

Conflicts and triage

Commentary on [Treves et al.](#) on *Just Preservation*

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Abstract: To represent diverse interests successfully, a strategy for dealing with conflicts is needed. We discuss an approach to maximizing the interests of the greatest number of individuals, present and future.

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Treves et al.'s (2019) aspiration to include the interests of a wide range of individuals, including those of future generations, is both ambitious and commendable. There is ample evidence that the qualities we deem morally relevant in humans (such as cognition, emotion and pain perception) are shared with many non-human organisms (a brief review of this research is provided in Carreia Caeiro's 2020 commentary). On the premise that the moral value of the interests of future individuals is comparable to that of current individuals, a consideration of future generations is paramount.

As other commentators have pointed out, broadening inclusivity will increase the number of conflicts of interests. Current conservation science, which is largely driven by anthropocentric values, already faces problems of stakeholder conflict (Redpath et al. 2013). Commentators Palmer & Fischer (2019) suggest that when non-humans and future individuals are taken into account, the diversity of interests at play will result in a deliberative moral gridlock. We propose an alternative to gridlock, which necessarily and explicitly involves privileging some interests over others on the basis of an analysis of the magnitude and scope of those interests.

1. Triage. Given limited resources and many competing interests, it has been argued that conservation requires a triage approach (Wilson and Law 2016). Triage is widely used in medical settings and in evaluating humanitarian projects to maximize the number of lives that can be saved per dollar available (McAskill 2015).

In conservation, triage is traditionally discussed in terms of saving one species at the expense of another (Wilson and Law 2016). However, triage can also be used to promote individual interests such as quality of life and wellbeing (Freeling and Connell 2020). Triage approaches generally use utilitarian reasoning that could be applied alongside Treves et al.'s ethical principles. For example, Singer's (2000) principle of equitable consideration (Singer is arguably the most famous utilitarian) would lead to an explicit calculation whereby the greatest number of human and non-human animal interests are maximized, given resource constraints.

A consequence is that some individuals would have their interests met and advocated for, at the expense of others. Ramp and Bekoff (2015) have criticized utilitarian approaches, as they tend to trade off animal lives for human interests, or for abstract collective properties (e.g., for 'the good of the species'). However, a utilitarian approach can be used to calculate the preservation actions that are most effective, or the advocacy that is most appropriate, for preserving the greatest number of human and animal interests possible. In an ideal world, the interests of all beings could be adequately met using available resources. Sadly, this is not the current state of our planet, and given a choice between triage or gridlock, difficult decisions must be made.

2. Future Generations. Other commentators have pointed to predation as an example of conflicting animal interests (Palmer & Fischer 2019). Should a trustee defend a lion's interests to hunt for food to survive? Or a gazelle's interest in avoiding predation? A utilitarian approach suggests that when there are conflicts between stakeholders, those who will benefit the greatest numbers should trump the interests of others. So if one gazelle could feed 10 lions, then the interests of lions take precedence. Of course, a lion cannot live off of a single gazelle in its lifetime – so lifespan considerations may tip the calculation in the other direction.

When future individuals are taken into account, however, these calculations must be made across generations. One must now ask which group of individuals would benefit the most in the long run if the others' interests were limited? And just how long is 'the long-run'? As discussed by Attfield (2019), there is a trade-off between the impact on future generations (which increases further into the future) and our ability to predict the impact on those future generations (which decreases further into the future).

Predator-prey relations are just one example of how considerations of future interests become intractably complex. Contrast a one-time capital investment in purchasing a pristine forest to prevent logging and to preserve the organisms living in it for the future, with the annual costs of enforcing fishing prohibitions in a marine protected area. Ultimately, wise use of conservation funds requires explicit recognition of the number of individuals and species preserved in both environments as well as the discount rate — the future value of current expenditures. Many conservation decisions are not framed in this way, yet the interests of potential future individuals hinge on such an explicit analysis.

3. Groups and Individuals. Treves et al. propose that we consider the interests of individuals rather than collective objects or concepts, such as species. They argue that a focus on collective properties such as evolutionary potential (evocentrism) should only be considered in relation to the wellbeing of individuals comprising that collective, rather than preserved for its own sake. We believe that a focus on evolutionary potential can maximize the collective interests of individuals, particularly when future generations are taken into account. Preserving evolutionary potential allows a population to adapt and persist across generations, resulting in the survival and wellbeing of more individuals, as well as the potential for a greater number of future individuals to be brought into existence.

Although maximizing the number of individuals brought into existence is a controversial premise amongst utilitarians, maximizing the wellbeing of the greatest number of individuals is not (Singer 2011). Preserving the evolutionary potential of present generations is likely to be an effective way to maximize these values over long timescales. Those whose aim is to maximize futurity must confront the potential conflict between the wellbeing of present individuals and the potential for maximizing the wellbeing of a greater number of future individuals when evaluating controversial conservation actions such as lethal control.

Broadening the scope of moral consideration for individuals is commendable, but the conflicts that are bound to arise must not be ignored. For this approach to work, a framework to maximize the greatest number of interests that can be preserved is needed to avoid a moral gridlock. There will inevitably need to be compromises, but by making these tradeoffs explicit, stakeholders and their representatives will be able to ensure the greatest good for the greatest number.

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