Obtaining Support for Eradication Programs Using a Common Ethical Language

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ABSTRACT

When determining whether or not to move forward with an eradication program, the question of possible success must be raised. Successful campaigns often need support from the public and governmental institutions, but different stakeholders may highlight different concerns when an eradication program is proposed. In what follows, the author argues that using a common ethical language when discussing particularly divisive programs with the public can help garner support for those programs. More specifically, utilizing utilitarian theory can play a valuable role in obtaining public support for eradication programs involving appealing animals.

KEYWORDS

Animal Rights, Animal Welfare, Appealing Animals, Biocentrism, Eradication, Ethical Theory, Inherent Value, Invasive Alien Species, Utilitarianism

INTRODUCTION

Invasive alien species (IAS) are considered a danger to the environment and the economy. Though the global community recognizes the importance of preventing new invasions, there are many instances in which prevention is no longer an option. In these cases, one is left with two practical possibilities: attempt to eradicate the species, or allow them to breed and spread (and perhaps try to control them later). When determining whether or not to move forward with an eradication program, the question of possible success must be raised. Successful campaigns often require support from the public and governmental institutions. Thus, as Simberloff (2002) notes, a successful eradication campaign “…may be as much a function of political skill and public education as of technology…” (p. 4). Different stakeholders often highlight different concerns when an eradication program is proposed. Although the environmental and economic concerns of various stakeholders like the general public, activists, and conservation biologists often overlap, each group (and members within each group) may weigh those concerns differently when considering a proposed eradication program. This paper argues that using a common ethical language when discussing particularly divisive programs with the public, can help garner support for those programs. More specifically, utilizing utilitarian theory can play a valuable role in obtaining public support for eradication programs involving appealing animals.

Before outlining the argument, it is helpful to note that the author does not assume that utilitarian ethics should be accepted by conservation biologists, wildlife managers, or ethicists generally. There are features of utilitarian theory that conservationists and ethicists may find unpalatable. Nor will it be argued that utilitarian theory should be the first consideration when determining whether or not a particular program in necessary. Instead, it will be shown that regardless of what theory one uses to
evaluate the ethics of an eradication program beforehand (be it by appeals to inherent value, a land ethic, deep ecology, etc.), utilitarian theory can play an important practical role in gaining public support for programs involving appealing animals. That is to say, the paper offers a practical strategy to help make certain eradication programs, which appear to be morally justifiable but publically controversial, more successful. Since utilitarian theory will be the focus, the author assumes that the program in question would be justifiable on utilitarian grounds. Thus, the paper will demonstrate that utilitarianism and other biocentric ethics are often compatible in cases of eradicating appealing animals. In short, the aim is to show that if utilitarian theory closely matches the concerns of the public and an eradication program could be justified by either utilitarian theory or a biocentric theory, then it is pragmatic to explain the necessity of the program in utilitarian terms.

**DEFINITIONS**

Before turning to the need for public support and the benefits of utilitarian theory, some terms need definition. Following Bomford and O’Brien (1995), “eradication” is defined as “the complete and permanent removal of all wild populations from a defined area by a time-limited campaign” (p. 249). Following Genovesi (2001), “invasive alien species” (IAS) is defined as “an alien species, subspecies or lower taxon which becomes established in natural or semi-natural ecosystems or habitats, is an agent of change, and threatens native biological diversity” (p. 6). Thus, it will be assumed that IAS targeted by the program pose a threat to the ecosystem and are not merely nonindigenous. Following Vane and Ruhhaar (2016), “appealing animals” are defined as mammals, birds, and pet species (p. 2).

The final definition needed requires a lengthier explanation. The term “utilitarianism” here refers to classical hedonistic utilitarian theory. Though many readers are likely familiar with utilitarian theory, it will help to provide a brief sketch of the variety of utilitarian theory employed here. According to classical utilitarian theory, actions that promote the most happiness for the largest number are considered morally correct. The most famous description of this view is John Stuart Mill’s greatest happiness principle. Mill (2001, p. 7) maintains that happiness is pleasure and the absence of pain, whereas unhappiness (or harm) is considered pain and the absence of pleasure. According to Mill’s theory, everyone’s happiness counts equally. Thus, if a person is faced with a choice between action A, which will provide some benefit to her but will significantly harm others, and action B, which may cause her some discomfort but will significantly benefit others, she ought to choose action B.

Varieties of utilitarian theory that focus on the promotion of pleasure and limitation of pain are known as hedonistic theories. Given that humans are not the only creatures with the capacity feel pleasure and pain, many prominent utilitarian theorists argue that any being that can feel pleasure or pain is deserving of moral consideration. Jeremy Bentham raised the possibility extending moral consideration to non-human animals as early as 1823. But this view gained more traction in the 1970s when some animal welfare advocates turned to utilitarian theory to show that the current treatment of nonhuman animals cannot be justified. One example of scholarship in this vein that remains particularly influential within the animal welfare community is Peter Singer’s 1974 essay, “All Animals Are Equal.” It is helpful to highlight Singer’s essay because one reason utilitarian theory is useful when engaging with activists is that many animal welfare activists turn to Singer to justify their position.

Though utilitarians like Singer argue that every sentient being may deserve equal moral consideration, different varieties of sentient beings are capable of different varieties of pain and pleasure. Many utilitarians recognize this and attempt to account for it in their utilitarian calculus. Furthermore, utilitarians generally recognize that it is important to account for all those affected by an action, not just those immediately affected. Thus, they believe one must consider both the likely present and future effects of our actions. Since utilitarian theory focuses on the effects of our actions (rather than the intentions), it is known as a consequentialist theory. After examining the potential consequences of an action, the utilitarian attempts to calculate how much pain or pleasure a particular
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