



## Final Issue Statement

# Wildlife Management and Conservation, and the Animal Rights Philosophy

Although a range of individual philosophies exists within the realm of “animal rights,” this Issue Statement addresses The Wildlife Society’s policy with respect to the specific animal rights principles that (1) each individual animal has inherent rights, (2) every animal should live free from human-induced pain and suffering, (3) animals should not be exploited for any human purposes, and (4) every individual animal has equal status regardless of commonality or rarity, or whether or not the species is native, exotic, invasive, or feral.

In contrast to the above philosophies, TWS supports an animal welfare philosophy that focuses on healthy populations and quality of life for individuals within those populations, and, importantly, conservation of species of animals as described by the Responsible Human Use of Wildlife Position Statement. It does not preclude management of animal populations or use of animals for food or other cultural uses, as long as the loss of life is justified, sustainable, and achieved through humane methods.

The conflict between many tenets of an animal rights philosophy and an animal welfare philosophy is profound. The Wildlife Society supports regulated hunting, trapping, and fishing; research on wild animals; non-lethal techniques such as aversive conditioning or capture and marking for research purposes; and the right of people to pursue either consumptive or non-consumptive use of wildlife. The Wildlife Society believes that curtailment of these uses will inhibit wildlife science and conservation.

The animal rights view holds that it is wrong to take a sentient animal’s life or cause it to suffer for nearly any reason, even to conserve species or ecosystems or to promote human welfare and safety, with a possible exception of defense of one’s life<sup>1</sup>. According to the animal rights philosophy, animals should be given all the same moral considerations and legal protection as humans. However, animal rights adherents have not come to consensus regarding which species are sentient enough to warrant these protections.

The animal rights emphasis on individual animals fails to recognize the inter-relatedness of wildlife communities within functioning ecosystems, and holds that protecting individual animals is more important than conserving populations, species, or ecosystems. Further,

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<sup>1</sup> Regan, T. 1983. *The Case for Animal Rights*. University of California Press.



the animal rights viewpoint precludes the use of animals in scientific research, designed to benefit animals and their populations. Finally, the animal rights philosophy fails to acknowledge the negative consequences to both wildlife and people that can result when wildlife populations are unmanaged and/or exceed their carrying capacity. Nor does the animal rights philosophy acknowledge the suffering inherent in the natural deaths of virtually all free-ranging wildlife.

The Wildlife Society is concerned that foundational elements of the animal rights philosophy contradict the principles that have led to the recognized successes of wildlife management and conservation in North America. Selective or broad application of elements of animal rights philosophy to contemporary issues of wildlife management promotes false choices regarding potential human-wildlife relationships, promotes false expectations for wildlife population management, and erodes the confidence in decades of knowledge acquired through scientific inquiry and indigenous knowledge of wildlife and their habitats. The Public Trust Doctrine, the foundation of many laws protecting wildlife in the U.S., is based on the premise that wild animals are a public resource to be held in trust by the government for the benefit of all citizens. Animal rights advocates philosophically oppose this concept of wildlife as a public trust resource, and further advocate affording legal rights to all animals. Taken literally, under the animal rights legal framework, there would be no existing legal basis for wildlife conservation and management. If the Public Trust Doctrine concept was voided, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for wildlife professionals to manage endangered species, overabundant, invasive, exotic, or ecologically detrimental animal populations, and to protect human health and safety, let alone conduct research for the benefits of wildlife themselves, or allow for widely accepted use of wildlife by humans.

The policy of The Wildlife Society regarding animal rights philosophy is to:

1. Recognize that the philosophy of animal rights as defined above, is inconsistent with science-based conservation and management of wildlife.
2. Recognize that animal welfare philosophies can be consistent with science-based conservation and management of wildlife.
3. Educate organizations and individuals about the need for scientific management of wildlife and habitats and about the practical problems relative to the conservation of wildlife and habitats, and to human society, with the animal rights philosophy.
4. Support an animal welfare philosophy, which holds that animals can be studied and managed through science-based methods and that human use of wildlife is acceptable, including regulated hunting, trapping, and lethal control for the benefit of populations, species, and human society, provided the practice is consistent with science and traditional knowledge, is sustainable, and individual animals are treated



ethically and humanely, consistent with the Responsible Human Use of Wildlife Position Statement.

Related TWS position statements include The Role of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, and Responsible Human Use of Wildlife.

*Approved by TWS Council March 2026*