



February 2023

## Taking Ethics to the Decision-Makers

### Contribution to GTI Forum [Solidarity with Animals](#)

Fred Koontz

Eileen Crist's hard-hitting [essay](#) argues effectively that *solidarity with animals* is a key moral and strategic direction for a Great Transition, noting that animal liberation could end much animal suffering and help restore Earth's ecosystems. Crist proposes abolishing confined animal feeding operations, adopting a mostly plant-based diet, and protecting wild animals in nature. Sound ideas, but is her vision too blue-sky for our morally cloudy world?

Crist's concept of a new solidarity with animals eludes us because of humans' predominantly anthropocentric worldviews and the consequent management of animals as resources to use rather than as sentient beings with intrinsic value. I hope a future post-anthropocentric civilization emerges that recognizes animals are sentient and social beings, have intrinsic value, and should always be treated with respect. Such changes will require a robust debate over what constitutes multispecies justice and the ethical boundaries of human-animal interaction.

One example of where this debate has been playing out is in the reform of state fish and wildlife departments (DFWs) in the US. Popularly known as "Fish and Game," these government agencies and their oversight commissions use an anthropocentric and utilitarian justification for killing wild animals. This is reflected throughout their practices, laws, and agency culture. The fifty state DFWs collectively spend \$5.6 billion annually to manage 450 million acres of land and employ 50,000 staff.<sup>1</sup> If only by virtue of their resources, DFWs should serve an important role in protecting the nation's wildlife. However, they have been increasingly criticized over their purpose: Should these government agencies stick to their traditional mission of animal trapping, hunting, and fishing, or should they focus on biodiversity conservation and animal well-being?

## **State Fish & Wildlife Departments: Stuck in an Ethical and Political Quagmire**

The debate over DFWs' purpose is fueled by a recognition that biodiversity loss is insufficiently addressed by DFWs, and research that shows that as the United States modernizes, there is a shift from domination values to mutualism values.<sup>2</sup> Domination values are consistent with DFWs' anthropocentric and utilitarian philosophy of treating animals as resources. Mutualism values reflect a belief that humans and animals ought to co-exist in harmony, that animals deserve some kind of moral or political rights, and that our abuse of them as mere resources should stop.

I witnessed arguments over DFWs' purpose when serving on the Washington State Fish & Wildlife Commission in 2021. Recent controversies included increasing cougar hunting, setting rules for lethal removal of endangered wolves, and stopping spring bear hunting. Conflicts often appear at first glance to be between preservation and harvest, but at a deeper level reflect differences in public values that spark disputes in decision-making about human-wildlife interaction.<sup>3</sup>

In recent years, the Commission and the department it oversees have been caught in an ethical and political quagmire, stuck between the Department's status quo priority of consumptive use of animals and adopting a paradigm shift emphasizing biodiversity conservation and animal well-being. Below I offer two observations from my Commission experience to provide some insight for turning wildlife agencies toward more just treatment of animals.

### **The Human-Animal Divide Runs Deep**

The cornerstone of Washington's animal trapping, hunting, and fishing rests on the human-animal divide, John Rodman's "differential imperative." Humans rule from the top, animals obey from the bottom. Fortified by anthropocentric state and federal laws, the Commission and Department hold life and death decisions over the state's wild animals, restricted only by requirements to sustain game, protect public safety, and recover endangered species.

Critics fall into two camps in regard to the human-animal divide: (1) conservationists that promote biodiversity values from a human-benefits perspective (e.g., ecosystem services) that essentially are consistent with a distinct divide and (2) proponents of animal well-being that see the human-

animal boundary as porous. What separates these two camps is that conservationists promoting biodiversity and ecosystem services typically leave individual animals and their well-being out of the discussion. This difference is important to build a praxis that moves wildlife agencies toward greater solidarity with animals.

Wildlife agencies' reliance on the human-animal divide could be blunted if conservationists at public meetings emphasized the intrinsic value of animals and minimized differences between humans and other species. Additionally, while the proponents of animal well-being often are concerned about biodiversity, their testimony usually focuses on individual animals (e.g., bear cubs orphaned from killing mother bears). This approach is given much less weight by agency decision-makers than arguments championing species and ecosystems, and this prejudice hinders well-being proponents from trying to build coalitions with those concerned with conserving biodiversity for human benefit.

### **Science and Values: Fear in the Hunter's Camp**

Since Aldo Leopold's influential book *Wildlife Management*, DFWs have claimed the supremacy of science.<sup>4</sup> One consequence is that many wildlife directors and commissioners fear "objective versus subjective" chaos will result if commissions stray from science-informed facts.<sup>5</sup> While all agree that advancing public interests require a foundation in facts, treating truth-from-science as the sole arbiter for making wildlife decisions is misdirected. Science alone cannot tell us what to do. Policy is informed by facts but ultimately is driven by values. Good decision-making deliberately weaves facts, ethics, and social norms together into just public policy and laws.

Wildlife managers make decisions with limited facts because our science is incomplete. As a result, DFWs and commissions typically ask experts, usually agency employees, to judge what scientific evidence suggests for particular issues. Identifying the best science and considering it impartially is difficult and with poor methods can be open to bias and subjective interpretation. Often the objectivity of agency experts is questioned by opponents who defend different interpretations of the available data. Agency experts counter with charges of "advocacy bias." Because people typically view scientists as either completely objective or completely unobjective, back-and-forth accusations of bias can cause mistrust of the wildlife agency, scientists, and science itself.

Unfortunately, all sides typically fail to consider that objectivity is a continuum, and that it can improve with practice and unbiased discussions.<sup>6</sup>

Among wildlife personnel and commissioners, values are typically considered subjective and are thereby discounted in decision-making. Paradoxically, Leopold, who founded science-based wildlife management, also said that ethics is a key to preserving nature.<sup>7</sup> Many commissioners, agency game managers, and hunters presume a fact/value dichotomy. They fear that incorporating values into the decision-making process, especially ideas about how we ought to treat individual animals, will lead to a slippery slope eliminating hunting. This worry makes it difficult to reach compromise. Ironically, much of this fear rests on animal values informed by science in recent decades by means of ethology, ecology, and evolutionary science. This new knowledge makes the well-being of individual animals an ethical beacon in our human-animal relationship. Yet, moral consideration of individual animals can run counter to killing them for recreation; maybe hunters' slippery slope fear is justified!

### **“What Then Must We Do?”**

Luke the Evangelist, Leo Tolstoy, and Billy Kwan urged us to directly confront misery because thinking about major issues is not enough. Eileen Crist calls out the immense violence against animals and reminds us that this violence is widely institutionalized, protected by undemocratic power structures, and largely hidden from an uninformed public. However, there are cracks of light in the darkness of animal injustice.

Wildlife agency reform is just one example that opens a much-needed public discussion on the human-animal relationship. As a Wildlife Commissioner, I found the largest barrier to these discussions was the limited understanding among the public, agency staff, and decision-makers of concepts of science objectivity, ethics, and the role of science and values in policy making. Consequently, I came to believe that animal-related public debates are a key to a Great Transition because they allow ethicists to highlight deeper philosophical issues driving Society's treatment of animals and nature. There are [many such opportunities](#) for ethicists to engage and find some blue sky for people, animals, and nature.

## Endnotes

1. Larry Voyles et al., *The State Conservation Machine* (Washington, DC: Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies and the Arizona Game and Fish Department, 2017), [tinyurl.com/4k9wr4xc](https://tinyurl.com/4k9wr4xc).
2. Wildlife for All, "Wildlife for All: A National Campaign to Reform State Wildlife Management to be More Democratic, Just, Compassionate, and Focused on Protecting Wild Species and Ecosystems," 2022, accessed December 26, 2022, [wildlifeforall.us](https://wildlifeforall.us); Michael Manfredo et al., *America's Wildlife Values: The Social Context of Wildlife Management in the U.S.* (Washington, DC: Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies and the Arizona Game and Fish Department, 2018), [www.fishwildlife.org/application/files/9915/4049/1625/AWV - National Final\\_Report.pdf](https://www.fishwildlife.org/application/files/9915/4049/1625/AWV_-_National_Final_Report.pdf).
3. Fred Koontz, "Refocus Fish & Wildlife Mandate on Conservation," *The Seattle Times*, Opinion Page, April 7, 2022, [tinyurl.com/6at922fn](https://tinyurl.com/6at922fn).
4. Aldo Leopold, *Game Management* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933).
5. Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).
6. Naomi Oreskes, *Why Trust Science?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).
7. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949).

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## About the Author



Fred Koontz is a Fellow at PAN Works, advisor at Wildlife for All, and board vice president at the Wildlands Network. A retired wildlife conservationist, he previously worked at the Wildlife Conservation Society, EcoHealth Alliance (formerly “Wildlife Trust”), and Woodland Park Zoo, and held adjunct faculty positions at Columbia University, New York University, and University of Washington. His current scholarly interests focus on reforming fish and wildlife agencies and crafting biodiversity conservation policy based on non-anthropocentric worldviews that interconnect science, values, and social norms. He has a PhD in zoology from the University of Maryland.

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