A New Vision for Sacred Life and Living Earth

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DISCUSSION PAPER: ANIMAL JUSTICE

All animals are members of the sacred living Earth community, free to engage in their natural behaviour and deserving of compassionate treatment. Current levels of abuse experienced by wild, farmed, working and companion animals contradict these principles. This is partly because modern society has become disconnected from nature and the industrial food system views animals as marketable items for sale. Inhumane treatment includes wild animals kept captive or hunted for entertainment purposes; working animals being mistreated and abused; factory-farmed animals being kept in cruel confinement (notably chickens and pigs) or used for laboratory experiments; and domestic animals being starved, beaten or ignored.

People of faith have a responsibility to ensure justice for the community of creatures with whom we share the Earth. They cannot speak or achieve justice for themselves.

70% of animals we eat are factory farmed: more than 50 billion a year

96% of eggs in South Africa are produced by caged chickens

6 Up to 200 000 animals a year suffer and die in cosmetic trials

Faith perspectives on animal justice

Faith communities are increasingly calling for a more compassionate and respectful relationship with other living creatures. This includes demanding the banning of cosmetic testing on animals, caged egg production, the confinement of sows to crates and the inhumane transportation of animals. Among other issues, there are also calls for the prohibition of captive breeding of lions and other big cats for commercial purposes and the capture and sale of wild animals for zoos and collectors.

Animal rights are enshrined in most living faith philosophies. Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism adhere to the virtue of “ahisma”, the avoidance of harm to any living creature. Archbishop Desmond Tutu calls for animal justice because “they have no one to speak up for them and no means of representing themselves to a higher authority... Unless we are mindful of their interests and speak out loudly on their behalf, abuse and cruelty go unchallenged.”

Questions to consider from a faith perspective

- What does your faith say about the status of animals, our relationship with them, and how we should treat them? How does your faith view animal justice?

- What could your faith community do, or do differently, that would promote animal justice? (If this is not an appropriate objective, what are your reasons?)

- Are concerns about animals and animal justice discussed, preached, taught or prayed about and acted upon in your faith community?

- What might encourage and support people in your faith community to act on their faith-based values to support animal justice?
Background to animal justice issues
The sources of animal injustice are multiple and complex. The underlying driver is
the notion held by some people that animals are objects that can be owned, killed,
eaten, put to work or exploited in various ways. This has enabled the
commercialisation of animals; their use for sport, entertainment and gambling
purposes; and as testing and research subjects, including vivisection and genetic
engineering. Wild, farmed, working and companion animals experience injustice in a
variety of ways from destruction of their habitats and poaching to factory farming.

Wild animals are affected by the destruction of habitats to make way for expanding
human settlements, extractive industries and industrial farming, with the
accompanying use of pesticides and herbicides. They are also victims of widespread,
and mostly illegal, trafficking in wild animals (such as pangolins and chimpanzees)
and/or their body parts (such as rhino horn and elephant tusks), and of trophy
hunting, including the breeding of “canned” lions. Wild animals are also killed
because they are perceived as a threat to livestock or human life or they are hunted,
and increasingly farmed, as bush meat. They are sometimes inadvertently killed or
have their natural and necessary behaviours affected by infrastructure, such as
power lines electrocuting birds and dams blocking the migratory flow of fish.

Farmed animals are most significantly affected by the industrialised system of
factory farming or confined animal feeding operations. Examples include the lifelong
confinement of laying hens in battery cages, of dairy cows in shelters with concrete
floors, and the confinement of breeding pigs in sow gestation and farrowing crates
for most of their lives. Painful practices such as tail docking, dehorning, debeaking,
castration and hot-iron branding are routinely performed on many animals without
anaesthesia or pain relief. Transporting animals in hot, overcrowded and unhygienic
conditions for long distances, often without food and water, is inhumane. Farmed
animals are deprived of the opportunity to live out their natural behaviours in a
system characterised by systematic mass cruelty.

The injustices perpetrated on working animals may involve being overburdened and
overworked, inadequately sheltered and fed, or beaten. Companion animals, our
pets, are generally the best treated, but even they are sometimes victims. Wholly
dependent on humans for food, water, shelter and healthcare, they can be subject
to neglect. They are vulnerable to acts of individual cruelty, indifference and lack of
compassion. There is an absence of legislation to prevent overpopulation resulting in
homeless dogs and cats dying of starvation, disease and injury, or being euthanised.
Domestic “pets” and guard dogs are often bred for profit, and in inhumane
conditions.

There is an ethical imperative for a new narrative on how we interact with, use and
treat animals, whether they are wild, farmed, working or companion animals.