

## ARTICLE

# Ethical considerations in wildlife medicine

LoraKim Joyner, DVM, MPVM, MDiv

One Earth Conservation

## Abstract

Component wildlife ethics includes two aspects: an understanding of ethical principles and skills in ethical deliberation. Ethical principles reviewed here include utilitarianism, deontological ethics, environmentalism or respect for nature, virtue ethics, relational ethics, care ethics and reverence for life ethics. Other processes and tools that take into account human sociology, behaviour and subconscious functioning in moral decision-making include conservation psychology, narrative ethics, socioscience, listening and communication skills, and needs-based ethics. We also take into account non-human functioning such as welfare science, conservation behaviour and cognitive ethology. Incorporating these tools and instituting ethical practices and programs within our wildlife and conservation management plans and organizations improve our ability to care for ourselves, other humans, wildlife and ecosystems.

## BIO

LoraKim Joyner is the Co-director of One Earth Conservation, an ordained Unitarian Universalist Minister, and a certified trainer in Non-violent Communication. She has worked in avian conservation in Mesoamerica and South America for over 35 years as a wildlife veterinarian.

## Introduction

The stress veterinarians and rehabilitators experience over moral and ethical issues can be intense. This is in part because decisions on levels of care and whether the animal lives or dies may not conform to what is known to be in the best interest of the animal. Furthermore, society's understandings of animal's and human's relationships have changed dramatically in recent decades, with a plethora of differing viewpoints on animals' agency and value. In a given medical case, no one may agree on how much intervention is appropriate and how much financial resource to expend.

Those working with wildlife may experience even more challenges, given that funding, time and staff are often inadequate. The variety of species and their different needs make for complex treatment and care. Also, wild species often coexist in proximity to humans, which enhances the chance for human-wildlife conflict. The moral complexity of working with wildlife is staggering and not only leads to social conflict but can also cause personal burnout and stress. Finally, pressure on diminishing wildlife populations increases the stakes for a positive outcome, especially when dealing with rare and endangered species.

## Keywords

Ethics; communication; veterinary ethics; wildlife medicine; nonviolent communication; conservation psychology; conservation behavior; animal welfare; utilitarianism

## Correspondence

LoraKim Joyner, DVM, MPVM, MDiv  
One Earth Conservation  
82-52 211 Street  
Hollis Hills, NY 11427  
E-mail: amoloros@gmail.com

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As a wildlife veterinarian specializing in wild bird medicine, and eventually moving to Guatemala to work with parrot conservation, the author directly experienced these challenges. Whilst working with parrots as well as other wild birds and animals that came into the clinic, what soon became clear was a lack of resources to adequately and humanely house and treat the wide variety of animals that came to the facility. Guatemala at this time was rife with poverty and guerilla warfare, and decisions made as a veterinarian also impacted the well-being of community members. For example, the author controlled the salary paid to workers, whether people worked in risky locales and situations, and how medical services could be provided. The demands were impossible to meet given the oppressive and violent conditions. As one professor in ethics once said, "Life is full of tragic choices. There is no correct ethical stance over another, only the presence of one another to support us as we engage to make difficult decisions in our life."

Although, in most situations, a veterinary clinic does not exist in such dire circumstances, many veterinarians experience the dilemma of how to address the often-competing claims of themselves, other staff members, clients and owners and their families, and the animals. This process of choosing between interests

of self and interests of others, or between interests of others, is known as ethical deliberation. The more skilled we can become in ethical deliberation, the greater our ability to resolve conflicts that arise out of our passionate understanding of the best way to treat wildlife, whilst also caring for ourselves and the people with whom we work. Unfortunately, training in ethical deliberation has not been adequate to the task—people, organizations and animals may languish because of it. For instance, how people “got along with one another” was mentioned during the National Wildlife Rehabilitator Association’s 2010 Symposium as a pressing concern amongst those working in wildlife rehabilitation. One recent study reported that up to 50% of conservation projects in Mexico fail due to interpersonal conflict and lack of social capital, and not due to funding restrictions or characteristics of the species or habitat (Rubio-Espinosa 2010). In another study, the most prevalent cause of conservation project failure was due to interpersonal relationships and conflict (Catalano et al. 2019).

A membership letter in January 2009 from the president of the American Veterinary Medical Association, Dr. James Cook, stated:

... I am worried that differing perspectives on animal welfare have the potential to do what earthquakes and hurricanes couldn’t do...divide us. The AVMA has plenty of science-based information to help legislators decide and veterinarians lead on these complex issues, but that isn’t enough. I need for you to listen respectfully to your colleagues and engage in a respectful exchange of ideas. We all see things in different ways, but we can’t get mired in those differences to the extent that we lose sight of our common goals and veterinary oath.

For the sake of our common goal of animal health, we need to find ways to engage in ethical issues, such as with respectful conversation. How we engage in ethical issues is as important as the ethical principles employed. Using the science of understanding humans and non-humans gives us tools that help us more skillfully and effectively handle ethical situations. This paper will review ethical principles as one framework for handling ethical issues and investigate other frameworks and tools to add to a wildlife medicine ethical toolbox.

### Principal ethical approaches

Learning ethics happens best when situated in real-life situations, in which the participant is enmeshed. Think of a situation involving wildlife that caused some confusion, conflict or emotional reaction. These may be situations where decisions were made to offer more or less care, whether to cause more or less harm or where questions

arose about whether a behaviour “is right” or if someone “should be” doing something different.

Examples of situations include the following: not having enough funding to pay for staff well or even take care of the animals; not having enough space to house the animal, which is an abundant species, and hence, must consider euthanasia; needing to release recovered individuals into subprime habitat or in less-than-optimal condition.

For the sake of clarity, I choose a common issue that often perplexes those who care for wildlife.

Imagine being presented with a young black-crowned night heron that was attacked by a cat. She is depressed and may have a broken wing. The reader has never treated this species before and is unfamiliar with how to diagnose, treat, house and release this particular species. In addition, there are no funds to cover costs, and money has been tight around the clinic recently. Finally, today is a very busy day, and there may not be much time to read, go online or call someone for information about caring for the bird. Should you or anyone else accept the bird into your care or, in general, treat wildlife?

### Utilitarianism

Approaching the situation of the heron from the viewpoint of utilitarian ethics, the decision is based on terms of better or worse—basically, a cost versus benefit analysis. One seeks to choose a strategy that maximizes good, which, in this case, considers the needs of the heron and the humans involved. Whatever decision is made can be justified because the final outcome causes less harm than if no action was taken. The end result justifies the means.

In this case, one must take a measure of where the suffering occurs. The heron is wild, and you know little of how to care for the bird. She will suffer in your clinic. Yet, the bird is suffering now. You and your staff will lose time and money to treat the bird. On the other hand, you will gain experience and positive public relations if you accept the bird. You also really like herons, and she is so beautiful. You would like to do the bird some good and learn more about herons by practicing on the bird. You figure that the bird will suffer more if you send it home with the kids who brought it in. You might call up the local rehabilitation clinic, but you know that they too do not have much experience in this species, are swamped with baby birds and do not have many staff or financial resources. All in all, you figure out that it is a greater harm to not accept the bird, so you do.

Disadvantages of the utilitarian approach include trying to determine what suffering is allowable under what conditions. What might be construed as minimal harm

by one may be maximum to another. It also purports that individuals can be treated as objects and do not have intrinsic worth or value in and of themselves. In other words, you can do what you wish with animals and people if the final result is the least harm and the best for the most beings. This approach can lead to tough circumstances for individuals whose well-being is sacrificed for the benefit of others. Often, animal welfare approaches relating to animals fall under this principle.

### **Deontological ethics**

This approach, on the other hand, elevates the worth and dignity of every individual as the ultimate good. One might know this as Kantian ethics, named for Immanuel Kant. Kant stated that humans have an intrinsic worth and dignity and should therefore be treated always as an end and never merely as a means. The same applies for non-humans—animals are not a means to an end.

In the case of the heron, one might say that under no circumstances should the heron be treated with less than 100% care. This means that considerations of publicity, learning, beauty, one's willingness to contribute or finances do not come into the picture. Knowing that adequate care cannot be provided for the bird, it is not accepted into the clinic. Alternatively, knowing this, the rest of the day's appointments are cancelled, and the bird is driven to a wildlife clinic that specializes in heron care. Alternatively, one might decide that there is not anyone who can care for the bird adequately, so she is euthanized.

The largest criticism to this approach is how hard it is to consistently adhere to absolute statements. For instance, one may say that herons should never suffer, yet as citizens allow the presence of a hog production farm nearby whose grounds flooded last year and killed a number of herons with the faecal pollution. One might also have competing rules at stake. For instance, one might say that herons should never suffer, and that humans do not have the right to end the life of another. These two rules can complicate actions if one does not have a way to end the suffering without euthanasia. The stance of animal rights organizations often falls under deontological ethics.

### **Environmentalist and respect for nature**

Sometimes at odds with both deontological and utilitarian ethics is environmentalism or "Respect for Nature." In this approach, humans have duties to a species, not just to individual animals. Our moral concern is not whether a wild animal can live according to its evolved set of behaviours (deontological ethics says the individual

animal has absolute integrity that cannot be violated) or what might cause the greatest harm to individuals or a group of individuals (utilitarianism). What is held as the ultimate value is the extinction of a species, which is deplorable.

In the case of the heron, one might consider what species of heron it is. Is it common, threatened or endangered? Is it not native to the area? Is it hurting other native wildlife? If the heron is not threatened, one might not be as concerned as if it were a rare species, or was suffering population decline or other environmental threat. One might also elect to not care for the bird because it is just an individual. Resources are directed towards the survival of the whole species, such as donations to conservation and environmental protection.

Criticism here lies in the fact that individuals might suffer as a result of actions that protect the species or the ecosystem as a whole, such as hunting deer or killing wolves. Who decides which individuals or which species merit less attention than other species or the ecosystem?

### **Virtue ethics**

In virtue ethics, we relate to animals in ways that make us virtuous people. For instance, we say that a virtuous veterinarian cares for all animals. In the case of the heron, one would elect to treat the bird and do everything possible in to care for the bird, regardless of other commitments. Alternatively, one could say that a virtuous veterinarian is prudent; takes care of herself or himself, the staff and those she supports financially; and is the working and financial success of the clinic. In this case, one might not admit the bird or even spend time with the bird to see that care was provided. Not only might there be competing virtues, but also with the previous two examples, the ethical choice is based on human perspective and not on the animal's.

### **Relational, care and reverence for life ethics**

These are three approaches that are similar in some ways to virtue ethics, in that how an animal is cared for depends on how humans relate to the animal. In relational ethics, if we see our relationship to animals as stewards or as veterinarians, then we are inclined to take care of the heron. However, relational ethics does not tell us how to care for the bird and does not take into account the individual bird. It is our relationship to the bird that matters most. With care ethics, we draw on our empathy and say that if an animal suffers, we are obligated to do all we can to care for them. It is the author's belief that the care ethic is strong in wildlife rehabilitation. One possible disadvantage to relying on this as an ethic, however, is that

it depends on humans understanding animal physiology and behavior, and correctly interpreting when an animal is suffering. What if our sense of empathy is misplaced or not even triggered? In these cases, we might care for the heron but not realize how the animal suffers due to our intervention techniques. Alternatively, we might not “connect” with the bird and not be able to properly care for the animal because we see it as “not suffering.”

The term “Reverence for Life” comes from Albert Schweitzer, who said, “In this sense, reverence for life is an absolute ethic. It does not lay down specific rules for each possible situation. It simply tells us that we are responsible for the lives about us. It does not set either maximum or minimum limits to what we must do.” Criticism here comes from there being no absolute guide for what we may do. For instance, one might consider the heron the most amazing wonder on Earth. We are responsible not only for this bird but also for all the other amazing species and individuals on the planet. How do we decide? Which animals “deserve” better care? Humans are inclined to offer greater reverence or compassion to those that look like us. We may wish to refrain from a speciesist stance in which we accord greater worth, respect or care to one species over another. Our subconscious, however, evolved to recognize faces and care for those closely related to us. For instance, the heron with her reserved stance and bird-like ways might be ignored more frequently or given less care or medication than an injured chimpanzee brought to the clinic. If asked, one might not admit to thinking that the heron has less worth than another species; however, the time, money and effort spent on one species say otherwise.

Similar to reverence, Tomas Regan writes of inherent worth. For Regan, every species has a distinctive value that is inherent in their existence. They are a “cup” that is precious in its own right, no matter how we might fill the cup with our definitions of “animal” or “species,” or descriptions of their behaviour. No matter how we see the species or imagine their thinking, feeling, behaviour and capacity to suffer, all species are valuable and have inherent worth (Regan 2004). It is not our thinking, current philosophy or cultural constructs that determine our care, but the existence of the animal himself or herself.

### **Hybrid ethical views**

In all likelihood, most of us would approach the heron with a mixture of ethical approaches, if not all of them! One set of principles alone does not seem satisfactory, and yet, a conglomeration of principles may be no less confusing and leave one straining to resolve the incompatible claims that each ethical approach demands.

The opportunity to combine elements...does not, however, make it easier to formulate a plausible, logically consistent account of human duties to animal. (Sandhoe 2008)

No matter the approach, one is still faced with the fact that we treat species differently, and in a very real, pragmatic and tragic sense, we consistently compromise our values. In fact, the only consistent approach to ethics is that we are all inconsistent.

The author’s rational approach to ethics encompasses the belief that there is no rational, consistent approach to ethics. Decisions are frequently made based on self-interest, past experiences and emotions that do not register in the cognitive realms. In one study of veterinary students at Cornell, those aspiring to work with food animals considered more procedures to be humane for all species than did students aspiring to work with small animals (Levine et al. 2005). Both sets of students experienced the same curricula; however, their careers impacted their interpretation of this knowledge.

In the case of the heron, the veterinarian or rehabilitator might be experiencing a difficult day due to an argument with a family member or friend. This results in fewer personal resources to give to a complex and time-consuming situation such as treating the heron. On that day, one might be more inclined to argue that the heron is not suffering, or that it is okay to spend less time on the case than one might otherwise. Consciously, if given time to think or research, one knows that biology, physiology and welfare science indicate that birds do feel stress and pain in therapeutic procedures. At a subconscious level, however, one might take shortcuts in treatment or alternatively compromise self-care. Either way, our subconscious is often the final decision maker in what we do. Hence, it behoves us to know all we can about how humans think and feel, so we can challenge our assumptions in order to deliver the best care to ourselves and others. In addition, learning all we can about non-human animals will impact our discernment of what we can do to positively impact their well-being.

### **Understanding humans**

Though we seek to understand humans as irrational beings, we should not dismiss a rational ethical approach that conforms to ethical principles. Rationality can refine and improve our choices and perhaps ease our own confusion or discomfort. We are largely influenced, however, by the culture around us in ways of which we are not always aware. The greater our awareness of how we are influenced helps us understand both ourselves and others whose actions may be at odds with ours or seem inconsistent. Understanding promotes empathy for ourselves and



others, which, in turn, promotes greater ability to discuss ethics. Empathy opens space to increase our understanding of cultural influences, feelings and thoughts, which, in turn, promotes greater empathy.

### **Humans as feeling animals**

Understanding human's emotive functioning guides us in discerning how we reason and interact socially (Briscoe & Joyner 2008). From earlier ape ancestors, humans inherited complex emotional responses hardwired to help us form social attachments and engage in care giving. The need for social attachments helped us not only raise our young but to offset the biology of earlier apes that leans towards freedom, autonomy, individualism and ego (Turner 2000). Whilst the earlier ape biology was successively adaptive to living somewhat individually in a subarctic niche in the forest, this way of living proved impractical as ape species radiated out in the Africa savannah. There, human ancestors needed to support one another in complex social relationships so as to maintain social cohesion and reciprocity to combat predation and secure food.

To grow in social complexity, the ability for complex emotions also grew. Since humans are hardwired for complex emotions, we are primed to form attachments in a large variety of forms, including those far from one's base family and community and extending out to other species. In tension with this desire to form attachments is the individualism and ego of ape evolution, which influences any care situation such that humans are also primed to seek benefits for themselves alone and to eschew community, including communities of mixed species. Along with self-interest, humans also evolved to rely upon each other, seek connection, and appreciate biodiversity. We have developed an "innate tendency to focus on life and life-like processes" (Wilson 1984) and can respond to non-human animals with a sense of kinship and awe. This appreciation of life and the living world are known as biophilia.

Cognition or rational thinking partners with emotions, the limbic system and subconscious thought-processing to impact our ethical codes and moral actions. In simple terms, a "low road" uses neural circuitry that runs through the amygdala and other similar automatic nodes without being conscious of it, and the "high road" sends messages to the prefrontal cortex where one can think about what is happening and intentionally impact our actions. The low road is always operating and, indeed, impacts all our decisions and actions. For this reason, a rational argument alone will not greatly impact human behaviour, and indeed, rationality does not exist outside of the emotions that underlie our thinking.

Unfortunately, research in the past has overlooked the role of affect and emotions in moral functioning (Zeidler et al. 2005). Recently, we have learned that care, empathy and other relational-based concerns impact learning and decision-making, as does having a sense of safety and comfort. For instance, in one study, girls more than boys gave greater attention to safety and comfort of themselves and others and less to that of decision-making (Zeidler et al. 2005).

Overlaying this evolved neural (limbic and cognitive) network to form attachments is the capacity for culture to guide human moral concerns. This is in part because humans have evolved to use rituals to mobilize emotional energy for the benefit of community. In other words, rituals found in community gatherings, such as those in religious traditions, guide behaviour for adhering to ethical codes and community taboos and strictures. Furthermore, the use of negative emotions such as guilt, shame and fear developed for social cohesion, as did the use of positive emotions such as pride, satisfaction and happiness (Goleman 2006).

### **Humans as learning animals**

Knowing how emotions impact reasoning is but one factor to consider in social interactions. Intertwined with how we feel is how we learn. Understanding how these two dances together tempers our plan for intentionally growing our capacity for ethical engagement.

A recently discovered brain cell, the mirror neuron, senses both the physical moves another person is about to make and their feelings and prepares us to imitate that movement and feel with them. Mirror neurons exist throughout our lives, ever adapting to social cues around us and how we might care for others. When our body mimics the action of another person, we have a greater sense for what that person or non-human animal felt. We are able to do this not through conceptual reasoning (high road) but through direct simulation, by feeling, not by thinking (the low road; Goleman 2006).

Another recent understanding is how our brains have an incredible capacity to grow and to heal, even as we age and after terrible trauma (Bolte 2006). According to the theory of neuroplasticity, thinking, learning and acting actually change both the brain's physical structure and functional organization from top to bottom. This means that we heal after emotional and physical trauma to our brains, and the potential to grow the ability to communicate, empathize and think is always present. This is a paradigm shift in our understanding of the brain and brings hope as scientists get closer to designing protocols and strategies to grow and heal brains of all ages. In other

words, we can always learn and grow in interpersonal and intrapersonal skills and understandings.

### **Humans in culture—speciesism**

As mentioned earlier, we view species differently, often with a bias towards those animals most closely resembling humans. The result is that we treat different species differently, even though our values are to care for all species equally and accord them respect. The challenge to live according to our values is that we have subconscious and even conscious understandings of species that our culture constructs. For instance, herons and eagles may feel the same amount of pain, yet the author would guess that in most cases, eagles garner much more care and support than herons. This is known as speciesism, “a failure in attitude or practice to accord any nonhuman being equal consideration and respect” (Dunayer 2004).

### **Human dimensions of wildlife and conservation psychology**

Besides speciesism, there are many other ways that cultures construct how we view animals, resulting in acting inconsistently. One aspect comes from the work in the social science of human dimensions in wildlife. Here, one sees how values, ideology and value orientations impact behaviour. Findings suggest that “values related to conformity, tradition, security, and self enhancement support utilitarian views toward wildlife, while values related to openness to change and self-transcendence support more protectionist, aesthetic, and mutualistic views toward wildlife” (Manfredo 2008). Depending on how these collections of values are emphasized, one might lean towards an utilitarian view (animals can be used as a means to an end) or mutualism (animals have worth in and of themselves and did not evolve to be manipulated by humans).

People also diverge on ideological perceptions of wildlife. In hunter and gatherer societies, many researchers posit that an egalitarian ideology was present. Wild species were fellow inhabitants of the same world. A domination ideology emerged with pastoral societies as hierarchies formed amongst people and between humans and non-humans. This domination ideology underlies how humans see themselves as separate from nature in modern times and facilitates the belief that humans’ role is to exercise mastery over wildlife (Manfredo et al. 2009).

Value orientations impact behaviour as well. For instance, two different people might hold equally important the value of treating all living things humanely. Yet, this value might lead one person to euthanize the heron

and the other to attempt to save her life. The difference is due to value orientation. Two value orientations direct a lot of thought about wildlife in North America (Manfredo et al. 2009). One value orientation is domination and the other is egalitarian or mutualism. “The stronger one’s domination orientation, the more likely he or she will be to prioritize human well-being over wildlife, accept actions that result in death or other intrusive control of wildlife, and evaluate treatment of wildlife in utilitarian terms. A mutualism wildlife value orientation, in contrast, views wildlife as capable of living in relationships of trust with humans, as life-forms having rights like those of humans, as part of an extended family, and as deserving caring and compassion.” In the United States, there is an increasing trend towards mutualism orientation and away from domination, though both are prominent within our society.

The field of conservation psychology takes what we know about the science of human behaviour and the interdependence between humans and nature and then seeks to promote a healthy and sustainable relationship (Clayton & Myers 2009). Currently, there are books, journals, conferences, websites, departments at universities and careers founded on how we understand humans in relation to other species and how we can use that understanding to impact behaviour. Conservation psychology persistently and deeply asks: what is the human place in nature and what is nature’s place in the human being? These questions are asked, so that we can sustain care. To care about an issue or a species, people must be informed, people must feel and “people should act in ways that express both their knowledge and their emotions” (Clayton & Myers 2009). Conservation psychologists coach people to care by integrating cognition, emotions and behaviour. Behaviour change does not happen just at the individual level but involves whole communities. One must also seek to align our behaviour with our values in community settings in order to see if more of our energy, resources and time is spent defending our ideological stances than in taking concrete steps to improve care for others.

One conservation psychology tool that works at the community level is ethnoornithology. Ethnoornithology “explores how peoples of various times and places seek to understand the lives of the birds round them” (Hunn 2010). It studies the relationships between humans and birds. In the author’s work, understanding is sought about how people working in the complex and often discouraging situation of conservation and wildlife medicine in Central America think of birds. Understanding what motivates them to do this work and how they make meaning of their work informs how we could support and improve our efforts. To gain this understanding, in 2009–2011, the

author conducted ethnoornithological research targeting conservationists working in Central America.

Briefly summarizing hundreds of pages of notes, the author found that the major meaning-making activity was the work itself (collecting data and applying knowledge to improve the lives of birds) and the times when teamwork was most manifest. Meaning-making also happened frequently around meals when stories were told of the work and experiences. Meaning evolved during the collection and review of media, such as photographs and videos. Whilst watching media, they gathered to partake in both silent storytelling and spoken meaning-making as they talked about what they are seeing. Meanings that frequently surfaced regarding their efforts included love, conversion, calling, insiders/outside, interconnection, death, hope, end times (eschatology and apocalypse), sacrifice, service, suffering, compassion, worth and dignity, awe, wonder, social justice, prophetic voice, resistance and solidarity. Having time for meaning-making activities allowed the team to work together more effectively across differences of class, ethnicity, language, gender, religion, age, values and behaviour patterns.

Though it is not possible for everyone involved in wildlife to become proficient with the sociological aspects of human and wildlife relationships, there is much merit in forming multidisciplinary teams that include social scientists or facilitators to help us navigate the complexity of human thinking and behaviour.

## **Understanding non-humans**

### ***Cognitive ethology and conservation behaviour***

Non-humans also experience complex thinking, emotions and behaviour. In recent decades, the field of cognitive ethology has emerged to help identify what an animal experiences. Cognitive ethology “emphasizes observing animals under more-or-less natural conditions, with the objective of understanding the evolution, adaptation (function), causation, and development of the species-specific behavioral repertoire” (Tinbergen 1963). In other words, as one studies the subjective lives of animals, one can better understand their levels of stress, suffering or discomfort. This informs how our actions (or inactions) impact the well-being of other species. By studying animal cognition, we develop tools to change attitude and perceptions of non-human animals in society, and hence improve treatment (Mendi & Paul 2004).

Conservation behaviour is the application of knowledge of animal behaviour to solve wildlife conservation problems (Blumstein 2010). By knowing a species’ social, reproductive and antipredator (or predation) behaviours,

one can help design conservation strategies that take into account non-human cognition and behaviour. Such strategies include rescue, rehabilitation, translocations and reintroductions, and hence wildlife medicine.

### ***Welfare science***

The scientific approach to animal welfare is one framework that society can use to resolve questions about the proper treatment of animals. It works in conjunction with other frameworks within the broad range of ethical approaches, such as the theories, philosophies and principles of ethics outlined in the beginning of this chapter. “The scientific study of animal welfare makes important and unique contributions to issues of animal ethics. It can be used to indicate and clarify problems, identify trade-offs, evaluate alternatives, develop solutions, and build up an understanding of how life is experienced by animals themselves” (Fraser 2008). Keeping abreast of recent research in welfare science guides humans in determining the validity of assumptions of animal well-being, whilst also minimizing the propensity to project one’s own subjective experiences onto animals. The Five Domains Model is an excellent tool and includes five categories to assess welfare: nutrition, environment, health, behaviour and mental domain.

### ***Compassion and communication tools for engaging ethical complexity***

Determining what animals think, how they feel and how they suffer through philosophical arguments, cognitive ethology and welfare science must be part of our ethical decision-making process. Ultimately, however, one can never know what is “best” in the morass of ethical vagueness regarding non-human life. Instead, one can be compassionate in each moment by considering the needs of all species, which can only be done by having open and sustained discussions with our fellow humans. We might still make tragic choices, but less so. Every deliberation or application of wildlife medicine then becomes a practice ground for the skills of compassion and communication, which impacts our delivery of ethical care. The following are some tools for improving communication and compassion.

### ***Narrative ethics***

In narrative ethics, stories are told about ethical choices. Whilst speaking, the teller is able to clarify their own needs and values, as are the listeners. These stories take the form of case examples that cover more than the medical aspects of a situation. They also highlight

moral guides to living the good life, not just in veterinary care, but in all aspects of one's life. These narratives of witness with their experiential truth and passion compel re-examination of accepted medical practices and ethical precepts, which, in turn, allows us, as a community, to develop our ethical abilities. Using narrative ethics that emphasizes communication does not preclude the use of principle ethics. Indeed, both contribute to understanding moral life and the process of ethical decision-making in healthcare situations (McCarthy 2003).

In the case of the heron, members of the care team might gather to hear the case report of how decisions were made to care for the heron. There is no "right" or "wrong" ethical philosophy or principle here to determine. Instead, the process brings together everyday humans struggling to make the best choice possible in the given situation. In the process of telling, an internal dynamic occurs within both the teller and listeners that stimulates emotions as well as conscious and subconscious thought of past experiences, values and cultural constructs. This dynamic helps us align our behaviour with our thoughts and emotions.

### **Socioscience**

Mark Twain once said, "The physician who knows only medicine, knows not even medicine." Socioscience guides the veterinary team member in knowing more than medicine. It is similar to narrative ethics, in that those in science and medicine take time to examine the ethical implications of their work through intentional periods of presenting and discussing ethical case reports. During these case reports, socioscience stresses morality and ethics as well as the interdependence between science, medicine and society. It does this by considering the psychological and epistemological growth of child or adult individual, and the development of character or virtue (Zeidler et al. 2005). It focuses on growing the individual through relational challenges that focus on complex ethical situations that involve science and human communities. Relational skills and growth are paramount; habits of mind may suffice for decisions and actions initiated by an individual but do not suffice for real-life complex situations that animal caretakers encounter. A given medical case might entail desires for the flourishing of not just the non-human animals but also of self, family, staff, broader communities, global society and habitats full of other species.

Relational and communication skills are also important because often the best possible decision or action requires collective decision-making that can be both challenging and uncomfortable. In these decision-making

processes, the group constructs meaning and understanding through the pedagogical power of discourse and reasoned argumentation. Humans together, rather than alone, have the power to integrate the emotive, developmental, culture or epistemological connections within the decisions and actions themselves.

Ethical deliberation draws on personal beliefs, individual emotive characteristics and individual identity within a community, such as gender and ethnicity. To engage in discourse that tugs at emotions, core beliefs and identities, mutual respect and tolerance of dissenting views must be supported for the development of more sophisticated learning. Under all levels of discourse, we must examine how power and authority are embedded in scientific and medical enterprises, such as privilege, class, gender and ethnicity. To truly engage in a socioscientific approach to wildlife medicine, it follows that "buttons must be pushed, lines must be crossed, and sensibilities must be challenged" (Zeidler & Sadler 2007).

Full listening helps us attune to others and their internal states. By stilling the cognitive loops and chatter that go on inside of us, we come to attentive recognition of what another is feeling and, hence, have a greater chance to understand them and offer empathy. When another person feels heard and receives empathy, they, in turn, are in a better place to listen, as well as recognize their own emotional state without it being overridden by concerns of threat from without.

Transformational reasoning occurs when one can clearly internalize and articulate the thoughts, arguments or position of another. This is because one's reasoning becomes integrated with that of another (Zeidler et al. 2005). In socioscience processes, one begins with the presentation of controversial science or medical case studies followed by participants taking turns arguing various viewpoints. It is important to repeat back what one has heard and to argue the case you do not agree with. In this process of "pretending" to take the other side, one actually gains in empathy for other positions and grows in sophistication with one's newly acquired and more integrated ethical approaches. Participants can also be urged to build consensus regarding the issue to further expand their abilities in discourse.

In practical terms, a group of rehabilitators could hold monthly meetings that discuss the ethical and moral implications of their work. By coming together in this way, the group grows their relational, listening and dialogical skills. This brings greater coherence between their values, subconscious processes and behaviour towards one another and the animals in their care. A trained facilitator can help guide the group in both narrative



ethics and in socioscience case reports and encourage ever greater active listening and empathy.

### **Needs based ethics and compassionate communication**

Compassionate Communication, based on Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication theory, emphasizes honesty and empathy in interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships (Rosenberg 2003). Through practice, it leads to shifts in thinking and emotional responses. It is based on the understanding that human beings operate best in social groups when they receive empathy. Greater connection and rapport between individuals, so paramount in social discourse, occurs when communication (verbal, paraverbal, and body language) used arises naturally from the subconscious's emphasis on the idea of universal needs and not on judgment, blame or domination to get needs met. Instead, empathy through deep listening, authentic sharing of needs and feelings and clear requests suggest the best strategy for people to come up with creative solutions where everyone is heard and everyone, including non-human animals, has their needs considered. Turner develops this theory by developing concrete ways that people can transact through the medium of needs to produce positive emotions and commitment (Turner 2002).

In the case of the heron, we seek to empathize with the needs of everyone involved in the case:

- The heron
- Herons as a species
- Veterinarians
- Veterinary team members
- Rehabilitators
- People who found the heron or care for the cats who attacked the heron
- Family members of those working with the heron
- Habitat and other species that evolved in balance with the heron (as prey and predators)
- Individuals within local conservation and wildlife groups, such as preserves and the Audubon society
- Yourself (as reader)

By equally considering the needs of all involved, one can come up with creative, synergetic solutions that deliver the best care possible to the broadest constituency. This happens because keeping "all needs on the table" allows one to break free from ideological stances or cultural constructs that might normally restrain us, such as animal rights versus animal welfare, or domination versus mutualism. Instead, one comes into a spaciousness to hear one another and, indeed, listen to how life is coming through

the very worthy lives of the species with which we share our communities. This does not ensure that hard choices will not still need to be made. Even if the ultimate choices one make are regretful, such as euthanasia or trapping the feral cats living in the preserve, one's work is sustained by connecting fully to the broad diversity of life around us.

### **Where do we go from here—next steps**

Component ethical discourse cannot be achieved by reading this paper, or even the thousands of tomes dedicated to ethics. Ethical processes also differ between cultures, and this article only begins to touch the surface of how multicultural skills are an important part of moral reasoning. It takes practice, hard work and discomfort for our whole lives. We can always improve. We are neither static beings—nor are others, our communities or our science or medicine. Ethics cannot be achieved then by just one period of focus. One is not alone in this life-long effort because ethical discourse also cannot be done alone. It is a multidisciplinary effort that involves the community, in which our wildlife medicine is embedded. The question of what to do next is not "What will I or you do?" but "What will we do, together?"

For future herons and other wildlife, there is much we can do together. We can work together to develop protocols within our institutions or strengthen individual and community processes of support. We do this, so that our care will be dictated by our ultimate values and the inherent value of other species, and not by the vagaries of our cultural influences and daily events.

### **Possible actions**

1. Organize a study group that reads and discusses relevant texts;
2. Organize an ethical practice group to develop skills and confidence in ethical deliberation (and to challenge unchecked assumptions);
3. If you belong to an organization, do numbers one and two above within your group;
4. If you are individual, seek companions who will join you, or alternatively find a partner with whom to learn and confide;
5. Present and discuss ethical case reports within your medical team;
6. Present ethical and human dimension lectures at meetings and provide opportunities to practice ethical deliberation at conferences and symposiums;
7. Form an ethical guidance committee to support these processes within the organization and to support members.

## Conclusion

So, what about the heron? Are you any closer to knowing what you would do in this case, or future cases? Specifically, does this paper help improve your clarity of thought, process of decision-making or application of care? The author would like to know, as she believes that we employ ethics as a community of wildlife care practitioners and would like to support you in your work. In the nourishing of ourselves, we can give more to the flourishing of all life. Even if one cannot decide how to take care of the next wild animal one comes across in a clinic, backyard, roadside or preserve, we can strive to do better perhaps for the one after that and the many to come. This paper is just a beginning of a shared lifelong obligation as stated in the veterinary oath.

## THE VETERINARIAN'S OATH

*Being admitted to the profession of veterinary medicine, I solemnly swear to use my scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society through the protection of animal health and welfare, the prevention and relief of animal suffering, the conservation of animal resources, the promotion of public health and the advancement of medical knowledge.*

*I will practice my profession conscientiously, with dignity, and in keeping with the principles of veterinary medical ethics.*

*I accept as a lifelong obligation the continual improvement of my professional knowledge and competence.*

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