



## Nov 13, 2024 Animals in Conflict – Part 1: Conscripted and Victims

By Janice H. Cox, MBA and Jackson Zee

*This article is the first installment of a three-part newsletter series examining the impact of human conflicts on animals. The newsletter series is adapted from the original blog by Cox and Zee, which was published by the Conflict and Environment Observatory and republished with their kind permission. The citation and link to the original blog are as follows: Cox, Janice & Zee, Jackson, 2021, How animals are harmed by armed conflicts and military activities. March 18.*

*<https://ceobs.org/how-animals-are-harmed-by-armed-conflicts-and-military-activities/>. The authors updated the article from the original blog in October 2024. Additional comments, with the authors' approval, by Dr. Andrew N. Rowan have been added in italics.*

### Introduction

Wild and domesticated animals have long suffered abuse, injury or death in armed conflicts. In this paper, Janice Cox and Jackson Zee explore this history of harm and the reasons behind it, arguing that the animal victims of war require greater recognition and protection.

### Animals Conscripted into War Effort

Wild and domesticated animals have long suffered abuse, injury or death in armed conflicts. In this paper, Janice Cox and Jackson Zee explore this history of harm and the reasons behind it, arguing that the animal victims of war require greater recognition and protection.

Before the mechanisation of warfare, armies often conscripted large numbers of animals into service to support their war efforts. Horses, donkeys, oxen, bullocks and elephants carried men, material and supplies; pigeons carried messages; camel-mounted troops were employed in desert campaigns; and cavalry horses often led the charge on the front line.

A Guardian article [reports](#) that 16 million animals “served” in the First World War, the first industrialized conflict where vast numbers of animals were still in use. The RSPCA has [estimated](#) that 484,143 horses, mules, camels and bullocks were killed in British service alone between 1914-18. *[ANR comment<sup>2</sup> – Maria Dickin, the founder of the People’s Dispensary for Sick Animals in the UK, instituted the [PDSA Dickin Medal](#) in 1943 to honor the contributions of animals in World War II. The award is commonly referred to as the animal’s Victoria Cross. The first recipients of the Dickin Medal were three homing pigeons who contributed to the recovery of aircrews from aircraft that had crashlanded in the ocean. In 2004, Princess Anne unveiled a memorial in Hyde Park, London, to the animals who have served and died alongside British and allied troops. Special tribute is given to the 60 animals awarded the Dickin medal, including 32 pigeons, 18 dogs, three horses and a cat.]* While the number of animals conscripted to directly support fighting has decreased, their use by militaries remains common.

Dogs have been particularly widely used by the military and remain so today. Their roles include tracking, guarding, delivering messages, laying telegraph wires, detecting explosives and digging out bomb victims. Rats have also been used to detect mines, while dolphins and sea lions continue to be trained to protect harbours from underwater mines and enemy divers. There are reports of cats being used to hunt rats in trenches, canaries being used to detect poisonous gas, and, in World War I, [glow worms](#) being used for illumination at night to read communiques and maps.

These activities have often led to animal casualties and deaths, and the shocking death toll is covered in a later article. But there were also untold deprivations and animal welfare issues, ranging from poor training methods, housing, overwork and exhaustion, exposure to heat or cold, starvation, thirst, disease, and abandonment.

Animals have also been widely used in [military research](#), particularly into weapons and injuries. Weapons have been tested for safety and efficacy, usually using pigs and sheep – many of which were shot and killed in testing. Rodents, rabbits, and primates have also been used widely in laboratory testing in relation to the toxicity of weapon constituents, while still more animals have been used to test chemical, biological or radiological warfare or for medical personnel to experiment on and train to deal with burns, blasts and wounds.

*[ANR Comment<sup>2</sup> – For example, the [primate equilibrium platform \(PEP\)](#) was used to test the ability of primates to keep a platform level after exposure to either toxic agents or ionizing radiation. The PEP was featured in the 1987 film [Project X](#), starring Matthew Broderick and Helen Hunt.*

*While animals continue to be used in military laboratories, the US Department of Defence commissioned a [2022 report](#) to assess how NAMS (non-animal methods) could be deployed to investigate biomedical issues of interest to the military.]*

## **Animals in Conflict: Timeline**

Animals in Conflict: A Timeline	
Conflict	Impact on Animals
WWI: 1914-18	More than 16 million animals were made to serve on all sides, with nine million killed (including eight million horses, mules and donkeys).
WWII: 1939-45	An <a href="#">estimated 400,000 to 750,000 domestic pets</a> were killed in Britain in one week at the beginning of the war following a government campaign focusing on pet safety/suffering and expected food shortages. The German Army lost 179,000 horses in 2 months on the Eastern Front.
Vietnam: 1955-75	The use of defoliants destroyed the habitats of tigers, Asian elephants, gibbons, civets, leopards and other species. At least 40,000 animals were killed by unexploded landmines in the 20 years following the war.
Mozambique Civil War: 1977-92	Giraffe and elephant herds in the Gorongosa National Park <a href="#">shrank by 90%</a> .
Iran-Iraq War: 1980-88	Wild goats, wolves, otters, pelicans, striped hyenas, river dolphins and other wildlife were wiped out or rendered almost extinct.
Sudanese Civil War: 1983-2005	South Sudan's elephant population fell 95% from 100,000 to 5,000.
Afghan War: 1990s	Over 75,000 animals were lost due to mines, about half of the livestock population.
Gulf War 1990-91	Over 80% of livestock and 85% of zoo animals in Kuwait died, including 790,000 sheep, 12,500 cows and 2,500 horses. A deliberate oil leak into the Persian Gulf by Iraqi troops caused the deaths of up to 230,000 aquatic animals and birds.
Russia-Ukraine War 2022-	<p><a href="#">According</a> to Ukraine's Ministry of Agrarian Policy and Food, as of 16 June 2022, an estimated 42,000 sheep, 92,000 cattle, 258,000 pigs, and more than 5.7 million poultry had been killed since Russia's invasion began on 24 February. There is a lack of feed and veterinary care for many animals. Approximately 300 dogs <a href="#">died of hunger and thirst</a> in an animal shelter in Borodyanka during the occupation. <a href="#">Politico</a> reported that hundreds of animals died in their cages at a zoo in Russian-occupied Ukraine when explosions destroyed the nearby Nova Kakhovka dam. Kyiv's Environment Ministry stated that the war had taken a heavy toll on Ukraine's natural resources and wildlife – with the deaths of animals being "not just a result of the war" but one of its "aims."</p> <p>The <a href="#">Ukrainian</a> (Feb 2024) examined various harms to ecosystems and animals in an article "How Russia's war against Ukraine affects animals and the environment." Since the start of the full-scale war in 2022, about 25% of Ukraine's protected areas have been occupied. Many animals in war zones are disoriented and frightened by explosions, shooting, machinery and night flashes. This leads to changes in behaviour and migration patterns. Aquatic ecosystems also suffer from the environmental effects of Russia's military invasion. The <a href="#">Ukrainian War Environmental Consequences Work Group</a> reported increased dolphin strandings in the Black Sea.</p>
Israel-Gaza War: October 2023-	<p>Gaza's animals have been victims of the conflict, as recorded by <a href="#">Al-Monitor</a>. Animals on farms, in shelters and in homes, have been killed, wounded or displaced. According to a UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) report, 149 sheep, 5 cattle and 172 broiler farms have been destroyed. Fish farms on the coast were wiped out when the coastline was bulldozed.</p> <p>In February 2024, the <a href="#">Times of Israel</a> reported that hundreds of feral dogs had entered Israel from the Gaza Strip since the start of the war, raising concerns about their impact on wildlife and human health. Another side effect of the war in Gaza is animal starvation in zoos. The Palestinian Chronicle reported that the zoo at Jabalya, home to around 100 species, had lost 90% of its animals. Four Paws has been seeking to coordinate a zoo rescue in Gaza.</p>

Click the timeline image above to get a clickable PDF.

## Animal Victims of War

What follows briefly examines how conflict can affect wildlife, including marine animals, farmed animals, working animals and companion animals.

### Wildlife

Even [low-level](#) human conflict can drive dramatic wildlife declines. A study published in the journal [Nature](#) analysed data from 1946 to identify the effects of human conflict on large mammal populations in Africa. The results suggested

that of all the factors studied, repeated armed conflict had the most significant impact on wildlife – and even low-level conflict could cause profound declines in large herbivore populations. Weakened environmental governance is a critical factor in wildlife loss.

Wild animals can be killed and injured by landmines, while the increased availability of small arms can [intensify](#) unsustainable hunting. Wild animals are also hunted and killed for food, both as a coping strategy and for products to be sold to raise funds for the conflict. The extent to which non-state armed groups have used wildlife crime to raise funds is [contested](#). Where the trade and consumption of wild meat (bush meat) started during conflicts, it often continues into peacetime. It has links to One Health (including epidemics/pandemics), biodiversity loss and wildlife trade.

In the oceans, marine animals can suffer through [naval exercises and warfare](#), with common pathologies being decompression sickness and acoustic traumas, possibly exacerbating mass strandings of whales.

## **Zoos**

Zoo animals are often the [victims](#) of conflict. In times of war, zoos lack paying visitors, and zoo animals are seen as a liability. The animals may be killed, eaten, injured, starved, stolen, traded, abused, even abandoned or released into the conflict zones as a diversion to distract combatants and slow recovery efforts. Following the [invasion of Iraq in 2003](#), large carnivores, including lions, panthers and jaguars, were released from the Baghdad Zoo and private residences by the retreating Iraqi forces to impede coalition forces from advancing on the city; these animals were either [killed](#) or captured and returned to the zoo in the weeks after the onset of conflict.

## **Livestock**

Livestock have been injured in war and specifically targeted and killed. The circumstances often mean that people cannot care for or feed their animals properly, and the animals can succumb to disease. In the chaos of conflict,

animals are commonly overworked or eaten, while shortages of veterinary care and veterinary medicines are common.

### **Working animals**

Working animals are essential for transporting people, water, supplies and firewood. However, despite this, they are often slaughtered when food reserves run out or are sold because cash assets are needed, and proper care and feed provisioning are difficult. This leads to further pressures and vulnerabilities for people, especially refugees and displaced persons.

### **Companion animals**

Companion animals can also be [victims](#) of war, being killed, maimed, abandoned and sometimes eaten. In times of extreme food shortages, companion animals have been euthanised because owners could not care for them or even eaten by their owners or other people in the community. In many cases, companion animals are abandoned and become lost in the chaos of war, especially when their owners are displaced or become refugees. Displacement of people may fuel a free-roaming (stray) population of former pets, raising public health concerns (e.g., rabies) that may lead to substandard and inhumane population management methods, such as culling with poisons.

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#### *Authors:*

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