

# Ethics Beyond Humanity

Integrating Animal Perspectives into Climate Justice Discourse

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In a conversation about climate justice with Professor Markus Wild, whose philosophical work extends beyond the human sphere into animal ethics and naturalism, one might expect a call to abandon our human-centred mindset in favour of a more inclusive perspective. Instead, he proposed a more pragmatic and less radical approach, extending modern human-centred justice frameworks to include non-human animals in our response to climate change. From a broader perspective on migration and the limits of invasive species management to the role of animals as both contributors to and victims of climate change, Professor Wild challenged us to rethink not just how we protect nature, but how we live with it in a rapidly changing world.

## Rethinking migration and invasive species in a changing climate

One of the interesting aspects discussed in the interview was that when it comes to climate change, we cannot just focus on “repair effects” after it has already happened, but we also need to “intervene with the causes.” One less publicly discussed example is how climate change is already shifting where animals live or belong. Species are moving across ecosystems, and instead of treating animals as invasive or out of place, it might be necessary to start seeing them as part of the new normal. As temperatures rise and warmer seasons are longer, animals do what they have always done. If the local ecosystems and resources are destroyed, “the [animals’] population will move along with the resources” they need to survive. For instance, marine species appear in Swiss lakes because the water is warmer, or birds move uphill in the mountains, following more likely habitat conditions. The professor argued that this movement “is just part of the normalisation of the effects,” which, on one hand, could be

considered a “dangerous expression,” but on the other hand, “the effects are already there, so you have to deal with them.”

This leads to a second, closely related idea: The need to rethink how we discuss and act regarding invasive species. Today, the only approach that is happening is to treat them like enemies and spend a lot of resources to wipe them out. However, as Professor Wild pointed out, this approach might not only be useless but also often impossible. “It will not be possible to kill all the invasive species”, and trying to keep out some species from cities and ecosystems is a losing battle. At first, this line of thinking might seem to go against the usual approach to protecting nature and conservation, where the goal is often to keep local species safe from newcomers, “invasive” or “alien.” But in reality, it is less about giving up on protection and more about recognising the limits of how we have been doing it.

This also connects to a deeper ethical question that Professor Wild raised: How we respond to future impacts and deal with past harm. In his view, climate justice has a backwards-looking dimension: Do we have “a duty to restore the living condition” we have damaged, even when it comes to “nonhuman animals”? Pointing at wolves returning to Switzerland as an example, he questioned whether it is possible to argue that “wolves have been living here all the time and have a kind of natural right to be here.” But, as he suggested, restoring their presence or rebuilding habitats we’ve destroyed purely for animals’ well-being, without direct benefit to humans, might be hard to defend in public debate, not at least because climate change and its impacts are predominated by an anthropocentric perspective.

## **Animals as victims or contributors of the climate change**

Another interesting topic is about the role of animals which was also mentioned by Angela Martin during the public panel. Based on Professor Wild, animals have a complex relationship in the climate change topic, which determines the “dual role of animals in the concept of contributors or victims at the same time” facing the changing climate. The standard story about climate change is that humans are the main cause of climate change and will also be the main victims. But non-humans are also central to climate change. In particular, while some animals do contribute to atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> through emissions (for instance, industrial animal agriculture is a major contributor to climate change), climate change will also be a major contributor to the suffering of wild animals, and they are also victims in this process (Sebo, 2016).

It should be considered that we have a reason to care more about farmed animals, but we do not have a self-interested reason to care about wild animals as victims (except the ones we benefit from their existence). Moreover, while it is much clearer how we should address the problem of farmed animals and climate change due to the higher level of concern, it is not at all clear how we should address the problem of wild animals and climate change. It could be mentioned that industrial animal agriculture is responsible for about 18-51% of global human-caused greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (Sebo, 2016).

In other words, industrial animal farming is described not just as farming, but as a “monopoly industrial reproduction of life”. Professor Wild referred to that as “this is like producing cars completely”. In this industrial system, animals function similarly to inanimate objects in a production line. If a car stops running, you buy a new one. Likewise, animals in these farms are primarily kept “to bring profit from meat or other products” and are often seen as “an instrument for a certain purpose, it’s a functional category”, or a “functional unit in a production process”. From a farmer’s perspective within this system, an animal is accurately seen as “a means to produce meat. It’s not a living being”. In this context, where animals are treated as functional units without agency or a voice, attributing responsibility for climate impacts to them “doesn’t make any sense to us”.

Beyond industrial farming, wild animals are significantly impacted as victims of climate change. As it was mentioned before, their migration is presented as an “effect of climate change”. This forced movement to different places or habitats is part of what the sources call

the “normalization of the effects” of climate change. While some might view this as creating new ecosystems, it also involves dealing with “normalization of negative effects”, such as species being pushed out of habitats due to rising temperatures or even disappearing. Wild animals face biodiversity loss, forced migration, and extinction as consequences of the changing climate.

And finally, while acknowledging animals’ biological contributions to emissions, the sources strongly frame them as victims of a human-dominated system and the consequences of climate change, placing the responsibility for the negative impacts of industrial animal production on human choices, particularly consumption.

## **Acknowledging Anthropocentric Perspectives on Climate Change**

Although human-centrism was generally evident in both the literature we’ve read and the discussions we’ve had during our colloquium, the non-human world was still a recurring theme. Palmer (2011) notes that ecosystems and species are important and visible in climate change debates. However, it is not the direct ethical implications on the non-human world that are at the centre of these discussions, but rather how the impacts of climate change on species affect us humans. This includes, for example, debates on the loss of ecosystem services or the effects of intensive agricultural use. While Palmer (2011) highlights how most climate ethics treat animals and ecosystems as valuable only when they affect humans, Professor Wild suggested a different approach: Recognize this tendency, but choose to work with it, rather than against it. Act more inclusively from where we are and with the tools we already have. In other words, when asking Professor Wild about a paradigm shift in the way we look at climate change, he argued that the most pragmatic way is to stick with the human-centric perspective and ask ourselves how animals can be integrated so that they benefit the most. Homo sapiens are naturally trained to do things from their own human perspective. This, in turn, is reinforced in an emergency, which climate change certainly qualifies as. Therefore, taking a human-centric approach, but bringing in the binary vision by thinking about how to integrate animals as much as possible, is the most pragmatic way. Professor Wild believes that the best way to implement this approach in Europe is through human rights. In other words, using these institutional tools in order to protect and benefit animals. For example, the city of Basel could explicitly guarantee the right to a healthy environment in its constitution. This would include measures to protect habitats, reduce pollution and mitigate climate change,

thus implicitly benefiting animals. Another example would be to further promote urban green infrastructure. The greening of roofs and facades with native plants would both improve the human well-being (cooler cities, improved mental health) and support urban biodiversity (particularly pollinators, insects and birds).