49.

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

Naess, Arne (1991). “Should We Try to Relieve Clear Cases of Suffering in Nature?” *Pan Ecology*. 6: 1–5.

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

Palmer, Clare (2016). “Saving Species but Losing Wildness: Should We Genetically Adapt Wild Animal Species to Help Them Respond to Climate Change?” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XL, pp 234-251.

Palmer, Clare, (2015) . “Against the View That We Are Usually Required to Assist Wild Animals,” *Relations. Beyond Anthropocentrism* 3, 2: 203-210.

Palmer, Clare & Larson, Brendon (2014). “Should We Move the Whitebark Pine? Assisted Migration, Ethics and Global Environmental Change,” *Environmental Values* 23 (6):641-662.

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

Palmer, Clare (2010). *Animal Ethics in Context* (New York: Columbia University Press).

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

Pearce, David (2015a). "A Welfare State for Elephants? A Case Study of Compassionate Stewardship," *Relations* 3.2.

Pearce, David (2015b). *The Hedonistic Imperative*. (Los Gatos, CA: Smashwords). Available at: <https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/514875>.

Preston, Christopher (2011). "Re-Thinking the Unthinkable: Environmental Ethics and the Presumptive Argument Against Geoengineering," *Environmental Values* 20, pp. 457–479.

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

Sagoff, Mark (1984). "Animal Liberation and Environmental Ethics: Bad Marriage, Quick Divorce," *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 22, 2: 297-307.