



Animal rights

It is very easy to confuse the many animal rights and anti-hunting/anti-vivisection campaigns with the issues of conservation and endangered species.

While this confusion is understandable, it is important to be able to separate the main issues involved namely ANIMAL RIGHTS (which covers all forms of cruelty to animals) and CONSERVATION which deals more specifically with endangered species and the protection of wildlife habitats and natural resources.

We hope these brief notes will help you to understand these issues more clearly.

Conservation

There can be no doubt that we need to look after this planet and its natural resources.



At the present time, we are plundering our earth for its minerals, oil, timber and other natural resources. At the same time we are taking more and more land each year for the purpose of building houses, roads, factories, airports, shops, offices and farms etc...

Every day, some 395,000 more humans join us in this world. This means that we increase the human population of the planet by a staggering total of one million more people every two to three days!

It has been estimated that it takes three million acres of good arable land to feed one million people - and yet

we are taking vast acres of land away from agriculture each year.

The loss of land through the destruction of habitat means that an ever increasing number of plant and animal species are threatened with extinction.

Species of plants and animals which have declined in numbers to the point where they could disappear are regarded as endangered species. Other animals and plants which seem to be declining rapidly in numbers might be described as threatened species or, if laws are passed to prevent further decline, protected species.

Practically all the conservation organisations are concerned with the endangered, threatened and protected species - and tend not to become directly involved in the issues of "animal rights".

So, the conservationists, environmentalists and ecologists are really concerned with the major issues of destruction of habitat endangered species, conservation of natural resources and general environmental protection.

Hunters

Hunters come under several different headings. There are those who hunt for 'sport', hunters and trappers who make a living from the animals they kill, but who generally kill animals that are plentiful. There are poachers, killing for profit, who supply a market made possible by the demands of tourists. There are fox-hunters who dress up in their scarlet coats and make a social occasion out of a kill ("the unspeakable in pursuit of the uneatable" as they were once described) - and there are those who simply take pleasure in killing.

Looked at under their separate headings we discover the following:

Fox Hunting

There are now three times as many foxes as there were forty years ago and there are fewer active hunt organisations than there were forty years ago. This decline in fox hunting may have resulted in the rapid increase of the fox population. Some people say that there is a need to control the number of foxes in Britain and reduce their numbers and many people think that the typical fox hunt is an effective means of control. Others say that foxes are not a pest and that if a fox does become troublesome there are alternative and more humane methods of killing it. The alternatives to hunting are shooting, gassing and poisoning - none of which can be guaranteed to succeed in killing the fox without prolonged suffering.

Shooting for Sport



There are still a great many people around the world who enjoy killing animals for 'sport' and for the collection of trophies such as animal heads which are mounted for wall display. The number of people who kill for sport appears to be steadily declining, except, perhaps in America.

However, in America, the hunter buying ammunition for the shooting of prey species actually pays a 'conservation tax' on each cartridge which goes to help the State wildlife conservation bodies.

Generally speaking hunters tend to shoot species that are plentiful, and it is in the interests of these hunters to ensure the survival of the species that they want to hunt. For this reason the majority of prey species cannot be hunted during their breeding seasons.

There are those who shoot animals in order to eat them. A typical pheasant shoot produces birds intended for the table, so there is a purpose behind the shoots. The shooting of pheasants and similar game birds is probably no worse than killing animals in a slaughterhouse or battery farm.

It does not necessarily make the shooting of game birds 'alright' but there is at least a purpose in killing

pheasants if people eat them. The same can be said for the wildfowlers who shoot geese and ducks.

Deer hunters, whatever we may feel about them, help to control the number of deer. The sheer discomfort of deer stalking has been responsible for the comparatively small number of hunters. In many areas there are far too many deer, so the hunter is one instrument for the reduction in deer numbers. At the same time, the deer meat (venison) gives the kill an additional purpose.

It was the hunters of otters who drew attention to the decline of that species in Britain. The otter hunts ceased hunting before the otter was given protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act. However, it was not the hunts which reduced the number of otters, but rather the reduction of their natural habitat and the pollution of rivers.

If we can find some excuse for certain types of hunter, there are others which appear to have no valid purpose. Hare coursing involves observing one or two greyhounds chasing a hare that has been given a head start of 80m or so. The greyhounds are given marks by a judge for how skilfully they chase the hare. There is nothing in this sport to test the skills of the hunters and there is no reason for reducing the numbers of hares in this country - they are not a pest.

Poachers

Poachers are by far the worst threat to wildlife. Few of the hunters previously mentioned are a threat to rare species. The poachers form one of the most serious threats to wildlife conservation. In fact, after the destruction of habitat, poachers are the greatest menace.



However, even here we must stop and think for a moment to ask ourselves why a poacher kills. It is not for sport and only rarely for food, (such as in Zaire where gorillas are now being hunted for their meat by people who are killing to feed their families). In fact the poachers generally kill because there is a market for horns, ivory, skins, etc. taken from the animals they kill.

The next question we must ask ourselves is; "who makes this market possible?" The answer, sadly, is that it is people like us, the ordinary tourists who make it profitable for so many poachers to massacre the world's

wildlife.

There has always been a market for ivory, and animals skins have been prized by the makers and buyers of fur coats or crocodile skin shoes etc.

Remember that we become tourists each year when we go off on our holidays. We may go no further than our own seaside towns - but we are still tourists. Have YOU ever bought seashells at one of those all too numerous shops which sell shells, coral and similar animal remains? If you have, then you have helped to encourage the poachers and plunderers of the sea bed. Remember that all those animals were ALIVE until they were dredged up.

Perhaps you have brought one of those attractive little sealskin purses or key rings - or other innocent items so often seen on sale. The seal is not an endangered species - and yet the buying of such souvenirs helps to keep the trade in sealskin products going.

Poachers will only be put out of business when the tourists refuse to buy their products, when people refuse to wear the skins of animals as an adornment and when people no longer buy ivory products.

So, while the poacher is a menace who needs to be put out of business - we have to admit that people like US make their horrible slaughter possible. So, it is the tourists who have as much blood on their hands as the poachers themselves.

Seal Culling



This is another borderline subject. The species of seals killed by sealers are not those listed as endangered species, so at the moment this is not strictly a 'conservation issue'.

However, the horrific massacre of harp seals along the eastern coastline of North America has shocked and angered all those who have an interest in wildlife.

It is worth noting that, thanks to EEC bans on the import of sealskins into Europe, far fewer baby seals are being clubbed each year. Until recently, it was estimated that some 180,000 seal pups were clubbed to death each year. The killers are a mixture of greed motivated hunters who kill simply for the cash they can raise from the sale of skins - to the fishermen of the area who have a reason to dislike the vast numbers of seals that move into their fishing waters and either eat or frighten away the fish.

If you study the effect of the seal breeding time on the fishermen - then you will have to admit that they have at least some cause for wanting the number of seals reduced.

Those 130,000 'spared' seals will eat roughly 260,000 tons of fish each year. The harp seal is still numerous - and evidently increasing in numbers. The effect on fish stocks caused by the needs of these seals could bring about a sharp rise in the cost of fish to the housewife in both North America and Europe.

Almost certainly, the harp seal numbers will need to be kept in check and carefully managed. The trouble is, how does one keep those numbers down without inflicting pain, suffering and horror?

Our own grey seal is 'culled' each year to avoid too many seals around our coastline. The culling has been going on since 1961 - and yet we now have far more seals than we had twenty-five years ago!

The Circus

Circuses, in one form or another, have been around for hundreds if not thousands of years. Fortunately, they have been steadily declining in numbers and popularity since the beginning of World War II, although there are still a number of small circuses to be found in Britain.

Most people now seem to agree that it is wrong to make animals perform tricks as a form of Public spectacle, so fewer people attend circus performances. Many people agree that circuses would be fine if they were limited to performances by humans - many of whom would be well worth an audience in view of the skills they demonstrate. Animal acts are not in the same category - and they tend to degrade the animals made to perform for the benefit of human audiences.

In fairness to most circus managements it must be said that the animals are often extremely well cared for -

and actually loved and cherished by their owners or trainers. However, there can be little doubt that it is both morally wrong to confine animals to small cages and cart them hundreds of miles each year and also detrimental to their health.

The sooner the circus can be limited to human performances, the better it will be.

Vivisection

Vivisection is probably the most controversial of all the animal rights issues. 'Vivisection' literally means the cutting apart of live animals. Most experiments don't involve any cutting, but many of them cause the animals pain and distress. In the UK in 1996, scientists carried out 2.71 million animal experiments.

Many of the experiments test new medicines which could be beneficial to humans, but many animals are killed in the process. Animal testing has been branded as unreliable by anti-vivisectionists, along with some doctors and researchers, as animals can react to chemicals and conditions in very different ways to humans. For example, only two out of 100 chimpanzees injected with HIV in the last 10 years have become ill, and none have contracted AIDS.

There is definitely a case to be made for using animals for medical research (though it is not a clear-cut one!) but it is very difficult to justify the testing of new cosmetics on animals. There are already enough fully-tested cosmetic ingredients already available to make the testing of new ones pointless.

Some of the cruellest animal experiments are tests like the Draize eye test, in which a substance is dripped into the open eye of an animal (usually a rabbit) and any reactions are observed. The LD100 test (Lethal Dose 100%) uses 60 to 100 animals, and determines how much of a chemical or medicine the animals need to ingest before they all die. The LD50 test is similar, except that the dose needed to kill half of the animals is determined. This then assists in deciding a safe dosage level for humans.

It may be very difficult to end animal experiments. There will always be occasional successes with new medicines brought about by vivisection, but there are many more failures. Does the saving of hundreds of thousands of human lives justify the killing of billions of animals? Think carefully about answering this question, especially if you eat meat.

Cruelty to Animals

Finally, we must take into account the number of animals cruelly treated or neglected by their owners.

Although we in Britain are reputed to be 'a nation of animal lovers' we can also be extremely cruel to our pets.

The RSPCA and other animal welfare organisations are called upon to deal with thousands upon thousands of direct cases of cruelty each year.

Pets turned loose when the family goes away on holiday, unwanted puppies or kittens placed in sacks and dumped on motorways or in ponds and rivers, animals starved or beaten for no reason - all these form part of the sickening list of cases.

Whereas some animals may be starved to death, another form of cruelty is over-feeding. Of course, the people who stuff their pets full of all the wrong foods (sweets, chocolate, cakes etc.) do this out of kindness - and yet the end result is cruelty in that the animal becomes overweight and suffers diseases which humans who overeat suffer.

Pets given to young children who have no idea how to care for them must be regarded as another form of unintentional cruelty.

Children who are so keen on their pets at first - but then leave them in dirty cages for weeks at a time and feed them only when they remember are also just as guilty as those who deliberately treat their animals badly. We must encourage laws governing the selling and looking after of pet animals.

In the end it all depends upon the education of young people in matters relating to their own environment and the living creatures who share this planet with us.

If we can encourage young people to respect this world and all its wonderful natural resources - then we might have the opportunity of saving at least some of the endangered species and wild places for the benefit

of those who follow us.

Unfortunately, each one of the subjects fleetingly covered in these notes would take pages and pages in order to present all the views and evidence. In the end however, it all comes down to careful consideration and common sense.

If we are to achieve a greater degree of conservation in the future we will achieve it as a result of common sense and understanding shown by young people.

In all these cases there are two sides to the story. If we are going to be good, sensible conservationists, we must be ready to understand those opposing viewpoints even if we do disagree with one side or the other.

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