

Pragmatically speaking, it is important to look beyond the value orientation to the root causes of a conflict, and to define actions needed to deal with these. Through debate, causality is often impugned because the focus on value orientations and beliefs and take up all the attention and energy. The root cause remains a standing item, unaddressed and hardly given any thought as the protagonists commit themselves entirely to defending their positions. Ultimately it is the process to decide upon remedial action that bends and shapes the pure ethics of either side into usable strategies. In the case of the tahrs, it appears that both the cause of the problem and the subsequent solution are under dispute. Deeper reflection forces one to conclude that there is more at stake here than just the tahrs.

Predictably, in many of these debates it is not only issues of principle that are at stake; institutional dynamics, and attempts to exercise some form of hegemony over public opinion also come into play. Principles, or moral arguments, constitute one aspect of the debate, but institutional profile and hegemony always accompany these, and in practice they are very difficult to divorce from the moral and ethical issues at hand. Of course, a value gains more power with more adherents, and institutions and agencies are created expressly to encourage a larger following to this end. In their normative forms, ethical notions exist as statements of values or intents. In praxis, when issues of institutional power are involved, other factors and interests automatically get mixed in with the otherwise pristine ethical standpoints. Nonetheless, we are forced to live with these multiple interests when dealing with issues of public concern.

One could also argue that party politics and allegiances play roles in shaping the ethical discourse and outcome. However, this is an area that very few ethicist like to delve into because it brings out the complexity of interests which go beyond abstract notions of values into real-politik. These interest are about power and influence. Pragmatists, I think, have a better appreciation of the nature of power and its ability to resonate through that which would ordinarily just be about beliefs and all noble things humans aspire to.

The views expressed here are not that of the IUCN, but the opinion of the author(s)

IUCN

1286 South Road
PO Box 11536
Hatfield
Pretoria
Tel: 012 362-6980
Fax: 012 362-6990

The World Conservation Union
IUCN-South Africa Country Office

Hatfield
Pretoria
0028

POLICY THINK TANK SERIES
NO. 18

The Himalayan tahrs and the ethics of culling

Saliem Fakir, IUCN Policy Think Tank No.18

April 2002

The Himalayan tahrs are not indigenous to South Africa, and found themselves quite by accident amongst the animal and plant variety of the Cape National Park. The tahr is an exotic species; what some in the conservation field would characterise as an unwelcome invasive alien. The Himalayan tahr (*Hemitragus jemlahicus*) is a close relative of the goat, which is native to parts of Asia. It is said that the tahrs were first brought to South Africa as zoo animals, and that a herd escaped from a local zoo in Cape Town in the 1930s. Current estimates put the figure of the Himalayan tahr population that escaped to be around 1000 or so.

For conservation managers trying to keep the Cape floral kingdom free and untainted from invasive alien species, the tahrs are a pest that should be counted and culled for the greater interests of biodiversity. To animal rights groups, the tahrs are yet another symbol of their cause, and they draw the battle lines very clearly on this issue. Both sides take their tenets and positions seriously, and both rely to an extent on passionate zeal to defend their somewhat religious stances. There is also a certain kind of machismo and self-righteousness on both sides which effuses the discussions. A sensible discussion that should lead to greater wisdom rather than greater anger is usually impossible as the dialogue takes the form of screams, howls and scrambles for attention.

IUCN

The World Conservation Union

The pertinent point here is not whether to suppress multiple views or interest, but how to manage them. Is that not the essence of democracy?

This piece is really an attempt to tackle the complex ethical excursions our minds have to take in order to determine the verdict of right or wrong, and to discern whether the decisions we take are sound and conform to some level of consistency. For the time being, let us set specific opinions aside, and focus instead on the process that brings one to a certain opinion. I will come to the issue of ethical considerations and processes later. The need for emphasis on process is based on an observation that our society is so immersed in the Platonic tradition that we believe that “the truth” exists in a pure form, and that it is accessible to us (that is, we are attached to the idea that between two protagonists, one or the other must possess the truth). All the same, debaters always argue for that which accords with their general interests, sometimes even – arguably – bending their initial moral arguments to fit within this framework. So let us first examine some of the pure ethical considerations inherent in the tahr issue.

Conservationists take a rather anthropocentric and utilitarian view of life. Animals are not generally recognised as sentient beings, and even if they were, culling would still be argued for in that the culling of a small group of ‘foreign’ species is necessary for the long-term sustenance of other ‘sentient’ species, and indeed the entire eco-system. This kind of utilitarianism has its weaknesses. One of the major weaknesses lies in the fact that it places emphasis on the consequences of actions rather than the values that inform those actions (although many utilitarians would argue otherwise!). Another utilitarian ethical stance claims that necessity always dictates the means, i.e. one must choose between the lesser of two evils. This must be done in order to regain some balance in an effort to serve the larger good of all plants, animals, and humans. So it would seem that the animal rights perspective is not only opposed to the actions of the conservationist, but to their utilitarian values as well.

Let us then assume, for the sake of argument, that the tahrs are found to be so numerous that they cause major upsets and imbalances in the ecosystem. These would be apparent not just in fancy theories of ecosystem management, but in the visible pain and death of other animals (to use Singer’s criteria of pain and suffering), and the destruction of plants (by the way, I wonder if Singer has

considered the minority of people who also regards insects and plants as sentient beings? What would his opinion be regarding these biological beings in our midst?). In such a case, if left to their own devices, the tahrs would lead us into an even more perilous situation. If not removed, nor their numbers reduced, other animals, plants, and insects would experience increasing discomfort, deep suffering, and then ultimately death and possible extinction. This situation would generate dire straits requiring concerted action to reduce the impact. Further suffering would lead to moral crises, forcing us to act in order to remedy the situation.

Because of what the above would lead to – both for individual sentient beings, and the overall eco-system - to take no action would be against the moral stance of both parties. Even if both parties agree on the need for action, the action itself needs to be consistent with their value orientations. Hence, the solution to the problem is now mediated through the framework of the two value systems. It is through the process of compromising these pure ethical systems in order to reach a workable strategy for remedial action that tensions arise. Even in such a crises situation however, it does not appear that any suggestions or solutions from one party would be entirely acceptable to the other. How, then, to move forward?

The party which provides no reasonable solution for discussion is batting in the abstract, and certainly cannot take the lead just by the re-enunciation of a value. Clearly, in our hypothetical case, pure value alone will lead to death or suffering. This in itself jeopardises the good intent of the moral precepts, and one is left to choose between the lesser of two evils. Where there are solutions tabled, they need to be weighted against certain criteria, so that the most practical and least harmful action is taken. It may be the case that the intervention proposed does not fit snugly with either of the absolutist positions. As is usually the case, two parties at odds with each other often only reach consensus on actions that do not meet either of their purest criteria, but lie somewhere in between.

If some intervention is to be taken to prevent the future deaths of more plants and animals here, it will have to be carried out by humans, given that there are no natural predators in this case. Humans are the only life form with sufficient power to remove the tahrs from their current situation. Only humans can represent the interests of the other beings in the tahrs’ environment who cannot possibly rid themselves of the innocent competitiveness of the tahrs.

The utilitarian view argues for the nobility of the common good - a sort of majoritarianism – and this principle becomes more difficult and fuzzy when dealing with multi-cultural societies and competing interests. Therefore, we must deal with the issue of sufficient and adequate representation of the relevant groups and values. The formal value system is meant to be embodied by the State, and extra-legal values and interests are represented by private and civil society groups, i.e. those outside the control or domain of the State. Often these formal and extra-legal systems are at odds with each other. This is certainly true in the case of the tahrs.

Furthermore, there is the question of what constitutes the ‘good’. Singer is right, this gets us into trouble as the concepts of ‘good’ and ‘common’ become very complicated. Who really has the objectivity to represent all concerned interests, as well as the power to make decisions stick?

It is the preference of Singer that we not follow the interest of realpolitik, but that which appeals to our highest moral sense. In this case, the interests are not political, but merely focused on the avoidance of pain and suffering. At the abstract level this is easy, but realistically humans are political beings as well as moral beings. When it comes to processing moral issues, it is by taking into account political interests that we are led to the dilemma of what to regard as a legitimate interest, and whether all interests can be processed with the level of dexterity required to ensure that interest based cases are heard as such. It is here that Singer’s thesis falls short, as he does not factor in issues of power; political or otherwise.

Despite Singer’s arguments that extraneous features such as language and reason are not excuses for distinction between humans and other animals - that animals, by dint of suffering pain like humans, share a common interest with us and hence we are equal - humans do exhibit power over other animals. Because it influences how different species survive on this planet, human power cannot be ignored. While we may be equal in some ways, we are not equal in power. Such distinctions are very real, and do give some interests more advantages than others.

The acquisition of power is largely a result of human foxiness, and having the ability to convert thoughts and intelligence into material products that enable the transformation of nature and the environment. It does not matter in the end what philosophical arguments say about the equalness of our nature because in reality, power - which at present is the monopoly of humans - transforms the world we live in. Let us also extend this to the fact that in many cases power is also used to subjugate other humans, as some groups of humans have more power than others. In pure abstract and rational terms we are all equal, and so one could talk about a common set of universal values, but in reality humans are unequal amongst themselves and have the ability to obliterate other species.

Despite any moral or idealistic arguments to the contrary, ultimately the nature of power is only mediated through conflict between different contending interests who challenge each other in the acquisition of the instruments of power. Because it is central to their ability to distinguish themselves from others, humans clamour for power. And, because those in power are likely to suffer from the illusion that they are God-like or all powerful, ethical decisions need to be taken by them with the very nature of power in mind.

We all have value orientations, and these are necessary to inform our actions. It is not so much the value orientations that are at issue here, but the conduct of those who hold such values. Often the tussle for power and/or to ensure a certain value is adhered to take/s on fascistic overtones. The real issues can be lost in this clamour, resulting in more harm than good for the protagonists and their arguments.

We cannot separate pure abstract values from the influence and interest of power as power shapes the real-politik of ethical outcomes. Hence, to ensure an ethical outcome, decision-making processes must allow a fair chance for give and take on both sides. The emphasis on process is currently being missed with regard to the issue of the tahrs. As I have articulated before, a pragmatic process is necessary in order to move away from our immersion in Platonic ideals, as these offer only the false promise of fool-proof maps which will lead us to ethical bliss.

The process in itself should enshrine an ethic that recognises the differences in power between the groups that make up our multi-cultural society. This is necessary because ultimately, non-humans depend on the fairness of human

mediation for the preservation of their own sanctuary. It is also in recognition of the fact that representation by proxy is not real representation. There is a lot of this going around in South Africa, where those who have resources often tend to project the view that they represent many more than themselves.

A fair process can be far more profound than the final decision, as it ensures that everybody who has a view is being heard and treated equally. The need to aggressively express and defend opinions may be merely the reflection of a bad process. That is, when a process is genuinely disempowering, a natural reaction is to make up for this by over-asserting oneself. Therefore, the emotional element may be due less to fundamentalist views and more because the protagonists feel that they are not been given a chance to be heard.

In dealing with the tahrs the focus should be less on achieving a purely ethical decision, and more on ensuring that a fair and pragmatic decision-making process is followed. Such a process can only exist if the following elements are in place:

1. Ensuring that there is a commitment to finding a solution rather than winning a view.
2. Ensuring independent scientific opinion (supported by both parties) to identify the cause of the problem; or, where evidence is produced by one party, ensuring that the opposing party has been given sufficient time to examine it.
3. Ensuring there is a process whereby consensus can be reached as regards the identification of the cause(s).
4. Ensuring that there is an adequate process in place that allows sufficient tabling of options to deal with the cause, with their associated costs. These options should include both short-term and long-term solutions.
5. Monitoring of the actions of the various parties after agreement has been reached.