CEAP

Research brief #7

COVID-19, One Health, and a Right to Health for Animals

Headline Issues

> COVID-19 has a wide range of positive and negative impacts on nonhuman animals.
> These impacts reveal the inadequacy of current health policy frameworks like One Health.
> To improve our health policy frameworks, we should extend a right to health to animals.

The Center for Environmental and Animal Protection (CEAP) aims to provide academic leadership for research, policy-making, and addressing critical social issues at the intersection of environmental and animal protection.

NYU | ARTS & SCIENCE

Summary

COVID-19 has had a wide range of positive and negative impacts on nonhuman animals. Many animals, like minks, were directly affected by contracting the virus, and many others were indirectly affected when the pandemic prompted humans to treat them differently than we otherwise would have. In some cases these deviations from the status quo benefited animals, and in other cases they harmed animals. For instance, some companion animals benefited from being adopted during lockdowns, while some farmed animals suffered from being "culled" in especially painful ways due to slaughterhouse shutdowns.

These impacts reveal the inadequacy of health policy frameworks like One Health. One Health aspires to improve human, nonhuman, and environmental health holistically, but it also values nonhuman health primarily for the sake of humans, which can lead to policies that harm or neglect other animals unnecessarily.

To improve our health policy frameworks, we should extend a right to health to animals. As with humans, this right would establish that nonhuman animals have an interest in health, and that we have a responsibility to assign weight to this interest when making decisions that affect nonhuman animals.

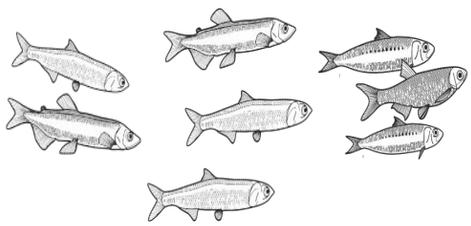
COVID-19 and animals

COVID-19 has had a profound impact on farmed animals. Humans "culled" many animals, particularly minks, to limit the risk that the virus would spread from humans to animals and back to humans. Humans also "culled" many animals due to temporary slaughterhouse closures.

While we would have slaughtered farmed animals either way, many of these cullings were especially brutal: for example, animals were gassed, shot, overdosed, electrocuted, beaten, suffocated, and subjected to ventilation shutdowns, among other methods.

COVID-19 has also had an impact on lab animals. Countless animals were used in basic and biomedical research about the virus. The body parts of other animals, such as shark livers and horseshoe crab blood, were also used in the development of COVID-19 vaccine candidates.

"These impacts make it clear that we need to build a new status quo for animals, not return to the old one."



The pandemic has also impacted lab animals who were not used in COVID-19 research. For instance, when universities reduced on-site activity to meet social distancing requirements in Spring 2020, many institutions reportedly exterminated lab animals.

The pandemic has had mixed effects for companion animals as well. On one hand, many humans adopted companion animals and spent more time at home with them during social distancing, and many animals benefited from increased attention and affection.

On the other hand, many humans also abandoned companion animals because they feared that they would be unable to care for the animals or that the animals would be vectors for disease. Increased attention from humans can also lead to increased companion animal abuse.

The pandemic has had similarly mixed effects for wild animals. On one hand, it decreased some harms for wild animals. For instance, there was less light and noise pollution and less risk of vehicle collisions, which allowed many animals to roam relatively safely.

On the other hand, the pandemic also increased some harms for wild animals. Some wild animals, like bats, can be disease vectors for humans and may be targets of persecution as a result. Wild animals can also suffer from an increase in poaching and plastic pollution.

These impacts make clear that we need to build a new status quo, not return to the pre-pandemic status quo. Human violence and neglect is a risk for animals either way, and improving animal health and welfare requires improving our treatment of animals.

The One Health Framework

One Health is a policy framework that recognizes the links between human, animal, and environmental health. The general idea is that the more we learn about animal and environmental health, the more we can learn about human health. And the more we improve animal and environmental health, the more we can improve human health. For example, the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations describes One Health as an "integrated approach" that recognizes that "the health of animals, people, plants and the environment is interconnected," and it claims to promote One Health "in work on food security, sustainable agriculture, food safety, antimicrobial resistance (AMR), nutrition, animal and plant health, fisheries, and livelihoods."

One Health and Animals

These impacts reveal the inadequacy of current health policy frameworks like One Health. One Health recognizes that human, nonhuman, and environmental health are linked, and so our efforts to improve human, nonhuman, and environmental health should be linked as well. But there are several problems with our current application of this framework.

One problem is that we are currently not doing enough to reduce our use of animals in health policy. Our treatment of animals in factory farming and the wildlife trade substantially increases our vulnerability to zoonotic diseases. To mitigate this risk, we need to do more than implement reforms and "cullings." We need to end our use of animals at this scale.

Another problem is that we are currently not doing enough to increase our support for animals in health policy. Part of why animals are so vulnerable right now is that we lack the infrastructure necessary to protect them. To mitigate these risks, we need to invest in this infrastructure now so that we can be better prepared for future disruptions.

Another, related problem – which partly explains the first two – is that we currently value animals for the sake of humans, rather than for their own sakes. If we treated animal health and welfare as intrinsically valuable, then we would prioritize efforts to reduce our use of animals and increase our support for them, with benefits for humans and nonhumans alike.

A Right to Health for Animals

To improve our health policy frameworks, we should extend a right to health to animals. The human right to health is expressed in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which recognizes a right to "the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health" and commits states to taking concrete steps toward this goal.

As with many modern legal rights documents, the ICESCR states that these human rights are grounded in our shared humanity. But while the idea that *all* humans have a right to health is good, the idea that *only* humans have this right is unacceptably exclusionary. It erases more than 99% of the individuals who have a stake in global health policy.

We can solve this problem by grounding our right to health not in our shared *humanity*, but rather in our shared *vulnerability* and *dependency*. Humans merit a right to health because we have a vital interest in, and need for, physical and mental health and well-being. Yet all sentient animals have this interest and need. Thus, all sentient animals merit this right.

Granted, we might not be able to protect the health of all animals in practice. But as with humans, to say that animals have a right to health is not to say that we can, or should, ensure that all animals will be healthy. It is instead to say that we can and should treat the health of all animals as important for its own sake when deciding what to do.

To say that animals have a right to health is not to say that we can, or should, ensure that all animals will be healthy. It is instead to say that we can and should treat the health of all animals as important when deciding what to do.

References

Aysha Akhtar, 2012, *Animals and Public Health: Why treating animals better is critical to human welfare*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Alasdair Cochrane, 2020, *Should Animals Have Political Rights?* Cambridge: Polity.

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. One Health. Available at http://www.fao.org/one-health/en/

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI).

Veronica Nanni, In Press, "Global response of conservationists across mass media likely constrained bat persecution due to COVID-19," *Biological Conservation*.

One Welfare, 2021, *One Welfare*: http://www.onewelfareworld.org.

Phoenix Zones Initiative, 2021, *What Is Just One Health*:http://www.phoenixzonesinitiative.org/what-is-just-one-health.

Jeff Sebo, 2022, *Saving Animals, Saving Ourselves: Why animals matter for pandemics, climate change, and other catastrophes*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, G.A. Res. 217A (III).

Jonathan Wolff, 2013, *The Human Right to Health*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

This research brief is intended to inform decision-makers. The views expressed in this brief represent those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the host institutions or funders.

We encourage the wide use of this document. All permissions request should be directed to the NYU Center for Environmental and Animal Protection: ceap@nyu.edu.

This research brief was prepared by Laurie Sellars, Kimberly Bernotas, and Jeff Sebo. It is adapted from their article "COVID-19, One Health, and a Right to Health for Human and Nonhuman Animals," *Health and Human Rights Journal* 23:2 (December 2021), 35-47.

Laurie Sellars, MA, is the 2022-23 Postgraduate Fellow with the Law, Ethics & Animals Program at Yale Law School.

Kimberly Bernotas, MA, is the foster care manager of Bideawee, an animal welfare and pet adoption organization in New York.

Jeff Sebo is Clinical Associate Professor of Environmental Studies, Affiliated Professor of Bioethics, Medical Ethics, and Philosophy, and Director of the Animal Studies M.A. Program at New York University.

© New York University Center for Environmental and Animal Protection, 2022.