

Save Yourself: Self-Interest as a Stepping Stone Towards Ending Animal Abuse Industries

Opinion by: Daniel Clark

I. Introduction

Animal rights advocates have long pleaded for the protection of all living creatures, appealing to notions including likeness,¹ suffering,² and dignity.³ Yet, safety remains elusive for countless non-human animals who are exploited and slaughtered in animal abuse industries for human consumption, knowledge, or entertainment.⁴ Scholars, lawyers, and campaigners have proposed myriad methods for granting rights to non-human animals, ranging from limited legal representation⁵ to full political participation.⁶ These frameworks have evolved in response to – and in dialogue with – scientific research (e.g. fish are sentient);⁷ ethical considerations (e.g. factory farming is a ‘moral atrocity’);⁸ and legal theories (e.g. non-human animals should be legal persons).⁹ In a morally consistent world, knowledge of sentient beings’ capacity to suffer – and evidence of actual suffering – ought to be sufficient to close down animal abuse industries. However, faced with the reality that the case for animal liberation has not (yet) resulted in enduring legal protection, I suggest that proponents of animal rights should borrow a few leaves from environmental law’s playbook and embrace, at least in the short term, arguments based on self-interest.¹⁰

This is far from being the first appeal for animal law to learn from environmental law.¹¹ While making the same comparison, Randall Abate outlined at least five reasons for environmental law’s (modest) success which animal rights advocates could emulate.¹² Of these, three stand out. First, the wrongs environmental law seeks to right have become ‘urgent and visible’. Second, ‘scientific evidence’ on direct links with human health are well established. Third, and according to Abate most importantly, environmental law has ‘worked within the system rather than against it’.

Animal rights law has addressed the first two points. The visible suffering of animals on farms, in slaughterhouses, and in research facilities is indisputable.¹³ Meanwhile, abundant scientific evidence has shown that plant-based diets outperform their animal-based counterparts on a range of

¹ Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (University of California Press 2004).

² Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (Jonathan Cape 1990).

³ Eva Berner Kempers, ‘Animal Dignity and the Law: Potential, Problems and Possible Implications’ (2020) 41 *Liverpool Law Review* 173.

⁴ Literally countless. Estimates for fish deaths rely on weight not numbers, see Karol Orzechowski, ‘Global Animal Slaughter Statistics & Charts: 2022 Update’ (Faunalytics, 13 July 2022) <<https://faunalytics.org/global-animal-slaughter-statistics-charts-2022-update/>> accessed 2 July 2024.

⁵ See Matthew Liebman, ‘Representing Animals’ (2024) *Maryland Law Review*, forthcoming.

⁶ See, for example, Sue Donaldson, ‘Animal Agora’ (2020) 46 *Social Theory and Practice* 709.

⁷ Helen Lambert, et al, ‘A Kettle of Fish: A Review of the Scientific Literature for Evidence of Fish Sentience’ (2022) 12 *Animals* 1182.

⁸ Lewis Bollard, ‘Why Factory Farming is a Moral Atrocity’ (*Current Affairs*, 1 March 2024) <<https://www.currentaffairs.org/news/2024/03/why-factory-farming-is-a-moral-atrocity>> accessed 2 July 2024.

⁹ Alexia Staker, ‘Should Chimpanzees Have Standing? The Case for Pursuing Legal Personhood for Non-Human Animals’ (2017) 6 *Transnational Environmental Law* 485.

¹⁰ See Alexander Gillespie, ‘Self Interest’ in *International Environmental Law, Policy, and Ethics* (Oxford Academic 2014).

¹¹ See Kristen Stilt, ‘Rights of Nature, Rights of Animals’ (2021) 134 *Harvard Law Review* 276.

¹² Randall Abate, *What Can Animal Law Learn From Environmental Law?* (Environmental Law Institute 2020).

¹³ The suffering has become urgently visible thanks to undercover filming by activists and whistleblowers who expose animal cruelty at great personal risk. See for instance Joey Carbstrong, ‘UK FIRST INVESTIGATION INSIDE PIG GAS CHAMBER (Pilgrim’s Pride, Manchester)’ (YouTube, 2 May 2023) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eVebmHMZ4bQ&ab_channel=JoeyCarbstrong> accessed 2 July 2024.

health metrics.¹⁴ However, Abate's third reason has not yet been sufficiently addressed in animal rights law. By arguing for the primacy of self-interested motivations, this article seeks to re-frame animal rights as a necessary development within the system rather than an outside threat to societies and (legal) systems.

I start by briefly detailing how animal rights law has (so far) failed to provide comprehensive protection for non-human animals. I then suggest that cautious self-interest (what I call the 'self-ish approach') could help fill some of the gaps. Finally, by drawing a comparison with environmental law, I outline some benefits and potential pitfalls to using human advantage as a stepping stone for animal rights. My examples are drawn mostly from the United Kingdom – a State which prides itself on its treatment of animals but whose practical protections fall far short of what is promised on paper. Public interest in treating sentient beings well, combined with a clear presentation of the self-interested reasons for doing so, could be a potent force to implement enduring animal rights.

II. Enforcement Gaps

That non-human animals could be granted rights has become a contentious topic in political and legal spheres. For some, ending the exploitation of sentient beings would be the next logical step towards developing a modern, humane society.¹⁵ For others, especially those for whom animal abuse forms the basis of their economic or cultural activities, the proposal is an unwelcome threat which risks eroding human rights. Besides, as others say, do various laws not already protect animals?

Certainly, non-human animals are the subject of abundant anti-cruelty and welfare protection legislation.¹⁶ Far from preventing harm, however, these laws quantify the degree to which it is acceptable. In animal welfare, the enforcement gap refers to a systemic failure to enforce the standards set out by laws or regulations. A recent series of investigations by the activist group Animal Rising revealed the extent to which RSPCA Assured (the accreditation scheme of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals which is often described as the gold-standard in welfare schemes) fails to meet even the most basic welfare regulations.¹⁷

With animal rights, an even larger enforcement gap is at play. A fundamental discrepancy exists between how humans see other animals (even farmed animals) and their willingness to continue abusing them. Seven in ten Brits self-identify as an 'animal lover', with only three percent of respondents stating they 'don't like animals'.¹⁸ Meanwhile, three-quarters of respondents correctly identified chickens as sentient; yet, the same percentage of Brits eat them.¹⁹ Clearly, an ethical enforcement gap is preventing people from applying their own moral beliefs to their everyday actions. In a similar vein, the United Kingdom's legal mechanisms are failing to put the lofty self-regard of this 'nation of animal lovers' into practice. The next section suggests that self-interest could be a means of closing these enforcement gaps.

III. Self-Interest and Animal Rights

¹⁴ See, for example, Elena Hemler and Frank Hu, 'Plant-Based Diets for Personal, Population, and Planetary Health' (2019) 1 *Advances in Nutrition* 10.

¹⁵ See Martha Nussbaum, *Justice for Animals: Our Collective Responsibility* (Simon & Schuster 2023).

¹⁶ See Animal Welfare Act 2006 available at <<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/45/contents>> accessed 2 July 2024.

¹⁷ See Alex Lockwood, 'RSPCA "Assured": Covering Up Cruelty on an Industrial Scale' (Animal Rising, May 2024) <https://www.animalrising.org/_files/ugd/80f7b1_312aaf59f84e462fa13ae8d355c2cf02.pdf> accessed 2 July 2024.

¹⁸ Milan Dinic, 'The YouGov Food Study' (YouGov, 20 April 2022) <https://yougov.co.uk/society/articles/41665-yougov-food-study?redirect_from=%2Ftopics%2Fsociety%2Farticles-reports%2F2022%2F04%2F20%2Fyougov-food-study> accessed 2 July 2024.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

Much of the existing legislation relating to non-human animals is selfish. In other words, its purposes are, at least to some extent, influenced by human motivations. First, there is a human bias in choosing which animals are worthy of protection. Indeed, many anti-cruelty laws focus only on reducing *some* forms of suffering for *some* specific species. For example, the United Kingdom's Animal Welfare Act 2006 applies only to 'vertebrate[s] other than man'. Second, animal welfare regulations help ease the consciences of consumers without requiring overly onerous behavioral change, thus enabling abuses to be perpetuated. Third, limited welfare protections for farmed animals are often coupled with anthropocentric motivations. As one recent paper put it, 'preslaughter stress mitigation is vital for ensuring animal welfare ... and producing good quality meat'.²⁰ The meat industry is built on providing sensory pleasure to consumers. Thus, if stress mitigation in fact led to worse-tasting meat, it seems likely that the industry would not hesitate to adopt more stressful slaughter methods. Seen like this, it is not difficult to understand that animal welfare is an excuse not a protection: slaughter is, by its very nature, a stressful experience for any sentient being who wants to stay alive.

To convert current selfish motivations for using animals into self-ish reasons to stop doing so may not require a fundamental shift. Self-interest is easy to understand and, for most people, even easier to act upon. Although altruists probably do exist,²¹ self-interest – or 'the act of considering the advantage to yourself when making decisions'²² – is often unavoidable in capitalist societies which pit citizens against one another.²³ Acting out of self-interest need not always be assimilated with selfishness.²⁴ However, the anthropocentric status quo too often allows a narrow understanding of (short-term) human interests to justify the use and abuse of non-rights holders. My decision to advance a self-ish approach is born of an acknowledgment that rights are at present fundamentally anthropocentric.²⁵ A right is 'a claim *to* something and *against* someone' (emphasis in original).²⁶ With a few notable exceptions,²⁷ such claims have always been reserved for humans. To grant 'strong legal rights', of the sort described by Saskia Stucki as 'basic rights, such as the right to life, liberty, and bodily integrity', to non-human animals, current rights holders (humans) must be convinced that they would benefit.²⁸

As such, the self-ish approach seeks to expound the human benefits of expanding rights beyond the human. Thankfully, scientific evidence for switching away from our current system of animal abuse is overwhelming, urgent, and visible – satisfying two of Abate's key reasons for environmental law's success. In the past 200 years, inter-related environmental and health crises have highlighted the need to radically reform animal abuse industries for self-interested reasons. Animal agriculture is the second largest cause of anthropogenic greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions behind only fossil fuels, contributing at least 16.5 percent of the world's total GHG emissions.²⁹ It is also responsible for a

²⁰ Pavan Kumar, et al, 'Improving Animal Welfare Status and Meat Quality through Assessment of Stress Biomarkers: A Critical Review' (2023) 197 *Meat Science* 109048.

²¹ See David Sloan Wilson, *Does Altruism Exist? Culture, Genes, and the Welfare of Others* (Yale UP 2015).

²² Cambridge Online Dictionary, 'Self-Interest' <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/self-interest>> accessed 2 July 2024.

²³ See Henri Santos, Michael Varnum, and Igor Grossmann 'Global Increases in Individualism' (2017) 28 *Psychological Science* 1228.

²⁴ Activists practising self-care is a classic example. See Melanie Joy, *Getting Relationships Right: How to Build Resilience and Thrive in Life, Love, and Work* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers 2020).

²⁵ Oft-cited exceptions to this rule are merely extensions of the human: corporations and ships do not have rights for their own sake.

²⁶ Joel Feinberg, 'The Rights of Animals and Unborn Generations' in *Rights, Justice, and the Bounds of Liberty: Essays in Social Philosophy* (Princeton UP 1980).

²⁷ See Matthew Liebman, 'Animal Plaintiffs' (2024) 108 *Minnesota Law Review* 1707.

²⁸ Saskia Stucki, *On Rights: Human and Animal Rights in the Anthropocene* (Springer 2023) 3.

²⁹ Richard Twine, 'Emissions from Animal Agriculture—16.5% Is the New Minimum Figure' (2021) 13 *Sustainability* 6276.

plethora of other environmental crises, including water and air pollution,³⁰ plastic pollution,³¹ and deforestation.³² Similarly, farming animals is a major public health risk. To feed the world's growing population, meat producers face a choice between 'extensive land use on one hand or intensive animal management on the other' – a phenomenon that Matthew Hayek has dubbed 'the infectious disease trap of animal agriculture'.³³ Antimicrobial resistance is caused in large part by the routine use of antibiotics in farmed animals.³⁴ This growing threat is 'one of the top global public health and development threats', according to the World Health Organization.³⁵ On an individual level, meat consumption has been associated with many cancers and other diseases.³⁶ Finally, one should note the moral harms caused by speciesism, including the many ways in which the subjugation of non-human animals intersects with other forms of discrimination.³⁷

Self-interest may not be the noblest reason to protect others but using it to advocate for animal rights has major advantages.

First, self-interest is convenient. So much in the field of animal rights feels like an uphill battle. Trying to protect animals by granting them legal personhood invariably finds resistance among those who see it as eroding what it means to be human. Meanwhile, appeals to compassion lead to accusations of impracticality, while brutal facts rarely change hearts and minds.³⁸ Sustained media and industry influence have conditioned people to a desire not to harm animals as an extreme view.³⁹ By contrast, arguments based on self-interest are far more palatable.

Second, self-interest is inevitable in many legal settings. Litigation involves one party bringing a claim against another party. In many legal systems, plaintiffs only have standing if they have sufficient *interest* in the case. Several cases involving non-human animals have revolved around whether the humans involved have legal standing to act on the animal's behalf – with many failing to meet this criterion. A self-ish approach to animal rights could sidestep some of the challenges associated with putting a non-human animal before the courts.

Third, and most pertinent for this article, self-interested rights for animals have a model (albeit imperfect) to follow: self-interested rights of nature. The next section outlines some teachings from environmental law and consider whether animal rights could tread a similar path.

IV. Environmental Rights and Wrongs

³⁰ Colin Scanes, 'Impact of Agricultural Animals on the Environment' (2018) *Animals and Human Society* 427.

³¹ For example, '[a]bandoned, lost and discarded fishing gear ... accounts for 10% of global ocean plastic pollution', see Erin Scott, 'Mitigating Ghost Fishing' (2023) 4 *Nature Reviews Earth & Environment* 737.

³² Michael Eisen and Patrick Brown, 'Rapid Global Phaseout of Animal Agriculture Has the Potential to Stabilize Greenhouse Gas Levels for 30 Years and Offset 68 Percent of CO2 Emissions This Century' (2022) 1 *PLOS Climate*.

³³ Matthew Hayek, 'The Infectious Disease Trap of Animal Agriculture' (2022) 8 *Science advances*.

³⁴ Katie Tiseo et al, 'Global Trends in Antimicrobial Use in Food Animals from 2017 to 2030' (2020) 9 *Antibiotics* 918.

³⁵ World Health Organisation, 'Antimicrobial Resistance' <<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/antimicrobial-resistance>> accessed 2 July 2024.

³⁶ Barath Prashanth Sivasubramanian et al, 'Comprehensive Review of Red Meat Consumption and the Risk of Cancer' (2023) 36 *European Journal of Epidemiology* 937.

³⁷ Jim Everett et al, 'Speciesism, Generalized Prejudice, and Perceptions of Prejudiced Others' (2019) 22 *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 785.

³⁸ Anne Toomey, 'Why Facts Don't Change Minds: Insights from Cognitive Science for the Improved Communication of Conservation Research' (2023) 278 *Biological Conservation* 109886.

³⁹ See, for example, recent animal rescues in Sonoma County, Maria Bolotnikova, 'You're More Likely to Go to Prison for Exposing Animal Cruelty than for Committing It' (Vox, 9 November 2023) <<https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/23952627/wayne-hsiung-conviction-direct-action-everywhere-dxe-rescue-sonoma-county-chickens>> accessed 2 July 2024.

At present, the human benefits of environmental rights are more easily understood than the human benefits of animal rights. With climate and biodiversity crises threatening the future of all life on Earth, lawmakers are slowly coming to understand that protecting ecosystems goes hand in hand with protecting human interests.⁴⁰ Evidently, the legal and political will has been lacking to date. Even so, environmental law has made significant steps away from the anthropocentric status quo: an emerging branch of environmental rights scholarship has embraced eco-centrism.⁴¹ Efforts to reconcile law with nature, for example through Earth jurisprudence scholarship, have drawn on teachings from Indigenous legal systems and Earth system science.⁴² Consequently, protecting the autonomy of living entities to avert ecological collapse and the sixth mass extinction is finally being taken seriously.⁴³ In 2017, for example, the Whanganui River in Aotearoa (New Zealand) became the first river to receive the status of legal person.⁴⁴

Animal rights remain readily dismissed as unnecessary – or even as a distraction in the face of other environmental and societal crises. Such thinking is erroneous in two key ways.

First, it creates a false dichotomy where helping animals is placed in opposition to other social justice movements. Yet, in fact, speciesism is deeply entwined with racism, sexism, ableism, and other systemic injustices.⁴⁵ Indeed, speciesism and environmental injustice are two sides of the same coin in both their origins and solutions. That existing legal systems have been unwilling to confer strong rights upon non-human animals reveals a prevailing view of humanity which is removed from – and superior to – the natural world. In *The Climate Crisis and Other Animals*, Richard Twine writes that ‘dominant norms of human exceptionalism are self-defeating, partly because they are predicated on an assumption of human abstraction from the rest of nature’.⁴⁶ As Twine notes, such abstraction is a root cause of the current climate and biodiversity crises.

Second, viewing animal rights as a non-essential indulgence in a world where more than 800 million people are affected by hunger ignores the extent to which humans would benefit from other animals becoming rights holders.⁴⁷ As outlined above, the self-interested reasons for transitioning towards a plant-based food system include a dramatic boost to agricultural efficiency which could help combat world hunger, as well as drastically reduce GHG emissions.⁴⁸ In this case, human interest is perfectly aligned with the interests of non-human animals.

Despite eco-centrism’s increased clout, self-interest undoubtedly remains at the forefront of nature rights in many jurisdictions.⁴⁹ The United Kingdom has passed significant environmental

⁴⁰ Arguments for environmental rights have fallen on both sides of the divide, see Christopher Stone, ‘Should Trees Have Standing? – Towards Legal Rights for Natural Objects’ (1972) 45 *Southern California Law Review* 450.

⁴¹ For example, Sara De Vido has alluded to ‘some eco-centric moves in international environmental law’ since the World Charter on Nature of 1982, Sara De Vido, ‘A Quest for an Eco-Centric Approach to International Law: The Covid-19 Pandemic as Game Changer’ (2020) 3 *Jus Cogens* 105.

⁴² See Jeremy Schmidt, ‘Of kin and system: Rights of nature and the UN search for Earth jurisprudence’ (2022) 47 *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 820.

⁴³ Robert Cowie, Philippe Bouchet and Benoît Fontaine, ‘The Sixth Mass Extinction: Fact, Fiction or Speculation?’ (2022) 97 *Biological Reviews* 640.

⁴⁴ Matthias Kramm, ‘When a River Becomes a Person’ (2020) 21 *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 307.

⁴⁵ See Frauke Albersmeier, ‘Speciesism and Speciescentrism’ (2021) 24 *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 511.

⁴⁶ Richard Twine, *The Climate Crisis and Other Animals* (Sydney University Press 2024).

⁴⁷ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, International Fund for Agricultural Development, Unicef, World Food Programme, and World Health Organization, ‘The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023’ (2023) <<https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/8b27c570-2f8b-4350-8d5a-8e82432e6db7/content>> accessed 2 July 2024.

⁴⁸ Hannah Ritchie, ‘If the World Adopted a Plant-Based Diet, We Would Reduce Global Agricultural Land Use from 4 to 1 Billion Hectares’ (Our World in Data, 4 March 2021) <<https://ourworldindata.org/land-use-diets>> accessed 2 July 2024.

⁴⁹ This is not universally true, of course. For example, Article 83 of the Constitution of Ecuador (2008) states that Ecuadorians have a duty ‘to respect the rights of nature, preserve a healthy environment and use natural resources rationally, sustainably and durably’. See Raffael Fasel and Sean Butler, *Animal Rights Law* (Bloomsbury 2023).

legislation, including a net-zero commitment and Environment Act with legally binding targets.⁵⁰ However, a major discrepancy between law and practice endures. Indeed, in February 2024, a delegate from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs let the mask slip at a United Nations session by admitting that the United Kingdom's opposition to nature rights is a 'fundamental principle ... from which we cannot deviate'.⁵¹ With this outlook, it is unsurprising that the United Kingdom is 'one of the world's most nature-depleted countries'.⁵²

Trade-offs between human, environmental, and animal interests seem inevitable in some cases. Take the example of the River Wye which recently found itself at the confluence of inter-connected debates around environmental, animal, and human rights. The river's 155-mile journey through England and Wales is as iconic as it is now degraded: the Wye has been plagued with algal blooms caused by nitrogen and phosphorus primarily originating from chicken manure running off fields. The number of chicken farms in the Wye area has soared from 13 million to 25 million in a decade.⁵³ In February 2024, River Action, a group of environmental campaigners, brought legal action against the Environment Agency. In May, the High Court rejected the challenge and ruled that the Environment Agency had implemented the law properly.⁵⁴

The lack of legal accountability in the face of clear environmental harm is redolent of the impunity with which animal abuse industries flout welfare regulations. Rather than to rely on subjective interpretations of safe limits for exploitation, genuine environmental protection would involve inalienable rights to put rights of nature on a level playing field with economic interests. The law may appear insulated from reality at times. However, it is not immune to the limits of the Earth's planetary boundaries: legal systems depend on ecological systems more than ecological systems depend on legal systems. This discrepancy between environmental damages and legal diffidence is the starting point for initiatives like the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Rivers.⁵⁵ Its first clause is that 'all rivers are entitled to the fundamental rights set forth in this Declaration, which arise from their very existence on our shared planet'. Other declarations follow, such as that 'all rivers are living entities that possess legal standing in a court of law' and, as such, a river has the right to 'perform essential functions within its ecosystem' and 'be free from pollution'.

Besides providing lessons for animal rights campaigners, the ongoing debate about rivers in the United Kingdom also illustrates a point of tension between environmental and animal rights. It is sometimes assumed that protecting an ecosystem will protect the animals living in it. Certainly, concerns about the River Wye's biodiversity encompass concerns for the individual animals and their right to a livable habitat. However, environmental rights can blur into decidedly human motivations. For example, the Herefordshire Wildlife Trust laments that 'the salmon population of the River Wye is at a critical state ... with angling catches down 94% from their peak in 1967'.⁵⁶ Protecting a river

⁵⁰ Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, Forestry Commission, Environment Agency, Natural England and The Rt Hon George Eustice, 'World-Leading Environment Act Becomes Law' (GOV.UK, 10 November 2021). <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/world-leading-environment-act-becomes-law>> accessed 2 July 2024.

⁵¹ Jonathan Watts, 'UK Government Can Never Accept Idea Nature Has Rights, Delegate Tells UN' (The Guardian, 22 February 2024) <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/feb/22/uk-government-can-never-accept-idea-nature-has-rights-delegate-tells-un>> accessed 2 July 2024.

⁵² State of Nature Partnership, 'State of Nature 2023' (2023) <https://stateofnature.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/TP25999-State-of-Nature-main-report_2023_FULL-DOC-v12.pdf> accessed 2 July 2024.

⁵³ Sandra Laville, 'Environment Agency Failed to Protect River Wye from Chicken Waste, Court Hears' (The Guardian, 7 February 2024) <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/feb/07/environment-agency-failed-protect-river-wye-pollution-chicken-waste-court>> accessed 2 July 2024.

⁵⁴ Jonah Fisher and Esme Stallard, 'Government Wins Court Case over River Wye Pollution' (BBC News, 24 May 2024) <<https://tinyurl.com/4xa85w69>> accessed 2 July 2024.

⁵⁵ Earth Law Center, 'Universal Declaration of River Rights' (Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature, 29 September 2017) <<https://www.garn.org/universal-declaration-of-river-rights/>> accessed 2 July 2024.

⁵⁶ Herefordshire Wildlife Trust, 'What's Polluting the River Wye?' <<https://www.herefordshirewt.org/blog/whats-polluting-river-wye>> accessed 2 July 2024.

to enforce fishing rights is one of many examples where environmental and animal rights seem to conflict.⁵⁷ Indeed, the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Rivers is clear that rivers should have ‘the right to native biodiversity’ and condemns the situation of ‘imperiled fish populations’. Despite appealing to the living status of rivers, it stops short of advocating for all life in the river to be protected, leaving a gaping hole for exploitative industries like fishing to continue.

V. Save Yourself

When human desire to consume an animal’s flesh conflicts so absolutely with that animal’s interest to live, only rights can provide meaningful protection. Yet, granting rights to non-human animals would pose an existential threat to many of the existing customs on which societies presently depend. Disrupting the anthropocentric status quo within the system thus requires a new outlook on self-interest. Phasing out animal abuse industries would bring immense relief from suffering to trillions of sentient beings which are slaughtered for food each year. At its core, however, this article has argued that animal rights can be motivated primarily by self-interested reasons. Just as environmental rights protect all of humanity, not just the ‘eco-zealots’ advocating for them, the advent of animal rights would also bring immeasurable benefits to all humans. Implementing a full ban on breeding, raising, exploiting, slaughtering, selling, and consuming animals requires a reset in how the harms of animal industries are calculated and communicated. Swapping ‘save the animals’ to ‘save yourselves’, at least in the short term, could more quickly and less contentiously establish strong animal rights.

⁵⁷ See David Pellow, ‘Environmental Justice, Climate Justice, and Animal Liberation Movements: Confronting the Problems of Social Difference’ in Jeannie Sowers, Stacy VanDeveer and Erika Weinthal (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Environmental Politics* (Oxford Academic 2021) 263.