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## THE DEBATE OVER ELEPHANT CULLING: IS IT EVER MORALLY JUSTIFIED TO CULL ELEPHANTS?

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### Abstract

*This article argues that, since elephants do not just live in forests or parks but in a whole social, economic, political and ecological environment, it is necessary to look at how surplus elephant populations affect the lives of human beings living in these communities and the environment. It also argues that it is not always wrong to cull elephants. However, this ought to be done under certain circumstances, for example, in cases where it is necessary to protect their habitats or the habitats of other animals and in cases where the elephant population threatens the livelihoods of human beings. Culling ought, however, to be done in a way that does not make the elephants suffer unnecessarily.*

### INTRODUCTION

Elephant culling is the periodic, planned killing of elephant herds, families, and individuals (Hoyt, 1994, 149). Zimbabwe's elephant population is estimated to be over 66 000. According to the *CAMPFIRE News Magazine* (Vol. 15, May 1997), the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management (DNPWLM) considers 35 000 to be the optimum for the available habitat. The Zimbabwean government and conservationists realised that this surplus elephant population can be reduced through culling. However, they have received a lot of criticism from animal welfarists, especially from the Western countries such as The United States of America, Britain, and Canada where interest in animal welfare is quite considerable. Animal welfarism is not as strong in Zimbabwe as it is in the above three countries. Nevertheless, elephant culling in Zimbabwe has resulted in tension between animal welfarists and conservationists.

This article will first show that conservationists and animal welfarists do not have the same theoretical commitments and, because of this, they disagree on the issue of elephant culling. Some animal welfarists argue that it is wrong to cull elephants in Zimbabwe. There are, however, other animal welfarists who take a moderate point of view and argue that elephant culling is justified in order to protect their habitat. On the other hand, conservationists argue that it is justified to cull surplus elephant

population in cases where they threaten biodiversity. This article argues that, since elephants do not just live in forests or parks but in a social, economic, political and ecological environment, it is necessary to examine how surplus elephant populations affect the lives of human beings living in this environment. It will argue that, if culling benefits both human beings and the environment, then it is morally justified. However, the article will also argue that the animal welfarists' point of view should not be discounted since it is important that elephants should not be made to suffer unnecessarily in the culling process.

#### ANIMAL WELFARISM AND THE PRINCIPLE OF EQUAL CONSIDERATION OF INTERESTS

Animal welfarists are primarily concerned with the well-being of all animals that are sentient, that is, animals that can suffer or experience enjoyment. Animal welfarists argue that animals, like human beings, want to avoid pain. Therefore, human beings should not act in such a way as to cause unnecessary pain to these sentient non-human beings as this is immoral. Thus, the animal welfarists extend the utilitarian principle of equal consideration of interests to sentient non-human creatures.

According to Singer, the principle of equality states that all humans are equal regardless of race, sex, age, or nationality. In response to the argument that not all human beings are equal because they differ in their physical features, intellectual capacity, and moral principles, Singer argues that "we should make it clear that the claim to equality does not depend on intelligence, moral capacity, physical strength or similar matters of fact. Equality is a moral ideal, not a simple assertion of fact" (Singer, 1986, 220). He views the principle of equal consideration of interests of human beings as central to the way in which human beings ought to treat each other, but more significantly, he maintains that the principle should also be extended to non-human animals, which also feel pain as human beings do.

Similarly, Bentham argued that, if animals have a capacity to feel pain and pleasure, then they should be subject to the same moral law of equal consideration of interests that applies to human beings, for "the question is not, can they [animals] reason? Nor can they talk? But can they suffer?" (Singer, 1986, 221). From this perspective, animal welfarists argue that, if inflicting pain on a human being is morally wrong because of the suffering it causes to that person, then it is also wrong to inflict pain on a sentient non-human animal because of the suffering this causes to that animal. Thus, for animal welfarists the criterion for moral standing is sentience, for everything that has a capacity to feel pain and pleasure has moral standing.

The principle of equal consideration implies that human beings' conduct towards animals should not depend on what they are like, or what abilities they have, but on their capacity to suffer. In her article, "Immoral and Moral uses of Animals", Christina Hoff has argued that the capacity for suffering confers a minimal *prima facie* moral status to any creature. Therefore, anyone who is wantonly cruel to a sentient creature wrongs that creature. Thus, for Hoff and other animal welfarists, objects, which do not have the capacity to feel pain and pleasure, are excluded from this moral domain, for objects such as trees, habitats, soils and mountains only matter in so far as they promote the well-being of individual sentient animals. Their preservation is essential, however, because they provide a suitable environment for sentient animals and, thus, enhance animal welfare.

### CONSERVATIONISM AND ELEPHANT CULLING

Conservationists, on the other hand, are interested in the prevention of the destruction of ecosystems, species, and habitats and promoting biodiversity. They are primarily concerned with ecological collectives and not with individual sentient animals. This explains why conservationists spend most of their time, energy, and resources in trying to save habitats or a species threatened with extinction and why they advocate culling in cases where animal over-population threatens habitats or other animal species. Conservationists are concerned with individual sentient animals only in cases where they promote the preservation of other species. Unlike animal welfarists, therefore, conservationists believe that moral standing should not only be limited to sentience, but should extend to ecological collectives.

Zimbabwe's surplus elephant population is harmful, not only to national parks such as Hwange, Victoria Falls and Gona-re-Zhou, but also to the rural communities where they destroy crops, human property and even threaten human life. Because of the damage elephants are causing in the communal areas, development has been retarded and the local communities have developed a negative attitude towards them. It is also argued, for instance, that elephants have contributed to the decline in the Zimbabwean rhino population because they are destroying their habitat. The surplus elephant population is, thus, disadvantaging both human beings and other animal species and also destroying their own habitats.

Conservationists in Zimbabwe have, thus, argued that it is necessary and logical to cull the surplus elephant population in the interests of conserving both the elephants themselves and other animal species. They maintain that elephant culling promotes human well-being and

development, not only by lessening the damage caused by elephants to the communal population, but also by generating revenue for the communities from the sale of ivory and other elephant products, as well as providing meat to the local communities. It is further contended that, when local communities are compensated, they are motivated to conserve wildlife and desist from poaching, as they realise that the wildlife in their areas has economic value. Consequently, the conservationists insist that it is necessary to sacrifice some elephants in order to preserve the species.

### ARGUMENTS AGAINST CULLING

Because animal welfarists are concerned with individual sentient animals, they strongly oppose elephant culling because it is undue cruelty to elephants. Such animal welfarists like John Hoyt and Cynthia Moss as well as organisations that advocate animal welfarism, such as the Humane Society International and the Humane Society of the United States, are very vocal critics of elephant culling. Hoyt and Moss argue from a moral point of view that elephant culling causes intolerable suffering to these sentient beings, and since human beings have a moral obligation not to cause pain to these animals, it is wrong to cull elephants. Hoyt argues that elephants are animals with complex social relations and killing some of them may disrupt these relations and this is likely to cause a great deal of suffering to the surviving elephants.

Some animal welfarists argue that the ecological collectives that the conservationists insist should be protected from destruction by elephants, have no interests and, therefore, do not have any moral standing. Others, however, take a more moderate position and accept that, in cases where elephants threaten their habitat and that of other sentient creatures, it is not always wrong to cull some of them. This point of view makes sense, for if elephants are allowed to destroy their habitat, they will starve to death and, therefore, might experience a great deal of suffering, the very thing that welfarists are trying to avoid. Culling is therefore necessary and morally justified in order to avoid greater suffering of elephants and other creatures. Whilst the claim that we ought to avoid inflicting pain on the elephants as they are sentient creatures makes sense, the view that it is always wrong to cull elephants is not sustainable, for as already argued, uncontrolled elephant populations inevitably destroy the communal people's livelihoods.

### CONCLUSION

Animal welfarists who take the extremist position that all culling is immoral over-emphasise sentience at the expense of other considerations, such

as human well-being and the need to conserve other animal species. However, conservationists should not totally ignore animal welfarists' concerns and ensure that elephants do not suffer unnecessarily during culling exercises. Elephant culling in Zimbabwe is, thus, necessary and justified provided those who cull the animals take care to spare them any unnecessary suffering.

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