



# Ethics

**How we value species at risk is ever more important on a stressed planet.**

CANADA'S *Species at Risk Act* includes a short opening clause that declares, "wildlife, in all its forms, has value in and of itself." The words appear only in the minimally enforceable preamble and their implications are not explained. Still, it is a welcome observation and maybe a small step towards a workable ethics for our time.

If wildlife has value beyond human utility, species are worth preserving even if they aren't good to eat, pleasing to observe or particularly useful in maintaining the integrity of ecological systems upon which humans depend. That's a cheerful idea. Surely we could use a little more respect for things beyond ourselves.

The catch is that "wildlife in all its forms" includes the malaria parasite, the polio virus and the invasive garlic mustard in the woods behind my house – wildlife that may have intrinsic value, but offend other priorities.

Malaria and polio are killers and crippers. Ecologically, they may once have helped control some human populations. Today, however, their effects mostly reduce capacities, divert resources and perhaps encourage higher birth rates, leading to ecological and human losses.

Garlic mustard has its place in Europe. But in Canada, it supplants indigenous flora, suppresses soil fungi and weakens native trees that need the fungi. The weight of my garlic mustard's intrinsic value depends on how it affects the larger socio-ecological system.

And so, an apparently simple moral point about the value of wildlife pushes us to see the ethical big picture – centred on the global need for socially just and

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ecologically sustainable relations.

Previous generations built their ethics for the smaller world they knew. Ours must apply to the full world we now have – our increasingly stressed biosphere, including its many diverse and interacting residents.

The main options are typically presented as human-centred or eco-centric ethics. These categories assume that the core ethical question is about who and what should be the beneficiaries of morally enlightened decisions. Conventional choices include family, tribe, class, gender, fellow believers, all humans, intelligent beings, attractive and useful species, ecosystems, and/or the whole biosphere – maybe also with obligations to one or more deities and extensions to ancestors and future generations.

In practice, nobody picks just one. Most people recognize several circles of beneficiaries but give them different status – valuing human life but putting their children first; respecting all wildlife, but having a particular fondness for the family dog.

In each case, the relevant moral decisions rest, at least implicitly, on judgments about what is in the best interests of the

favoured beneficiaries. In the old days of small groups of people living close to their land, perhaps many such judgments were reasonably well informed. Today, the world we need to understand is much bigger. Changes are happening much faster. The stakes are much higher. And all of the decision makers and all of the possibly valued beneficiaries, whatever their priority, are in it together. Each of us is stuck with the interrelations of all the human and non-human others on this planet.

"All ethics so far evolved," Aldo Leopold wrote over 60 years ago, "rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts." That may not be true of the history of ethics, but it is the only serious option today.

The ethical big-picture implications are unavoidably daunting. On a single, struggling planet, the practical gap between human and ecological interests has shrunk. Distinguishing among the beneficiaries is a little less important. But our obligation to understand and serve the common foundations of human and ecological interests is heavier.

In addition to the intrinsic value of wildlife, or any other particular beneficiaries, our ethics now must serve a global community of interdependent parts. 🌱

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For thoughtful insight on invasive species, see Brendon Larson's perspectives at [scholarship.org/uc/item/8366c0wq#page-1](https://scholarship.org/uc/item/8366c0wq#page-1).