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Climate Change Impacts on Free-Living Nonhuman Animals. Challenges for Media and Communication Ethics

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Abstract

The mainstream discussion regarding climate change in politics, public opinion and the media has focused almost exclusively on preventing the harms humans suffer due to global warming. Yet climate change is already having an impact on free-living nonhumans, which raises unexplored ethical concerns from a nondiscriminatory point of view. This paper discusses the inherent ethical challenge of climate change impacts on nonhuman animals living in nature and argues that the media and communication ethics cannot avoid addressing the issue. The paper further argues that media ethics needs to mirror animal ethics by rejecting moral anthropocentrism.

Keywords: media ethics, egalitarianism, climate change, wildlife, anthropocentrism

1. Introduction

Since evidence of climate change was brought to light by the first Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 1990, concerns regarding the issue have focused almost exclusively on preventing the harm humans suffer due to global warming. This is consistent with mainstream environmental ideologies, which are mostly human-centered (Corbett, 2006). Yet climate change is already having a severe impact on free-living animals (1) – causing particularly devastating damage to their habitats, health and social systems – which raises important ethical concerns from the point of view of nonhuman well-being.

This paper discusses the inherent ethical challenge in how climate change impacts on nonhuman animals living in nature and argues that media and communication ethics cannot ignore this debate when addressing the representation of climate change impacts. We usually believe that we have a duty to help human beings suffering from natural harms or those induced by climate change, such as disease, starvation or natural catastrophes. If this is so, and speciesism – the unjustified disadvantageous consideration of nonhumans based on species membership (Horta, 2010a) – is to be rejected, then it follows that we have a similar duty to come to the aid of nonhuman animals in similar circumstances.

As we shall see, contrary to popular belief, animals living free in natural habitats endure a wide array of natural harms. These harms can in some cases be seen to be aggravated by climate change (2) and systematically impact on the interests of nonhuman animals. In nature, nonhuman animals are often injured, starving or ill, and they have to cope with psychological stress in the face of extreme weather conditions. However, due to climate change, free-living animals are now also confronted with increased habitat loss, reduced and degraded food and water resources, and the resulting increased psychological trauma. Given these facts, we would seem to have a strong pervasive duty to help these animals whenever we can. As we shall see, the evidence in support of these claims is overwhelming.

This paper is structured as follows:

Firstly, it describes what natural life is like for individuals living free in nature. This is followed by a review of how global warming might affect their situation and a discussion of the ethical challenges this impact represents for media and communication ethics – including the claim that these challenges should not be addressed as environmental issues but rather as ethical and political/social matters, as is the case when humans are concerned.

Secondly, the paper defends the egalitarian position, which states that inequality should be reduced (or equality increased) among individuals (Faria 2014; Horta, 2016), a stance that receives widespread support in media ethics.

However, the authors of this paper claim that egalitarianism is incompatible with the mainstream speciesist view fully or partially endorsed by media ethics itself.

The aim is to raise awareness that media ethics needs to mirror animal ethics by rejecting moral anthropocentrism and embracing a non-speciesist stance. Ultimately, the goal of this paper is to contribute to a more realistic, accurate, and fair depiction of the impact climate change is having on all sentient individuals. To this end, the article concludes with a summary of the ethical recommendations provided by the recent literature and a discussion of what a true egalitarian approach should entail for media ethics.

2. Free-Living Animals: Population Dynamics, Natural Harms and Climate Change

It is a common belief that animals living in nature lead good lives and that the best we can do for most of them is just "to leave them alone". However, this view is largely based on an idealized view of free-living animals' lives. This "idyllic view of nature" ignores many relevant aspects of real life in natural habitats, resulting mostly from animal population dynamics and the natural harms of life in nature.

2.1 Population Dynamics

Thanks to the field of population dynamics, we know that certain animals reproduce and transmit their genetic information to future generations by increasing the chances of each new individual to mature and reproduce by having few offspring and investing a great deal of effort in parental care. Usually, these populations exhibit high survival rates, with many individuals reaching sexual maturity and the population stabilizing near the environment's carrying capacity (i.e., the maximum number of individuals of a certain species allowed by the characteristics of the ecosystem). Typical examples include humans and other apes, cetaceans and other mammals such as bears and elephants. Most animals that live in nature, however, follow a different reproductive strategy, which consists in producing many offspring and investing very little in parental care. Consequently, and given the finite resources available in the environment, they have low survival rates, with most individuals dying shortly after coming into existence, usually in very distressing ways. Examples range from amphibians and fishes (3) to invertebrates and mammals, including small rodents (Biggers, Finn & McLaren, 1962; Froese & Luna, 2004; Lu, Sopory & Whittaker, 2010 [2000]; Wolff & Sherman, 2008). Since suffering and premature death predominate among these animals and they are the most prevailing animals in the wild, it is plausible to conclude that, on aggregate, suffering and premature death predominate in the wild (Horta, 2010b; Tomasik, 2015a).

2.2 Natural Harms of Life in Nature

While our species has managed to reduce the impact of environmental stresses on human well-being, these are still a permanent cause of suffering and death for most free-roaming animals, regardless of additional impacts of human-induced global warming. In natural conditions, free-living animals often suffer, among other harms, physical injury, hunger and thirst, extreme weather conditions, psychological stress, predation and parasitism, and disease (Faria, 2016):

Physical injury: When a nonhuman animal becomes injured but not killed, she suffers on many different levels and injuries are often so severe that they prevent her from surviving (such as mutilations). Physical injuries are mostly caused by inter and intra-species aggressions (such as predation and territorial disputes), daily interactions with competitive conspecifics (such as forced copulation), natural events (such as flying accidents and exposure to harsh weather conditions), crushing (when an animal is pressed against the ground, usually by a larger animal) or harsh climatic conditions (particularly skin burns due to extreme exposure to strong sunlight).

Hunger and thirst: Due to the reproductive strategy prevalent in nature, nonhuman animals come into existence in great numbers despite the scarcity of resources. Therefore, the number of them existing in nature at any given time usually exceeds the resources available. Hunger and thirst are common in nature for a vast number of free-living animals, who may experience prolonged and harsh malnutrition and death. This situation is usually magnified when combined with predation.

Extreme weather conditions: Many nonhuman animals die due to extreme weather conditions, but even those that manage to survive will often suffer from cold or severe heat. Even in those cases in which the weather is good for the animals, climatic changes (particularly sudden ones) can also be a cause of great suffering and death. Extreme climate phenomena such as floods, droughts, heavy snows or heat waves have a tremendous impact on free-roaming animals' lives.

Psychological stress: Stress is the physiological response to a stimulus (called "stressor") perceived by the animal as a harmful event or a threat to her survival. The response may be triggered by an actual environmental pressure, such as extreme weather conditions (physical stressor) or by the mere expectation that a threat is about to take place (psychological stressor). Free-living animals go through very stressful situations in their natural environments. For

example, they experience physical trauma, live in places with a high density of predators or parasites, face conflicts with conspecifics and must endure constant variations in food, water and temperature. In addition to how harmful these situations can be in themselves for nonhuman animals, they also cause them to suffer psychological stress.

Predation: Predation is a biological interaction between two organisms that results in the killing and consumption of one of them (the prey) by the other (the predator). Predatory activity may assume distinct forms. For example, the prey may be consumed after or prior to being killed. The killing may be abrupt or slow and agonizing. Nevertheless, it consistently involves great violence being inflicted on the prey. Since all nonhuman animals at some point in their lives are exposed to (nonhuman and/or human) predators, predation is proven to be one of the most significant sources of suffering among free-living animals.

Parasitism and disease: Parasitism consists of an interaction between two organisms, usually occurring over long periods of time, during which one organism lives and feeds upon the other (the host), thereby reducing her fitness (i.e., individual capacity to successfully reproduce and survive) and ultimately leading to her death. Free-living animals may also suffer from parasitic diseases caused by bacteria. Among the most prevalent are Tuberculosis – a disease predominantly affecting the lungs – and Lyme disease, considered to be one of the most important tick-borne diseases, which affects vital organs such as the heart and nervous system.

Thus, life in nature is far less idyllic than we are led to believe, even without the intervention of anthropogenic climate change.

2.3 The Impact of Climate Change on Free-Living Animals

The above variables – population dynamics and natural harms – may be worsened with global warming, by expanding natural harms and creating additional problems for free-living animals‟ habitats, health and social systems. From the fifth IPCC report (2014), we can identify the following examples of possible negative impacts:

Higher temperatures: Higher maximum summer and winter temperatures are a threat to many free-living animals, whose social systems and food habits are adapted to specific temperature ranges.

Melting ice and snow: Polar regions are warming and thus shrinking. This is problematic for all nonhuman animals dependent on these ecosystems. Competition for territory and food increases, predators may have difficulties finding prey and prey may become more exposed to predators.

Ocean acidification: A substantial proportion of the carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere each year dissolves into the oceans, rivers and lakes, making them more acidic. Increased acidity has a range of potentially harmful consequences for marine organisms.

Warming water: As ocean, river and lake water becomes warmer, it naturally holds less oxygen, which is problematic for all species that breathe through gills.

Out-of-sync life-cycle events: Life-cycle events like migration, breeding and color changes are very often timed to coincide with variables such as day length, plant emergence and first snowfall. For many free-living animals, out-of-sync may mean becoming more exposed to hunger, thirst and predation, for instance.

Sea-level rise: Sea-level rise due to accelerated ice melting will inundate coastal habitats not only for humans but also for all nonhuman individuals freely living along the coast. For instance, rising sea levels and a change in salinity can decimate mangrove forests, leaving many fishes, shellfishes, and other free-living animals without a place to breed, feed or raise offspring.

More abundant and more severe storms: Since the 1980s, there has been an increase in the intensity, frequency and duration of hurricanes. A greater proportion of annual precipitation has also fallen as heavy rains, increasing flood risk and deposit runoff, which contains damaging sediments and increases erosion levels, reducing water quality and degrading the aquatic habitat.

More abundant and more severe droughts: Severe droughts stress and can kill the plants that nonhuman animals depend on for food and shelter, depriving individuals of water sources. Droughts can dry up essential breeding habitats.

Just as important as the many ways in which our climate is changing is the speed at which it is changing. The climate is moving so fast that many free-living animals may not be able to adapt or travel fast enough to more suitable areas as their current living areas become uninhabitable. Considering the three variables addressed in this section, it follows that free-living animals are subject to huge suffering in nature and that human-induced global warming may in some instances exacerbate their plight.

3. Challenges for Media and Communication Ethics

In recent decades, "the ethics of being in a communications context" (Christians, 1997, p. 3) has grown empirically and matured conceptually to address a diversity of challenges, mostly identified as emerging from the globalization of Western-white-patriarchal-dominant canons. Media accountability – including professional codes, media policies, and self- and co-regulation initiatives – have increasingly paid attention to the notions of pluralism, cross-culturalism, multiculturalism, and de-westernization in the search for universal moral values and principles that can be applied to all media and communication practices.

This expanded approach represented a relevant shift in media and communication ethics. However, despite this increased awareness, the concept of ethics has been systematically applied to human individuals alone and excluded nonhuman beings from any such reflections, resulting in an anthropocentric approach. This has certainly had an important impact on how nonhuman animals are represented in general – domesticated or free-living – and especially on public opinion and its "understanding of nature", since "our actions toward the environment depend not only on information but on the ways our views on the environment are shaped by news, media, films, social networks, public debate, popular culture, everyday conversations and more" (Cox & Pezzullo, 2015, p. 11). As we shall see, there are no moral grounds to exclude nonhuman animals from our ethical concerns, even if this may not be immediately apparent to some.

For many people, the obvious framework with which to approach the situation of free-living animals is environmentalism. As media ethics was shifting towards a less Eurocentric, less androcentric view in recent decades, an array of environmental ideologies emerged to guide us in our interpretation of nature and our relationship with the environment, including anthropogenic climate change. In this respect, Corbett defines an environmental ideology as "a way of thinking about the natural world that a person uses to justify actions toward it" (2006, p. 26). The same author also reminds us that the current dominant environmental ideologies, that is, the main belief systems that help us act, do not allocate any intrinsic value to nature or its nonhuman inhabitants, only instrumental value according to human desires and wants. All such ideologies are profoundly anthropocentric: From unrestrained *instrumentalism*, which sees the world and all its resources as solely existing for human benefit, to *conservatism*, which shares the same approach but acknowledges the need to make a wise use of nature in order to continue benefiting from its resources, and *preservatism*, which is very similar to conservatism but includes reasons to protect nature and its inhabitants that go beyond their purely instrumental value to include scientific, ecological, esthetic and religious value (Corbett, 2006).

There is also a long and less influential list of alternative ideologies that challenge this anthropocentric approach and assign intrinsic value to nature and its nonhuman inhabitants (*biocentrism*) or even to ecological wholes, including ecosystems, species, biodiversity or biocenoses (*ecocentrism*). Most of these views are, nevertheless, speciesist. They discriminate on the basis of species-membership (Faria & Paez, 2019) treating similar human and nonhuman interests differently. Thus, they retain an unjustified systematic bias towards humans that prevents us from labeling them as non-discriminatory.

In this respect, one of the most influential ecocentric positions is that of the Land Ethic, devised by Aldo Leopold (1949) and developed later as environmental ethics and earth ethics by J. Baird Callicott, (1980, 2014). The Land Ethic approach pervades most of the environmental views that currently allocate intrinsic value to entire ecosystems – towards which we would supposedly have moral obligations. The basic normative claim of this view is well captured by Callicott's maxim that we should act to preserve the "integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community" (Callicott, 1980, p. 311). This claim has been universally applied in the management of natural environments by human beings and entails, among others, the practice of culling individuals of certain species to preserve an alleged balance in ecosystems. This means of managing nonhuman populations in nature was labeled as "environmental fascism" by US philosopher Tom Regan (1983, p. 362), since sentient individuals may be sacrificed for the greater biotic good (which may mean nonhuman animals being sacrificed to protect a single plant species). Since human beings produce the greatest imbalance in ecosystems, to be consistently applied this biotic precept should also require the culling of the over populous homo sapiens for the greater biotic good. Clearly, this would not be acceptable, suggesting that the ideology fails to be non-anthropocentric. It allows for first- and second-class sentient beings (humans and other animals, respectively), towards whom we have different obligations.

The above may provide the context for understanding why environmental communication is grounded in the same mainstream anthropocentric interests (Corbett, 2006; Hansen, 2013; Lester, 2010) (climate change media coverage is no exception, see for instance Boykoff, 2011; Moser & Dilling, 2007; Painter, 2013). Media coverage does address nonhuman free-living animals (labeled as *wildlife*), but always from a human-centered perspective that does not allocate the same moral consideration to nonhumans as to humans and almost never considers nonhumans as sentient individuals.

It follows from the above that environmental ideologies are not useful tools for media ethics to address either free-living

animals in general or the impacts of climate change on them. This should come as no surprise, since environmental ideologies are not the theoretical framework humans employ when dealing with the impacts of climate change on humans either.

Ethical concerns have emerged as being particularly crucial in climate change debates after the global movement for climate justice. The fundamental objection of climate change ethics is that those humans who are the least responsible for climate change are suffering its severest consequences (Ionesco, Mokhnacheva & Gemenne, 2016; Monbiot, 2017; Robinson, 2018). Although these claims are fair, they neglect a large part of the reality, because human-induced global warming does not only impact on humans but on nonhumans as well (IPBES, 2019), and human ethics cannot therefore be limited to the impact of our choices on other humans alone. If we were to apply the concept of climate justice across species, nonhuman animals would fall within its scope. That is, they should be considered victims as well, and the least responsible for the global warming impacts that affect them.

Therefore, the impact of global warming on nonhuman animals cannot be addressed as an environmental issue, but rather as an ethical, political, economic and social matter – as with the impact of climate change on humans. In the following sections of this paper, the need is suggested to take moral and political philosophy, and more specifically animal ethics, into consideration in order to find an approach that illuminates media ethics. That will in turn allow for both a more accurate and fairer representation of other animals in nature (4).

Media and communication have not completely overlooked all of this, however. On the contrary, the lack of criticism of the strong speciesist-anthropocentric perspective on ethics in media and communication in recent decades has triggered the emergence of, firstly, a human-animal studies and, later, a critical animal studies approach within the research field of critical communications (for instance, Adams, 2003; Almiron, 2016; Almiron, Cole & Freeman, 2016; Almiron, Cole & Freeman, 2018; Freeman, 2014; Malamud, 2011; Molloy, 2011; Pick & Narraway, 2013; Plec, 2013). This new focus not only calls for the moral consideration of free-living animals, but also includes exploited nonhumans within its concerns. Specifically, the critical animal and media studies approach is based on the idea that the media plays a central role in manufacturing human consent for the oppression and exploitation of nonhuman animals – and one just as central as in the oppression of humans, so extensively documented by critical media scholars. This critical stance represents a developing research field today and frames our discussion here.

In this respect, three main ethical challenges for media and communication can be identified when addressing climate change impacts. These are related to the issues of:

- nonhuman animals as morally considerable entities,
- free-living animals as subjected to climate change impacts,
- free-living animals in nature as beneficiaries of aid.

3.1 Nonhuman Animals as Morally Considerable Entities

Suffering – whether physical or mental – is not pleasant to experience. Accordingly, humans have always strived to avoid or at least alleviate it. Our whole history can be described as successive attempts to deal with suffering. Pain management, for the alleviation of mental and physical suffering, has probably been the greatest modern medical achievement along with anti-bacterial drugs (Bourke, 2014). Suffering is such a universal concern that humans even explain their activities in relation to how much relief and prevention of human suffering they produce – artists say that they take our minds off our worries, farmers claim that they prevent us from starving, rulers justify their policies in terms of security and safety.

Humans suffer because they are sentient beings, and sentience is what generates interests (e.g., the interests in avoiding suffering). This has come to be a fundamental ethical criterion in deciding which beings are morally considerable and how we ought to act towards them. Nevertheless, humans are clearly not the only sentient beings on Earth (Braithwaite, 2010; Broom, 2014; Dawkins, 2012; DeGrazia, 1996; Gregory, 2004; Low et al, 2012; Rollin, 1989). Since sentience is precisely the capacity that makes it possible for a being to be affected in positive (pleasure) and negative ways (suffering), moral consideration should be extended to include all sentient nonhuman beings as well. This is, of course, contested by anthropocentric moral views. However, this widespread anthropocentric position has been systematically challenged in past decades (5).

The crucial idea is that whatever attribute (e.g., certain complex cognitive capacities) we may use to draw a moral boundary between humans and nonhumans will either fail to be exemplified by all humans or will be possessed by some nonhumans as well. This is commonly called the “argument from species overlap” (Horta 2014). It follows from this that for any proposed attribute one faces a dilemma – whether we exclude some human beings from the scope of full moral consideration (e.g., those who lack certain cognitive capacities) or we extend such scope to also include nonhuman animals as well. This means that if we accept a criterion that deprives nonhuman animals from full

consideration, that criterion will also exclude a number of sentient human beings. If, instead, we wish to agree on a moral criterion that will not deprive any sentient human being from moral consideration, that criterion will not be able to ground moral anthropocentrism. As a consequence, the ethical consideration of nonhuman animals follows from most widely accepted ethical theories today (a review is provided in Horta, 2016).

Interestingly enough, media ethics is not in opposition to the latter conclusion. In communication, whether we take a humanitarian, ethics of justice stance (for instance Christians, 1997, 2019) or a democratic, cosmopolitan ethical stance (for instance Ward, 2013, 2015), logic demands that nonhuman animals should also be included in the category of morally considerable beings. It follows from Christians‟ claim regarding the humanist ethical project that the suffering of nonhumans must matter to us. This is so if we stand by its four pillars: justice, truth-telling, human dignity and nonviolence. Nonhumans in general, and specifically in our case nonhumans living free in nature, are unjustly affected by human actions (causing them unnecessary suffering or adding suffering to natural harms). The truth of their situation deserves to be told and the violence they experience deserves to be reduced, whether for their own sake or for the sake of human dignity. As Lori Gruen puts it: “We disrespect our humanity when we act in inhuman ways towards non-persons, whatever their species” (2011, p. 58).

Even from contractualist ethical approaches, such as Ward‟s (2013), it follows that we cannot consistently deprive nonhuman animals of moral consideration, since protecting and increasing equality in democracies is the primary goal of this perspective. If the egalitarian principle of current liberal democracies is really put to work, it will forcibly lead media ethics towards morally considering other animals, as has already been pointed out by other contractualists in the literature (e.g., Rowlands, 1997).

3.2 Nonhuman Animals as Victims of Climate Change Who Deserve Equal Consideration

Most nonhuman animals living free in nature are sentient beings. Given that they not only endure natural harms but are also subjected to the effects of climate change, then, just like humans, they should be considered potential victims of anthropogenic global warming. In the previous section, this paper discussed why they deserve moral consideration. In this section, it is discussed how such consideration entails equal consideration when assessing the impacts of climate change in particular.

A number of positions in normative ethics currently assume the principle of equal consideration, as formulated by Singer (1979), following Bentham. This principle states that the equal interests of different individuals count the same, regardless of the individual attributes of those whose interests they are.

Thus, if a being has an interest not to suffer, her suffering must be accounted for just as it would be if it were the equal suffering of another individual. Two equal interests are two interests that are comparatively equally important to those who have them. Accordingly, an equal interest not to suffer is an interest of the same weight, corresponding to an instance of suffering of an equivalent intensity and duration.

Some may dispute that the interests of humans and nonhuman animals should count the same. They may claim that when making interspecies comparisons of suffering it is false that humans and other animals have an equal interest not to suffer. Due to human beings‟ higher cognitive capacities, so the argument may go, their suffering is much worse compared to that of nonhuman animals under similar circumstances. This objection misses the point, however. Whether humans suffer more than nonhuman animals under similar circumstances does not affect the claim that, when other animals suffer just as much as humans, their suffering should count the same. Moreover, while there are circumstances in which humans do suffer more than nonhuman animals, the opposite can also be true (e.g., Akhtar 2011).

It follows, then, that nonhuman animals living in nature being potentially harmed by the impacts of climate change must matter to us as well. Nevertheless, as stated above, this is not to deny that satisfying different individuals‟ interests not to suffer may sometimes require different actions by moral agents. In fact, when facing the same event, different individuals may not suffer equally. In this sense, being treated in the same way may not be required by the principle of equal consideration. Yet, and crucially, the principle of equal consideration is not what makes egalitarianism a distinct ethical theory. According to egalitarianism, the goal is not to reduce the total amount of suffering in society, since this still could result in some individuals leading miserable lives (if others could score very high in happiness because of that fact). Rather, the goal is to achieve the most equal distribution of whatever it is that makes life worth living, which, in practice, amounts to helping those in the worst situations (Horta, 2016, p. 125). This idea is also implicit in climate justice when defended for humans. However, if the view is to be applied consistently, it should also address existing inequalities between human and nonhuman animals. This requires paying attention to those nonhumans living in nature. As Horta reminds us, egalitarianism is a position that has gained growing support in moral and political philosophy in recent decades because many people oppose inequality and “think the worse off deserve special attention” (2016, p. 134). For Holtug & Lippert-Rasmussen, for instance, egalitarianism means to “have equal shares of goods such as resources or welfare, or perhaps equal access to, or opportunities to obtain, these goods” (2006, p. 2). Equality is a

complex notion, but a strong protest against inequality and in favor of the interests of the worse off is common to most definitions of it.

To conclude, (i) any position that accepts the principle of equal consideration must agree that it applies to human and nonhuman animals alike. Like humans, nonhuman animals have interests – though of course not all human and animal interests are the same. The interests a being has depend on the experiences it is capable of. Because both animals and humans are capable of feeling pain, for example, both have an equal interest in avoiding it. Appealing to species membership (speciesism) in order to exclude the consideration of nonhuman interests is as unjustified as appealing to race (racism), sex, gender (sexism) or higher cognitive capacities (ableism). Therefore, the suffering of sentient free-living animals in nature should be considered equal to that of human beings in similar circumstances. Furthermore, and (ii), if an egalitarian approach is to be applied, it does not only follow that speciesism must be rejected but also that we may often be required to give priority to nonhuman animals since they are worse off relative to human beings.

Again, this reasoning is not alien to media ethics. Critical media and communication scholars have been concerned about equality for a long time. Working from within the humanitarian and egalitarian frameworks, several lines of media research discuss the representation of human diversity and vulnerability (Chouliaraki, 2013; Christians, 2019; Lawrence & Tavernor, 2019; Paulmann, 2018; Shan & Christians, 2016; Ward, 2015). Humanitarian communication has successfully incorporated altruistic claims regarding equality, solidarity, care, rights protection or empathy for humans. Scholars have scrutinized all of these to highlight their faults and influence on society. Chouliaraky, for instance, has elaborated on "how the move from an objective representation of suffering as something separate from us that invites us to contemplate the condition of distant others towards a subjective representation of suffering as something inseparable from our own „truths" that invites contemplation on our own condition, is also a move from an ethics of pity to an ethics of irony" (2013, p. 3). Chouliarakis' criticism of the current humanitarian imaginary created by the media, what she calls the "ironic spectator", refers to an "impure or ambivalent" spectator shaped by a self-oriented morality, where doing good to others is no longer about "our common humanity and asks nothing back" but "about „how I feel?" and must, therefore, be rewarded by minor gratifications to the self" (p.3).

The current call by critical communication scholars for a (less selfish) reinvention of humanitarian communication and paying special attention to the representation of the worse off is an ethical appeal that cannot be consistently professed if we exclude from it nonhuman animals' suffering.

3.3 Intervention to Help Nonhuman Animals in Nature

If we agree that all sentient individuals, including nonhuman animals, are morally considerable, irrespective of their species or other alleged species-specific attributes, it follows that they ought to be helped whenever in need. This is true not only for nonhuman animals affected by global warming and victims of climate change, but for all free-living animals in general, since the reasons to help them are the same.

Even though some philosophical positions claim that humans have only negative duties toward other animals, in (human) ethics the idea that we also hold positive duties towards other humans is fairly widespread. That is, that we should help or benefit them whenever possible. If that is so, and speciesism is to be rejected, then we also have positive duties toward nonhuman animals. A number of authors have already argued for an obligation to intervene in nature to help nonhuman animals living there (for instance: Cunha, 2015; Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011; Faria, 2016; Faria, 2015; Horta, 2016; Nussbaum, 2006; Tomasik, 2015a).

Yet debates in animal ethics have predominantly focused on the reasons we may have to refrain from harming animals currently under human control. These are apparently good reasons. Human action causes significant harm to an appalling number of animals that come into existence only to experience the daily suffering and excruciating deaths associated with systemic animal exploitation. In contrast, the situation of free-living animals in nature has not been seen as so problematic. As a matter of fact, the belief that animal well-being is morally relevant has often been combined with the belief in a strong obligation of non-intervention in nature – in turn, usually grounded, to a greater or lesser extent, on an idyllic view of nature.

Objections to helping animals in nature based on a "laissez-faire intuition", according to which we should let nature be, are prevalent in the literature. Some of these are put forward by appealing to the nonexistence of morally relevant entanglements between human beings and free-living animals in order to justify simply letting them be (Palmer 2010, 2015; for criticism see Faria 2013, 2015). Others, while challenging the more traditional approaches to nature as a "flat moral landscape", have nevertheless been reluctant to accept more pervasive interventions in nature for the sake of nonhuman animals living in nature. According to these authors (most notably Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011), because nonhuman animals are part of separate and sovereign "communities", there is an obligation of non-interference, which implies a duty to preserve the ecosystems they inhabit (for criticism see Faria 2016). Another means of opposing intervention to help animals in nature is by claiming that it conflicts with environmentalist aims. However, most of us

accept that we ought to intervene in nature if the individuals in need were human beings. In fact, this is what we commonly do in those cases in which humans are victims of natural disasters (anthropogenic or not), irrespective of potential conflicts with environmentalist goals. It thus follows from a non-speciesist point of view, that the situation of free-living animals in need in their natural habitats should be equally perceived as object of moral concern.

Clearly, this is not to claim that humans should intervene in nature on a large scale to alleviate nonhuman suffering, but rather that we should do so whenever we can, provided that by helping one animal we do not, all things considered, worsen the situation for all animals affected. As a matter of fact, this is already done by some activists and organizations, often by providing animals with water and food, curing them of injuries and diseases, and helping to reduce or to keep their population numbers down with non-invasive birth control programs. Furthermore, we are already intervening in nature, though simply not for the best ethical aims, anthropogenic climate change probably being the best example.

Thus, this approach implies that whenever it is in our power to do so, and if the intervention is expected to bring about more benefits than harms for the animals involved, we have similar reasons to intervene in nature with the aim of helping nonhuman animals as we do to help humans. Furthermore, this approach supports the idea that the interests of nonhuman animals should be made a priority since, because of their many sources of harm and the colossal number of them (this is true either for animals living free in nature or for nonhuman animals exploited by humans; for some calculations regarding free-living animals in nature, see Tomasik, 2015b), they are the worse-off individuals.

This is a particularly relevant point for a fully egalitarian media ethics, since communication might play a decisive role in helping public opinion understand the suffering experienced by other animals in nature (anthropogenic or non-anthropogenic) and our corresponding duties towards them. In the following section, this paper discusses some practical consequences for media and communication ethics of representing the impacts of climate change on free-living animals in nature.

4. Media Ethics and the Impact of Climate Change on Free-Living Animals

Some media and language scholars sharing the core argument developed here – that nonhuman animals are morally considerable and that the media and communication need to play an active role in this change of paradigm – have produced recommendations and guidelines aimed at discussing anthropocentrism in the standard codes of communication practitioners (Dunayer, 2001; Freeman & Merskin, 2016; UPF-CAE, 2016).

This paper has added to these recommendations the need to include the rejection of speciesism in discussions of climate change, if we are to genuinely put a truly egalitarian approach into practice. Accordingly, communication practitioners should consider at least four crucial issues when dealing with the impact of climate change on free-living animals in nature:

- Avoiding any type of use, manipulation and harm on free-living animals and their habitats in communication practices.
- Depicting, not concealing and, if possible, emphasizing the real conditions of nonhuman animals in nature (by avoiding the idyllic-view bias) and the impact of global warming on them.
- Avoiding human-centered perspectives (anthropocentric representations) when referring to free-living nonhumans; that is, taking their interests into consideration or even making this a priority since they are so badly off.
- Using the appropriate language (neutral and objective but also respectful and honest) to as far as possible avoid delusive, euphemistic language like the one employed by the industries that exploit free-living animals (for entertainment, sports, tourism, drugs, etc.).

To date it has been commonly assumed that human beings should be given preferential moral consideration, if not absolute priority, over members of other species. However, this idea has been recurrently challenged from different normative viewpoints. At the core of all of these viewpoints is the principle of equal consideration of interests – i.e. the idea that if a being has an interest not to suffer, her suffering must be accounted for just as it would if it were the equal suffering of another individual. The rejection of speciesism necessarily follows from this principle. In addition, this paper argues that if egalitarianism is the adequate ethical approach to guide our behavior, as sustained by the main media ethics approaches, then we have further compelling arguments to apply a non-speciesist framework by giving priority to improving the situation of nonhuman animals – since they are comparatively the worse off. Under such approach, it is unjustified to inflict a substantial amount of harm on worse-off individuals in order to benefit the better-off. Thus, accordingly, human beings should reject all practices that contribute to aggravating the situation of non-human animals in nature as well as to improve their situation (in general and, in particular, in relation to the impact of climate change).

In short, what non-speciesism requires from media and communication ethics is to simply apply humanitarianism without discrimination. Today, it is commonly accepted that we need responsible media to help public opinion understand the daunting global problems of poverty, environmental damage and technological and economic inequalities. It is widely accepted that we need media and communication practitioners who are supportive of human rights and social justice. In the case of journalists, many see themselves as some kind of advocate who gives voice to the powerless – advocacy journalism is a genre of journalism that intentionally adopts a biased view towards those more in need. Communication executives at NGOs or governmental humanitarian branches have similar feelings and corporate social responsibility is a standard in advertising and public relations codes. It is thus widely agreed that it is wrong to take a neutral stance towards suffering when humans are involved. This is equally true of nonhumans – arguably the worse-off individuals – if we are to apply a truly egalitarian approach.

5. Conclusions

To conclude, this paper has argued that in discussions about climate change (i) similar interests – in particular, the interest not to suffer – have to be similarly accounted for, regardless of species membership, and (ii) described the reasons for the prevalence of nonhuman suffering in nature. It (iii) has concluded that, if we are to apply a non-discriminatory stance, all forms of speciesism are to be rejected. This implies helping nonhumans in nature as we do with human beings in similar circumstances, provided we can do so without causing greater harm. Our reasons are particularly strong if we adopt an egalitarian approach, since nonhumans living in nature are comparatively the worse-off individuals. Lastly, this paper has (iv) suggested that media and communication ethics are actually committed to these fundamental claims though fail to apply them because of prevalent speciesist attitudes. Accordingly, to contribute to a more realistic, accurate, and fair depiction of the impact of climate change, media ethics needs to embrace a non-speciecist stance by rejecting moral anthropocentrism.

Some might say that the paper goes too far in requesting intervention to help free-living nonhumans, considering the dominant tenets of the non-interventionist paradigm influenced by environmentalism and the idyllic view of nature. However, this is what follows from an impartial examination of the situation of nonhuman animals in nature and the rejection of all forms of discrimination.

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Notes

(1) We agree with Dunayer (2001) that *the wild* – and subsequent derivations as *wildlife* and *wild animals* – reflect a human-centered view that fosters a separation between *them*, the *savage*, and *us*, the *civilized*. We think this language endorses an illusory duality between culture and nature, which is at the core of speciesism [the speciesist ideology justifying the lack of humanitarian assistance in nature (and exploitation in general) of other animals]. We therefore avoid the term and replace it with more neutral concepts.

(2) We do not yet have decisive data to suggest that climate change is harmful for animals living in nature overall. Ultimately, our claim is that nonhuman interests should be taken into account when assessing the impact of climate change, regardless of whether its overall impact is negative, neutral or positive.

(3) We use "fishes" deliberately in order to emphasize the individuality of these animals.

(4) Environmental authors are probably the ones to blame for the original confusion between environmental ethics and animal ethics (the ethics of our treatment of other animals). Influential founders of environmental thinking like Callicott (1980) compared concern for nonhuman animals with environmental approaches in a very delusive way, and environmental communication authors like Corbett (2006) included animal rights in the list of environmental views. This is not consistent with reality, since the concern for nonhuman animals emerged as a separate public claim from the environmental movement (although some environmentalists could of course contribute to both fields) and, as an academic reflection, it emerged in relation to moral philosophers not concerned with environmental issues but with social justice (Singer, 1975; Regan, 1983).

(5) For a detailed discussion of the conceptual and normative issues surrounding anthropocentrism, see Faria & Paez, 2015.

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