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# Earthlings Seeking Justice: Integrity, Consistency, and Collaboration.

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FINAL DRAFT VERSION

## ***Earthlings Seeking Justice: Integrity, Consistency, and Collaboration***

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Animal rights advocacy is necessary to save Earthlings—every last one of us. This essay starts with this perhaps provocative premise to immediately privilege the importance of this social movement—one that is often marginalized in comparison to human rights and environmentalism, yet encompasses both by default. Environmental advocacy needs to embrace animal advocacy in order to protect human beings in this age of environmental crisis, an age that demands problem-solving and sacrifice. This essay situates animal advocacy<sup>1</sup> as the vital bridge connecting the struggle to protect the rights of human beings with the struggle to protect all living beings.

First, this essay theorizes why animal advocacy is marginalized, and explains why the movement should be considered central to a sustainable society that maintains justice for all sentient beings. Focusing on common ground between animal advocacy, human rights, and environmental advocacy an ideological basis is proposed on which these movements can coalesce to resist the ever-increasing corporate exploitation of life. The

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<sup>1</sup> By “animal advocacy” I mean the animal protection movement broadly, but especially what is commonly referred to as the “animal rights movement” to end the use of nonhuman animals as resources for food, entertainment, clothing, and research, based on a moral philosophy that the interests of all sentient beings matter.

essay ends by utilizing exploitation of farmed animals as an example of how a justice ethic—a shift away from raising and eating animals—would support the work of environmentalists, animal advocates, and other social justice advocates.

### **Why is Animal Advocacy Marginalized?**

In the classes I teach, I rarely need to ask students why human rights are important or why we care about other human beings. At least in education, the moral basis of respect for humanity is now taken as a given. But when one broaches the topic of environmental or animal protection, it is often necessary to establish why nature or other species matter. Certainly, there are always anthropocentric (human-centered) reasons why other species matter. Humans need clean air, clean water, and food, and hence we need wetlands, bees, earthworms, trees, etc.—we are all ecologically inter-dependent. We could just leave it at that when establishing a foundation for the importance of the natural environment to humanity, or we could assess the value of other species through an economic lens, considering how domesticated and wild/free species support industries and sustain human beings. But these self-interested perspectives don't value other animals for who they are (their inherent value)<sup>2</sup> as opposed to what they can do for us (their instrumental value).

Without embracing animal ethics, environmentalists can often stand within this anthropocentric (what's-in-it-for-me) model, primarily asserting environmental goals in terms of human benefits. This appeal to human self-interest seems to hold much appeal to humanity; we are the producers and consumers of all campaigns, which lends organizations to a human-focus. Environmental advocacy also holds a measure of respect for social justice causes focusing on human aspirations and needs (as long as they are moving toward sustainable practices). But neither environmentalists nor humanitarians seem to pay much attention to justice issues involving nonhuman animals.

In fact, it is often viewed as a liability for either camp to be associated with animal advocacy. Perhaps such a focus seems to belittle human issues (discrimination, starvation, genocide) or to fundamentally threaten humanity's sense of entitlement over the more-than-human world (especially when it comes to such things as animal

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<sup>2</sup> I like Lee Hall's notion we should respect animals "on their own terms" (the name of her 2010 book).

agriculture and hunting, or competing with wild animals for trees, fresh water, land, and so on). While social movements are, by definition, charitable and altruistic, they must compete for dollars and other scarce resources, casting a wide net for support (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996). Thus, they are reticent to risk (over)extending their concerns to issues that may be controversial or offensive to donors/supporters (Snow et al. 1986). But why is animal advocacy *in particular* controversial and, thus, marginalized?

On a pragmatic level, animal advocacy challenges and threatens to change (and in many cases end) how we exploit other animals—essentially, our assumed right to use, own, domesticate, breed, eat, and kill other animals.<sup>3</sup> In particular, consider how animal advocacy threatens industries of agribusiness, fishing, captive animal entertainment, scientific experimentation, and fashion-industries, where nonhuman animals are “products” from which corporations and individuals profit. Additionally, animal advocacy seeks to end the standard human practice of overlooking the interests of nonhumans, in favor of human interests, in most decision-making processes, especially with regard to habitat.

On a socio-psychological level, the idea of respecting nonhuman animals threatens our own self-perception as an exalted species that, either biologically or by divine right, is “superior” to other animals, and is thus entitled to a dominant status (Schmidtz 2002; Scully 2002; Taylor 1993). Western culture, in particular, has cultivated a notion of the human (a rational, civilized person) in opposition to the animal (an uncivilized, less developed creature within nature), even to the point of strategically referring to certain humans as “animal” to deny them privileges unjustly reserved only for “humanity” (Adams 1990; Spiegel 1996). These hierarchical dichotomies (human/animal and even culture/nature) require deconstruction before humans can ideologically appreciate and embrace animal and earth liberation (Freeman 2010a).

### **Why is Animal Advocacy Central to Creating a *Just* Notion of Sustainability?**

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<sup>3</sup> Animal advocacy is largely about liberation – letting nonhuman animals live free of human control (Hall 2010; Kheel 2008). Partly for this reason I choose to describe “wild” animals as “free.”

While the life-preserving goals of environmental advocacy may make it evident why other social movements ought to be concerned about the environment, it is perhaps less clear why environmental advocacy needs other social movements. The mainstream environmental movement seeks to protect humans and many specific animal species. But environmentalists do not provide a sound justification for limiting privileges to certain species (such as humans, whales, elephants, etc.), while at the same time using lethal or violent methods against many nonhuman animals. Environmental advocates therefore need to include animal ethics in their platform as a matter of consistency. Once environmentalists respect all sentient subjects, their protection of the human animal and other favored species will be morally consistent.

Similarly, social justice advocates working on behalf of humans also need to embrace animal advocacy as a matter of moral consistency. Humans may face severe disadvantages if the powers that be decide to “manage” our species as we do other “invasive” or dangerously destructive species (Freeman 2010b; Taylor 1993), which would equate to what Tom Regan (2002) referred to as environmental “fascism” (107). Granted, this is an egoistic rationale, and there are more altruistic reasons for humans to extend rights or freedoms to fellow animals, such as empathy and acknowledging our kinship (Kheel 2008; Regan 1983; Singer 1990; Steiner 2008). In any event, we ought to live up to our own self-image as a compassionate and just species rather than cope with the shame, albeit perhaps subconscious shame, that comes with our (ab)use and exploitation of fellow animals and nature.

Animal advocacy also leans on the power of environmental ethics and human rights. The animal protection movement seeks to protect both free and domesticated nonhumans. Animal advocates therefore rely on environmental advocates to protect habitat and to extend moral standing to the more-than-human world, and they rely on human rights inasmuch as animal activists extend certain extant, well-established human rights to nonhuman animals.

Furthermore, each of these three social movements target similar opponents, especially corporations (and their government enablers), that exploit living beings and resources in a competitive global market. These powerful entities are the common adversaries of many non-profit organizations that work to protect the vulnerable—

humans, other animals, and the environment—from corporate abuse. One way for social movements to garner more power to face these mighty foes is to join forces. As an allied force, movements on behalf of humans, other animals, and the natural world are more likely to democratically influence government and corporate practices.

Despite a traditional/historic separation between these three movements, the good news for animals (including humans) is that the ethical basis and ideals of the animal advocacy movement overlap with advocacy on behalf of the earth and humanity, lighting a common path for all living beings. Most fundamentally, they all share an inherent respect for life that precludes objectification and exploitation. Each seeks to promote fair play and responsible and respectful interactions with the diversity of life.

While each cause has its particular focus—human rights directs concern primarily at humanity, animal advocacy looks to the wellbeing of sentient individuals, and earth activists focus on certain species and ecosystems (Sagoff 1993)—if the concerns of all three movements were taken into consideration, joint action would call for humanity to:

- respect sentient individuals (members of the animal kingdom, including human beings), allowing them to live free from suffering caused by exploitation and oppression, and
- respect life-supporting ecological systems, sustaining the natural world and all living beings (including human beings).<sup>4</sup>

Advocacy for humans, nonhuman animals, and the environment are all part of a wider social *justice* movement. Each form of advocacy holds that humans should meet survival needs in ways that are fair, responsible, and moderate—calling us to share the planet and, in so doing, to avoid oppression and exploitation.

### **Applying this Justice Ethic to the Issue of Farming & Eating Animals**

Animal advocates lament the environmental movement's reluctance to fully embrace veganism. Animal activists have increasingly called for coalition-building between animal advocates and environmental advocates to fight the proliferation of factory farms, but environmentalists tend to shy away from such coalitions, fearing that they might

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<sup>4</sup> As an example of this blended ethic, Dale Jamieson (2002) contends we can respect nature as a home for all animal beings.

alienate members of their organizations (some of whom hunt or are engaged in animal agriculture) (Holt, 2008). *E Magazine* editor Jim Motavalli (2002) investigated this “great divide,” describing environmental goals as broader and more flexible, and animal advocacy goals as narrower and absolutist. Whereas most animal advocates call for a vegan diet, the focus of environmental activists and organizations does not generally include concern for farmed animals, thus many environmental advocates simply encourage people to reduce meat consumption (Motavalli 2002).

When it comes to promoting a vegan diet, many animal advocacy organizations take an abolitionist approach because their priority is protecting the lives of individual animals. Earth activists, on the other hand, often promote reform (“sustainable” use of animals for food), consistent with the movement’s tendency to focus on reducing consumptive practices, mitigating health risks to humans, and showing a modicum of decency for the welfare of farmed animals. Environmental organizations tend to protect individual animals from being killed only when those animals are human, endangered, or charismatic (particularly mega-fauna, marine mammals, and apex predators)—none of whom are used in animal agriculture (Freeman 2010b).

Environmental advocates contradict themselves when they claim to be holistic, prioritizing the health and wellbeing of a particular whole species, while expressing concern for the suffering and death of privileged *individuals* only within certain species, such as humans, dolphins, turtles, seals, sharks, and wolves. In order to coherently assert that these particular individuals should not be objectified or exploited, environmental advocates must justify this glaring inconsistency by explaining why only individuals from specific species ought to be prioritized (in instances where survival does not dictate killing to survive). Furthermore, environmental advocates who exclude domesticated species yet respect the lives of *human* animals (who are certainly not wild or endangered) must account for this equally glaring inconsistency.

It is evident that environmentalists offer privilege to the human animal in many ways. For example, even though humans are responsible for the lion’s share of environmental destruction, and even though humans are an over-populated species that ought, by definition, to be considered “invasive” and “non-native” across most of the planet, humans are (rightly) never targeted for culling or outright destruction (nor should

any other animals be targeted for culling). Environmental advocates lean on human/animal and culture/nature dualisms in accepting this traditional exclusion of humanity, thereby adopting the environmentally damaging mindset that lies at the core of abuse and exploitation of the environment (Freeman 2010b).

This anthropocentric privilege was demonstrated in a 2010 study that I conducted, in which I analyzed web messages from 15 environmental organizations to see what they had to say about animal-based vs plant-based diets (Freeman 2010b). My research demonstrated that environmental organizations often acknowledge the unsustainable nature of an animal-based diet, yet yield to consumer preference for animal products. Consequently, such organizations merely encourage those consuming animal products to do so in a more environmentally sensitive manner, reducing meat consumption or simply choosing more “sustainable” options, including farmed fish, organic, or grass-fed beef—none of which are fully sustainable—without calling for more substantial dietary change. Approached apprehensively, if at all, veganism was often referenced as an extreme and unrealistic ideal. But solutions posed ought to be relevant to the actual causes of severe environmental degradation, therefore environmental organizations ought to encourage shifting to a plant-based diet (Freeman 2010b).

In doing so, environmental advocates should prioritize the following (acknowledging that these may vary regionally): plant-based, organic, non-genetically modified, local, and fair-trade. While in some regions or instances, certain animal products might be ecologically sustainable, they are not going to be morally justifiable, most notably, when such options involve the needless farming (and killing) of sentient individuals. Based on the inherent value of each farmed animal—as someone not something—earth activists should not cater to conventional dietary preferences, or show flexibility and tolerance with regard to farming, hunting, and eating other living beings. Determining *necessity* is essential: Whenever killing is unnecessary for human survival, such violence is less likely to be morally justifiable, even if deemed more sustainable than other animal agriculture options (Freeman 2010b).

Environmental activists should also question the naturalness, necessity, and fairness of animal agriculture. Most seek to protect that which is natural, but environmental discourse has not yet explained how farming other species is “natural.”



And while all types of agriculture affect the natural world and living beings, *plant-based* agriculture is less destructive and, in any event, is necessary to feed our vast human population (Singer and Mason 2006). Advocating for plant-based agriculture and against animal agriculture would be morally consistent with environmental advocates' anti-exploitative stance, extending this core ideal beyond protecting nature and individual humans to include individual domesticated nonhuman animals. Environmental advocates ought to take a stand, for the sake of consistency, against *domesticating anyone* (Hall 2010; Kheel 2008; Nibert 2013). Incorporating animal ethics into an environmental platform increases the logical integrity of environmental advocates' respect for nature and for human rights.

If environmental activists (especially ones who identify with deep ecology or ecofeminism and seek to deconstruct dualisms that privilege human domination over nature) are to establish and maintain ideological consistency, they must do more than merely suggest that we all try to adopt Meatless Mondays, purchase grass-fed dairy products, or switch to non-GMO farmed fish. Environmental organizations ought to strongly promote a plant-based diet as part of their core platform for an ethic of justice, asking humanity to share the earth and not to exploit other animals (Freeman 2010b).

## **Conclusion**

Advocacy groups for the environment, nonhuman animals, and humans are all life-affirming at their core, honoring intrinsic value in living beings and nature. By embracing *both* animal ethics and environmental ethics (such as through veganism), social justice activists demonstrate increased logical consistency, promoting fairness to all life forms (Hall 2010; Kheel 2008). The future of all Earthlings depends on humanity's willingness and ability to choose responsible coexistence—sharing our planet and respecting the diversity of life.

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### **Discussion/Essay Questions**

- What do you think of the author's premise that animal advocacy is a necessary bridge between human rights and environmental advocacy?
- Are there any logical reasons that environmental advocates should privilege the rights of the human animal, especially considering our environmental destructiveness, over the rights of other sentient animals?
- If farming animals is not a natural nor necessary practice, and it is often more ecologically destructive than farming plants, should environmental advocates continue to acquiesce to humans' current desire to consume animal products?
- On what types of campaigns can you envision activists for humans, nonhuman animals, and nature working together? What would the core message be that would adequately represent all their interests and philosophies?

### **Suggested Further Readings**

- Hall, Lee. 2010. *On their own terms: Bringing animal-rights philosophy down to Earth*. Darien: Nectar Bat Press.

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