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**BRWR NOTE** Reciprocal (max cost: 0.00).

**AUTHOR** John Muir Institute for Environmental  
**TITLE** Environmental ethics.

**VERIFIED** WorldCat (4372676) Physical  
**MAX COST** 0.00 USD  
**LEND CHG**

**IMPRINT** Albuquerque, N.M. : John Muir Institute for  
Environmental Studies and University of New Mexico,

**LEND RSTR**

**ISSN** 0163-4275 2153-7895

**FAX NUM** 808-725-5579

**FORMAT** Serial

**EMAIL** pifsc.library@noaa.gov

**EDITION**

**AFFILIATION** LVIS, FEDL, IAMSLIC

**ART AU** Robert W. Loftin

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**ART TITLE** The Medical Treatment of Wild Animals

**SHIPPED** 10/06/2017

**VOL/NUM** 7 / 3

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**LNDR NOTE**

**DATE** Fall 1985

**PAGES** 231-239

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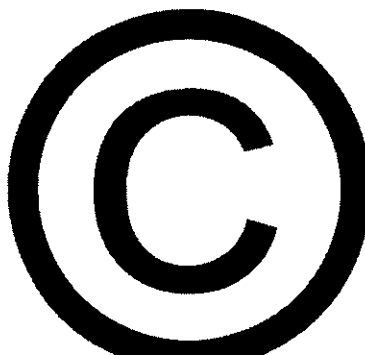
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# The Medical Treatment of Wild Animals

Robert W. Loftin\*

The medical treatment of wild animals is an accepted practice in our society. Those who take it upon themselves to treat wildlife are well-intentioned and genuinely concerned about their charges. However, the doctoring of sick animals is of extremely limited value and for the most part based on biological illiteracy. It wastes scarce resources and diverts attention from more worthwhile goals. While it is not wrong to minister to wildlife, it is not right either. The person who refuses to do so has not violated any moral duty and is not necessarily morally callous. The treatment of wildlife is based on the mistaken belief that value lies in individual wild animals rather than the entire ecosystem. The genuine concern of those who doctor wild animals should be channeled in to more constructive directions.

Taking care of sick and injured wild animals is commonplace in our society. Since I am an official of the Jacksonville chapter of the Florida Audubon Society and known as a birdwatcher, I often receive requests for advice on how to take care of helpless birds. Requests for information on the feeding and care of wild "patients" outnumber all others, both on the local Audubon society telephone and at the national headquarters in New York. Several persons in my city are licensed by the Federal government to hold wild birds in captivity for medical treatment. There are numerous "how-to-do-it" books on the medical treatment of wild animals and the rearing of wild orphans.<sup>1</sup>

Some wild animal hospitals are well financed and organized. Several have received financial support from foundations and corporations. The better ones have skilled professional veterinarians who sometimes undertake heroic measures to benefit injured animals. A case which attracted national media attention involved attaching artificial rubber flippers surgically to a sea turtle that had been injured in a shark attack. The attempt failed because there was too little bone for attachment.<sup>2</sup> In other cases a team of surgeons tried to transplant a cornea from the

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<sup>1</sup> For example, "Care and Feeding of Orphan Song and Garden Birds" and "Help for Hooked Birds," both available from Suncoast Seabird Sanctuary, 18328 Gulf Boulevard, Indian Shores, FL 33535.

<sup>2</sup> *New York Times*, 24 January 1984, sec. 1, p. 10.

eye of a badly injured eagle to the eye of another eagle and a Laysan albatross found in San Francisco was fitted out with new feathers and flown back some 5,000 miles to its home on Midway Island to be released.<sup>3</sup>

Those who undertake the medical treatment of wild animals are well-intentioned, motivated by an understandable sympathy for their fellow creatures. I respect this, and these endeavors do have a certain value, but, as I argue in this paper, the value is quite limited, and, for the most part, not what people think it is. Although taking care of helpless wild animals is not wrong, neither is it right. As a result, humans who refuse to extend medical treatment to wild animals have not failed in any moral duty, nor are they necessarily morally callous, for we have *no* moral obligations to suffering wild animals except to end their suffering.

Environmental ethics is variously divided, but one important watershed is between those who hold that individual nonhumans are the locus of value, and those who hold that more corporate, systemic, or holistic entities such as species or entire ecosystems are the locus of value. Among the "individualists" are Tom Regan,<sup>4</sup> Peter Singer,<sup>5</sup> all of the "animal liberation" philosophers and fellow travelers, as well as those in the reverence-for-life tradition of Albert Schweitzer.<sup>6</sup> On the other slope of the watershed are thinkers such as Aldo Leopold,<sup>7</sup> J. Baird Callicott,<sup>8</sup> and many biologists who argue for systems or species as the locus of value.

While proponents of these two approaches agree on many things, the treatment of injured wild animals clearly divides them. If an individual is what is valuable, if this individual has interests (which it surely does in a nontrivial sense), and even more strongly if it has rights, then humans have some obligation to provide assistance if they are able. I certainly have that kind of obligation to another human. If I am driving down a remote country road and I happen upon an injured person, I have failed in my moral duty if I merely drive on (assuming this person intends me no harm). This is so whether or not the person requests my assistance, or even, perhaps especially, if he is unconscious. If I happen upon a sick cormorant, have I failed in my moral duty if I merely drive on? If so, I contend, it is only because I have not stopped to put the suffering animal out of its misery.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Baughman, "Perspectives," *Sports Illustrated*, 21 November 1983, p. 104.

<sup>4</sup> Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Avon Books, 1976).

<sup>6</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization*: vol. 1, *The Decay and Restoration of Civilization*; vol. 2, *Civilization and Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1960).

<sup>7</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949).

<sup>8</sup> J. Baird Callicott, "Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair," *Environmental Ethics* 2 (1980): 99-120. See also C. H. D. Clarke, "Autumn Thoughts of a Hunter," *Journal of Wildlife Management* 22 (1958): 420-26.

Let us distinguish between negative and positive rights. Negative rights can be fulfilled by doing nothing. The cormorant has a negative right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of cormorant happiness, whatever that may be, which I can respect simply by leaving the bird alone (unless I have a good reason to interfere). The cormorant has this right not as an individual, but derivatively, as a part of a functioning system of interrelated organisms. If a third party is interfering with the cormorant, for example, by shooting at it illegally, I have a duty to intervene and stop the miscreant if I am able—but this is a duty to the *system*, not to the individual bird.

As you may have suspected by now, I regard the ecosystem as more valuable than the individual animal. I don't approve of the medical treatment of wild animals because I locate myself more within the holistic than individualistic camp. As a result, I am extremely reluctant to get bogged down in the interminable morass of doctoring sick animals. It is better, as I see it, to spend what time and energy I have to save more habitat for the benefit of healthy animals. To treat individual animals is merely a one-shot, short-term action. Even if I can save the life of an individual, that animal, like all of us, is doomed to die. Unless I can somehow return it to the breeding population, I have done nothing that will survive the death of that particular individual.

The chance of getting a sick or injured animal back into the breeding population is a slim one. Even if I keep it alive, I may never be able to release it. If I release it, it may not be able to care for itself in the wild. Only the fittest survive. Even if it can survive in fierce competition with healthier, more experienced animals, can it hold its own with them in the even fiercer competition to propagate its genes? If it does, is it perpetuating less fit genes, say by replacing the genes of a sea turtle that somehow knows how to *avoid* shark attacks? Other turtles know how to do that. Sharks and sea turtles have lived side by side in the oceans for eons. Most birds' nests fail. Most of the fledglings do not make it through the first year. The same is true of most other groups of animals, including human beings under natural conditions. That is how the system works; that's what *makes* it work.

Even an individualist could accept what I have said thus far. An individualist could readily agree that it was better to abandon one sick cormorant and work to establish a cormorant refuge, because more individual cormorants would then enjoy life, liberty, and the pursuit of cormorant happiness. There is nothing to prevent an individualist from calculating the greatest benefit for the greatest number of individual animals in budgeting his practical action. Careful economy of time and effort for maximum effect can characterize both individualists and holists. They might well agree about the best course of action in particular cases, while disagreeing about their respective value presuppositions.

Our human ethics, however, morally obligates us to try to keep all the bad human genes in the gene pool by keeping everyone alive that we possibly can. While the obligation to allow everyone to replicate his or her genes is less clear, we

are reluctant to tell anyone that he or she cannot. I am willing to accept this burden in the case of humans. Sometimes I worry about the long-term effects of our well-organized and determined effort to undermine the human gene pool, but I see no alternative. I cannot simply stand aside and let human babies die. In this context, the idea of a "eugenics" program is not only unworkable, but unthinkable. There is no chance that any such program could adhere to objective biological criteria. Such considerations would supplant genuine biology from the outset. Those sterilized would not be the genetically defective, just those at the bottom of the scale of social status. Should we now develop a wildlife ethic which passes these kinds of problems on to nonhuman animals as well? Of course not, since such an approach ultimately harms both the system and the individual.

Wild animal hospitals do have value, but the value is indirect. They foster an attitude of sympathetic concern for wildlife. Unfortunately, however, they channel this concern in the wrong direction—toward individuals rather than systems. Some of this does spill over into a concern for healthy animals and the habitat necessary to sustain them. Part of this spillover is educationally valuable. A hawk or an owl that has been crippled by a gunshot wound can be used to teach youngsters not to shoot healthy hawks and owls that are part of a healthy, functioning natural system. Pictures of brown pelicans with their bills sawn off, when shown on national television, create a general sense of outrage toward such wanton acts of cruelty. Some of this indignation may even spill over into opposition to wearing furs and eating meat. I hope so. This spillover value, nevertheless, focuses on the protection of the system, not the individuals involved, and could more effectively be generated by efforts to protect the system directly.

In the case of endangered species, my position about individuals requires some qualification. If a species is so rare that every individual counts, then more is at stake than a single individual, and we act accordingly. Every species contributes to the diversity and stability of the whole system. Each species is an energy manager within the system. Each individual is too, but the system is structured so that most are doomed to die early. Their lives, however, are not wasted—sharks preying on sea turtles are part of the system, too. That is the system.

The system has to be managed. Man has long managed the system. Aboriginally he did it with fire. By setting fires at the right times and in the right places, he improved the forage for those animals he wished to encourage. With the coming of agriculture, man began to manage the ecosystem on a different scale. Every time one plows a field, one turns back ecological succession. This is management for the benefit of man himself, in his interests. There is another kind of management with a different goal, trying to undo some of the damage that man has done. We simply cannot afford the luxury of a nonmanagerial environmental ethics.

To try to save endangered species is to manage the system. This *may* entail medical treatment for those individuals whose survival potentially affects the whole system in the long term. But we should do it for the system in the long term, not for the individual in the short term.

Indeed, it seems to me that one of the major problems with the individualist approach to environmental ethics is that it has great difficulty accounting for the fact that we accord greater value to individuals which belong to species that have few members than to individuals which belong to species that have many members. An individual sandhill crane, which belongs to a species that has many members, has as many interests and presumably as many rights as a whooping crane. What reasons can we give for preferring the whooping crane? Any position that says there are none is in serious difficulty.<sup>9</sup> At the very least, that kind of individualism must be supplemented with another ethic that gives us reasons to be more concerned about endangered plants and animals.<sup>10</sup> (One can always drag in homocentric reasons—i.e., that people value rare species more than common ones—but that line of reasoning tends back toward the kind of human-centered ethical thinking which got us into this mess and should be avoided if possible.)

My major criticism of wild animal hospitals is that they compete for scarce resources (grants, corporate support, volunteer labor) which could be better spent.<sup>11</sup> Nothing I have said is intended to assert that doctoring animals or fostering wild orphans is in itself *wrong*. If one wishes to amuse oneself in this way, there is nothing wrong with it. In that respect, it is something like drinking a Pina Colada—you don't really need it, the money you spend doing it could do far more good elsewhere, but you owe yourself something in life. Yet, while it is not *wrong* to do it, it is also not right—not efficient, not even wise. It is far better to spend time, energy, and money working to set aside some undisturbed beaches for the benefit of healthy sea turtles, so that they will have a place to lay their eggs away from the distracting lights of beachfront condominiums than to put rubber flippers on one turtle. (Perhaps it could be argued that money, time, and resources spent on doctoring animals or drinking Pina Coladas would just be wasted on something else if people stopped engaging in these activities. This kind of rationalization, however, is not a justification—just an excuse.)

Although it is not wrong to treat wild animals, it is a mistake to feel pious about it. Don't expect the animals to appreciate your efforts—they do not understand

<sup>9</sup> Peter Singer, "Not for Humans Only: The Place of Nonhumans in Environmental Issues," in *Ethics and Problems of the 21st Century*, ed. K. E. Goodpaster and K. M. Sayre (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979); Tom Regan, *Case for Animal Rights*. Both Singer and Regan say there are no nonanthropocentric reasons to prefer very rare animals to common ones. As a result, their position is in serious difficulty. This is the Achilles heel of the animal liberation position. Lilly-Marlene Russow also falls back on anthropocentric reasoning in her argument that rare species should be preserved on aesthetic grounds, since these are presumably human aesthetic sensibilities which are to be considered. This forces her to the conclusion that there is little reason to save those animals which we find lacking in beauty, such as the snail darter. See Lilly-Marlene Russow, "Why Species Matter," *Environmental Ethics* 3 (1981): 101.

<sup>10</sup> See Bryan G. Norton, *The Spice of Life: Why Preserve Natural Variety*, forthcoming.

<sup>11</sup> In television commercials broadcast in the Jacksonville area, Cynthia Mosling, head of a local wildlife hospital, appeals for funds by pointing out that it costs her \$1000 per month just to feed the many animals she cares for.

that you are trying to help them. All the sea turtle knows is that it hurts and these strange two-legged creatures, which it fears, keep messing around with its flippers. I wonder if a red-tailed hawk with only one wing enjoys life in a cage? I have no way of knowing, but I see no reason to believe that it does. It might as well be dead. If you want to go to the trouble of keeping it alive, that is permissible, but do not pretend that you are doing the *bird* a favor. You're keeping a wild pet.

Most bird hospitals seem to be based on biological illiteracy. Where there is life, there is death. Those who minister to wild animals, however, seem to fail to understand that. Birds are not little feathered people. Yet, bird physicians act on that premise and treat the symptoms rather than the root causes of the disease.

A look at the activities of one of the more successful hospitals may help illustrate my point. In an article in *Camp-orama* (a magazine distributed in Florida to the owners of large motor homes), Ralph Heath, director of the Suncoast Seabird Sanctuary in Indian Shores, Florida, tells how God called him to the work of saving injured wildlife. He first picked up an injured cormorant, then people began to bring him injured gulls, etc. Word got around and soon he had 400 sick birds on his hands:

... these included a blue heron sickened by polluted water; ducks caught in an oil spill; an egret that had flown into a picture window; a blue jay ripped by a cat; an American bald eagle, victim of a power line; and a baby horned owl that had fallen from its nest, breaking a wing and leg.<sup>12</sup>

Although Heath is aware that his work makes little difference in the long run, since he is only able to save a very small number of the birds actually injured, he defends his work on moral grounds: "... we felt that our very being here in some mystical way helped offset the evil in the world."<sup>13</sup>

While it is a morally defensible position to argue that one's actions derive their moral worth from the mere performance of those actions and not from the good consequences derived from them, it is hard to accept that the treatment of sick birds should fall in this category. Heath, for example, claims to have been heartened one day to meet three teenage boys who had driven 500 miles roundtrip from Miami Beach to bring him an injured pigeon! Those concerned about systems should blanch at the thought of the fossil fuel consumed to rescue a pigeon—a semi-domesticated *nuisance* species. But why not? Once one accepts the premises—that wild (or semi-wild) individual birds have a right to life—such actions become admirable rather than absurd. Perhaps the next step will be to require such

<sup>12</sup> Ralph Heath, "Children of the Air," *Camp-orama: Florida's Monthly Camping and RV Guide* 9, no. 10 (March 1983): 33.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

actions of all of us—in short, to provide retirement homes for animals no longer able to live in the world on their own.<sup>14</sup>

If the moral worth of animal doctoring is grounded in the *principle* exemplified in the act and not in the consequences of the act, then special moral problems can arise with regard to conflicts of principle, motive, and interest. One needs to be morally consistent. In the case of animal hospitals, however, this is apparently not easy to do. The fund raising literature for Suncoast Seabird Sanctuary, for example, is sponsored by a restaurant which advertises steaks and chops on the back of the brochure. Apparently the deep concern for animal welfare expressed on the front of the brochure does not extend to the individual animals reared on factory farms.<sup>15</sup>

Animal hospitals also need to be careful about conflicts of interest. In 1982, for example, Exxon Oil Company gave the Suncoast Seabird Sanctuary a grant and then featured it in its advertising. In the advertisement, Heath is quoted as saying:

About 90 percent of the birds we treat have injuries or ailments directly or indirectly related to man. They fly into, or they're hit by, or they get tangled up in something made by man. They get sick from contaminated water, or they may be deliberately attacked and cruelly hurt by people. But our records show that less than one percent suffer from oil contamination.<sup>16</sup>

While Heath may sincerely feel that all of these statements are true, the final remark, nevertheless, casts some doubt on the moral worth of the sanctuary's activities, and the moral worth of Exxon's donation, especially since in other literature the director of this sanctuary has pointed out that oil spills *are* a problem, for example, in the article in *Camp-orama* as quoted above. On the one hand, if the hospital changed its mind about the effects of oil spills because of the Exxon grant,

<sup>14</sup> There are some already. The Wildlife Retirement Village in Waldo, Florida, is one, but I understand that they primarily take animals that have been reared in captivity and are no longer wanted by their former owners. This is often the case with animals such as the great cats, which are cute when young, but grow up to become dangerous. This is quite a different matter from taking it upon oneself to treat truly wild animals. Once humans have assumed the obligation of taking an animal or its ancestors out of the wild they have taken on a responsibility that cannot be lightly disregarded. See Eugene Hargrove's editorial concerning the chimpanzee Lucy, "Growing Old Chimpanzee," *Environmental Ethics*, 3 (1981): 195-96.

<sup>15</sup> Cynthia Mosling, a local wildlife doctor, stated in a presentation to the northeast Florida group of the Sierra Club, that she buys ten pounds of chicken every day to feed her crippled hawks. These chickens are reared on factory farms under appalling conditions. The continued existence (I hesitate to call it life) of a hawk that can never fly again is not worth the lives of the many chickens it will consume before its death, even on animal liberation grounds. Nor does it help to point out that if the hawk were healthy and free it would be killing an equal number of wild animals for food. I have already pointed out that this is the role of the predator within the system. Raising chickens on factory farms to feed captive hawks contributes nothing to the ecosystem, but tends to undermine it.

<sup>16</sup> *Florida Naturalist* 55, no. 1 (January-March, 1982): 18.

then the moral worth of its activities is diminished. On the other hand, the moral worth of Exxon's donation would actually have been enhanced if the motivation had been based on the fact that oil spills are a problem. It would, of course, have no moral worth at all if the purpose of the grant had been nothing more than an attempt at improving public relations.

Is it really true that oil has little to do with animal welfare problems? Anyone trained to look at systems rather than individuals ought to be able to see instantly that oil is the fundamental driving force that fuels the industrial system that causes nearly all the injuries to the birds which Heath lists. I, for one, am not mollified by the fact that an oil company contributes money to patch up a few birds that petroleum-fueled automobiles run over. This superficial mitigation of very deep environmental sickness is somewhat like offering free hospitalization to a child who is dying of cancer contracted from exposure to industrial chemicals. It might make that individual child feel better, temporarily, but it doesn't get at the root of the problem. It reminds me of the "Christmas basket" approach to poverty relief. The best approach is to make every effort to eliminate the social problems that produce poverty, the pollution problems that expose people to industrial chemicals, and in the case of these kinds of animal injuries, to encourage oil conservation and the development of better ways to prevent oil spills and to clean them up when they do happen.

The basic philosophical or ethical defense of the medical treatment of animals usually focuses on animal rights arguments. But just what are the consequences of the position that animals have rights—implicit in animal doctoring—especially a right to life? It is tempting to say that the right to life is the most basic of all rights—without which all others would lose most of their meaning. It is possible, nevertheless, to hold that for wild animals the right to *liberty* is more fundamental than the right to life, and that therefore animal hospitals violate the right to liberty by confining animals in order to treat them. This position is a very strong one in that it suggests that animal hospitals are morally wrong because they place the right to life before the right of liberty. It is actually stronger than my own position, that such activity is neither right nor wrong. In this context, my position may appropriately be regarded as a kind of compromise.

Some defense of animal doctoring may be available in terms of Tom Regan's "preservation principle," which he defines as "a principle of nondestruction, noninterference, and generally, nonmeddling." He writes:

By characterizing this in terms of a principle . . . I am emphasizing that preservation (letting be) be regarded as a moral imperative. Thus, if I regard wild stretches of the Colorado River as inherently valuable and regard these sections with admiring respect, I also think one ought not to meddle in the river's affairs, as it were.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Tom Regan, "The Nature and Possibility of an Environmental Ethic," *Environmental Ethics* 3 (1981): 31-32.

Regan distinguishes two versions of this preservation principle, *prima facie* and absolute versions.<sup>18</sup> The absolute version precludes any management of the parts of the environment which one regards with admiring respect because they are inherently valuable. He wisely rejects this sweeping version of the preservation principle in favor of the *prima facie* version because

letting be what is at present inherently good in nature may lead to value diminution or loss in the future. For example, because of various sedimentary changes, a river which is now wild and free might in time be transformed into a small, muddy creek; thus, it might be necessary to override the preservation principle in order to preserve or increase what is inherently valuable in nature.<sup>18</sup>

This version of the principle seems to leave room for all the management one would care to undertake, provided that management is directed toward increasing and preserving the inherent goodness of the system, rather than, say, providing enhanced opportunities for humans to enjoy the system. This version of the principle could countenance regulating the water level in a wildlife refuge for the benefit of the ducks, but not building a road so that people could get in and look at the ducks.

Whether the *prima facie* version of the "preservation principle" permits or forbids animal hospitals is not clear. Obviously it permits the treatment of endangered species, since greater inherent value may be gained in the long term, but whether the inherent value of an individual animal of a common species is sufficient to override the principle of nonmeddling is less clear. If it does not, then Regan too has to conclude that treating wild animals is a kind of meddling, and hence morally wrong.

How then should we treat sick or injured wild animals? Since pain is bad, it ought to be eliminated if that is feasible. Therefore, it is my moral duty to end their pain as quickly as I can. The best way to do this is simply to kill them, as quickly and humanely as possible.

In closing, I want to return to the "spillover" effect, which, as I have argued, is virtually the only genuine benefit of wild animal hospitals. Those of us who are dubious about the value of these efforts cannot afford to overlook this point. The people who are engaged in treating wild animals are well-intentioned, and deeply concerned about the welfare of the natural world, far more than most. Fundamentally, we are on the same side. Therefore, it is counterproductive for the environmental holist to assume an adversarial stance against the animal physician. The best approach is to try to channel this genuine concern for the impact of man on the natural world in more productive directions which will result in more good in the long term.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.