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Research Proposal: The Value of Life

The Wildlife Aid Foundation (WAF) is a British charity that focuses on the rescue, rehabilitation, and release of wild animals that have become sick, injured, or otherwise not suited for their wild environment. The charity was created by Simon Cowell in 1980, and “deals with more than 20,000 wildlife emergencies every year,” and even had their own television show called Wildlife SOS on *Animal Planet*. Their hospital is located in Surrey, Leatherhead, with the main goal being to, “return every animal that is capable of surviving, back to its natural environment,” if at all possible. The Wildlife Aid Foundation also has a YouTube channel, on which they regularly upload videos of their rescues, rehabilitation processes, and releases of the animals that they are involved with. In one instance, the rescue team, led by the CEO and founder Simon Cowell, head out to rescue a bird that is trapped in the wall of a building. While the bird’s life is prioritized, the wall of the building is broken open by a hammer to secure the bird and finish the rescue attempt. However, the process of saving this bird results in the destruction of a person’s property, which will require time and money as well as the proper materials to fix. On one hand, the life of a living thing is being valued and protected by this foundation, while on the other, the life of a non-human creature is being prioritized over the property of a human being that will need to be repaired.

However, this draws the question: is the rescue of these animals providing relief to the people involved by removing them from their property, or is it ignoring them to instead prioritize the animals’ well being? If the goal of life is to survive as a species, why should we as humans

prioritize the health of another species over our own? By extension, should humans be concerned with non-human life? Do we place economic value on living things? Saving these animals destroys human property that might have taken capital for that person to build or buy, so it seems like the decision to damage that property to save an animal has to be decided upon. Therefore, this paper begs the question of how life compares to the importance of economy or the well-being of others.

To answer these questions, focusing on the value of a life, even if that life is non-human, I will look upon readings of this class such as Madison's *Introduction to Critical Ethnography*, which draws specifically on the notion of morality and the "right" thing; "she was, for all intents and purposes, trying to 'do the right thing'" (Madison 3, 2005). Although focusing on a different narrative of women's rights and representation, the idea of "doing the right thing" remains intact when considering the value of a life versus the value of property, in this example. In this case, I ask the question, would it be the right thing to value the life of an animal over the value of someone's property? A foundation like this one, that does not charge the people who request their aid to come and rescue an animal, require a fair amount of funds for supplies such as medical equipment, wages for staff and veterinarians, rescue gear such as nets and cages, etc. thus they rely on donations. There is no set price for the process of rescuing, rehabilitating, and releasing the animals, thus donations from the foundation's supporters and bystanders seem to set this standard.

By looking at these variables, this once again begs the question, what is the price of a life? Is the cost of this life one that is equal to the cost of the property that has been damaged? Or is it something much more than we can comprehend? According to the Animal Humane Society, "the total cost of caring for and rehoming [more than 22,000] animals amounted to more than

\$12 million [in 2019].” Similarly, the WAF states that they deal with, “more than 20,000 wildlife emergencies every year,” which is for all intents and purposes a fairly similar number to the Animal Humane Society’s. Would this be the value of over 22,000 lives? Or is the value of life more than just a monetary value? Several wildlife protection charities and organizations, such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), have a system in place for donations which go towards a specific endangered or threatened species. Anyone who visits their website is able to choose an animal to send their donation to. These donations range in price from \$25 to \$250 for each individual animal, of which the person sending the donation “adopts” the animal they are donating towards. In this sense, is the price of an endangered species between the range of \$25 and \$250?

Likewise, compared to the donations given to supporting an endangered species, the prices of these endangered animals by poaching groups differs greatly. For example, according to Phys.org, the ivory of an elephant, “at its peak in 2014 wholesale prices for raw ivory stood at \$2,100 per kilogramme in Chinese markets, but by 2017 the price had fallen to \$730 per kilogramme,” so is the price of this species worth different amounts to different people (up to \$2,100 per kg to poachers, but only up to \$250 to the WWF)? The monetary value of a life seems to vary greatly from organization to organization, and even from person to person, so is monetary value an accurate or fair representation of life’s worth at all? In a different approach, Sarah Gonzales of the National Public Radio (NPR) questions the value of human life compared to the value of the economy amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. While this take differs in content, focusing on human life rather than non-human life, the content remains of the same caliber: what is valued more? The life of an organism, or the economic price of an object or, in this case, an entire country? Gonzales begs the question immediately in this transcript, “is it worth it to shut

down the economy to save lives or should we let people die to save the economy?” which, although focusing on a greater scale of the initial thesis question, initiates the same conversation about the value of life, especially in comparison to the economy as a whole.

Since humans are the only ones capable of saving these animals, it is important to look upon positionality, which, “is vital because it forces us to acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we denounce the power structures that surround our subjects,” of which I realize that, in the situation previously detailed, the Wildlife Aid Foundation’s rescue team, as humans, have the power, privilege and authority over the animal being rescued to make decisions: in this case, to damage or destroy a portion of a building that the bird was trapped inside (Madison 14, 2005). Similarly, other animals that have been shown being rescued by the Wildlife Aid Foundation have been cut from tangled soccer nets, removed from ceiling rafters that must be removed or broken in the process, and otherwise caught or trapped in materials of human make and use which must, often times, be destroyed or discarded following the rescue. However, is it fair to assume whether or not people are putting enough stock into the well-being of these animals as opposed to the aesthetic appeal of their properties? Branching off of the idea that humans are the only hope these animals in need have, is this thought itself problematic? When looking at the white savior complex, “wherein white women and men act as if they are ‘saving’ or ‘rescuing’ those less fortunate than them in countries, usually in Africa,” the complex itself is problematic and leads to harmful consequences. Is it fair to apply this complex to that of humanity as a whole when looking at animals of other species? If so, is it a valid act of humanity to defy natural selection and natural processes to rescue these animals? Or, like the white savior complex, will it lead to harmful consequences from our actions as the “messiah?”

Furthermore, how does the means of funds as well as work relate to the functions of societal, environmental, and economical needs and demands? The funds received by this charity are derived from the donations of its supporters, which acts as a flow of income to the foundation that acts as doing a the right thing (as per mentioned by Madison, sometimes the thought of doing the “right” or “good thing” is not accurate or truthful in full) by rescuing animals in need free of charge (Madison 3, 2005). However, how does this act of generosity and kindness from the charity affect the economic, societal, and environmental demands of those they interact with? As stated in Arturo Escobar’s *Anthropology and Development*, “the crisis of development also put in evidence the obsolescence of the functional domains with which modernity has equipped us to enunciate our social and political concerns,” wherein these domains are as previously stated, “of nature, society, economy, polity, and culture,” the development of anthropology and of society as a whole has changed life drastically (Escobar 499, 1997). Thus, with these changes, we have seen many environmental shifts: the increased volume of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, increasing pollution throughout the world, increased and more dangerous wildfires throughout the world, etc. These events and changes throughout the environment, sparked by human innovation and advancement, act as a threat and a catalyst to wildlife health. Does the advancement and innovation of society justify sacrificing the lives of animals and other lifeforms? As humans, we have built a society that is centered around ourselves as a species: one that is built off the idea of removing other organisms from our line of advancement; one that destroying life is not an issue when it comes to the bigger picture of human progression. City structures, that the aforementioned bird caught inside the brick wall of one such building, are included in this, as they were created and built up through the deforestation and destruction of once-natural land where wildlife once existed without outside threat or influence. On the other

hand, humankind has no need to worry about the habitats of nearby wildlife if it means their own species' survival, betterment, and advancement, and yet foundations such as this continue to assist in the survival, care, and protection of such wildlife. The rescue of these animals may act as a defiance to nature: survival of the fittest and natural selection would normally take its course, and yet this foundation insists on meddling with such forces. What is the reason for this aid of non-human life? Perhaps it is a sort of retained guilt for being the reason such animals have come in harm's way, whether it be through human pollution (swans rescued with fishing line and fish hooks stuck in their skin and beaks; hedgehogs trapped in rusted tin cans; etc.), human inventions (deer and birds brought into the foundation's care that have been injured by automobiles, etc.), or simply human existence (birds trapped inside the walls of buildings, in ceiling rafters; etc.).

In order to prove this hypothesis, I will conduct research through observing video evidence from the Wildlife Aid Foundation's own YouTube channel as well as their television program. While this evidence may be biased due to its origin, video evidence serves as a primary resource and provides up close and personal information and details important to this research that may be unable to be gathered otherwise. In order to even out the bias that may be included within these videos, I will also conduct surveys on a random selection of people in the immediate Chicago area, as well as on the Internet. The questions on this survey will pertain to my thesis on the price of life. For example, the survey could include a question such as, "how much should it cost to provide veterinary equipment to a non-profit organization?" "Should taxes be raised in the surrounding area to provide funds to veterinary staff?" "In your opinion, is the life of a human being worth more than the life of a non-human animal?" This way, I will be able to get a wider sample size that may change according to location, population, age of those surveyed, etc..

I believe that, with the research collected from both the video evidence as well as from individual surveys from a random sample, the information I will have gathered will be sufficient to prove my hypothesis and to provide insight into the topic at hand.

The demographic of those included in the surveys will be fairly diverse and random, as the UIC campus population, where the surveying will be conducted, is a widely diverse area with people of every race, ethnicity, gender, class background, and age. The random responses from those of these different categories and ranges serves as an important variable to this research, as some people may view the price of a life differently than others, if at all, which will serve as evidence that the very idea of this paper is controversial based on the differing answers.

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