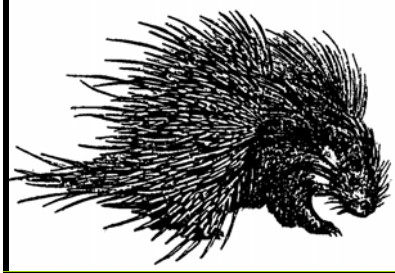
MARCH 2005 NUMBER 32



Porcupine!

Newsletter of the Department of Ecology & Biodiversity, The University of Hong Kong

Animal Rights and Conservation

Almost overnight Hong Kong has discovered that invasive species are a real problem, especially when they bite. The fire ants are not the first invaders and certainly will not be the last, but in at least one respect they not the most difficult to deal with. There has been universal agreement on "kill them all" as the correct response to an invertebrate invasion. Invasive plants elicit the same, unanimous response. When it comes to invasive vertebrates, however – particularly if they are big-eyed and furry – such unanimity cannot be guaranteed. To many people, vertebrates are individuals, not just species. Animal welfare societies, such as Hong Kong's SPCA, have been around for a long time, but over the last couple of decades they have been joined by groups who make much stronger claims for the rights of individual animals and are willing to act more forcefully in their defence.

At first sight, conservationists and people concerned with the well-being of animals would appear to be on the same side, but conservationists are concerned with the survival of species, genes and ecosystems, while animal rights advocates are concerned with the well-being of individual animals. It is common in practical conservation work to kill large numbers of individual animals – not only invasives, but also native species whose numbers have exceeded the carrying capacity of a small, isolated reserve. Many of us have killed animals during research. We usually justify these killings, as well as any non-lethal suffering we cause to animals, on conservation grounds. This defence is derided by some rights theorists as "ecofascism" – individual rights are subordinated to the overall good of the species or ecosystem. They point out that populations, species and ecosystems are merely human concepts and do not suffer, while individual animals can and do.

"Do fish feel pain?" (Photo: Valerie Ho)

Supporters of what has come to be called "strong animal rights" believe that individual animal rights override all, or almost all, other considerations. It is just as wrong to use lab mice for experiments as to use human children. These are the people who break into animal research labs. A slightly weaker version simply asserts that the suffering of sentient animals deserves equal consideration with human suffering, so, as with human suffering, one should always act to minimize it unless there is some other overriding consideration. Sentient is used to mean "able to suffer", and philosophers, on no particular evidence, seem to assume that this ability disappears somewhere between birds and fish. Do fish suffer? Note that simply responding to stimuli is not by itself evidence for suffering – robots and protozoa can do that.

Weaker still is the version of animals rights that I currently subscribe to – a sliding-scale of rights from the animals with the

most complex minds (great apes, dolphins?), down to animals with no minds at all. I support the Great Ape Project in its plan to give basic legal rights to chimps, bonobos, gorillas and orangutans, but I must also admit that this sliding scale is not entirely logical. How do I know that dogs, for example, suffer less than gorillas, and if they don't, how do I justify giving their suffering lesser consideration? Most people in Hong Kong, I suspect, support an even weaker version: animals have the right to avoid unnecessary suffering, but this can be overridden by human needs, such as cheap eggs and pork, or drugs and vaccines that have been tested on primates. There is also a very long western religious and philosophical tradition that animals are there for human use and have no rights at all.

I have emphasized suffering as the criterion for assessing rights violations, since at least the more mentally complex mammals undeniably do suffer in a way that is recognizable to us. It is not entirely logical – who could enter a Hong Kong fish market if we were similarly sensitive to suffering in fish? – but it is a start. Other issues are much harder to deal with. Do animals have a right to life, or is it O.K. to kill them painlessly? Do they have a right to freedom, even if freedom risks suffering and death? To me both these appear to be ascribing human concerns to animals without any evidence, but I could perhaps be similarly accused of denying them without any evidence.

Conservation biologists have long dismissed people concerned about the welfare of individual animals as "bunny-huggers", whose views can be safely ignored. But membership in animal welfare and rights organisations has skyrocketed world-wide over the last few decades. Even their – to conservationists – most extreme beliefs are supported by respected philosophers. I am not suggesting that we should stop controlling invasive vertebrates or that we should ban all intrusive research. However, conservationists have to start taking the ethical issues involved in causing harm to individual animals more seriously. We cannot continue to give purely scientific answers to ethical questions: projects must be justifiable on both ethical and scientific grounds. Failure to respond to ethical concerns will erode our public support and, ultimately, our ability to save species from extinction.

Finally, to put research and conservation killings into perspective: factory farming in the USA alone kills over 100 million mammals and 5 *billion* birds every year, after short, very unnatural, lives. Your diet is almost certainly causing a lot more suffering than your research.

Further reading:

DeGrazia, B. 2002. Animal rights: a very short introduction. Oxford University Press. *A readable overview of the field from an advocate of "equal consideration".*

Richard T. Corlett

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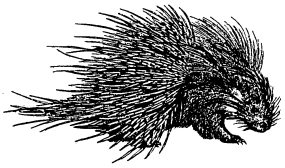

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Editorial

Welcome to our new approach to Porcupine! We have done away with bulk mailings in favour of using a leaflet (which has been circulated separately), designed to highlight the flavour of each issue, in combination with our web-based version. I hope that you enjoy our new look, and would welcome feedback.

The delay in getting *Porc! 32* out is largely my fault, but I have as one of my excuses some good news to round out Professor Dudgeon's 'Year of Biodiversity'. Some of my leave last year was spent on preparations for a CITES conference in which, among other things, several species of interest to Hong Kong were listed on Appendix II. Important among these was the Humphead Wrasse (So Mei), part of the live fish trade and a star turn at Ocean Park. The listing is an important acknowledgement that some fishes, like other vertebrates, can be seriously threatened by exploitation, and will hopefully lead to a more sustainable trade in the future.

On whether or not fish, threatened or otherwise, may suffer pain in the same way as their back-boned relatives, however, is not so clear, according to the lead article of this issue (see also the two papers below by Sneddon and Sneddon et al. – thanks to Kenny