

From Nonhuman Animals to the Environment

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I plan to work on seven related projects that center on the following theme: “From Nonhuman Animals to the Environment.” I will be exploring the benefits for environmental ethics of approaching questions in this discipline by way of nonhuman animals. There are significant differences between my “from nonhuman animals to the environment” approach and the more popular “from the environment to nonhuman animals” approach. It is often assumed that in order to deal adequately with the current environmental crisis one must first develop a reticulative vision of the whole, and, as a consequence, develop a version of deep ecology wherein our primary ethical obligations are to ecosystems, rather than to individual human beings or to individual nonhuman animals. Tom Regan has famously (or infamously) argued that the idea that our primary ethical obligations are not directed to individual human beings or to individual nonhuman animals but to ecosystems amounts to a sort of environmental fascism wherein individuals are for the sake of the whole simpliciter. Although Regan’s language here might seem hyperbolic, the legitimate concern he has for sentient individuals (whether human or nonhuman) should not be ignored. By contrast, one persuasive way to read Aldo Leopold’s classic *A Sand County Almanac* is that it basically contains a hunter’s ethic that attempts to justify with equanimity culling members of overpopulated herds. The odious Malthusian implications of this view for the overpopulated human species are not usually noted. The ultimate hope is that the “from nonhuman animals to the environment” and the “from the environment to nonhuman animals” approaches can mutually benefit each other by keeping each other honest, as it were, in a friendly dialectical tension. My approach relies on two philosophical arguments: from sentience and from marginal cases.