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A contemporary relationship and handling of wild animals from a biological and animal ethics perspective.

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Increased abundance of wildlife in the cities

There is broad scientific consensus that mammals, birds, fishes and many invertebrates are fully susceptible to pain and capable of emotions. In addition, there is a new “capability approach” stressing animal skills (Nussbaum, 2023). Data from evolutionary biology and the cognitive and behavioral sciences confirm to what extent we previously had underestimated animal achievements or falsely categorized them (Huber, 2021).

Our improved comprehension in the area of animal ethics and animal cognitive skills should accelerate the ongoing debate on how science (knowledge) and ethical treatment (moral) of animals could go hand in hand.

Although there is broad societal consensus that animal suffering has to be prevented, wild animals in our cultural landscape are insufficiently addressed. The traditional categorization of animals into useful or harmful ones has equally become obsolete in this context as the differentiation into livestock, animals in research, pets, wildlife or “other” animals.

For several reasons, including habitat loss, global climate change, and food availability along with „urban gardening“ and „vertical farming“ initiatives, previously declared “wild” animals like foxes, wild boar and roe deer nowadays commonly inhabit our cities and metropolises. People in or around the big cities encounter them in surrounding parks or green spaces and “compete” for space while they spread almost uncontrollably. Contemporary and fair handling of these animals have thus become very timely and has advanced to a whole of society endeavor. Our presentation will address practicable suggestions towards a better relationship with animals and better handling under consideration of modern scientific ethological data.

Re-thinking of wildlife management beyond hunting

Modern wildlife management is a complex control procedure requiring evidence based expert knowledge at all levels. Using evolutionary biological and ethical arguments, a better coexistence of humans and wildlife in harmony with climate protection measures and sustainable living criteria could be reached. More and more wildlife are populating urban areas, presumably due to identifying more attractive habitats than in the intensively cultivated landscape. Apart from a warmer climate during winter (2-4° higher than in the surrounding environments), urban areas are more attractive to wild animals due to a higher structural variety and even fewer persecution by predators (Reichholf, 2022).

There are some judicial differences between animal taxa according to their economic value for humans. Huntible wildlife versus not hunted species, endemic species vs. neobiota and finally, different laws regulate species conservation, hunting, invasive species etc. From a contemporary ethical perspective, the legal differentiation is no longer timely since *all* animals deserve conservation and protection and the traditional simplified categorization of animals into harmful and useful ones has become obsolete.

Demand for improved attending to veterinary medical needs

Thus, the higher wildlife densities in urban areas together with a higher societal demand for animal welfare and care are creating a need for more intensive research in the veterinary field. We propose that veterinary scientists and veterinarians are preparing for an increased demand for clinical treatment of urban wildlife. Future initiatives should aim at improved subject specific trainings for practicing and prospective veterinary professionals. Through direct collaboration and round tables, students, professionals and scientists have to team up with ecologists and landscape architects and urban planners to develop future concepts for a peaceful coexistence between urban wildlife populations and humans.

Not only we foresee substantial research demand in the area of improved therapeutical approaches and preventive measures for different infectious diseases in wildlife species. Further, veterinary experts have to be involved in developing and testing innovative approaches to control population growth of some wildlife species without surgical means or without removing healthy individuals from the population. Next, urban citizens have to be trained better than ever before in how share their space with wildlife species and under when to take caution and how to adjust leisure time activities to breeding attempts among wildlife species.

Any improved management of wildlife involving ecologists, veterinarians and urban infrastructure specialists will not only serve the people, but will mainly benefit mammals and birds, insects and all other animals in and around big cities. While city suburbs are attractive to many people not least due to the proximity to nature and wildlife, veterinary professionals have a large responsibility in mediating between the interests of animals and humans to the extent that suffering and pain are to be excluded. To be implemented measures in this respect include a modern, science- based management reproduction plan, effective relocation projects and impactful and non-invasive (e.g. orally administered) vaccinations. These actions will require research and collaboration but will prevent tensions and conflicts in urban areas.

A good case study for an evidence based, collaborative biodiversity management comes from the City of Vienna, where rescue work and first aid for wildlife animals are professionally performed in all districts along with a “baby flap” for found and injured animals ensuring that citizens can engage in low-threshold animal protection, while at the same time ensuring that experts are involved and other stakeholders are not upset.

In conclusion, we are stating that any previously used categorization into wild-, domesticated, research or non-human animals is to be abolished and should not relate to the veterinary care that animals are receiving. Individual veterinary treatment should have priority over the protection of species so that every animal has to be treated in the best possible way.

A round table gathering veterinarians, ecologists, urban and landscape planners and biodiversity specialists should enable fair and modern co-existence of animals and humans in the Anthropocene while limiting wildlife killing to cases of euthanasia and ultima-ratio hunt.

References

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