

# Animals, Ethics and Trade

## THE CHALLENGE OF ANIMAL SENTIENCE

*Edited by Jacky Turner and Joyce D'Silva*

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- The use of animals for meat, for hide, for their labour and in laboratories has been justified with the assumption that unlike humans, animals aren't fully sentient beings.
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# 19

## Sustainable Development and Animal Welfare: The Neglected Dimension

*Kate Rawles*

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### **Sustainable development – two problems**

The idea that societies need to develop in ways that are sustainable is – in theory at least – almost universally endorsed. Since the concept first came to prominence at the 1992 United Nations' Conference on Environment and Development – better known as the Rio Conference or Earth Summit – 'sustainable development' has become a guiding policy principle across the world. But the language and concept of sustainable development is definitely a double-edged sword.

It *can* be extremely constructive. For example, it has shown us that poverty and environmental degradation are not separate, competing, concerns, but profoundly interrelated. And it confronts us with the imperative need for humans to learn to live within the carrying capacity of our planet. But there are downsides. I want to focus on two of these. The first is that sustainable development is sometimes used – or misused – to mean economic growth that can continue indefinitely. More generally, it can be used – or misused – in a very uncritical way in relation to western, industrialized paradigms of development. In other words, sustainable development can be a euphemism for business as usual. The second problem is that it has systematically neglected animal welfare. I want to argue that these two issues are, in various ways, interconnected – and that both need to be addressed if sustainable development is to be a constructive and worthwhile goal.

### **The sustainability triangle**

I will begin with the second of these two problems, and by raising a question. In the vast body of sustainable development theory and policy, why has concern with animal welfare been so consistently neglected? Part of the answer relates

to the way the main aims of sustainable development are characterized. Sustainable development – and this is one of its strengths – embraces a range of different goals. These are often summarized in various versions of the ‘sustainability triangle’, with social justice, economic development and environmental protection (or similar) in each of the corners. (See Figure 19.1)

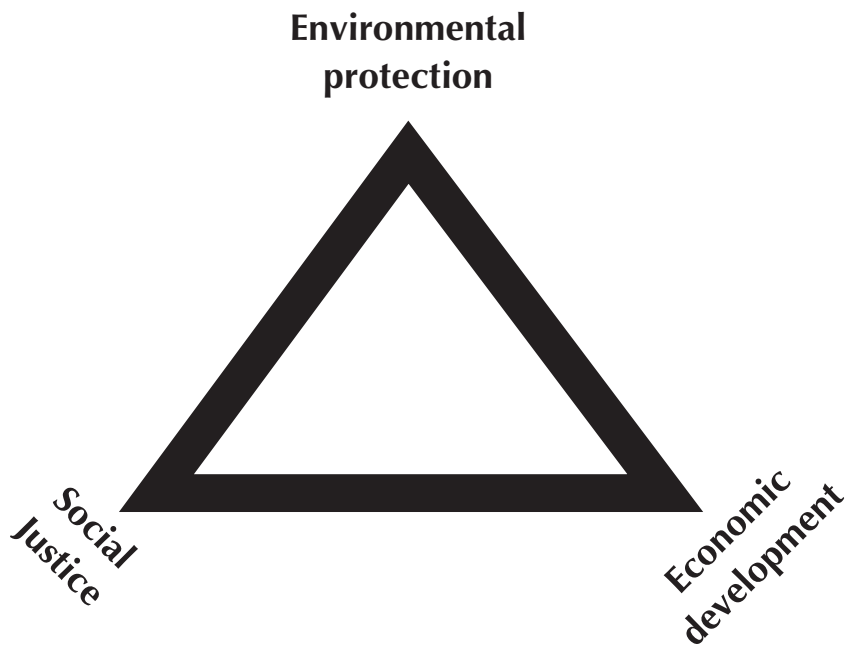


Figure 19.1 *The sustainability triangle*

None of these corners readily encompass animal welfare concerns. Social justice typically refers to justice within human societies rather than to justice across species. Economic development is pursued primarily as a means to enhancing *human* quality of life. The environmental protection corner is probably the best candidate, but even here, animal welfare does not really fit. The primary focus of environmental protection is with species, habitats, ecosystems etc, in other words, with ecological ‘collectives’ of various kinds. By contrast, the primary focus of animal welfare is with individuals. Moreover, whereas the environmental movement is typically concerned with looking after natural or semi-natural habitats, systems and processes, animal welfare is concerned with all sentient animals, including domesticated ones (Rawles, 1997). So, if the goals of sustainable development are characterized in the form of this kind of triangle, animal welfare will almost inevitably be neglected. It is not naturally included under the social justice or economic development corners. And, while environ-

mental protection seems the most likely candidate, environmental movements and animal welfare movements in fact have a very different focus.

### **Animal welfare as ‘unscientific’**

Worse than this, there can be downright resistance to including animal welfare as part of the environmental agenda. This is another part of the answer to our question. Worrying about the treatment of individual domestic animals can be seen as suspect. It is irrelevant from a species conservation perspective. It may be branded sentimental. And of course there is a long legacy of scepticism within (some) scientific communities about animals even *having* subjective mental states. This scepticism is much less prevalent now, but in the past it has tended to support the view that concern with animal welfare – which after all assumes that animals can experience not only subjective mental states but particular kinds of mental states, including unpleasant ones – must be both anthropomorphic and unscientific. Given that many of the different elements within the environmental movement draw authority from science, being associated with animal welfare might, in the past at least, have been resisted for fear of a loss of credibility.

I think there may still be a similar worry from a sustainable development perspective. Sustainable development is strongly associated with environmental issues and is (rightly) informed by science and scientific approaches in a range of ways. It, too, draws a deal of credibility from its links with scientific methods and evidence. Indeed, it is sometimes presented as exclusively concerned with the scientific, rational, objective and value-free project of establishing the earth’s limits, and then figuring out how we can live within them. Presenting it in this way can appear to make the need for sustainable development a simple logical deduction from certain facts about the world, and therefore indisputable. From this perspective, an ethical concern with how we treat individual domestic animals is not only (allegedly!) irrelevant but might be seen as weakening the apparently value-free, hard-nosed, objective credibility of sustainable development, when presented in this way.

### **Animal welfare – threatening to business as usual**

So far, then, I’ve suggested that the sustainability triangle, and the fear of being perceived as ‘unscientific’, may explain why concern with animal welfare has been neglected within the sustainable development agenda. A final part of the answer is that animal welfare can be perceived as threatening to business as usual. This is particularly true of business within the agri-industry sector, a sector with turnovers in the billions and one that is still expanding. The Worldwatch Institute, for example, says that:

Global meat production has increased more than fivefold since 1950, and factory farming is the fastest growing method of animal

production worldwide. Industrial systems are responsible for 74 per cent of the world's total poultry products, 50 per cent of pork production, 43 per cent of the beef, and 68 per cent of the eggs.

(Worldwatch Institute, 2004)

Industrial farming systems are very big business. They are also, of course, a main focus of animal welfare concerns, and not just in the sense that there may be particular cases of poor husbandry. Beyond a certain point, the industrialization and intensification of animal husbandry systems is, arguably, *inherently* incompatible with good welfare for the animals reared within them. Taking animal welfare seriously, therefore, amounts to a significant challenge to this form of agri-business.

In general, then, given the way that sustainable development is often characterized, the relative exclusion of animal welfare from the sustainability agenda actually has a certain sort of logic, and can certainly be understood. There is an additional dimension to this logic if sustainable development is understood as business as usual or as economic growth that can be continued indefinitely. In this case, animal welfare concerns are not only different from the main concerns of sustainable development, but threatening to them.

### **Business as usual – profoundly inadequate**

I began this chapter with the suggestion that two downsides to the concept of sustainable development are the neglect of animal welfare and the possibility of presenting sustainable development merely as a euphemism for business as usual. That concern for animal welfare can be seen as a threat to business as usual indicates where the two problems intersect – and how they might be solved. Absolutely central to this resolution is the recognition that sustainable development *cannot* be about business as usual. Economic growth cannot continue indefinitely. It is inevitably constrained by ecological limits such as the earth's finite capacity to provide the resources that fuel economic growth, and to absorb the pollution that resource consumption generates. Moreover, the business as usual model is underpinned by a particular way of understanding the concepts of 'development', 'progress' and 'success' that is highly problematic. These concepts, as they are currently understood in the industrialized worlds, support ways of life that are environmentally destructive and that cannot be enjoyed by everyone – in other words, ways of life that are environmentally and socially *unsustainable*. So these concepts in conjunction with a bit of technological efficiency cannot lead us to sustainability.

The situation can be summarized like this. First, highly industrialized, consumer-based societies and lifestyles – held to be developed, successful and progressive – have an enormous negative impact on the environment. This manifests as a range of environmental problems, including species extinction, climate change, other forms of pollution and so on. Secondly, these lifestyles are

currently enjoyed only by a minority of the world's human population. Thirdly, the majority who don't have this lifestyle would, on the whole, like it. And fourthly, this section of the population is increasing in number. So we have a minority living a privileged, and damaging, way of life, and a majority aspiring to it. But if everyone on earth were to live in 'middle class comfort' then, by 2020, we would need three planet earths (WWF, 2004).

### **One-planet choices and rethinking our values**

The stark choices that this summary presents us with also makes clear why sustainable development is not, fundamentally, a value-free, scientific challenge to do with establishing the earth's limits and harnessing efficient technology to allow us to live within them. Sustainable development is fundamentally about our social values. Consider the choices. We could continue as we are, a route that seems certain to lead to environmental collapse. We could endeavour to restrict 'development' to a minority of the human population. Even leaving ethical concerns aside, this route seems certain to lead to social collapse, or at least to the exacerbation of social instability and violent protest. Or, we could try to redefine 'development', 'success' and 'progress' in ways that, when put into practice, would offer quality of life for all, compatible with protecting our environment. This third option means rethinking what we currently *mean* by 'quality of life' as well as by 'success', 'progress' and 'development'. In other words, *accepting the challenge of sustainable development means rethinking our values*. In particular, it means critically reassessing the values and priorities that underpin modern, industrialized societies and lifestyles.

This is not an anti-modern, back-to-the-caves point of view. There are, of course, many wonderful things about modern industrialized societies and ways of living. However, there are also some major insanities. Conjure, here, your own most powerful images of waste, pollution, human degradation, excessive consumption, human poverty and environmental damage. One in five people, currently, suffer malnutrition and about the same number – more than one billion people – do not have access to clean drinking water. The phenomena of conspicuous consumption, junk food and obesity 'epidemics' exist in conjunction with this. The lives of the economically privileged global minority are far from invariably richly fulfilled. I think it was Peter Singer who wrote that we are destroying the planet . . . for beef burgers. Taken literally, of course, this is too simplistic. But, as a metaphor for the most problematic aspects of industrialized societies, it is extremely telling.

### **Sustainable development and ethically decent societies**

So, a central challenge of sustainable development is fundamentally a values-based one. It is about reassessing and rethinking the values that underpin western, industrialized notions of development, progress and success. And it is

about articulating our vision, or visions, of an ethically decent society. As a minimum, this must be one in which *all* people, rather than just a minority, are enabled to achieve a basic quality of life; and one in which the non-human world is respected and looked after. Part of this respect and looking after involves acknowledging that the resources we take from our planet are not infinite and need to be used wisely – sustainably. But part of respect involves going beyond this to acknowledge that the living world is not just a set of resources for the benefit of one species. Of course we are bound to use the environment, animals and people as resources in many and various ways. We cannot avoid this. But seeing the environment *purely* as a set of resources – the resource view – fails, at a theoretical level, to acknowledge the value that other forms of life and living systems have in their own right. More importantly, the resource view fails in practice, in that it underpins the exploitation of people, the environment and animals. This is where we reconnect with animal welfare. The idea of an ethically decent society is simply not compatible with a society that systematically treats sentient animals in its care *merely as things*. The resource view in this context is encapsulated in this often-quoted claim from *Farmer and Stockbreeder* (1982):

The modern layer, is after all, only a very efficient converting machine, changing the raw material – feedingstuffs – into the finished product – the egg – less, of course, maintenance requirements.

It is this attitude that has led to the animal welfare atrocities associated with many intensive agricultural systems. And it is this same attitude that lies at the heart of the problem with the business as usual approach to sustainability and, arguably, at the heart of the problem with modern industrialized societies – the tendency to see the world and everything in it primarily as a set of resources to service economic development, and the inappropriate prioritization of economic development *above* social justice and *above* environmental protection.

## Conclusions

In sum, there are many points that could be made about the ways in which industrialized, intensive husbandry systems, a key source of animal welfare issues and concerns, are in fact also unsustainable. Examples would include their reliance on very high rates of energy consumption, low human employment, high rates of pollution and so on. This in itself provides a powerful argument against them. But I've chosen to focus here on the deeper links between sustainable development and animal welfare. Three main conclusions, I believe, follow.

First, I have argued that the sustainability triangle will not naturally accommodate animal welfare concerns. My suggestion is that, rather than trying to force such accommodation, we turn the triangle into a diamond, with animal welfare as the fourth corner (see Figure 19.3). In my view, sustainable development



Figure 19.2 *The battery cage for egg production*

understood and promoted in a form that explicitly acknowledges the importance of animal welfare would be a richer and more adequate concept in both theory and practice.

Secondly, I have argued that sustainable development is badly misrepresented when it is understood as giving priority to the economic corner of the triangle – or diamond – and when it supports, rather than challenges, the dominant understandings of ‘development’, ‘progress’ and ‘success’. These concepts, and the general prioritization of economic over other concerns, have contributed in no small way to the social and environmentally unsustainable status quo. Acknowledging this reveals that the real challenge of sustainable development is about rethinking the values and priorities that underpin modern industrialized societies, and about developing our visions of what an ethically decent society would involve.

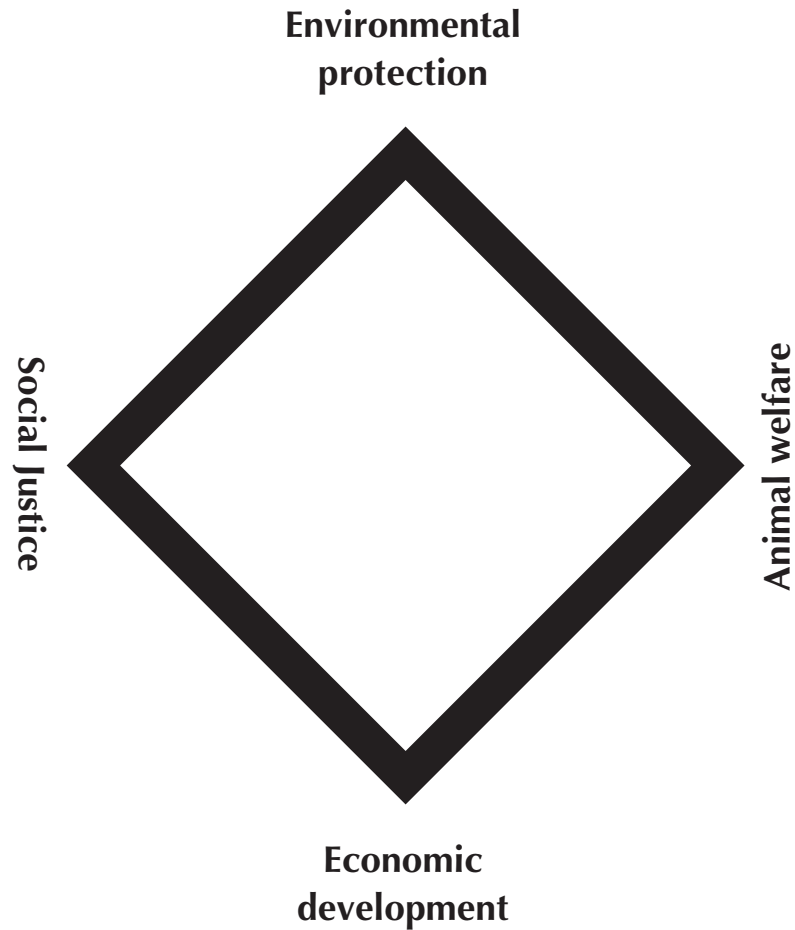


Figure 19.3 *The sustainability diamond*

Thirdly, I have suggested that such visions must include a rejection of an exclusively resource-based approach to the environment, people *and* animals – and that this brings animal welfare into the heart of the sustainability agenda at its best. Respect for sentient animals is neither sentimental nor unscientific. Rather, respect for sentient animals reflects compassion that is rooted in a scientifically informed understanding of how other animals actually experience the world – including the worlds that we impose on them. We should not be sheepish about being compassionate. Compassion for others, and resistance to using others – human or non-human – merely as resources, is a fundamental value that underpins sustainable development in its fullest, most constructive

sense. In my view, this is the only sense of sustainable development worth fighting for. Translating this understanding into real practical change is undoubtedly amongst the most important and urgent challenges we face.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to Martin Chester for the design of the sustainability diamond.

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