Everyday Ethics

Comments on the dilemma in the April issue: ‘Giraffes’ greater good?’

The dilemma in the April issue dealt with a young healthy giraffe that was genetically similar to other captive giraffes. The zoo’s trustees had to decide whether to euthanase the animal to free up resources for a more genetically distinct animal (In Practice, April 2014, volume 36, pages 214–215). Ian Sayers pointed out that, as a result of loss of natural habitat, zoos’ breeding programmes are needed to try and preserve the diversity of species. However, they also have limited finances, so a judicious use of funds is necessary. Although, he believed that the ideal solution would be to stop encroachment on natural habitats, rendering zoos unnecessary, euthanasia might be the best option in this case.

If preserving the diversity of species was the true role of zoos, their collections would consist mainly of endangered species. According to the Born Free Foundation, only 13 per cent of species kept in zoos are threatened. What is more, the giraffe is not one of them.

Modern zoos are centres of entertainment, education and they are also profit-making enterprises. Are we certain that a profit motive does not contribute to the procurement of cute baby animals to draw in the crowds, which can be disposed of once their purpose has been served? This situation is different to the euthanasia of surplus dogs at a rehoming centre, which would be involved in rigorous efforts to avoid the reproduction of surplus animals, rather than actually contributing to it.

Is killing a healthy animal potentially ethically problematic? Death might not be a ‘welfare issue’; it is possible to kill an animal without it being aware of the process. Nevertheless, an ethical issue remains. Most people would agree that killing a person humanely is an ethical issue, but can such ethical problems also apply to killing other species or are there moral distinctions to be made?

What is the moral worth of the giraffe? Is it merely of instrumental worth: a resource drawing crowds in a profitable zoo or a repository of genes within a population? Perhaps it possesses an intrinsic worth, as a sentient being. If there is any such thing as intrinsic worth, it seems that sentence is the source of it and that individuals are the bearers of it. Collections of individuals (eg, species, ecosystems) are not sentient and, inasmuch as they possess moral worth, it is an instrumental worth which relates back to their constituent individuals. This does not mean that killing an individual sentient being is always wrong, but there should be a strong presumption against doing it on behalf of a highly putative gain to some future ecosystem, particularly when motives are mixed.

Perhaps the lesson zoos offer is that the natural world consists of items of utility, whose purposes we define and dispose of accordingly. This is just the sort of education likely to worsen the predicament which zoos profess they try to prevent. If the trustee discussed in this dilemma realised this, the decision would be to spare the giraffe and resign from the board.

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Have you faced a dilemma that you would like considered in a future instalment of Everyday Ethics? If so, e-mail a brief outline to inpractice@bva-edit.co.uk. We pay a small honorarium for contributions that are published.

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