

by Paul McCarney

Appreciating Nuance - The Difference Between Animal Rights And Animal Welfare



Hunters should not repudiate the concept of animal rights, which has at least 2,000 years of history, or demonize its proponents. Both groups have things to learn from each other.

We sometimes see the conservation movement as a linear thread through history on which we trace the growth of ideas and key figures in a neat and tidy narrative.

In reality, the story of the conservation movement is as beautifully tangled and intricately complex as the issues it works to address. Conservation has always involved alliances and collaborations between a wide variety of actors with diverse motivations and priorities. It is the cross-pollination of ideas brought on by the creative interaction of different perspectives that have achieved the many monumental conservation successes we celebrate.

Therefore, it is from deep affection and pride that I celebrate the diversity of ideas, opinions and voices that comprise this conversation. However, it can be difficult to appreciate the perspectives of others, especially when they differ from our own, without understanding the history of those perspectives.

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Appreciating nuance

To appreciate nuance in the wider conservation community, it is important to understand the distinction between animal rights and animal welfare. Distinguishing between these related but different concepts helps us find common ground between subsets of the conservation community.

We hear a great deal of rhetoric in the hunting community about our opposition to animal-rights groups. Public discourse often exacerbates the apparent dichotomy between hunters and animal-rights activists, in part because bridging perspectives is difficult and in part because controversy sells.

To understand the differences between animal rights and animal welfare, we need to consider the philosophical and social origins of what became the animal-rights movement. While hunters' end goals may differ drastically from animal-rights organizations, we hunters may well find that we are some of the strongest proponents of animal welfare.

Rights versus welfare: the difference

In his poignant book *Heartsblood*, David Petersen explores the two concepts, animal rights and animal welfare, and quotes the research organization Responsive Management's distinction between them: "Animal welfare supports the humane treatment and responsible care of animals that ensures comfort and freedom from unnecessary pain and suffering. By contrast, the animal rights movement dictates that the use of animals for any human benefit is wrong."

The origins of a philosophy

While there are key philosophical differences between animal-rights and animal-welfare supporters, we most commonly hear about animal rights in the context of the organized and coordinated social movement and political advocacy campaigns. However, the philosophical foundations of animal rights go back further than the organized movement.



Animal Welfare vs Animal Rights

What are the differences between their beliefs?

What's The Difference?	Animal Welfare Supporters	Animal Rights Activists
 EATING MEAT, FISH & DAIRY	Animals must receive optimal care and good nutrition	Go vegan! Killing animals is comparable to the Holocaust
 WEARING LEATHER, FUR, WOOL, & SILK	Animals used for skin, fur, feathers or other materials must be treated humanely	Do not wear any animal products. Dress in plant-based materials and synthetics only
 OWNING PETS	Pets are family: they should be housed, fed, and cared for properly	Pet ownership is a form of slavery
 ANIMALS FOR ENTERTAINMENT	Animals should receive appropriate nutrition, housing and care	Ban all such activities, including horseback riding and zoos that protect endangered species
 ANIMALS FOR MEDICAL RESEARCH	Animals must be well cared for and experiments provide benefits not obtainable otherwise	Ban all animal use in research, even though most life-saving medical treatments were tested on animals
 ANIMALS AT WORK	Working animals, such as service dogs or plough horses, need to be cared for properly and humanely	End this important relationship that humans have long enjoyed with animals
GENERAL IDEOLOGY	We must treat animals we use with respect	We have no right to use animals at all, even for food

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Animal Welfare vs Animal Rights: *An Important Distinction*. From the blog Truth About Fur.

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In his 1987 book, *Second Nature: The Animal-Rights Controversy*, Alan Herscovici suggests that “[a]fter biblical times, the first glimmers of concern for animals appear in the work of certain Greek and Roman writers, who questioned the central role of man in creation.”

In a 2004 paper on animal ethics in the journal *Essays in Philosophy*, professors David Fraser and Rod Preece identify the philosopher Pythagoras, 570-495 BCE, as perhaps one of the first to apply the concept of justice to treatment of animals. Pythagoras believed that humans have a “fellowship” with animals, and so, “if we kill them and eat their flesh, we commit injustice and impiety, inasmuch as we are killing our kin.”

Herscovici, the senior researcher at Truth About Fur, also finds an early discussion of what we might recognize as a consideration of animal rights among philosophers such as Plutarch and Porphyry, who both lived between 46-305 AD.

The modern Western philosophical underpinnings of the animal-rights movement are rooted in 18th Century concepts of the rights of humans. Texts such as Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man* (1791) and Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) explored the emerging legal concept of rights. Academics then explored the application of these concepts to animals.

The debate about the identity of animals and our corresponding responsibilities to them has been ongoing for many hundreds of years. As Fraser and Preece summarize, throughout the debate philosophers generally fell into two groups, “some attributing characteristics to animals that make them appear similar to humans in the possession of beliefs, desires, consciousness, self-awareness and other features, which are interpreted to entail human responsibilities toward other species, while others claim a fundamental dissimilarity which they see as justifying the continued use of animals for human purposes.”

Any line of thinking shaped over 2,000 years deserves our consideration. We may not agree with it, but we should at least offer our time and sympathetic understanding.

The origins of a movement

PETA, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, states, “Animal rights is not just a philosophy—it is a social movement . . .” The origin of an organized animal-rights movement goes back at least to 1822, when England passed the first animal-protection legislation to address the cruel treatment of domestic cattle.

Much of the early animal-rights movement crystallized between the 1860s and 1960s around two main issues: better treatment of domestic farm animals and an end to vivisection (scientific experimentation on animals).

By the 1970s, animal-rights advocates began to recognize that they needed to move from what Alan Herscovici describes as a “focus on individual problems” to develop “a comprehensive moral argument for animal rights.”

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Much of the early animal-rights movement focused on single-species campaigns. Wikimedia Commons

A comprehensive moral argument came in 1971 with the publication of *Animals, Men and Morals: An Enquiry Into the Maltreatment of Non-Humans*, by Oxford University philosophers Stanley and Roslind Godlovitch. The Godlovitches argue, “[o]nce the full force of moral assessment has been made explicit there can be no rational excuse left for killing animals, be they killed for food, science, or sheer personal indulgence.”

At this point, the animal-rights movement solidified as one focused not only on reducing animal suffering, but also on ending all human uses of animals. Again, while we can disagree with their principles and beliefs, we can also acknowledge a certain cohesion in the logic of animal-rights advocates in equally opposing hunting, animal ownership, clothing manufacture, farming and all other human uses.

Animal welfare

Animal welfare advocates do not necessarily oppose the human use of animals. Rather, animal welfare focuses on reducing suffering and treating animals with respect and care. It is in this distinction between the two schools of thought that hunters can locate their ethics.

Hunters will readily recognize policies and regulations aimed at improving animal welfare in the form of minimum draw weights for archery hunting and minimum cartridges for firearms. The purpose of these rules is to reduce the potential for suffering by requiring that we use enough power to kill game animals quickly.

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Fur trappers think a great deal about animal welfare. Truth About Fur interviewed researcher and humane-trapping advocate Neal Jotham, who has worked since 1965 to raise awareness and knowledge about trapping methods to reduce suffering.



A Conibear humane trap. Oneida Victor, Inc.

In 1970, with CAHT, the Canadian Association for Humane Trapping, Jotham created a short film called “They Take So Long to Die,” which showed some of the issues with trap technology at that time. The goal was to stimulate action to make trapping more ethical. One person who supported the movement to improve animal welfare in trapping was Frank Conibear, who in 1929 began to design a more humane trap for fur-bearing animals.

The care trappers have for the animals they capture led to the establishment of a research facility in Alberta in partnership with the Fur Institute of Canada and the Alberta Research Council. Work at this facility made critical contributions to the development of AIHTS, the Agreement on International Humane Trapping Standards.

We should resist what might be a knee-jerk reaction against concepts such as animal welfare. It may sound similar to other terms, but there are important conceptual differences between “welfare” and “rights” and it is in understanding those differences that the hunting community can better articulate our ideas and do even more to strengthen the conservation movement.

But there are some things we should be cautious of as we engage in such conversations.

The fallacy of the false dilemma

One of the reasons we have a difficult time with complex concepts is that in public discourse they are often simplified and presented in a way that obscures their more specific meanings. Sometimes this

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simplification is unintentional; when it is intentional, it is usually a tactic to stifle opposition.

So in conversations that explore concepts like animal welfare, we need to articulate both our understanding of the term and our support for its values. We need to be cautious not to take the bait of the false dilemma (also known as the either/or fallacy), a mistake in logic that makes meaningful discourse exceedingly difficult.

PETA, for example, declares that people who support animal rights “believe that animals have an inherent worth—a value completely separate from their usefulness to humans.” While this is certainly true, the belief that animals have inherent worth is not restricted to supporters of animal rights. Rather than a dichotomy between animal-rights advocates and everyone else, what we find here is a point of agreement that is obscured as an either/or situation.

The PETA statement implicitly suggests that either you are an animal-rights advocate who believes animals have inherent worth, or you think animals have worth only in their usefulness to humans. It eliminates the large middle ground of groups and cultures that believe animals have inherent worth *and* that humans can ethically use them.

The mistake here is one of poor argumentation; the tragedy is that we miss an important opportunity to find common ground, which is not a repudiation of animal rights.

Common ground

The key to success with all big conservation issues is finding common ground between a wide diversity of perspectives. We need to ask ourselves where we find that common ground. I think the concept of animal welfare can help.

We might suggest that animal welfare is the other side of the coin of foundational hunting ethics such as the concept of fair chase.

Fair chase promotes an approach to hunting that ensures the hunter does not have a disproportionate advantage over wildlife by, among other actions, opposing high-fence hunts and accepting a set of disadvantages that provides the animal with a reasonable chance of escape. Therefore, ethical hunting demonstrates a concern for the welfare of wildlife in the sense that it considers the broader environment of an animal’s entire life and its place in a wider ecology.

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“Drawing the line in Mississippi”—a 1902 Washington Post cartoon by Clifford K. Berryman depicting Pres. Roosevelt’s concept of fair-chase hunting, i.e., refusing to shoot a captured bear. (This was the origin of the Teddy bear.)

Hunter-conservationists think about animal welfare in the context of nature and our place within it. In this conceptualization, animal welfare does not revolve around humans; rather, we place ourselves in the bigger story of conservation and healthy wildlife populations.

David Petersen, in *Heartsblood*, argues, “as a nature hunter, nature lover, and neo-animist, I find it impossible to endorse any animal rights group, even though we may agree on many animal welfare issues, if that group universally decries hunting . . .”

Where does this leave us? Should hunters refuse to work with any animal-rights group if it “universally decries hunting”? Or should we embrace the common ground of animal welfare and a desire to work for a future with healthy populations of wildlife, even if that common ground is only tenuous and

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temporary?

Conclusions

In their essay on the historical question of animal ethics, Fraser and Preece comment on the unfortunate fact that “the modern debate often seems not to have advanced greatly beyond the stage reached in the historical debate.”

In the end, I think all this points to a couple of main conclusions:

First, the overarching problem can only be surmounted with improved communication. According to Fraser and Preece, different sides of this debate make “broad generalizations about ‘animals’ that simply contradict those of their opponents, with little (or mainly selective) use of empirical observations to justify those claims.”

Second, remember that the debate over animal ethics has been ongoing for thousands of years. This means that it is not the burden of any single one of us to solve it—do not go into conversations intending to settle the issue, change anyone’s mind or even just prove a point. Instead, measure success by listening, having thoughtful dialogues and ending the conversation on positive terms.

Finally, remember that disagreements are inevitable. However, disagreement is not the problem; it is that each side digs in and clings tightly to its ideology with little discussion about how to make progress on the disagreements. Fraser and Preece again: “lacking any agreement on an appropriate methodology for resolving the contradictions, it is hard to imagine that the current approaches will move toward consensus.”

In the interest of appreciating nuance and embracing complexity, I do not think we necessarily need consensus. There may be times when the rhetoric and argumentative fallacies of animal-rights discourses make it nearly impossible for hunters to endorse them. But if we willingly and earnestly engage with the many philosophies involved in the conservation movement and truly listen, we will be better equipped to untangle the dialogue and find common ground where it exists.

In his PhD thesis, in environmental studies, Paul McCarney examined the social and ecological dimensions of wildlife research and management in the Arctic. McCarney lives in St. John’s, Newfoundland & Labrador, where he works with the Canadian government on marine conservation. McCarney is a frequent contributor to Conservation Frontlines. This essay also appears on his blog Landscapes & Letters.

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