

Viewpoint: ‘Animal individualism’ ? Why picking and choosing which animal species should survive or die is a terrible idea

How should humans care for the beings that share the planet with us? This is one of the defining questions of our time. Between 1970 and 2018, wild animal populations have fallen by an average of [69 percent](#), according to the World Wildlife Fund, due to factors including habitat loss, overhunting and fishing, pollution, and climate change. In that same period, the human population has more than doubled and, by [one estimate](#), now weighs nearly 10 times as much as all undomesticated mammals put together.

A common reaction is the urge to save individual animals. This urge has been validated by generations of thinkers who have argued for the elimination of animal suffering on ethical grounds. One of the latest in this line is the renowned philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum, whose [recent essays](#) in The New York Review of Books make an expansive case for human action to protect animals from harm.

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In her December piece, Nussbaum proposes that sentient animals should have the chance to live flourishing lives, free of suffering inflicted not only by human activity but also by wild predators. While she acknowledges that “if we tried to interfere with predation on a large scale, we would very likely cause disaster on a large scale,” she still suggests humans should intervene on animals’ behalf — even in the wild, which she describes as “a place full of cruelty, scarcity, and casual death.” The main prescriptions that issue from this approach are surprisingly trivial: Ban tourism that profits from viewing predation; save litter runs; and feed captive animals synthetic lab-grown meat, to name a few.

This kind of thinking is well outside mainstream conservation practice. No major environmental group, to my knowledge, is working in any organized way to thwart orcas, lions, peregrine falcons, owls, and other predators. Scientists dating back to Darwin and beyond have studied natural systems without passing moral judgement on predation or any other mechanisms of evolution and energy transfer.

Nussbaum’s approach, however, is arguably an outgrowth of a less radical, more widely held worldview of [animal individualism](#), characterized by a focus on the rights of specific animals. Highly developed consciousness in many of these creatures is thought to make them susceptible to the sort of suffering our ethical systems seek to avert in human individuals. But individualism — also at the heart of our legal and economic systems — is a terrible guide to stewarding the natural world.



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The crusade for individual animal welfare treats wild animals like pets, often reducing conservation to the protection of hand-picked mascots in isolated bits of habitat that are inadequate to safeguard the climate and large-scale ecological phenomena, such as migration. It causes us to look at nature as an assortment of beings with different ethical standings, rather than as intricate living systems that require a lot of space and a tolerably slow pace of change.

Over my three decades in the conservation movement, I've learned that the best approaches set out to save and connect natural systems, not specific animals. True, some commercially prized species of plants and animals — mahogany and pangolins, for example — need special protection from overexploitation. But any approach that fails to conserve ecosystems at large scales will fail sentient and nonsentient life forms alike.

A prime example is the Endangered Species Act, the United States' main biodiversity law, which provides legal protection for individual species when they are at risk of or nearing extinction. The 1973 law was a landmark achievement. But the law only kicks in when a system is already starting to lose species, and it

takes a single-species approach to habitat protections. Unsurprisingly, it hasn't prevented the collapse of biodiversity at the population level.

Under the Endangered Species Act, conservation debates have often centered on whether a certain species is worth saving. For instance, measures to protect the [Delta smelt](#) — a very small fish endemic to California that most Californians have never seen — have been derided by farmers and politicians, including [the 45th U.S. president](#), for stifling the state's agricultural economy. Critics argue that the protection efforts reduce water flows to Central Valley farms. What is actually at stake in the debate over the Delta smelt, however, is the health of the San Francisco estuary, the largest in California, which has thousands of populations of wild species and millions of humans inhabiting its shores.

At its extreme, the zealous defense of individual prey animals can provide an intellectual fig leaf to scorched-earth predator control. Government-sponsored killing of wolves, pumas, and grizzly bears throughout the 19th and much of the 20th century eliminated these animals from vast areas of North America to keep livestock safe. An awakening to the ecological and moral costs of the slaughter brought reform to these programs, but the reflex to treat predator control as the solution to ecosystem imbalances persists.

In Canada, for instance, caribou are [in trouble](#). To thrive, the animals need to roam through vast mosaics of forest and tundra shaped by fire, birds, groundwater, and insects, among other things. But these natural systems have been disrupted by roads, oil prospecting, and climate change. (The proposed [Ambler Mining District road](#), should it be approved by the Biden administration and the State of Alaska, may similarly impact Alaska's Western Arctic Caribou Herd.) Mature forests, where caribou feast on lichen, have become scarcer, reducing caribou numbers to the point that wolf predation might push them over the edge. Having failed to respond to the systemic issues, the Canadian government has been compelled to deal with symptoms, [killing](#) wolves to keep the caribou alive.

Pumas, which today range throughout Central and South America and western North America, have also been the object of species-specific policies — both to save them and get rid of them. Research shows the folly of viewing them apart from their systems. Scientists have documented ecological relationships between pumas and at least [485 other species](#), including mammals, birds, invertebrates, reptiles, amphibians, plants, and fish. Some of these relationships are with the animals the big cats eat, like deer — an infliction of suffering Nussbaum's approach would abhor. But the carcasses pumas leave behind feed dozens of species of carrion eaters and diversify vegetation by enriching the soil with nitrogen. Extirpated from their range in the central and eastern United States, pumas are now returning eastward, and scientists [say](#) we should let them.

In his 1949 essay "[The Land Ethic](#)," conservationist Aldo Leopold exhorts people to admit all the non-human beings with whom we share territory into our ethical *community* and to acknowledge the roles various beings play in the ecosystem, rather than focusing on their independent individual destinies. "The Land Ethic" recognizes that the best thing we can do for any individual animal, regardless of whether it is sentient, is love the system in which it's embedded.

I've spent a lot of time in the last five years talking to Indigenous peoples — all from cultures that hunt.

They live in and around [ecosystems](#) their families have stewarded for countless generations. Most of them express a worldview akin to Leopold's — not as the result of any big epiphany, but as a matter of common sense. Why risk the integrity of the system that feeds you? What is the upside of disrespecting a web of beings that sustained ancestors, provided sounds for your language, and played critical parts in your stories?

One of John Muir's most famous quotes is "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe." One of Shakespeare's is "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." And yet, we sometimes need a fresh reminder that our world is a fabric of dazzling complexity that we must steward with a view of the whole — and with a healthy dose of humility in the face of all that we don't yet understand.

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