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From Solidarity to Policy

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

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The liberation of animals is compelling, yet the idea is fraught with practical complications when applied to societal public policy. In such an endeavor, it is first essential to recognize and discuss the obstacles to goal achievement. It is the discourse that matters.

In her [essay](#), Eileen Crist summarizes well the position that human domination is a flawed belief because animals and people are obviously indistinct. But to actually foment policies in which animals and humans are treated the same would require nonhuman creatures to no longer be considered property. And to change their property status would necessitate the granting of personhood to animals. While some courts have wrangled with awarding animals juridical standing, neither constitutions nor statutes have yet to fully establish animals as persons. Assuming enough political will could materialize to change the legal status of animals, the next issue is precisely which ones are to be granted personhood. Dogs, cats, elephants, and monkeys might be worthy, but it is unclear, for example, if the rats that infest large cities would receive the same consideration. Should insects have human rights? All marine animals? Could airport operators control geese next to their runways to prevent them from being sucked into an airplane engine? To complicate matters further, what happens if the next zoonotic pandemic is caused by a virus that spills over from domestic pets to humans? Would it be illegal to cull sentient cats to save human lives?

There is a call to abolish Consolidated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs, or factory farms). The horrors of factory farming were first articulated by Ruth Harrison in 1964 and have since been exposed by a cavalcade of books, articles, websites, and documentaries. Even though the problems are well-known, eliminating the system is a tall order. Factory farms feed billions of people worldwide inexpensively and generate billions in profits for corporate conglomerates,

supported by veterinarians, advocacy groups, agricultural trade unions, and elected officials of every political persuasion. China is not diminishing but is instead expanding its footprint as the world's largest pork producer, with one of its new skyscraper facilities capable of slaughtering over a million pigs a year. In Europe and the United States, the animal welfare movement has adopted a compromised position that accepts meat and dairy products as long as there are humane conditions (free range, larger cages, etc.) and compassionate slaughtering mechanisms (the use of a bolt gun that renders an animal unconscious before killing). The turn toward plant-based and cultured meats and dairy is an obvious solution. However, building the alternative meat industry to a scale approximating animal food has been problematic, and the health benefits are questionable because of significant quantities of sodium and synthetic chemical ingredients. Hoping for a global population of vegans is another possibility, yet such a yearning runs afoul of cultures where meat consumption is a fundamental part of their self-identity. Cognitive dissonance in the human-animal relationship is not necessarily a sufficient rationale for changing long-held traditions. Furthermore, it is difficult to envision criminalizing the killing of cows, chickens, pigs, and turkeys for food.

The essay also calls for the protection of wild animals and their homes. Thus far, the primary means of achieving this goal has been through endangered species laws and treaties that protect particular animals and their habitats. There are also anti-poaching initiatives, rewilding programs in public parks, wildlife sanctuaries, conservation set-asides, and efforts to clean up microplastics in oceans. The problem with existing endangered species laws is that relatively few animals are involved. Only about 1,300 animals are classified as endangered or threatened in the US Endangered Species Act. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which more than 160 governments signed, lists slightly more than 5,000 endangered species globally. What it takes to gain protection among the 8.7 million species on earth is as much about economics as about animal interests. Even if additional species were added, it is unclear how best to safeguard them. Consider wild lions. At one time, lions could be found worldwide, only to now be isolated in decreasing numbers in India and several African nations. In Kenya, one solution has been the creation of lion sanctuaries where they can roam freely, as is their nature. But how to keep and protect them in the sanctuary? As constraints, electric fences kill other creatures, while floodlights on borders disturb people and other wildlife. Making the confines too

small facilitates poaching because hunters can know exactly where the lions live. Another issue is that lions in restricted spaces become too adept at killing other animals to the point that the lions become invasive. Wildlife management, which is basically another form of human domination, can easily turn to mismanagement. To give another example, the protection of wild horses in the American West has left them so prevalent as to upset ecosystems and to become traffic hazards.

Public policy is complicated. It is difficult to define problems that affect diverse animals and then to devise solutions that are legally sound, politically legitimate, culturally inclusive, administratively effective, and consumer-friendly. The initial phase of rational policymaking is to recognize these challenges. The premise is that reasoned debate focused on both limitations and possibilities fosters good policies. Recently, this is what occurred in the process that led Iceland to forbid whaling, India to ban the capture and confinement of dolphins, Austria to prohibit fur farming, and many states in the United States to outlaw greyhound racing.

As animal solidarity efforts progress, one way forward is to encourage a discourse that is built on practical and systematic policy analysis. Starting early, K-12 education might include the human-animal relationship as a subject in history and literature classes. The increasing adoption of meatless Monday programs in public schools is a way to initiate the dialogue. To help, the [Factory Farming Awareness Coalition](#) offers guest speakers for K-12 schools and colleges to inspire critical thinking about industrial agriculture. In colleges and universities, courses on animal welfare and rights can be standard parts of the curricula in the sciences, humanities, and liberal arts. Creating courses is relatively easy, especially when there is student interest as well as models to follow. Over 150 law schools in the United States already offer at least one seminar on animal law. Professional academic associations could likewise become involved. An example is the Animals and Society section of the American Sociological Association. Legislative bodies might also shift disputes on animal issues from agricultural and environmental committees to new bodies focused on animal welfare and rights. The number of politicians adopting animal policy platforms is increasing, most notably the Party for the Animals in the Netherlands. Animal policy advisory organizations in government can be created as well, such as the recently constituted Mayor's Office of Animal Welfare in New York City. By generally encouraging broad-based public deliberations, there is a potential for shaping the direction of the policy process so that problems are well-defined and solutions for animals are more likely to be successful.

About the Author



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About the Publication

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