CEAP

Research brief #9
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Animals As Agents in Their Own Conservation

Headline Issues

> Animals are aware of and may adapt to conditions shaping their own survival.
> Conservation efforts often fail when they treat animals as predictable creatures that prefer wild habitats "out there" away from human settlements and interaction.
> Animals can be seen as partners with humans in shaping their own conservation outcomes. Programs have more success when treating animals as such.

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

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A Wider View

In times of unprecedented human impacts on wildlife, what shapes the success or failure of a species? Animals of course have basic instincts, helping them pursue the things they need, like shelter, food sources, breeding and nesting grounds. But recently, conservationists are increasingly finding that animals also make active and idiosyncratic decisions as individuals and groups about how to help themselves survive and thrive. In this way, animals not only have *sentience* (awareness of the conditions that affect themselves and others) but also *agency*. That is, they can play active roles in making decisions that affect their survival and quality of life.

Conservation Setbacks

When conservation programs do not account for animal agency, undesirable outcomes can occur: populations can decline, animals may end up in surprising places, or conflicts with humans in agriculture and urban spaces can escalate.

Our recent research examined 190 studies of the most common wildlife conservation and management strategies (e.g. relocation, reintroduction, and fencing) and their outcomes. As shown in the table below, this review highlights three common assumptions across the programs we evaluated that limited or undermined the programs' attempts to save populations and prevent conflict with humans.

Limiting assumption	Example of conservation failure
Animal behaviors are rigid and homogenous.	African elephants developed tolerance to noises/spotlights designed to keep them away from villages and crops.
Animals prefer pristine, wild habitats where they express wild behaviors.	Wolves that translocated away from US population centers returned, and en route traveled through agricultural areas and preyed on domesticated animals.
Humans' relationships with wild animals have little impact.	Human communities removed from natural protected areas (e.g. South Africa, India) meant they stopped being able to monitor wildlife. Poachers and other destructive actors moved in more easily.

Broadening Expectations

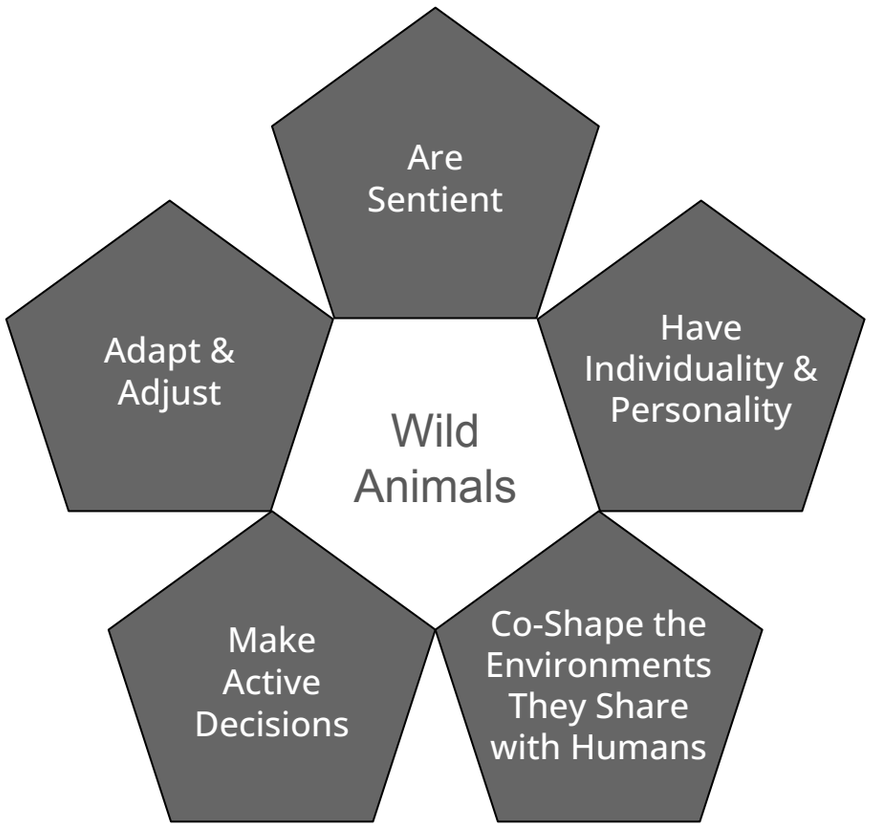
Focusing on animal agency helps to broaden expectations of what is "normal" for individuals or groups of animals. The list of assumptions in the figure below can help engender collaborating with animals in their own conservation.

While these assumptions are uncommon across the 190 conservation programs we examined, certain Indigenous societies and traditional cultures have longstanding ways of seeing and knowing animals' individuality and sociality. We also found examples of methods that incorporate a more animal agency-oriented approach beyond the 190 studies using common management techniques that we reviewed.

For example, managers of a black bear control program in Colorado used their knowledge of individual bears' personalities to steer them away from human food sources, more effectively teaching them to avoid human spaces and conflict.

Overall, conservation plans that "listen" to animals, respond to changes in behavior, and collaborate with human communities close to wildlife help rebound populations and reduce conflicts.

In addition, focusing on animal agency can lead us to view conservation success in a broader way. Sheer numbers of animals and biodiversity metrics are important, but animals have relationships with one another and often with humans in their changing landscapes. Recognizing and protecting these interdependencies by collaborating with animals, recognizing their agency, and "following their lead" can improve the quality of life for both humans and other animals.



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