

MY WAY OF THINKING

MARK CARWARDINE

The broadcaster and campaigner airs his views on compassionate conservation and invites your thoughts on the subject.

Conservationists are cold-blooded killers. That may be a little harsh – I’ve yet to meet one who does not care passionately about all animals great and small – but there is no doubt that conservation can sometimes involve an awful lot of killing.

If you are a conservationist in New Zealand, for example, your motivation is to bring back severely depleted populations of native birds. But, in order to do so, you have to spend an inordinate amount of time killing all the introduced ferrets, stoats, weasels, rats, cats, dogs, hedgehogs and possums that now run amok in this once predator-free land. The harsh reality is that, without killing the animals that threaten native species, there would be nothing left to protect.

So, here’s a question: can we safeguard Earth’s biological diversity while treating individual animals with respect? That’s not the way we do things at the moment – conservation gets on with the daunting task of saving species and populations, while individual animals are the concern of animal welfare organisations.

But there is a growing resolve to combine efforts and reset the balance – through a movement called ‘compassionate conservation’. In other words, conservation with a heart. It is undeniably a wonderful aspiration. But is it a realistic bright new way, or merely a naive utopia?

It does sometimes feel as if we are on a slippery slope towards a rather abstract, cold-hearted, save-a-species-at-any-cost style of conservation. As if compassion for individual animals is no longer politically correct.

Personally, I hate sports hunting, for example. I know all the arguments for selectively controlling populations through hunting. Still, I just don’t like it. But I know I will get lots of hate mail for saying so. Does it make me a less professional or realistic conservationist? I don’t believe it does.

Unfortunately though, killing for conservation is not as clear-cut as we’d like it to be. To illustrate the point, here are three examples, with one simple question: are they acceptable?

First, Alaska. Grizzly bear hunting in the largest and most sparsely populated US state is designed specifically to reduce bear abundance, in the hope that there will be more moose and caribou – to hunt. That must be wrong.

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In Alaska, grizzly bears are legally hunted every spring and autumn.

Second, the remote South Atlantic island of South Georgia. This spectacular wildlife paradise was devastated by rats and mice, which were introduced by sealing and whaling ships in the 18th century. But recently – after nearly a decade, £10 million and hundreds of tonnes of poisoned bait – the 165km-long island was declared rodent-free. And, sure enough, the birds are bouncing back. If ever there was a conservation success story, this is it, and the killing – surely – was overshadowed by the stronger moral duty to care for the native penguins, albatrosses, pipits and other birds. That must be right.

Third, North America’s Pacific Northwest. Endangered northern spotted owls are under threat from more aggressive barred owls, which have been expanding their range. The US Fish and Wildlife Service came up with an answer: shoot enough barred owls to save the spotted owls. But how many is ‘enough’? 100? 1,000? 10,000? More? It’s impossible to know where to draw the line. Or, indeed, if a line should be drawn in the first place.

There will always be extreme views: kill, kill, kill for conservation, or never kill anything at all. But there has to be a middle ground, even if it requires a paradigm shift in thinking. We should strive for a happy medium, where it’s okay to care about individual animals, not just numbers. 🐾

MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.



WHAT DO YOU THINK? If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk