



Environment & Society Portal



The White Horse Press

Full citation:

Midgley, Mary. "Beasts Versus the Biosphere?"  
*Environmental Values* 1, no. 2. (1992): 113-121.  
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/5460>.

Rights:

All rights reserved. © The White Horse Press 1992. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism or review, no part of this article may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, including photocopying or recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission from the publishers. For further information please see <http://www.whpress.co.uk>.

# Beasts Versus the Biosphere?

MARY MIDGLEY

*1A Collingwood Terrace  
Newcastle-on-Tyne NE2 2JP, U.K.*

**ABSTRACT:** Apparent clashes of interest between ‘deep ecologists’ and ‘animal liberationists’ can be understood as differences in emphasis rather than conflicts of principle, although it is only too easy for campaigners to regard as rivals good causes other than their own. Moral principles are part of a larger whole, within which they can be related, rather than absolute all-purpose rules of right conduct. This is illustrated using the practical dilemma which often occurs in conservation management, of whether or not to cull animals that are damaging their habitat by overgrazing. Here, and in general, when we are faced with a choice between two evils, the need for scrupulous discrimination and honesty cannot be overstated; but it is not a worthy option to retreat behind moral principles of limited application.

**KEYWORDS:** Culling, habitat management, moral dilemmas, moral judgement

## THE ISSUE

Is there a necessary clash between concern for animals and concern for the environment as a whole?

Twenty years back, when both these causes first became prominent, they were often seen as clashing. Extreme ‘deep ecologists’ tended then to emphasize the value of the whole so exclusively as to reject all concern for the interest of its parts, and especially for the interests of individuals.<sup>1</sup> This went for individual animals as well as humans. On the other side, extreme ‘animal liberationists’, for their part, were busy extending the very demanding current conception of individual human rights to cover individual animals.<sup>2</sup> That did seem to mean that animal claims – indeed, the claim of any single animal – must always prevail over every other claim, however strong, including claims from the environment. Each party tended to see only its own central ideal, and to look on the other’s concern as a perverse distraction from it.

## RECONCILING FACTORS

Since then there has been considerable reconciliation. This has partly flowed from mere practical common-sense. People have begun to notice how much, in practice, the two causes converge, because animals and plants always need each other. The whole environment cannot be served except through its parts, and animals form an essential part of every ecosystem. The huge majority of animals still live in the wild, where their chance of surviving at all depends on the plants, rivers etc. around them. (Only a few species, such as rats and herring-gulls, can do well by exploiting resources provided by humans). Equally, plants and rivers commonly need many of their accustomed animals. Obvious examples are pollinating insects and birds, beavers to maintain swamps, scavengers to recycle waste, and insectivorous creatures, from anteaters to frogs, to keep insect populations from overeating the vegetation. The bad effects of removing such animals have been repeatedly seen. Even with captive animals, too, large-scale ill-treatment inevitably does have bad environmental effects. It is not just an accident that factory-farming produces appalling pollution. It is bound to do so, because proper treatment of waste would cost too much to allow the cheapness which is its main aim.

Thus the two causes do overlap widely. Naturally, however, both have also parts which still remain separate. Concern for the whole environment gives no direct motive to oppose bull-fighting, nor does humane concern for bulls directly forbid the proliferation of cars. These are distinct campaigns. Even if they seem closely connected and are often pursued by the same people, they differ widely in emphasis. But that kind of difference does not make all-out conflict necessary.

It is not surprising that there was real disappointment among the early crusaders at finding that those whom they had welcomed as allies were not complete soul-mates, only helpers for some of their aims. In all serious campaigning, once general talk needs to be cashed in action, this kind of bond-breaking disillusionment crops up and makes real difficulties. The sense of unity with one's allies is a powerful support in the hard work of politicking, and when differences appear, they always seem to threaten that support. If, however, we want to keep the legitimate element in that support, we must clear our minds about what kind of unity we need and can expect. Learning to do this is a central mark that a campaign has become serious.

There are, of course, also some exceptions to this general convergence of the two causes, some cases of real conflict. They are important, and we must look at them carefully in a moment. But in general, at the pragmatic level, there really is convergence, and in spite of the endemic tendency to pick quarrels where possible, the rivalry has come to look much less fierce than it did. The gradual perception of this convergence has paralleled the still more necessary shift by which people are, at last, also beginning to realize that human welfare, too, converges very considerably both with the interests of the biosphere and with

those of other animals. The public, if not yet its governments, is coming to realize that the biosphere is not a luxury, a theme park to be visited on Saturday afternoons, but something necessary for human survival. However hesitantly, that public is starting to understand that no environment means no people, and that a dismal, distorted environment means dismal, distorted people.

The public is also coming to suspect, far more sharply than it used to, that brutal and uncontrolled exploitation of animals cannot be compatible with true human welfare. People are growing more critical than their forebears were about some of the human purposes for which animals are exploited, purposes such as cruel sports, or wearing fur coats, or enlarged drug use, or constantly eating meat. They are more ready now to think that these things are less essential to human welfare than they used to suppose, and that having a clear conscience about cruelty may be more essential to it.

I do not mean that this new sensibility is yet translated into effective action. It is not. By a grim historical accident, the huge new technologies by which industries now exploit animals were established before this sensibility arose, and are now protected by solid vested interests. There is however a real moral shift towards disapproval of them, a shift which has made it harder for these vested interests to defend their habits directly, forcing them to rely much more on secrecy or straightforward lying.

The idea that the aims of life must somehow embrace the welfare of all life, not that of humans only, is gaining ground. The special qualities that make humanity worth preserving are now seen, much more than they used to be, as involving care for the rest of the planet, not only for ourselves. Vague though this sense may be, it does supply a context within which the claims of the animate and inanimate creation can in principle be brought into some kind of relation, instead of being perceived as locked in a meaningless, incurable clash. This idea still needs much clearer expression, but it is plainly growing.

## THE TROUBLE WITH FANATICISM

At the pragmatic level, then, the competition looks noticeably less fierce than it did. But of course we want more than that. We need to think out the principles involved. We would need to do that anyway, in order to clear our own thoughts, even if the rough convergence we have did not leave plenty of specific conflicts outstanding. But we need it all the more as things are, because, in the initial stage of unbridled conflict, both sides seemed to be suggesting that there really was no moral problem involved at all. Each party was inclined to see its own moral principle as unquestionably supreme. Each found the other's stand an irrelevance, a perverse trivialization, a distraction from what was obviously the only point morally relevant.

This is fanaticism. Fanatics are not just stern moralists, they are obsessive

ones who forget all but one part of the moral scene. They see no need to respect ideals which seem to conflict with their chosen ones, or to work out a reconciliation between them. This frame of mind is not, of course, peculiar to full-time fanatics. It is easy to fall into it whenever one is, for the moment, completely absorbed in some good cause, and good causes often do seem to demand that kind of absorption.

Nobody, however, can afford to get stuck with this way of thinking. Moral principles have to be seen as part of a larger whole, within which, when they conflict, they can in principle somehow be related. The impression that a simple, one-sided morality is in itself nobler than a complex one is mistaken. The issue we are now considering shows this. Any sane and workable approach to life has to contain *both* an attitude to individuals *and* an attitude to larger wholes.<sup>3</sup> Neither of them is reducible to the other. It is always possible for the two to conflict, but it is always necessary to try to bring them into harmony.

#### THE PARADOX OF 'PLURALISM'

Attempts by moral philosophers in the last few decades to find some single 'moral theory' such as Utilitarianism, which can organize the whole moral scene, have been misguided. They ignore the complexity of life. Of course we do need to relate our different moral insights as well as possible, and to work continually at bringing them into harmony. But our aims are complex. We are not machines designed for a single purpose, we are many-sided creatures with a full life to live. The ambition of finding a single underlying rationale for all our aims is vacuous. (Maybe God can see one, but certainly we cannot). Yet we do indeed need to integrate our aims as far as possible. This difficult two-sided enterprise is now being further obscured by one more irrelevant distortion from academics pugnaciously attacking or defending 'pluralism'. We ought to be through with this kind of thing. We should be asking "what is pluralism?" or "what kinds of it are necessary?", not wasting energy on yet one more polarized squabble.

The reductive, unifying ambition has, however, haunted many great philosophers from Plato's time on, and it was particularly strong in the founders of Utilitarianism, especially in Jeremy Bentham. As a controversial weapon, the idea that all valid morality can be 'reduced' to one's own favoured principle, so that anything not so reducible can be discredited, has enormous appeal. But again and again its crudity has become obvious. Utilitarianism, like other moral insights, was a light cast on a certain range of problems, not a final, comprehensive revelation for all choices. Accordingly, recent attempts to reduce moral philosophy to a tribal warfare between Utilitarians and 'Kantians' or 'rights theorists' is a shallow and futile evasion of its real problems – a point which both Kant and Mill in their better moments already saw very clearly, though Bentham perhaps did not.

What great philosophers do for us is not to hand out such an all-purpose system. It is to light up and clarify some special aspect of life, to supply conceptual tools which will do a certain necessary kind of work. Wide though that area of work may be, it is never the whole, and all ideas lose their proper power when they are used out of their appropriate context. That is why one great philosopher does not necessarily displace another, why there is room for all of them and a great many more whom we do not have yet.

Because our aims are not simple, we are forced somehow to reconcile many complementary principles and duties. This reconciliation, hard enough in our own lives, is doubly hard in public work, where people devoted to different ideals have to co-operate. This calls on them, not just to tolerate each other's attitudes, but to respect and understand them. Fanatical refusal to do this is not just a practical nuisance; it is a sin. But it is so tempting that it is endemic in all campaigning, and we are not likely ever to get rid of it.

It was not, then, surprising that, in the seventies, both deep ecologists and animal liberationists should have been slow to see this need. Both causes were indeed of the first importance, and both had previously been disgracefully neglected. In this situation, tunnel vision and mutual incomprehension are normal reactions. Since that time, however, as we have grown more familiar with both causes, there has been increasing realization that they can and must in principle somehow be brought together. Concern for the whole and concern for individuals are simply not alternatives. They are complementary, and indeed inseparable, aspects of a decent moral problem.

Neither moral integrity nor logical consistency forces us to choose between general ideals of this kind. When they clash on particular issues, they do so in the same way as other moral considerations which we already know we have to reconcile somehow. We are familiar with such clashes between other important ideals – between justice and mercy for example, or between all our duties to others and the duties of our own development. There is no clear, reductive way of settling who wins this kind of contest. We know that in these cases we can face a real choice of evils, and we then have to find some way of deciding which of these evils is, in this particular case, the worse.

## PRACTICAL DILEMMAS

As far as general principles go, then, the issue between animals and the rest of the biosphere has grown easier to handle in the last twenty years. Co-operation has become more natural to us, friction less habitual, and that is an undoubted gain for campaigning purposes. But of course it is not the end of our troubles. There is still a great deal of detailed work to be done on genuine, specific clashes of interest. Some of these occur within one of the two causes – between two rival ways of protecting the vegetation, or between the interests of two kinds of

animals. But naturally, some also occur at the border, between vegetables and animals. Indeed there are plenty of these, and we are not likely to get rid of them.

Consider a very common and pressing kind of example. What should happen when a population of herbivores – deer, elephants, rabbits, monkeys, feral goats, New Zealand possums or whatever – begins to damage its habitat seriously by overgrazing? Very often, of course, this trouble has been caused by earlier human actions. People have encroached on the habitat, or have removed predators, or have introduced the herbivores in the first place. But knowing that they shouldn't have done this does not necessarily help us, because these past actions often cannot be undone. We cannot now take the rabbits out of Australia. We need to think what to do next. In cases where – after considering all alternatives – culling seems to be the only practicable means of saving the vegetation, is it legitimate? Or ought we to ban all killing?

It is essential not to treat a problem like this as an arbitrary dilemma, a blank, unintelligible clash between unrelated moral principles, each espoused by a different tribe, an issue to be settled by tribal combat between exploiters and humanitarians. Both the values involved here are recognizable to all of us. There is a real choice of evils. To leave a habitat to degenerate is to injure all its animals – including the species concerned. It may be to destroy them all. To cull is indeed in itself an evil, and it risks setting the example for other and much less justifiable slaughter. It is perfectly true that the choice of individual animals to cull has nothing to do with justice to individuals. As often happens in human affairs when (for instance) it is necessary to allot food or transport hurriedly to one valley rather than another, culling would ignore individual desert for the sake of the common good. In human affairs, we think this legitimate if the danger to the common good is severe enough. Does that make it legitimate here?

The trouble is that some sort of compromise does have to be reached. The point centrally important here is a general one, not just about culling. It is that we have to do justice to the complexity of the problem. There really are two evils. In such hard cases – as also in ones where either of these interests conflicts with those of humans – we have to proceed by careful study of the local factors, not by any sweeping fiat from general principles.

Moreover, we cannot dismiss a particular method wholesale simply because the *pretence* of it has previously been used as a screen to excuse disreputable practices. Culling is indeed a practice whose name has been misused very grossly. (Almost all hunting has now become culling, justified by 'wise management'). Yet the repeated misuse of a name cannot damn a practice. There is, after all, scarcely a good practice in existence whose name has not been borrowed at times to gild something disreputable. Hypocrisy is indeed the tribute that vice pays to virtue. But the question in each particular case is, what actually – here – is the lesser evil? It is surely of the first importance to confront such questions realistically, and not to discredit one's cause by refusing to admit that any clash exists.

## BENIGN BY-PASSING

If anyone can find a way round that clash by inventive thinking, that is of course an excellent solution, or partial solution. Conservationists have recently found many such ways, and are deeply engaged in working out their details. Tourism, intelligently managed, can sometimes be used to finance protection of habitat. Though there are many practical difficulties about doing this effectively, and also some objections of principle to relying heavily on it, yet it certainly has made much conservation possible. Again, careful education of the local people to value and respect their creatures can do much to protect reserves and keep down the conflict. Jane Goodall has managed, in this way, to prevent poaching of chimpanzees in the Gombe.

But then, these chimps are not an expanding population, in fact, they are scarcely maintaining their existing numbers. The real trouble arises over populations which do expand, or which are already too big for their habitat. If they are confined to this habitat, they will wreck it; if (as usually happens) they escape, they will wreck the surrounding fields and become 'crop pests'. They may well do both. The problem is immediate; what is to be done?

Contraception is sometimes suggested as an answer. Contraception, however, requires careful and accurate dosing; we have already seen the bad effects of its slapdash use for humans. Using it properly for wild creatures would, on the face of things, mean more or less domesticating them. It is possible indeed to imagine a small population of large and easily recognized creatures – say elephants – being so treated. They would presumably need to be regularly called in, examined and dosed. But there would then be unpredictable behavioural effects from the different age-balance of herds and the absence of calves, effects which would need careful watching. Indeed the entire behaviour would have to be carefully monitored, inevitably increasing the interference with the animals' lives.

For such creatures, the thing is probably not impossible, but – apart from expenses – would it satisfy the demands expressed in claims for animal rights? It would certainly be a major, unchosen, lasting interference with the creatures' existence. And it is one that cannot possibly be supported by those who are in principle opposed to experimentation on animals, since a large, ongoing programme of such experiments would clearly be needed to make it possible.

When, however, we turn from elephants to large populations of small crop-eating creatures such as birds, mice and rabbits, imagination boggles and the whole scheme begins to look hopeless. Does anyone see a way of dosing them? Even at the middle level things are not much better. Processing a whole population of deer or baboons in the way suggested for elephants would be a desperate business, and again it would have quite unpredictable effects on behaviour. However carefully it were done, too, some would be pretty certain to slip through the net, producing unplanned descendants to mess up the project.



## CONCLUSION

I find no pleasure at all in raising these difficulties. If contraception could be made to work, it would have great merits, and if anyone actually does find a way to make it work, good luck to them. As I have just said, inventive, unexpected ideas of this kind are badly needed. But ideas that are not worked out at the practicable level remain as mere fantasies, dreams which only console us and enable us to make speeches. They do real harm by discrediting the central cause and distracting us from fresh thought about the real problem.

That problem mainly arises, of course, from steadily growing human numbers and human bad practice. In meeting it, we are certainly going to have to take many measures which are in one way or another objectionable. For instance, we will need to restrict human freedom to do many things which would be harmless in themselves but which have become ecologically damaging. Circumstances will force us to keep making unwelcome changes in what we permit and forbid. Morally, that is going to call for great honesty and scrupulous discrimination between changes that are actually needed and ones that are not.

But there will also be unavoidable dilemmas concerning the outside world. There too, we shall have to choose between ways of acting which are both objectionable. The matter at issue here – conflicts between the interests of particular animals and those of the wider environment – is only one of these cases. Where it is possible to find ways of keeping the biosphere going without killing or injuring any members of other species – or indeed of our own species – it is surely our business to use those ways, and we ought to make great efforts to find them. Where we cannot find such harmless devices, we ought to keep down the destruction to what is actually unavoidable. But when the only other choice is serious, large-scale damage – for instance by letting a forest turn into a desert – it is hard to see any justification for a continued veto on killing.

We are not, in any case, beings that can exist without doing any sort of harm. We cannot, any more than any other organism, live at all without destroying a great many other living things, animals as well as plants. Whatever our wishes, we are unavoidably a part of the great mass of predatory and destructive animals that produce most deaths in the wild. And among such deaths, the violent kind are often easier than deaths from starvation.

Of course this is not an excuse for wanton killing. But it surely is relevant when the question becomes “which deaths and when?” Deplorably, we are already in the position where we are bound to do some sort of harm, and where our decision about which kinds of harm to do can affect almost every other living thing on the planet. This, however, means that, by accepting and using this responsibility, we can also do much good. It is surely our business to direct things so as to minimize large-scale damage. I do not myself see how this responsibility could fail to override the objections to culling.

About insects, virtually everybody already accepts this position. (Objections

to insecticides on grounds of pollution are of course a different matter). And even about slightly larger ‘crop pests’ – mice, rabbits, small birds – humane people’s attitude is, in practice, usually much the same. Even vegans, after all, would certainly not get their grain and vegetables if crops were not protected, both in field and granary, by killing great numbers of these small potential competitors.

As we go ‘up’ the scale of life, our acceptance of culling becomes more hesitant. That is reasonable, because individuality does become more important in the lives of more social and intelligent beings. It does mean that we should be less willing to cull deer than rabbits, and elephants than deer, and it also calls for special care about the choice of individuals for culling if we do cull. But to veto all culling, whatever the alternative, is surely a fanatical over-simplification. It seems to me a position only possible for people who do not realistically grasp how bad the alternatives actually presented to us now are.<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The first trumpet here seems to have been Aldo Leopold’s *Sand County Almanac*, published in 1949. Leopold’s alarming pronouncements, along with others from later prophets, are well discussed by Passmore (1974), chapter 1 and throughout.

<sup>2</sup> The main architect of this position has been Tom Regan, in his books *The Case for Animal Rights*, *All That Dwell Therein* and many other writings.

<sup>3</sup> I have discussed the need to consider both, and the difficulty of bringing them together, in *Animals and Why They Matter*.

<sup>4</sup> I have not discussed here Peter Singer’s suggestion that the political principle of equality calls on us quite simply to refrain from killing other species if we forbid the killing of humans, so that all animal-killing involves criminal ‘speciesism’. (See his excellent book *Animal Liberation*, chapters 1 and 6.) This drastic way of cutting short the whole question seems to me to suffer – like other moral panaceas – from confusions which prove disastrous when we try to bring it from the field of campaigning slogans and work it out in practice. For campaigning purposes, however, it has undoubtedly been very useful, which means that there are important elements of truth in it. The bearing of current ideas about equality on the cause of animals is indeed of the greatest interest. I have discussed it at some length in *Animals and Why They Matter*, especially chapters 6 and 9.

## REFERENCES

- Leopold, Aldo 1949 *A Sand County Almanac*. New York, Oxford University Press.  
 Midgley, Mary 1983 *Animals and Why They Matter*. Athens, Georgia, University of Georgia Press.  
 Passmore, John 1974 *Man’s Responsibility for Nature*. London, Duckworth.  
 Regan, Tom 1982 *All That Dwell Therein*. London and Berkeley, University of California Press.  
 Regan, Tom 1983 *The Case for Animal Rights*. London, Routledge.  
 Singer, Peter 1976 *Animal Liberation*. London, Cape.