

The Moral Urgency of Action to Protect the World's Megafauna

By Michael Paul Nelson and Kathleen Dean Moore

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Concerned ecologists recently made the case for the *ecological* urgency of action to save the world's terrestrial megafauna (Ripple et al. 2016). These large mammals, desperately endangered by human depredation and habitat destruction, are critical to the functioning of the world's ecosystems, and thus critical to human survival. To the extent that we value human survival, then, we ought to value the survival of the great beasts.

Here, we make the case for the *moral* urgency of action to save the world's megafauna. It is not just that the great mammals are ecologically useful, a fact that creates a pragmatic and self-regarding interest in saving them. In addition, they are morally worthy, and so we have an affirmative moral duty to preserve them.

With their immense size and strength, long life spans, and complex behaviors, megafauna capture the human imagination, earning the honorific *charismatic*, a word that comes from the Greek *kharisma*, meaning *divine gift*. This intuition of value is borne out by the world's ethical traditions, which provide at least three different types of reasons why we ought to defend terrestrial megafauna—reasons derived from utilitarian values, from moral duties, and from human virtues. When so much is at stake in the survival of the great beasts, it is essential to state clearly all the reasons—moral as well as ecological – why megafauna ought to be saved. Fruitful public discourse about the best policies depends on both a clear understanding of the facts and a clear affirmation of what is of value.

Utilitarian arguments: An act is right if it has good consequences

In Western cultures in particular, good decisions are judged to be those that maximize benefits and minimize costs.

Protect useful ecosystems. The extirpation of much of the world's megafauna has been justified on just this ground—that the benefits of economic development outweigh the costs of the loss of the great mammals. In such thinking, we have badly miscalculated, trading short-term benefit for long-term good, underestimating the costs and overestimating the benefits. New ecological understanding makes it clear that trading away a world with the intact and resilient ecosystems

that megafauna support is deeply imprudent, and on this ground, immoral, a violation of the commitment to good consequences.

Protect evolutionary possibility. Consider not just the current but the prospective value of the genome of a great beast, the consequence of natural selection over millennia—the development of extraordinary capacity through unimaginable numbers of births and deaths. The genome is the holder of infinite potential. It is the conduit to the future, the pathway through which more lives will evolve, an unimaginable parade of forms and functions. A species extinction is so much more than the loss of a glorious animal. It is the loss of unknown animals that might have come to be—the loss of possibility, which is the greatest loss of all.

Deontological arguments: An act is right if it honors one's duties.

Some believe a good decision or action is one adhering to a duty or obligation, rather than one leading to a specific outcome.

The duty to honor the sanctity of life. For those who believe that the great mammals are divinely created—rather than the unfolding product of evolution and the earthly and creative urgency of life—the obligation is the same, to protect their thriving. If God created them, as monotheist traditions have it, then we are called to honor our duties as stewards of divine creation. Other religious and indigenous wisdom traditions, almost without exception, understand lives as sacred and sacrosanct. If animals are sacred, then every extinction, every destruction, is a profanity.

Given, on the other hand, that these animals are part of the flowering of evolution over millions of years, then wonder at the chance that the universe has produced creatures who are extraordinary, beautiful, mysterious, awe inspiring, and irreplaceable. If the good English word for this combination of characteristics is *sacred*, then the great mammals are sacred though secular. Or, using different concepts, put it this way: The lives of the great mammals are of infinite and intrinsic value; the duty to honor and protect them is a duty of reverence.

The duty to act compassionately. Compassion is the capacity to imagine oneself in another being's place, to feel their suffering as if it were one's own, to feel their urgency toward life, as one feels one's own striving to live. A compassionate person, intently listening to the cries of

other beings, strives to create a world in which suffering is reduced. The more that ethologists learn about the capacity of the great beasts to feel pain, to cringe, to grieve, to engage in rituals of mourning, to seek what will sustain their families—which is to say, the stronger the analogies become between the behaviors of animals and of humans—the stronger is the duty to treat their suffering as one’s own.

The duty to protect beauty. Beauty is a positive value. To say that something is beautiful is to say that it is worthy of admiration and respect—the arc of a giraffe’s neck, the speed of a herd of gazelles. The human pleasure in the perception of this harmony, this wholeness, is one source of its value. But beauty has value in itself, as an ideal of harmony and the perfect blending of form and function, so manifest in the great beasts of the Earth. A judgment of beauty thus makes a claim on a person. It calls one to live up to one’s value judgment by protecting what is beautiful.

Duties of reciprocity. Consider that this world and its rare and endangered megafauna are great and life-sustaining gifts from a fecund Earth. We did not earn these gifts; we have no claim upon them. If they were taken away, there would be nothing we could do but mourn their loss and scramble, perhaps futilely, to replace their ecosystem benefits. What is the appropriate response to a gift? This we know, as our parents taught us: A gift requires, at the least, gratitude, which calls us to attentiveness, celebration, and careful use. To ruin, waste, or grind it into the ground is to dishonor the gift and violate our duty as a recipient. Gratitude for a gift also implies reciprocity, that we give in turn, using our gifts to benefit the Earth and its terrestrial megafauna.

Duties based on wonder and awe. Some ecological stories reveal the astonishingly improbable unfolding of a world that brings forth the Earth’s great mammals, whereas others shine a light on the unfathomable, pulsing, tangled web of relationships tied to the great beasts. Stories of complexity and improbability of this magnitude elicit wonder and awe. The sources of wonder and awe merit respect, even reverence. At the bare minimum, the wellsprings of wonder and awe deserve protection.

Virtue ethics: An act is right if it is grounded in virtue

For some, ethical actions are those performed by those people who embody and manifest an

appropriate set of virtues: care, empathy, respect, love, etc.

Humility. Apart from the loss of so much of the Earth's megafauna, perhaps the greatest loss in the modern era has been the loss of human humility. The latter of course contributes to the former. Humility is the virtue by which humans understand themselves as they truly are: not lord and master over the world but only one of the amazing species on the planet. We owe our being and the prized qualities of our humanity to that world. Understanding our essential relatedness to all life, we turn away from the arrogance that allows us, perhaps encourages us, to toss the world's megafauna into the abyss of nonexistence.

Moral integrity. Integrity is perhaps the greatest of all virtues. People of integrity match their actions to their beliefs about what is right and so achieve a oneness. They “walk the talk.” They understand the importance of the world's megafauna, appreciate their beauty, admire their improbable ecological history, and celebrate their ability to inspire awe and wonder. People of integrity say “this is of value, this must remain” and then they make it so. In this, people of integrity become whole as their world becomes whole again.

The survival of the great beasts is thus a great and essential moral test for us. If humans can act with good sense, honor, and virtue—sharing the world with the elephant and gazelle, the tigers and bears—perhaps we can earn our own humanity, even as we find a way for this astonishing world to continue.

Reference cited

Ripple W, et al. 2016. Saving the world's terrestrial megafauna. *BioScience*.
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Michael Paul Nelson (mpnelson@oregonstate.edu) is with the Department of Forest Ecosystems and Society at Oregon State University, in Corvallis. Kathleen Dean Moore is affiliated with the Spring Creek Project for Ideas, Nature, and the Written Word, also at Oregon State University, in Corvallis.