

Value-Laden Language and its consequences for wild animal welfare

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Summary

Value-laden language (see examples in Glossary below) defines and categorises animals and can indirectly impact on the welfare of animals, primarily by classifying some as undeserving of protection. Objectively, an animal might be defined as ‘any living thing that can move independently and that has senses for recognising and reacting to the environment around it.’ Value-laden language, on the other hand, may define animals in terms of how they are to be killed, taken or treated and risks ‘hiding’ the extent of welfare harms inflicted upon animals. Policy and legislative language classifying animals as ‘pests’ risks inadvertently encouraging management and control of wildlife without adequately considering their welfare needs or even the necessity of animal control.

What is the concern?

There are animal welfare consequences associated with the use of value-laden language, particularly in respect of wildlife (‘pest’) management and conservation contexts. There are also concerns relating to classification of animals as ‘problem’ species.

For example:

1. Wildlife can be classed as ‘pests’ or ‘nuisance’ species so that they can be killed or taken without clear identification and justification of the necessity of management or control.
2. Welfare concerns regarding wildlife are downplayed or minimised in wildlife management or control operations due to the social construction and classification of wildlife as ‘pest’, ‘vermin’, ‘nuisance’ or ‘problem’ species. The fear and distress caused to animals in trapping and wildlife management operations may be considered to be less of an issue because language defines such wildlife as a species that could (or should) be controlled. For example, see the Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949 (<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/12-13-14/55/contents>)
3. Negative classification of wildlife either by species or in respect of individual ‘problem’ animals fails to recognise welfare needs and socially constructs negative attitudes towards wildlife and wild animal welfare.

Primary species concerned

Species that are likely to be the objects of value-laden language in the UK include:

Corvus corone (Carrion crow), *Corvus monedula* (Jackdaw), *Pica pica* (Magpie), *Columba livia* (Common pigeon), *Corvus frugilegus* (Rook), *Rattus norvegicus* (Brown rat), *Mus musculus* (House mouse), *Sciurus carolinensis* (Grey squirrel).

Possible risk-mitigating actions

Arguably, these concerns can be addressed by requiring people to demonstrate, for example, that individual animals are causing a problem that requires mitigation, rather than classifying an entire species as 'pests'.

Overcoming the language barrier can help to ensure that interventions relating to wild animals and birds are made on the basis of need rather than via general classifications typified by value-laden language and that welfare concerns are taken into account. Options include:

1. Discontinue use of 'pest species' (etc) nomenclature;
2. Review wildlife management actions based on negative or value-laden language.
3. Review policies and attitudes toward wildlife that are based on negative or value-laden language (classifying wildlife according to value-based judgements and anthropocentric stance).
4. Use different language for wildlife.

Conclusions

Animals have a value in and of themselves, beyond that of their utility to human beings. Even in cases where there is a need to control wildlife, negative, value-laden language is unhelpful. Stronger evidence is required, both of the need for control and of welfare consideration as an integral part of control mechanisms.

Recommendations including stakeholder involvement

- Review the use of value-laden language in policy documents and legislation
- Consider the extent to which value-laden language influences policy approaches to wildlife and wild animal welfare language, including the prevalence and necessity of wildlife interventions and control

Use alternative forms of language that negate the use of negative and value-laden language.

Glossary – examples of value-laden terms

Alien (species) – used to convey a notion of wildlife as unnatural, unwelcome and to be eradicated. (See also Invasive Species)

Animal – considered by some to be derogatory or colloquial language that potentially denigrates animals as a form of 'lesser' mammal when compared to humans. Some academic journals, for example, prefer to use the term 'non-human animal' in order to distinguish between human animals and other animals.

Culling – killing of animals, in the context of wildlife (e.g. deer) in order to 'manage' the population at perceived sustainable levels.

Dangerous wild animal – dangerous wild animals are defined as such in the UK by the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976. The Act was intended to address what was perceived as a ‘fashion’ for keeping interesting ‘pets’ that came from species seen as being more dangerous or exotic e.g. apes, kangaroos, big cats and canids including wild dogs, wolves, jackals. The definition of such animals as inherently dangerous is problematic.

Exotic animal – term used (sometimes in legal and policy contexts) to denote a rare or unusual animal. In the case of ‘exotic pet’ may denote an animal generally thought of as a wild species that has ‘novelty’ value as a companion animal. Potentially raises concerns about the ability to consider the welfare needs of the ‘exotic’.

Game species (or ‘Game’) – the classification of certain wildlife as ‘game’ denotes their value as legitimate quarry according to game and wildlife legislation. Thus, game species can be killed or taken in accordance with legislation and regulatory controls. The term ‘game’ also denotes the perceived sporting or entertainment aspects of wildlife killing. (See also ‘Quarry Species’.)

Invasive species – denotes the negative connotations of a non-native species of wildlife, often as defined by legislation or regulations. Use of the term ‘invasive’ denotes the perceived tendency of a species to spread to a degree considered harmful to the environment and native wildlife and to possibly cause damage to human economy (e.g. farming interests) or human health. Thus, there is a perceived need to control the species. Invasive Alien Species is sometimes used to denote the unwelcome or ‘unnatural’ nature of the species.

Nuisance species/animals – term denotes that individual animals or an identified species have no value and/or are an inconvenience to human interests. The perceived level of nuisance arguably justifies killing or inflicting harm to preserve other interests and welfare considerations might be minimised.

Pest species – legislation/regulation such as the General Licences issued under the UK Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) allows landowners, occupiers and ‘other Authorised Persons’ to carry out a range of otherwise prohibited activities such as the killing or taking of wild birds listed on the licence. This licence may only be relied upon where the activities are carried out for the purposes specified, and users must comply with licence terms and conditions. These conditions include the requirement that the user must be satisfied that legal (including non-lethal) methods of resolving the problem are ineffective or impracticable. However, monitoring of licence use is minimal.

Quarry species – the classification of certain wildlife as legitimate quarry that can be chased, caught and killed. Denotes these species (as a group) as those birds or animals considered suitable for hunting.

Resource – term that denotes wildlife as existing primarily for human exploitation and that also indicates anthropocentric attitudes towards wildlife.

Rogue – term used to denote that a particular animal is causing a problem in a manner that arguably justifies its killing. The term ‘rogue seal’, for example is often used where a perceived problem with an individual common or grey seal is thought to be occurring at a particular site such that there is an argument for selective removal of the individual ‘rogue’ animal to protect fisheries.

Vermin – term that denotes that the species is believed to be harmful and its members are pests that should be killed. The use of the term legitimises the killing of the species as a class rather than consideration of whether there is a verifiable problem with an individual bird or mammal. The term ‘vermin’ sometimes permits less welfare concern for a species. For example, the Small Ground Vermin Traps Order 1958 legitimises the use of non-approved traps (break-back traps for rats and mice and mole traps), whereas all other spring traps require welfare approval.

Wild animal – derogatory or colloquial language or nomenclature that denigrates animals (or humans by association) and perpetuates the conception of animals as: beasts, brutes, bestial, beastly, dumb animals, sub-humans. Some human-animal studies and animal-centred publications suggest that ‘companion’ animals should be used rather than ‘pet’ animals, and ‘free-living’ or ‘free-ranging’ rather than (or in addition to) ‘wild’ animals. In addition, some publications require that ‘he’ or ‘she’ should be utilised in relation to individual animals rather than ‘it’.

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