

# Non-Human Animals and Non-Human People

Animal rights and Indigenous conceptions of animals

Final Paper for Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Resource Management  
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Anthropology 461  
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Dec. 11, 2007

Since the 1990's there has amassed an abundant literature and debate concerning Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) (Cruikshank, 2004; Nadasdy, 2003; Wishart, 2004; Menzies, 2006; Deur and Turner 2005). TEK challenges Euro-American cultural perspective that animals are not beings worthy of respect or consideration.

There has also been another cultural movement challenging how we think of animals: animal rights, liberation, and ethics philosophy (DeGrazia, 1999; Midgley, 1998; Regan, 1989; Pluhar, 1995; Rodd, 1990; Singer, 1975) has been on the rise since the 1970s. This cultural movement has fostered animal rights groups such as PeTA<sup>1</sup> and ALA, and a variety of environmental movements, and influenced the dietary choices of vegetarianism and veganism. While there are many differences in beliefs and practices among the various aspects of the animal rights movement, for the purposes of this paper I will take DeGrazia's (1999) view that these groups have more similarities than differences and can be treated as a whole.

I believe that while there are some issues that both groups can agree on, each groups holds a core conception of animals is radically different than the other leading to a conflict of goals between animal rights activist groups and First Nations people. For this paper, I will the views of animals held by the people of Southwestern Yukon, especially the Tutchone, the Kluane, and the Gwich'in and will compare and contrast these with the perspectives of animal rights parties.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a natural resource as "those materials or substances of a place which can be used to sustain life or for economic exploitation (Dictionary, 2003)." Neither First Nations groups nor animal-rights activists view animals as a material or a substance. Animals are often referred to by animal rights

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<sup>1</sup> People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals

people as non-human animals, whereas First Nations people in the southern Yukon speak of them as non-human people. One considers the evolutionary view of animal heritage as the underlying commonality whereas the other believes that animals and humans are both people.

To understand either view requires a radical restructuring of the currently accepted Euro-American ideas about animals. Both First Nations and animal rights organizations profess the importance of respecting animals and are agreed in their opposition to several common practices, such as catch-and-release fishing, species reintroduction, experimentation on animals, and using animals for entertainment. Both groups also support the conservation of animal habitat<sup>2</sup>. Outwardly these motivations for change manifest in a similar manner but the underlying conception of animals and the reasons for these views are quite different.

Catch-and-release fishing is increasingly common as a way to 'manage' the fish population while still providing recreation opportunities. In the southern Yukon, First Nations oppose this practice, as do animal rights groups like PeTA. PeTA's website lambastes catch and release because of the stress and suffering the fish experiences when caught, the damage to its body, and the low survival rate of fish that are caught and then released. In contrast, First Nations people oppose this practice because they believe humans should avoid 'bothering' animals needlessly, and that one shouldn't refuse the gift that is given by the animal<sup>3</sup>.

PeTA and First Nations' groups also oppose the reintroduction of species to areas that once supported them. PeTA argues that relocation requires a dangerous

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<sup>2</sup> rights groups see this as people free wilderness and First Nations as both animal and human activity areas

<sup>3</sup> Nadasdy has an approachable article on animal as gift. (Nadasdy, 2007)

tranquilization and can be extremely stressful to animals due to broken social ties and unknown territory. They propose that instead of manipulating animal populations that “effort [should] be focused on the alleviating suffering and promoting the well-being of the animals that live in a spot currently (PeTA Norfolk)”. Wishart (2004) explores this from the Gwich’in<sup>4</sup> perspective. His article looks at the government’s reintroduction of musk ox to Gwich’in territory to enhance wildlife viewing opportunities for tourists. This action is perceived by the Gwich’in as ‘bothering’ both the introduced musk ox and the extant caribou. The musk ox are ‘bothered’ by their capture and transportation and the caribou are ‘bothered’ by the intrusion of the musk ox with their stinky urine and competition for the same food supplies. The Gwich’in people consider the musk ox to be driving out the caribou that they have cultivated a relationship with over the centuries.

These examples reveal a fundamental difference in the conception of what an animal is and how it relates to humans. Animal rights debates portray animals as “human children...with more modest mental capacities, who are easily exploited and often do not know their best interests (DeGrazia, 1999).” In contrast, McClellan reports in her studies with the Tutchone people<sup>5</sup>(1975, 1970) that animal spirits are often considered more powerful than humans and were once almost impossible to distinguish from humans. The Kluane people “continue to see animals as intelligent, social, and spiritually powerful other-than-human-persons, with whom they engage in reciprocal relations. These relations are considered vital to their physical and cultural survival

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<sup>4</sup> The most northern non-Inuit First Nation in North America and is also known in literature as Kutchin and Loucheux (Wishart, 2004)

<sup>5</sup> Also (Nadasdy, 2003) for the Kluane peoples.

(Nadasdy, 2003).” It is generally considered that if animal’s bodies are treated correctly their animal spirit will be given another body and return to life (McClellan C. , 1975). Animals are also considered to be teachers about patience, proper behavior, and the landscape (Nadasdy, 2003, McClellan C. , 1970, 1975, 1985).

Both worldviews explicitly promote respect of animals but they perceive the concept of respect in different ways. Rights philosophers speak of this respect as a one-way standard of treatment of animals: respect is about what we do *to* animals. Regan(1983) refers to the right to “never be treated merely as a means to the ends of others..and includes the right not to be harmed”.

In contrast, Nadasdy (2007) outlines and explores Kluane ideas of respect toward animals which are constructed on ideas of animal-human social obligations and responsibilities. Nadasdy (2003) says that the exact practices have changed with time but the underlying respect has continued and disrespectful behaviour is still seen as endangering the whole human community.<sup>6</sup>

One example of an activity where these two concepts of respect for animals lead to very different standards of behaviour is in hunting. For the Kluane people animals are believed to give themselves to the hunter so that he and his people may live. Agnes Johnson explains this to Nadasdy (2007):

If someone gives you a gift at a potlatch, it is disrespectful to say or even think anything bad about the gift or to imply that there is some reason why they should not have given it to you... It is the same with animals. If they give themselves to you, you say a prayer of thanks and accept the gift of meat you have been given. To think about the animals’ suffering... is to find fault with the gift, to cast doubt

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<sup>6</sup> there are many stories of the consequences of disrespect , one being (McClellan C. , 1970)

on whether the animal should have given itself to you in the first place. To do this is to run the risk of giving offense and never receiving such a gift again.

From the perspective of an animal rights activist, this idea to ignore the suffering of an animal is a supreme disrespect. In general, these groups oppose hunting precisely because of the suffering that an animal endures.

I believe that the root of these different perspectives is that First Nations people see themselves as being in a social relationship with animals-as-people, whereas in the animal rights perspective animals are not afforded the status as people and it is therefore nonsensical to imagine such a relationship. Activists are concerned with restricting human's negative impact on animals, stopping meat eating and leather wearing while advocating for wildlife sanctuaries where animals can pursue their lives apart from human influence. This cuts off the social relationship with animals that First Nations see as crucial to their culture and to the natural order. For the Gwich'in (Wishart, 2004) the concept of wild is not a positive one. A wild animal is not "available to engage in social relations" with humans and the delicate balance between humans and animals is disturbed. The concept of wilderness distances people from that landscape and the beings that inhabit it.

The First Nations and animal-rights groups both have strong opinions about environmental and animal management issues, and while they are often in agreement their fundamental differences in the conception of the nature of animal-human relationships often leads to conflict in policy recommendations. As society deals with an increasing number of difficult problems in these areas, it may be helpful to consider these alternative paradigms which may open alternate avenues to a solution.

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