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Elephants and pandemics

Commentary on [Baker & Winkler](#) on *Elephant Rewilding*

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Abstract: Baker & Winkler’s critique of Asian elephant tourism and conservation in Thailand has convinced me that this was “an industry with too many victims.” Yet I fear that B&W’s proposed remedy of returning to past elephant husbandry by Karen hill-peoples has little likelihood of improving the lives of the elephants for long. Who can predict whether the Karen will live up to this hope? B&W advocate for the Karen, but not for “an abolitionist stance on elephant-human relationships.” In my view, whether we discuss elephants or the wild mammals that carry SARS-CoV-2, abolition of many human uses of animals is needed to save our planet and ourselves. Are Karen elephant-keepers that different from the bat-hunters who seem to have brought the pandemic to our doorsteps? Both eke out a marginal living in traditional ways exploiting animals. Human survival does not depend on sustaining “wet markets” or elephant tourism or eating meat every day. What we really need is fundamental reform of our relationships with animals, starting with the human governance of the nonhuman world that sustains us all. Elephants and pandemics expose the myth of limitless human freedom.

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Baker & Winkler (2020) (B&W) call our attention to Asian elephant exploitation, decry failed conservation, and condemn various cruel practices in Thai elephant tourism — “an industry with too many victims.” This quote captures the world that most of us inhabit. Virtually none of us is responsible for the victimization of animals and people. But what can we do about it? B&W articulate one specific goal for incremental improvement in human-elephant relations:

“We are advocating an end to the oppression, utilization, and deprivation inflicted on elephants by the tourism industry, but not necessarily an abolitionist stance on elephant-human relationships.”

It is heartening to see the qualifier “necessarily” because I worry that the proposed remedy does not go far enough for elephants. Whether one examines the largest nonhumans, such as Asian elephants, or the smallest, bats, we need to face the fact that we are a species with too many victims. In this commentary, I call attention to the similarities in the human-animal relationships that triggered the ongoing extinction crisis and our current pandemic.

The extinction crisis (Ceballos and Ehrlich 2018; Ceballos et al. 2015) and the pandemics of the past few centuries have killed and continue to claim the lives of trillions of animal victims (including humans). Not only do elephant deaths and population extinctions share a common cause with pandemics – namely, humans – but they also offer a common solution: putting an end to anthropocentrism (Kopnina 2019).

We brought the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic down upon ourselves. This rapidly mutating virus and its six other related coronaviruses that infect humans originated not from lab tinkering but from exploiting wild mammals, such as bats or pangolins (Andersen et al. 2020; Forster et al. 2020; Zhang et al. 2020; Zhou et al. 2020). There are many victims, and many accused, in the zoonotic chain of cause and effect that led to this pandemic. The wild mammals are clearly victims as individual prey of human hunters, and their populations have also been condemned to eradication campaigns during prior disease outbreaks (Karesh et al. 2005). The poor persons eking out a marginal living by collecting wild mammals and selling them to the retailers in “wet markets” and their unwitting clients are all victims and also stand accused of spreading the disease. These humans might be portrayed as innocent by some in much the same way that the Karen people are described by B&W (cf. Kopnina 2016, 2019). An anthropologist (I am one by training) might refer to the bat-hunters or the wild prey retailers as practitioners of a traditional way of life — but is that an adequate justification in view of the manifest risk?

The common assertions that some persons or cultures will care for animals or nature better may have become unfalsifiable claims. Although I of course share B&W’s goal of ending the exploitation of Asian elephants, I am concerned with the replacement of the current unjust and cruel system — which does little or nothing to preserve healthy Asian elephants and their social groups as a wild legacy for posterity — with another fragile system that may be unjust in its turn. The neglect and misery of the Karen people do not justify enslaving elephants. B&W warn us that conservation without taking into account either the elephants’ own interests or the interests of the Karen people will be incomplete. However, the claim that Karens, if restored to their land, their elephants, and their way of life, will be the primary actors in elephant rewilding seems to stretch the evidence. B&W write:

“Traditional mahouts with generations of situated elephant knowledge are integral to rewilding. Elephant conservation efforts need to include these Karen hilltribe and other traditional mahout communities. Karen communities have a long tradition of elephant keeping and forest protection ... they have also advocated successfully for forest rights in Thailand.” (Kunlawadi, 1997)

These multiple assertions are supported with a single citation to a study of one Karen village in 1997. Is this a resurrection of a myth about uncorrupted cultures in harmony with nature or a well-evidenced call for modern society to leave a people and their associated elephants in peace? Without criticizing the Karen, of whom I knew nothing before reading the target article, my skepticism arises from decades of study of human behavior.

I have analyzed human attitudes toward the most hated mammal on the planet — the gray wolf — as held by one of the most victimized peoples in North America, the Ojibwe tribal nations who call the wolf Ma’iingan and revere it as brother or companion to this day (David 2009; Shelley et al. 2011) (Fergus and Hill 2019). The attitudes of tribal members living off reservation,

in contrast, begin to resemble those of the broader Euro-American populace around them, less admiring of their ancestral companion the wolf. Even the Tibetan Buddhists excluded wolves and hyenas from their prohibition on killing animals (Norbu 1992). No peoples remain frozen in time, unresponsive to changing global forces. Research on human attitudes and behaviors has shown how mutable and fickle people are as a group, how subject we are to the whims of our leaders (Dunwoody 2007; Kinzig et al. 2013). Change is inevitable. Replacing a cruel and unjust system that does nothing to protect the rights of future generations of people and elephants with yet another unaccountable and fickle group of decision-makers is just as likely to let futurity down.

We can and should care about and for both nonhuman animals and people. Does that mean everything that humans do to animals is acceptable? Obviously not. But restricting our outrage to the “wet markets” (a euphemism I reject) or their procurers would miss the point. Capturing wild animals is slavery or imprisonment, whether in wet markets or in elephant tourism or in Karen working families. I mistrust the unsubstantiated assertion that Karen love and understand elephants and can hence be entrusted with their welfare (cf. Kopnina 2016 and Kopnina’s 2020 commentary on B&W). This seems to be a variant on the anthropocentric view that humans can do what they wish to animals because humans take priority. There is a clear alternative way of viewing the world: a non-anthropocentric one. To implement such a way of thinking, we have proposed a judicial process involving trusteeship for nonhumans and for futurity of all life.

In our own recent *Animal Sentience* target article (Treves et al. 2018b/2019), we propose a legal and ethical system to change the institutional structures that exploit nature and promote unsustainable use by giving power to “trustees” for contemporary nonhumans and for future generations of all life on Earth. Trustee-advocates for nonhumans, trustee-advocates for future generations, and trustee-advocates for current human users of Asian elephants would be on an equal footing to argue before a legally accountable constitutional court. That court would be vested with decision-making authority over human uses of nature with the enforcement power that entails (rather than the current corrupt US system of fiat by elected and appointed officials).

The court arguments would be triggered by any proposal to use a component of nature for human benefit, whether wildlife commercialization (Karesh et al. 2005) or recreation and other trivial human desires (Santiago-Avila et al. 2018). The trustee-advocates would hold adversarial debate before accountable, impartial judges, and the court would have the power to enforce the outcome, including policing against illegal uses and enforcing the limits on those uses that are permitted. The proposed remedy for humanity’s current unsustainable use of the biosphere is intergenerational equity, non-anthropocentrism, and according the appropriate role to science (in explicitly informing public policy on the outcomes of different value claims about nature rather than the current myth of scientists’ neutrality [Treves 2019; Treves and Santiago-Ávila 2020], which plays into the hands of special interests). Our model depends not only on the authenticity and constant testing of trustees, a view I think Baker (2019) endorses in her own commentary on our target article, but also a moral change in society’s attitude towards trusteeship, recognizing that we are merely the guardians of our planet for posterity, not its proprietors.

The hopeful conjecture that the ways of life of simpler indigenous societies somehow provide a sustainable contemporary model is replaced in our proposal by a system embedded in current national and international laws (Bosselmann 2017; Wood 2013, 2014). Such laws would

codify trusteeship and the right to a healthy environment in explicit constitutional provisions (Treves et al. 2018a) alongside ethical arguments for seventh-generation principles of stewardship of nature (Clarkson et al. 1992), such as those proposed by B&W for the Karen hill-tribes of Thailand.

Despite our vaunted inventions and ingenuity, our species has repeatedly proven its inability to protect biodiversity and prevent widespread harm to humans and nonhumans alike. I believe it is time to turn our ingenuity to self-policing and nature trusteeship, replacing the folly of unfettered economic growth with the more realistic view that our planet has boundaries and we are just one species among many. Only then can we preserve Earth into a future in which all life can coexist.

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