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If We Could Talk to Animals, Should We?

Wild Animal Sovereignty and the Ethics of Listening

In *Zoopolis,* sovereignty is framed as a means for protecting the particular set of interests of wild non-human animals against injustices. This paper will argue that the use of recent artificial intelligence (AI) technologies to interpret and communicate with wild animals, such as bioacoustic monitoring and language-decoding algorithms, constitutes an unjust violation of their sovereignty, privacy, and consensual rights. By accepting the argument that wild animals are political communities, as Donaldson and Kymlicka propose, I argue that their communicative worlds deserve the same ethical boundaries we must apply to sovereign human groups and individuals, namely, the right not to be surveilled, monitored, or rendered intelligible without consent. Ethical relations with sovereign communities of wild animals require epistemic humility; in other words, the willingness to respect the boundaries of what we cannot, and perhaps should not, fully understand.

I exclusively focus on the case of *wild* animals, or in other words, animals who avoid human contact or who "show a clear preference to be independent of humans."[1] Though the concerns I raise—about privacy, consent, and autonomy—might eventually apply to all animals, the case of wild animals is most ethically clear-cut given their status as sovereign beings in Donaldson and Kymlicka's political framework, which I adopt. The ethical questions explored in this paper take on a different character when applied to wild animals, whose communicative relationship with humans is fundamentally different from that of, say, a domesticated dog.

[1] Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka. *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights.* Oxford University Press. 2011. pp.177

Furthermore, considering that a vast majority of the AI technologies in question are targeted explicitly to understand wild animal languages, this is the most relevant facet of the challenge at hand.

The question thus becomes: what does it mean to extract meaning from a being we've agreed to give full autonomy and space? That is a different tension than where communication is already co-constructed with a domesticated animal. For that, we will need a more nuanced theory of how different animals hold or express privacy, but that is beyond the scope of this paper. In the case of wild animals, however, Donaldson and Kymlicka reject the model of dependent agency and argue that they do not want or need human assistance to interpret their good.[2] We therefore accord sovereignty to them on the grounds that they are competent to take care of themselves and to manage their communities independently and separately from humans, which is not the case for domesticated animals.[3] I will first outline the specifics of the AI technologies I am referencing and then present Donaldson and Kymlicka's case for sovereignty rights in Zoopolis. Building on this framework, I will explore how these technologies raise concerns about privacy, consent, and ultimately, violations of sovereignty.

The adoption of artificial technologies (AI) has become widespread in recent years, and many are being used to decode animal vocalizations and behaviours to better understand wild species. This approach has already been applied to several animals, including various whale species, often to better protect them.[4] Taking whales as an example, researchers deploy underwater microphones, robotic fish and beacons to record whale vocalizations, which serve for

[2] *Zoopolis* pp.175
[3] Ibid. pp. 175
[4] Mark Ryan & Leonie Bossert. *Dr. Doolittle uses AI: Ethical challenges of trying to speak whale.* Biological Conservation, 2024. pp. 1

sexual selection, calf rearing, echolocation and communication. Bioacoustics technologies are used to monitor habitats and species using digital recording devices, with the resulting volumes of data being analyzed by AI.[5] It is then used to identify patterns, understand their meaning, and digitally recreate these sounds to communicate with them or decode their songs into comprehensible 'human language'. In this case, understanding and translating whale vocalizations into something humanly comprehensible is intended to help identify their movements to, for instance, protect them from ship strikes and bycatch or prevent or reduce sonar interfering with their echolocation.[6] This strand of 'conservational AI' seeks to apply this technology in wild areas to protect non-domesticated animals intertwined in human activity.[7]

Turning to *Zoopolis*, Donaldson and Kymlicka's sovereignty model differs from "wilderness" conservation views. Just as international law governs the relations between human nations, they argue that principles of inter-community justice should govern human-animal relations. Under this framework, we can regard non-human animals as *peoples* rather than ecosystems and *individuals* rather than species.[8] Importantly, sovereignty does not mean just 'letting animals be', although that can be one form of justice.[9] It is instead a protection of a *people's* freedom, autonomy, and self-determination. Donaldson and Kymlicka expand part of this argument in a quote worth including in full:

> "On the one hand, sovereign communities have a right to protection from the aggression of foreign states (conquest, colonization, theft of resources), and from less violent forms

[5] Jacob Andreas, et. al. *Toward understanding the communication in sperm whales,* iScience, Volume 25, Issue 6, 2022,
[6] Ryan and Bossert. *Dr. Doolittle uses AI: Ethical challenges of trying to speak whale.*
[7] Fairbrass, Alison J. "Opportunities of artificial intelligence for monitoring nature in cities." *Urban AI. Urban AI* (2023).
[8] *Zoopolis* pp. 205
[9] Ibid. pp. 178

> of imperialism (paternalistic management or intervention in their internal affairs by outsiders, whether well-meaning or not) ... It provides the space for communities to develop along their own self-determining paths, under *controlled conditions of interaction with outsiders, rather than being subjected to the unchecked force of powerful outsiders (regardless of the intentions of those outsiders).*[10] [Emphasis mine]

Moreover, direct rights violations are not the only factor one must consider when interacting with wild animals, and sovereignty implies a certain right to privacy under self-determination claims. Destroying an individual's habitat is a clear rights violation, but what about using technology (in good faith) to decode animal communication?

In this case, privacy and sovereignty rights are being compromised in order to supposedly benefit the species, but this cannot be permissible under the proposed model. Like in the human case, sovereign communities have zones of internal life that should be free from external oversight or imposition. Under most ethical frameworks—especially those grounded in rights, dignity, and autonomy—it would not be morally permissible to violate a human group's privacy and consent for the potential benefit of future people. Violating someone's rights or autonomy—like experimenting without consent—treats them as a tool, which is impermissible, regardless of potential outcomes. Yet, when it comes to animals, assumptions about their moral status impede our ability to see it that way.

One possible objection to the claim of self-determination and privacy rights is that these are anthropocentric concepts that animals are not interested in claiming. Indeed, privacy as a legal right, or a philosophically articulated concept (ideas like digital privacy, bodily autonomy,

[10] Ibid. pp.180

or data protection), is constructed through human cultural, social, and legal systems. But in the more fundamental, ethical sense, privacy is rooted in something more universal: a being's interest in controlling access to themselves, their body, space, relationships, or information.[11] While it manifests differently across species lines, these are not exclusively human sentiments. What's clear is that wild animals exhibit behaviour which confirms their interest in privacy and non-interference.

For example, countless animals have adopted strategies to prevent eavesdropping, allowing private conversations to occur. Pepper cites the "silent song" of some bird species, which is compared to human whispering.[12] The chirping and copulatory trills of blackbirds, which are emitted in situations with a distinct need for privacy, are a case in point.[13] The fact that animals try to avoid being heard indicates that they are concerned about how and what they reveal to others about themselves. As put by Alan Westin, "studies of animal behaviour and social organization suggest that man's need for privacy may well be rooted in his animal origins, and that men and animals share several basic mechanisms for claiming privacy among their own fellows.'[14]

A second possible objection is that, in an effort to understand animals (bracketing the possible harms of deploying such technologies), the very *act* of data collection and surveillance does not affect the feelings or experiences of animals because it is all mostly invisible and unknown to them, and thus, "what they don't know can't hurt them."[15] There are strong grounds for rejecting this assumption. As self-determining beings, animals have a vital interest in

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[11] Angie Pepper, Glass panels and peepholes: nonhuman animals and the right to privacy. Pac. Philos. Q. 101 (4), 628–650. 2020.
[12] A. Pepper Glass panels and peepholes. pp. 631
[13] Torben Dabelsteen, et. al *Quiet song in song birds: An overlooked phenomenon.* Bioacoustics-the International Journal of Animal Sound and Its Recording 1998. pp. 93
[14] Alan Westin, *The Origins of Modern Claims to Privacy,* 1984. p.56
[15] Angie Pepper *Why it's wrong to spy on animals.* Justice Everywhere. (2022) https://justice-everywhere.org/animals/why-its-wrong-to-spy-on-animals/

managing their environment and deciding how they relate to others, including humans. To exercise this control, they must have accurate beliefs about their surroundings. By concealing data gathering activities, animals misunderstand who is observing them, undermining their ability to shape their relationships and undercutting their interest in self-determination.[16] Pepper argues that animals' right to privacy makes it morally wrong to surveil them without their knowledge. In the human case, it is widely accepted that awareness isn't always necessary for a wrong to occur; spying on an individual in a private moment, even if they never find out, is still widely considered wrong. Secretly collecting a person's medical data is a privacy violation, whether they're aware of it or not. Thus, we already accept that violating someone's boundaries can be wrong in itself, not just because it causes negative reactions or distress. Treating wild animals as individuals part of sovereign communities requires this reframing.

Along with privacy, the idea of consent is highly relevant. Individuals can provide consent through communicative preferences and behaviours that aren't necessarily explicit human speech or language. I therefore argue that animals as individuals have an interest in giving consent and that this interest is violated through the development of the AI technologies in question. Wild animals are considered wild precisely because of their preference to be independent of humans. If their preferences were to show otherwise, we could categorize them as "liminal animals", but I am focusing here on those animals who have, as Donaldson and Kymlicka say, 'voted with their feet' to be distinct from human societies.[17] Therefore, intervention in their internal affairs by outsiders is clearly against their preference and constitutes

[16] Ibid.
[17] Zoopolis pp.177

an action which they do not consent to. Furthermore, violating their consensual rights undermines their sovereignty as self-determining communities and individuals.

Of course, a lot of these technologies could significantly help wild animals. As mentioned above, it could protect whales from ship strikes and bycatch by rerouting human activities, or rerouting the whales themselves through direct communication with them.[18] One could object by saying that whales *would* consent if they knew about the potential benefits down the line, and that working *with* these sovereign communities would be made that much easier with this technology. Again, bracketing the very real danger in two-way communication with whales in this case,[19] there are two issues here. First, as mentioned earlier, we can infer the preferences of wild animals—and their desired relationship to humans—precisely through their wildness. Their avoidance of human contact signals a clear preference for independence, and working with current behavioural communication, sovereignty is possible without advanced technology. Second, if we interpret our relationship with wild animals through the framework of sovereignty, consent becomes necessary for any intervention. Based on observable wild animal behaviour, we have no grounds to believe that such consent has been given. On the contrary, their consistent efforts to remain separate from human systems suggest a refusal of this intervention.

To help illustrate the case for consent, imagine a society where humans are unknowingly continuously monitored through cameras and invasive, non-visible technologies like microphones and sensory probes. In this society, a company develops a machine learning

[18]It is worth noting that these interventions aim to address harms caused by human activity. Similar conservation outcomes could likely be achieved through changes in human behavior alone—without the need to 'speak whale.'

[19] Altering whale songs could disrupt their culture and social structures, affecting hunting, navigation, mating, and protection. These vocalizations are essential for whale cooperation, and human interference could have serious consequences for individuals and entire pods. Sending AI-generated whale sounds into the ocean could disturb navigation, cause distress, or harm whale health, potentially threatening their survival and species conservation.

algorithm capable of "decoding" individuals' emotional states and social cues based on private conversation audio and behavioural data collected. Algorithms continuously analyze their speech and behaviours to identify emotional patterns and identify when they are sad, anxious, or happy. This surveillance aims to predict emotions and gather information on communication patterns to better serve humans with personalized services they need, like better healthcare, personalized education, and mental health support. However, the subjects do not know about this research, that they were being listened to, and that their emotional states were being 'decoded'. While the intention may be to benefit people, these individuals have no agency over how their emotional data is used or interpreted.

This creates a situation where the data is being extracted and used by a system over which they have no control, and violates the consensual rights of all individuals involved. The key issue at hand is the assumption that emotions and communication are part of an individual's inner life, and decoding them without consent constitutes an infringement on their personal autonomy and right to control how they present themselves to others. This same assumption holds for wild animals. Under Donaldson and Kymlicka's model, animals are individuals and persons; therefore, by listening in on and interpreting animal communication and behaviour without their knowledge or consent, we are invading their privacy, autonomy, and rights to sovereignty, regardless of whether the data will supposedly be used for their benefit. The animals have no say in whether or how their vocalizations are interpreted.

Now, let's imagine an acknowledged sovereign human nation that has chosen to live away from mainstream society to preserve its customs and traditional way of life. An outsider team of researchers secretly set up hidden microphones around the community's perimeter to record private conversations without the community's knowledge. They then analyze tone, frequency,

and linguistic structure to decode their grammar and lexicon, recreate phrases, and train language models on the data. No matter the intention and whether the researchers claim to benefit this population in any way, this community's sovereignty rights have been violated. The key issue is not the intent behind the research, but the way in which the researchers bypassed the community's right to decide who is allowed to observe, record, and use information about them. It's a form of intervention that assumes the researchers know better than the community what is in its best interest, and this paternalistic approach strips the community of their right to decide their own future and protect their cultural integrity.

The activities involved in the emerging field of 'conservational AI', which at face value, may seem like a huge step forward for animal to human relations, fail to be just under Donaldson and Kymlicka's model. AI 'decoding' constitutes an injustice between the sovereign communities of humans and wild animals. Surveillance, interpretation, and intervention without consent—even under the banner of conservation—reproduce the logic of paternalism. Indeed, they risk treating wild animals not as neighbours in a pluralistic world, but as entities subject to our intervention at will. The moral status of these animals is thereby diminished, reducing them to objects of human concern rather than recognizing them as moral agents with their own interests and rights. This assumption not only overlooks their intrinsic sovereignty but also risks reinforcing an imperialist mindset, in which animals are seen as resources to be managed, controlled, and 'helped' according to human standards, even when such intervention disregards their autonomy and desires. In doing so, these practices strip wild animals of their dignity as independent beings and perpetuate a relationship of dominance and control, rather than fostering genuine coexistence between human and animal communities.

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