


Essay

Conflicts and Proposals for an Antispeciesist Ecofeminist Consideration of Nonhuman Animals in Disaster Contexts

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Abstract: This essay aims to defend the need to help animals in any disaster situation, be it anthropogenic, natural, or hybrid. To this end, I will first establish a brief foundation of the antispeciesist principles that have been advocated by different theorists over the last decades. Then, I will describe the conflict between environmental and animal approaches as a problem for the consideration of animals in unfavorable situations. This will be followed by the ways in which animals can be harmed in such contexts. After that, I will argue that many anthropogenic disasters affect animals, but they also deserve aid in the face of natural disasters: they are sentient beings and capable of suffering just like humans, to whom help is offered unconditionally in such cases. Finally, I will propose sentience, particularly suffering, and an ecofeminist and antispeciesist approach to address the situation of animals in disaster situations in a dialogic way between environmentalist and individual-centered positions.

Keywords: disasters; disaster ethics; animals; animal ethics; antispeciesism; ecofeminism; sentience; suffering; suffering-focused ethics



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1. Introduction

Over the past fifty years, the affirmation of the intrinsic value of nonhuman animals has gained growing visibility and relevance in the field of ethics and philosophy in general. Peter Singer laid the foundations for a utilitarian consequentialist defense of animals in *Animal Liberation*, one of the most well-known works on animal ethics [1]. Bernard E. Rollin and Tom Regan alluded to deontological positions centered on the rights that nonhumans should have [2,3]. Gary Francione has defended an explicitly abolitionist strand in animal rights theories [4–8], while Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka have focused on the application of citizenship status to animals [9]. Other normative variants of animal advocacy have been egalitarian or prioritarian, theorized by Oscar Horta and Catia Faria [10,11], as well as those focused on justice, highlighted by Asunción Herrera [12–14]. There have also been positions aligned with character ethics: philosophers such as Stephen R.L. Clark and Daniel A. Dombrowski have explored the moral status of nonhuman animals from a virtue ethics perspective [15,16], whereas Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan have defended a feminist variant, advocating a vegan approach within the ethics of care [17–22].

Despite differences in the moral prescriptions of each of these perspectives, most, if not all, agree on one fundamental reason in favor of full consideration of nonhuman animals: sentience [1,8,23,24]. Sentience constitutes the capacity to live positive or negative experiences or, in other words, to feel pain or suffering and/or pleasure or enjoyment. We know that animals are sentient beings because they have a centralized nervous system, but also because of their behavior, as they express pain through their gestures, sounds, or flight attitudes. This fact is a strong reason itself against any form of speciesism.

However, many other reasons reinforce the equitable consideration of nonhuman animals, based on some of the justifications on which anthropocentric attitudes are sustained.

For example, certain positions suggest that humans have a higher ontological status or even a soul, which other species lack. However, these claims are not verifiable, so they cannot be considered for the constitution of a solid case. Along these lines, there is also a widespread belief that humans are superior because of their self-consciousness and rationality, while nonhumans are inferior because they lack self-consciousness, reason, and intelligence. However, the capacity of self-consciousness or intelligence should not be relevant for the moral consideration of any individual. Otherwise, for the sake of consistency, it would be justified to treat certain humans who do not reach the standards of human rationality as nonhuman animals, which would be unacceptable for most people, including those who do not take into account the interests of animals.

Other views that defend the unique moral status of human beings are based on the relationships that are supposedly interwoven among humans and the idea that it would be unfeasible to build with nonhumans or among themselves. Nevertheless, this would leave unexplained the fact that, throughout history and today, humans have engaged in wars and genocides and have promoted discriminatory and unjust attitudes towards each other due to different reasons (ideological, racist, sexist. . .). In any case, some humans do not affectively bond with others in normative ways. Likewise, certain animals show prosocial behaviors towards each other [25–30]. It is also worth noting that dog–human bonding appears to positively impact the latter’s sense of loneliness [31], and they can establish relationships that benefit the caregiver’s self-esteem and sense of well-being by providing such care [32,33]. It is also estimated that the ability of animals to bond with humans can satisfy needs for attention and emotional intimacy, fulfilling psychological and adaptive functions similar to those of human friendships [34].

Though it is important to refute the above assumptions to show the inconsistencies of these anthropocentric views, the fundamental reason why animals should not be exploited or tortured is ultimately their capacity for sentience, just as it is the case for humans who do not meet the standard for “intelligence”—a debatable concept itself—or inter-relational skills. Regardless of their greater or lesser agency, animals are moral patients [3,12,35], and as such, we should take their interests into account, especially in disaster situations, in which their position is particularly vulnerable as they are exposed to danger, risk of extreme suffering, and death.

2. Conflicting Positions on the Moral Consideration of Animals in Disasters

To address the discussion about the consideration of animals in disaster situations, it is necessary to understand, along with speciesism itself, another root problem underlying this issue: the conflict between positions that vary in their propensity for intervention that, fundamentally, occurs between environmental ethics and animal ethics [23,36–41].

Within animal ethics, not only are there different normative positions, but these can be realized in practice in a variety of ways. Some positions may focus only on animals directly exploited by humans. In fact, many of the most influential antispeciesist texts specifically denounce the situation of animals in factory farms or in the healthcare and cosmetics industry. However, in recent years, the importance of animal suffering in nature and the moral demand to alleviate it are beginning to become visible.

In this line, there has also been a conflict between animal and environmental ethics. Environmentalist positions, which may be holistic or individual-focused—without postulating sentience as a key intrinsic value—promote intervention in nature if these measures seek to conserve entities such as living beings, species, or ecosystems, often resulting in harm to many animals. Antispeciesist positions, on the other hand, advocate acting in ways that help the latter as sentient individuals, regardless of what is best for the species, the ecosystem, or nature. Thus, certain environmental ethics, when faced with unfavorable situations, might ignore the needs of individual animals in favor of the betterment of global entities that are considered environmentally valuable.

Different variants within environmentalist positions may conflict with antispeciesist theories. One of these is *biocentrism* [42–46], an individual-focused position that holds that

the criterion for being morally considered is the fact of being alive. It assumes, then, that life is something valuable itself, independently of the experiences or interests of the beings endowed with it. *Ecocentrism* [47,48] is the position that holds that the morally valuable entities are not individuals but the ecosystems in which they live as well as their stability and integrity. Finally, *naturocentrism* can be understood as a variant or analogous position to ecocentrism that grants intrinsic value to nature as a holistic entity, though the term has also been used to name the view that we should give special moral consideration to natural entities. These theories have been criticized as problematic themselves, and especially in relation to animal ethics, for various reasons.

The main criticisms of the biocentric approach are described below:

The problem of granting intrinsic value to life. If an ethical position grants intrinsic value to life, then it denies it to the experiences that are lived in that life or to the interests or preferences that individuals may have. This is particularly questionable from the perspective of those lives full of suffering, such as that of a chronically ill person, a systematically tortured animal, or one continually exposed to adverse vicissitudes in nature, as is the case here. Given these assumptions, it seems intuitive to think that even non-existence would be better than a miserable life and, therefore, that it is not life that has intrinsic value, but what happens in it.

The risk of anthropocentrism. Opting for biocentrism may lead to adopting anthropocentric positions when human lives are at stake [49] (p. 291), [46] (pp. 114–117), [42] (pp. 254–256), for under this approach, all living beings could be prescribed to be respected equally, except when there is a significant human interest that could be truncated by doing so. This objection can be applied especially to animals affected by disasters. Theoretically, a biocentric position could support aid to nonhumans as living individuals (whether they are suffering or not, but only because of their intrinsic value as living beings). However, in practice, most rescue actions are primarily directed towards humans, and it is generally assumed that saving human lives takes priority over saving animal lives if resources are insufficient to meet the needs of both groups. In this sense, biocentric positions could lean towards a kind of pluralism between biocentrism and anthropocentrism, and thus may not be satisfactory for improving the situation of animals damaged by disasters.

Similarly, the ecocentric approach has fundamentally faced the following objections:

The sacrifice of the individual in favor of the whole. If the ecosystem has intrinsic value and safeguarding it prevails over the interests of the animals, then an ecocentric approach may defend the sacrifice of certain members of the ecosystem for the good of the community or the restoration of a damaged ecosystem after a disaster, even if this harms certain animals. These kinds of actions go directly against their interests. Moreover, in many cases, some are sacrificed in tremendously painful ways to achieve ecological balance.

Instrumentalization of nonhuman animals. From the previous point it follows that, if only ecosystems have intrinsic value, then individuals belonging to ecosystems have instrumental value, something that is counterintuitive and results in negative practical consequences for animals in disaster situations.

The risk of anthropocentrism. Finally, and like biocentrism, ecocentrism may end up adopting criteria that prioritize human interests if a choice must be made between these and the good of an ecosystem [50]. If we were to take into account the destruction that humans cause in ecosystems and their influence on anthropogenic disasters (although also natural, as will be seen later), measures analogous to those applied to animals—or even more drastic ones—would have to be taken, something that, as we know, is not carried out in reality.

The problems encountered by naturocentrism are very similar to those of the previous perspectives:

The aestheticization of an ethical conflict. Positions that defend only the intrinsic value of nature can be considered more aesthetical than ethical, since they would leave in second place the value of the sentient beings that inhabit it and especially their capacity to suffer.

The instrumentalization of nonhuman animals. If only nature has intrinsic value, then individuals belonging to it would have instrumental value, as is the case with ecocentrism.

The risk of anthropocentrism. Finally, as with the two previous positions, naturocentrism can in many cases be biased towards human interests in the face of dichotomous decisions.

If the objections mentioned above are correct, then these views are problematic themselves because of the inconsistencies they are unlikely to resolve. If we accept this, it seems that holding any of these environmentalist views is hardly compatible with acting in favor of animals affected by disasters.

3. Types of Harms That Animals May Suffer and How They Fit into Disaster Situations

The environmental positions mentioned above do not focus on the needs of animals, but this does not mean that they are not affected by numerous phenomena that are totally or partially natural or anthropogenic. Different factors harm wild animals, but also domestic animals or those belonging to intermediate contexts, such as semi-domestic animals living in rural areas, for example. These harms often occur in disaster situations, and can be classified into at least three types [51] (pp. 9–10):

Direct anthropogenic harms are those produced by humans as a direct result of specific actions, whether intentional or unintentional. Examples of intentional actions are fishing, hunting, or the killing of certain animals for economic reasons such as their negative impact on agriculture or livestock, or for conservationist reasons, that is, when animals of certain species are killed because of their negative impact on the conservation of other species. Examples of unintentional actions are those that injure animals due to the use of vehicles or machinery.

Indirect anthropogenic harms are those produced by humans without being a direct result of concrete actions, and they are related to disasters. Examples of indirect damages are those due to changes in climate caused by human action, such as temperature increase or torrential rains. This type of harm reinforces the debate about the moral responsibility we have towards animals beyond households or industrial farms, since human action is also an indirect cause of adversity to animals in nature.

Finally, *natural harms* are those that occur, at least apparently, without human involvement. They can occur as a consequence of a lack of food in nature, accidents, or conflicts between animals. But they also occur due to extreme weather conditions and natural disasters, situations in which it is difficult to know to what extent the deterioration of the planet at human hands has or has not had an influence.

Not only wild animals but all animals, regardless of their circumstances, are susceptible to injury or death from any or all the causes mentioned in the previous sections. Domestic animals can also be directly attacked and mistreated or suffer accidents in cities, or be indirect victims due to anthropogenic, natural, or hybrid disasters, given that they live in various places, from rustic to metropolitan, where they are subject to the possibility of being harmed by disasters. Along these lines, there is a growing awareness of the need to rescue them in disaster situations not only in animal ethics theory, but also in practice. For example, in the devastating fire in Tenerife (Canary Islands) in August 2023, the treatment of the affected animals was quite favorable: family animals and hundreds of dogs from a shelter, among others, were rehomed [52,53], and many received veterinary care [54].

In contrast to household animals, which might seem more protected, it is nevertheless very intuitive to think that farm and wild animals are affected by all kinds of negative circumstances. Farm animals may suffer direct anthropogenic harms resulting from their situation of exploitation and slaughter, but also indirect, natural, and hybrid harms in case of disaster. In the latter cases, they are often forgotten or rescued only to avoid economic damage by their owners. Animals living in the wild may be killed for food or recreational purposes, as in the case of sport hunting and fishing. In matters of indirect anthropogenic, natural, or hybrid disasters, they are the greatly affected, and only recently has their moral consideration begun to be vindicated by ethics focused on wild animal suffering [38,40,41,51,55–60].

4. Why We Should Care about Animals in Disaster Situations

So far, we have seen several compelling arguments in favor of taking into account nonhuman animals as sentient beings. This is also applicable to disasters, in which they may suffer as much or more than some human beings, due to the impossibility of saving themselves and the scant attention that is still paid to them. Thus, there are at least three reasons to take measures in favor of nonhuman animals in disaster situations.

Firstly, these situations are, in many cases, the result of indirect anthropogenic actions. The acceleration of climate change, a consequence of the overexploitation of the planet's resources by human beings, is favoring increasingly extreme natural events, including global warming. Several factors feedback on each other: forest fires, often direct and intentional anthropogenic harms, are aggravated by the indirect harms caused by high temperatures, and their increase in summer plus the absence of rain and humidity make fires uncontrollable. In addition, extreme heat may seem less dangerous due to its silent nature compared to other more aggressive phenomena, such as large floods or earthquakes. However, without the influence of other elements, it can be considered a disaster itself: it is ending human and nonhuman lives and affects the quality of life of animals both in the domestic sphere and in the wild. Last 2021, thousands of marine animals died boiled alive in Vancouver [61], and in 2022, thousands of cows died of heat in Kansas [62]. In these cases, we can speak not only of the evil of death as a deprivation-based disvalue, but also of extreme suffering prior to the cessation of life. Likewise, heat affects urban animals, especially with pathologies such as respiratory problems, whereby in summer and, increasingly, throughout the year, especially in cities where the temperature is higher, their quality of life worsens, and their safety is at risk [63]. These are just a few examples intended to illustrate a very unflattering framework of the consequences that the deterioration of the planet is having for all animals.

Secondly, the line between indirect anthropogenic and natural harms is blurred. If our standard of moral consideration for animals is based on whether their damage is of human origin, then we should morally consider animals in the face of almost any disaster, since there is often no clear distinction between damage that is strictly natural and damage that is partly natural and partly anthropogenic. For example, poisoning of invertebrates with insecticides is a direct anthropogenic harm, but poisoning with pesticides used to kill weeds is indirect, although the consequences would be the same. Combinations of the three types of harms can also occur, especially indirect and natural harms. Let us imagine that a disease is introduced into a forest, by indirect anthropogenic means, that ends up killing some animals. This kind of damage would be partially anthropogenic and indirect, but also natural, because the disease would have spread by natural contagion between individuals. Combined harm is common because humans have affected a large part of the planet's ecosystems. Moreover, it is likely that there is not a single ecosystem that has not been altered and damaged by human activity, considering the anthropogenic influence on climate change. Even primitive forests, which have developed with very little intervention (and which represent a minority on the planet), have possibly changed due to overexploitation that affects the global climate [51] (pp. 11–12).

Thirdly, and despite the relevance of the reasons mentioned above, moral consideration towards animals should not be based on the degree of human intervention in their harm, but rather on their capacity for sentience. The previous factors work only if it is considered necessary to help those animals directly or indirectly harmed by humans, but this is insufficient. In the face of natural disasters, no one seems to question the moral urgency of saving other people or even rescuing their corpses to provide respite for their families. Not helping animals in disaster situations would be a speciesist attitude, even if one militates for the rights of animals suffering in factory farms or otherwise exploited. It is not necessary that the damage be directly or indirectly anthropogenic to try to save animals or prevent their harm in extreme situations. The parameter for action must be their capacity for sentience and, more specifically in these cases, their capacity to suffer.

5. An Antispeciesist and Suffering-Focused Ecofeminist Proposal

Considering the arguments in favor of a context-independent antispeciesism presented above, an antispeciesist proposal for the treatment of animals affected by anthropogenic, natural, or hybrid disasters should be based, at least, on the three pillars described below. As a fundamental principle, sentience must be the key factor to defend a consistent and not partial antispeciesism. A fully antispeciesist position should focus not only on farm animals or those affected by direct or indirect anthropogenic harms, but also on those harmed by natural or hybrid disasters. If we base ourselves on sentience as a parameter, then we should help nonhuman animals equally with respect to humans in all disaster situations, whatever they may be. This does not imply we should underestimate the challenges that occur in practice in disaster situations, where prioritization between human and/or nonhuman individuals is influenced by numerous factors, such as the balance of resource allocation, prognosis, or the consequences of decisions taken. Giving moral consideration to animals in these contexts does not imply that they are always given priority over humans, but that they are included in rescue decision-making.

Likewise, animal sentience is especially relevant in its negative aspect: the reduction in their suffering must be a priority. There are various ethical positions, called suffering-focused ethics, which consider that the reduction in disvalue takes priority over the increase in positive values [64–67]. In the case of animals, especially those affected by disasters of any kind, it is necessary to postulate not only sentience but also the capacity and susceptibility to suffer as the key criterion for their moral consideration. This can be defended for various reasons, although it is worth highlighting, in this case, quantitative and qualitative factors: animal suffering in disasters is very extensive, due to the number of victims involved, and very intense; let us recall the marine animals that died boiled alive due to the heating of the water, for instance.

Finally, it is necessary to adopt individual-focused views, rather than anthropocentric biocentric or holistic views, that allow for a dialogue between environmental and animal ethics. A non-holistic antispeciesist ecofeminism [68] may be a good candidate for finding connections between these poles, as it can focus on the common links between environmental and animal ethics. There are many variants in ecofeminisms, but most, if not all, reject the dualisms that have favored the perpetuation of logics of domination [69] in which the subject prevails over the object in various ways: due to gender [70–73], because of the division between culture and nature [69,74,75], for materialist reasons [76–79], or for colonial reasons [80–82], among others. Ecofeminisms, based on the idea of inter-relation and interconnection of individuals among themselves and with nature, assume that sentient beings cannot be separated from the space they inhabit. On this basis, according to these views, it is not possible to address the environmental crisis without taking animals into account nor can animal suffering be tackled without considering how anthropogenic climate change affects them.

Antispeciesist feminist positions have coherently integrated some environmentalist approaches. Many of these theories attempt to set aside potential discrepancies between both views. As intersectional theories, they criticize common oppressions against various subaltern beings and offer normative prescriptions to address such issues. An antispeciesist ecofeminism must denounce that the current socioeconomic model, governed by a patriarchal and capitalist ideology, is based on the subjugation and exploitation of othernesses that are not only women or other dissident gender identities, but also any otherness that opposes the hegemonic masculinized rationality canon and the hyperproductivity of the industrialized world, such as nature and animals. Ecofeminist and antispeciesist perspectives make it possible to pay attention to nature without losing sight of the individuals who belong to it and who are victims of its very exploitation. The assimilation of this idea may imply a moderate alliance between environmentalists and those who focus on animal ethics, since some of their practices and the positive consequences of these practices may be similar, even if their reasons for acting as they do are different. That is, these positions

could join forces to achieve positive outcomes or as little negative as possible, in terms of expected value.

In this regard, both antispeciesist ecofeminisms [18] (pp. 76–80) and critical ecofeminisms [83] (pp. 373–380) point out that the unprecedented animal consumption endorsed by the neoliberal system cannot continue to be tolerated. It implies the validation of extreme torture to animals as well as one of the most serious forms of damage to the environment today, due to the amount of land invested in feeding livestock for human consumption and the pollution they generate [84,85]. Animal exploitation, thus, becomes a double harm to animals: direct anthropogenic harm through mistreatment and slaughter on farms, and indirect anthropogenic harm through the promotion of extreme climatic and environmental conditions that are also killing them, but in nature and in unfavorable situations.

Along these lines, the question of ontological and contextual antispeciesism has been debated within ecofeminisms [68] (pp. 224–234). Ontological antispeciesism opposes any kind of animal consumption. Those who defend a context-specific antispeciesism denounce factory farming but not animal consumption in contexts considered non-oppressive, according to these perspectives. Val Plumwood [86] advocated a position that was not aligned with ontological antispeciesist assumptions. Plumwood focused her case on the industrialized consumption of animals as part of nature. She argued that ontological veganism, based on ethical grounds, cannot be universalized to all contexts because the way animals are exploited in the West is not comparable to the way they are lived with, even consumed in the Global South. Her thesis denounces the way animals are consumed only in the context of the industrialized world. From a postcolonial perspective, Vandana Shiva [87] also considers that there is a significant difference in the way animals are treated in the Global South. Although she does not defend antispeciesist theses, her ecofeminist discourse defends the consumption of grains and vegetables in a sustainable way, which has traditionally characterized Indian food, and criticizes the destruction of the planet by human causes. The constructive discussion within ecofeminisms and the common goals they all share are significant examples of how environmentalists and animal advocates can agree on the growing need to stop the abuse of nonhuman animals. While feminist antispeciesist positions may prioritize animal interests in their theories and actions, and while environmentalists may condemn the exploitation of animals for reasons that are not solely animal-related, animals will benefit from any actions aimed at ending factory farming and, with it, (i) the suffering it causes, (ii) the pollution it causes, and (iii) the worsening of climatic conditions that this pollution may promote and that harm animals in the wild.

Similarly, certain actions to help wild animals that would be supported by an anti-speciesist feminism would not necessarily conflict with ecofeminist perspectives. This is especially true in cases of climate and other wholly or partly anthropogenic disasters, where animals are affected by the way humans have abused nature. Even if an ecofeminist position does not defend sentience as a principle of moral consideration but criticizes humanity's responsibility for damage to animals and the environment, it would be consistent with a biocentric approach to promote, for example, rescue operations for animals affected by floods or fires, or the construction of shelters to protect them from torrential rain, snowfall, or extreme temperatures. Even a non-interventionist position centered on the preservation of what is natural could not appeal to this claim in these cases, since the animals would have been affected by non-natural causes, so there would be no reason to oppose rescuing them.

These are examples of how even the practices proposed by some non-antispeciesist ecofeminist positions can have a positive impact on nonhuman animals and how many actions to aid animals do not necessarily conflict with these environmental views. Advocates of antispeciesist theories are unlikely to fully agree with those who accept some degree of anthropocentrism but can accept that an alliance between environmental and animal ethics is necessary, at least strategically, to address animal suffering in disasters: even if not all approaches share theoretical assumptions, fighting for the cessation of animal suffering

and exploitation can have positive consequences for all, which, moreover, feedback on each other. An ecofeminist and antispeciesist perspective is presented as a possibility for this encounter.

6. Conclusions

The purpose of this essay has been to defend the need to help nonhuman animals when they are affected by anthropogenic, natural, or hybrid disasters. I have begun by briefly contextualizing different positions that have been defended in animal ethics, and I have presented some arguments in favor of the moral consideration of nonhuman animals because they are sentient beings who can suffer, regardless of their relational, rational, or intellectual capacities. I have also explained some of the conflicts between environmentalist and animal-focused positions, and how they are reflected in the debate about helping animals in disaster situations. I have described the different ways in which animals are victims of natural, anthropogenic, or hybrid disasters, and argued that they should be helped because they are sentient beings and particularly because they are susceptible to extreme suffering in these situations.

I have argued for an ecofeminist antispeciesist approach to the consideration of animals in disasters. There may be different positions that can offer fruitful proposals for this issue, although I have defended this one because I believe that its intersectional basis proposes a particularly broad, complex dimension that is open to dialogue with other views. Ecofeminisms in general and antispeciesist ones in particular, unlike other positions not centered on gender or other intersections, are explicit in their denunciation of the systemic and oppressive mechanisms common to the exploitation of nature and animals, both symbolic and material. For these reasons, they constitute positions worth valuing and highlighting in animal ethics studies, including those focused on disaster ethics.

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