

Economic and environmental trends back animal rights

By Wayne Visser

There could not be a more relevant time in South Africa to write about animal rights. The last few weeks have seen the lid being lifted on "canned lion hunting" in private game parks, and the controversial proposals being forwarded at the CITES Convention in Zimbabwe for relaxing the ban on international trade in ivory and rhino-horn. These issues have brought animal rights centre stage and highlighted some of the complexities involved in the debate, among them the influence of cultural values on differing perspectives, the uncomfortable trade-offs between human rights and animal rights, the diverse environmental issues involved, and the influence of economics on shaping the outcome of the debate.

Let's take environmental issues, for example. Unfortunately, in Africa, because of historical competition for resources between human development and animal protection and conservation, as well as pressures for consumptive use of animals to generate income to combat poverty, animal rights and environmental groups have often found themselves in opposing camps. This is not always the case, particularly in many Western countries.

In much of the Anglo-Saxon world, there seems to have emerged an implicit alliance between environmental and animal rights organisations. There is a good rationale for this supportive relationship. Not only are they both struggling to further "non-human rights", often against similar powerful adversaries (e.g. some multinationals), but the meat industry arguably has considerable negative environmental impacts. For example (1):

- It takes 25,000 gallons of water to produce one pound of meat, but only takes 25 gallons of water to produce a pound of wheat.
- Cattle and sheep grazing has caused soil erosion and desertification in many areas as well as competition for native species.
- Each animal-free diet saves 1 acre of forest per year.

Although the relationship of animal rights with economics is a more complex one, three trends seem to indicate a positive direction. The first is an increasing acknowledgement and measurement of the "externalities" (economic jargon for "indirect cost to society or the environment") of various kinds of economic activity. The meat industry in the US is a good example. It is estimated (2) that the annual medical outlays and productivity losses

for various meat-diet-related diseases is \$300 billion, not to mention 1.67 million deaths annually. Making the associated companies pay for these "social costs" will increasingly bring their economic viability into question.

A complementary trend is the growth of "environment and animal friendly" markets world-wide. For example (3), in the US over the last five years, "natural product" sales (including vegetarian foods and cruelty-free cosmetics) have grown at a 20% annual rate, compared to only 3% to 5% for major food items of mainstream grocers. The total revenues for this market in 1996 were estimated at \$17 billion and are expected to exceed \$30 billion by the year 2000. This trend of ethical consumerism also reduces the economic opportunities and profitability of exploitative industries.

Lastly, with the the emerging discipline of environmental economics, the focus has shifted from exploiting animals indiscriminately (i.e. giving them zero value) to trying to estimate their "total economic value" (TEV). While for the most part this entails assessing "direct and indirect use values" which may still include treating animals as commodities, in many cases it has resulted in the protection and more sustainable management of species, especially due to the growing economic value of eco-tourism.

More important from an animal rights perspective is the argument that TEV must also include "existence or intrinsic value". This is the value that an animal, species or ecosystem has which is independent from its human-centred "use values", and is based simply on its inherent right to existence. While there is a further debate about whether it is possible or desirable to place an economic value on Nature, the fact that this "life value" is being recognised is a good omen for the future.

Quotes:

"The day will come when men such as I will look upon the murder of animals the way they now look upon the murder of men." - Leonardo Da Vinci

Sources:

- (1) The Activist House website
(<http://wsrv.clas.virginia.edu/~mev9e/activist/animals.html>)
- (2) "The American Diet", USDA ERS, Agriculture Information Bulletin #7(11), February 1995.
- (3) "Natural products a 'sprouting' industry", Business Ethics, March/April 1997.

Source:

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