

The Strategic Case for Animal Liberation

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Ecosocialists view animal rights as the third rail of climate politics. The opposite is true.

Tackling climate change will remake the world. Everything is on the table: not only our energy sources but how we travel, where we work, what we eat.

As Naomi Klein argues in *This Changes Everything*, the sheer scope creates an opportunity to unite the left's movements. But there's one movement Klein—and most ecosocialists—leaves out: animal liberation.

For many on the left, even those sympathetic, animal advocacy simply isn't a high priority. But if the climate left does not start engaging seriously with animal politics, we will be caught flat-footed in some of the most important debates of the coming decades. Two dilemmas will inevitably arise: first, in confronting the meat question, and second, in wildlife conservation: the potential conflicts between climate action and endangered species, climate impacts on biodiversity, and the role of protecting and restoring habitat in sequestering carbon.

The pandemic illustrates the consequences of sidelining these issues. Most infectious diseases, COVID-19 among them, [first reach humans through](#) contact with other animals; habitat disruption and animal farming thus play key roles in the spread and mutation of disease.

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Yet despite the political openings created by Covid-19 and the prospect of a Democratic administration next year, most socialist organizations still lack any coherent philosophical or policy approach to animal agriculture and wildlife conservation. We must decide whether we can keep treating wild and domestic animals as mere resources—and there are both ethical and strategic reasons to doubt that we can. The U.S. public, in surveys and ballot initiatives, professes a deep well of concern for other animals, concern that could help spur the fight for essential climate policies such as ending factory farms and restoring ecosystems. And a cultural shift toward animal liberation would make societal changes such as widespread veganism and reduced energy consumption a much easier sell.

Grass-Fed Won't Cut It

Environmentalists broadly agree we must shift away from industrially produced meat. Animal agriculture is responsible for roughly 15% of global carbon emissions. It comprises 83% of all land used for food while supplying only 18% of the calories, driving desertification, and habitat destruction from the Amazon to American prairies. It pollutes air and soil, poisons rivers and oceans, and wreaks havoc across marine ecosystems via overfishing. It exploits and abuses its human workers and, at the scale consumed in this country, presents a public health [crisis](#).

Some say that the problem is *how* we raise animals for slaughter, not that we raise them at all. A growing portion of environmentalists (including many Democratic [politicians](#)) praise “regenerative” or “rotational” grazing, a method of cattle ranching that could, advocates claim, replenish soil and even sequester carbon, offsetting emissions from the cattle themselves. We can have our cows, and eat them too.

The science on the merits of regenerative grazing is [still out](#) and often overstated in the media. Even if the benefits are real, however, grazing requires too much land. It would be ecologically more or less impossible to switch to all grass-fed beef without a drastic reduction in consumption—[one study](#) found that current pasture land could only support 27% of the United States’ current beef supply.

Burger King recently made headlines for supplementing its cows’ diets with lemongrass, claiming this could reduce methane emissions by 33%. Some scientists [put](#) this number closer to 4%, but even cutting 33% would be inadequate. Studies show seaweed supplements could make a larger dent, but growing enough seaweed for the whole industry is a [difficult technical challenge](#).

Besides, methane from cattle is not meat’s only climate problem. [More than half](#) of the livestock sector’s emissions come from other sources, such as deforestation for pasture, fertilizer for feed, and nitrous oxide from manure.

While beef consumption in the United States has been declining for decades, we still eat more than four times more beef than the rest of the world, and what we’re replacing it with—other meat, in particular chicken—isn’t [exactly good](#) for the climate. A typical serving of chicken has 11 times the emissions of a serving of beans, and that is before we get to other impacts such as pollution from waste. The idyllic vision of the small, humane farm—something that for the most part doesn’t [actually exist](#)—in some cases may be [worse](#) for the climate. And even the most sustainably grown chicken [doesn’t outperform](#) plant alternatives.

Yet sadly, ecosocialists often fail to stress the need for less meat. When asked about it in a [Reddit AMA](#), Naomi Klein replied that while she agrees high-meat diets are unsustainable, she didn’t address this directly in her book because "I just don’t see how you enforce vegetarianism :)"

This reasoning makes no sense. We would never throw up our hands and say, for instance, that we don’t know how to enforce a ban on gas-powered cars, and thus we aren’t going to talk about their emissions. No matter which way you slice it, the United States needs to eat a lot less animal flesh. To dodge this reality amounts to another form of climate denial. It’s also a strategically important issue to get right, as diet changes may be one of the most noticeable differences wrought by the climate transition in people’s everyday lives—thus among the most at risk of a backlash. The Right is already trying to make red meat a culture war. Rather than downplaying this issue until we take power, which seems to be the current de facto strategy, the climate movement should proactively build support for a plant-based future.

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Mass support for this future will take struggle, but it may come easier than you’d think. Klein is right that individual vegetarianism would be hard to enforce; the percentage of vegetarians in the United States remains low, and [most](#) go back to eating meat. (Though it’s worth noting that U.S. vegetarians and vegans are [disproportionately](#) women, low-income, and people of color, far from the white bourgeois stereotype.)

But polling suggests massive latent support for structural and cultural shifts that could pave the way for widespread veganism. A [majority](#) are at least somewhat concerned about the treatment of farmed animals. A 2018 [poll](#) commissioned by the Nonhuman Rights Project found only 6% think nonhuman animals

“don’t need much” legal protection, while 46% say they deserve the “exact same rights” as humans. A 2016 ballot initiative in Massachusetts meant to improve conditions for farmed animals passed with [a whopping 78%](#) of the vote. Most Americans even [oppose](#) experimentation on nonhuman animals, a practice often viewed as more “justified” than eating meat.

In fact, of the nearly one in four Americans who ate less meat last year than the year before (including 31% of people of color and 31% of women), animal welfare was a major reason for 41% and a minor reason for 24%. More critically, U.S. vegetarians and vegans who stop eating meat for environmental or health purposes are more likely to start up again than those driven by a deeper moral or religious conviction. People who reject the confinement and killing of animals will more willingly adjust their lifestyles to ecological limits—and advocate political change to achieve this—than those who hope lemongrass or seaweed might still save the beef industry.

It is probably no coincidence that the country with the most vegetarians and the [second-least](#) per-capita meat consumption, India, has a strong religious tradition encouraging abstention from beef. The low rate has remained steady despite rising incomes, bucking the global trend. While the country’s animal politics are [fraught](#) and do not serve as a direct model for the United States, it suggests that cultural attitudes toward animals can play a large role impacting behavior—a piece of the ecosocialist transition that is woefully neglected (unless we wish to rely on pure state compulsion).

Bringing Conservation Back In

It’s not just domestic animals that are a point of contention within the climate movement. While Republicans overstate the threat in bad faith, wind turbines do [kill](#) millions of birds and bats. Offshore wind infrastructure may [disrupt](#) whale migration; mining for metals used in solar panels and electric car batteries has disrupted indigenous groups and wildlife from [Alaska to Latin America](#). And in the U.S. Southwest, desert conservation groups have [fought](#) hard against proposed solar megaprojects that would have destroyed habitat for bighorn rams and other endangered species.

Wildlife advocates support renewables, but [ask](#) that placement in ecologically sensitive areas be prohibited, and to the extent possible that solar panels go in the already built environment (e.g., on rooftops and roads). Many also push for less overall use of energy.

Some leftists have little patience for wildlife protection. In *Four Futures*, for example, Peter Frase argues the only reason to save the whales or protect wilderness would be because humans want to live in a world with whales and wilderness. Nonhuman nature, for Frase, “has neither interests nor desires.” This is, at least in animals’ case, false: obviously whales, cows, and yes, even polar bears have interests and desires. But it’s also bad politics.

Consider the widespread [alarm](#) over animals killed in Australia’s wildfires, viral [articles](#) about dying coral reefs, or even the [misguided](#) but earnest enthusiasm over wildlife sightings during quarantine. In a 2019 Gallup poll, 77% of Americans said they worried a great deal or a fair amount about loss of wildlife habitat, and 68% worried about extinction of plant and animal species, more than were worried about climate change. In another poll, 90% supported the Endangered Species Act (ESA), with 68% percent saying that they would be more likely to vote for a politician who “supports environmental safeguards such as the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Air Act, and the Clean Water Act.”

Concern for wildlife isn’t confined to privileged white moderates or closet eco-fascists—it’s shared by most of the country.

To be fair, as Frase would concede, there are self-interested reasons to protect habitat. Intact ecosystems store carbon, regulate local climates, and prevent future pandemics; wildlife benefits us in myriad other ways, too, from pollination and pest control to [improving water quality](#), and the great outdoors provide opportunities for recreation and reflection.

But it may not just be human well-being that motivates the mass politics of conservation. In [one study](#), participants were less likely to support a proposed dam in Bolivia when presented with “moral-ecological” arguments against it, including a case for intrinsic rights of nature. These arguments were more influential than information on the economic benefits of the undammed ecosystem (though both had an effect).

This study doesn't prove people care *most* about wildlife over other factors, as the moral-ecological arguments presented also included local indigenous people's relationship with the land. But it's not a zero-sum game: concern for other animals can reinforce our broader commitments to justice. Indeed, study participants were most opposed to the dam when presented with both moral and economic arguments.

The climate movement, then, should embrace animal-centric arguments for restoring ecosystems, in addition to highlighting carbon benefits. Not only are these arguments effective, but the ESA is probably the strongest tool we have to protect habitat. We should avoid pitting renewable energy against endangered species, as this will lose valuable public support. We should encourage respect for wildlife: If people are invested in wild animals' well-being, they will more eagerly support a less [extractivist](#) society with less energy, fewer consumer goods, and as much as [half the planet](#) set aside as habitat.

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And besides, we can't leave the urgent task of preventing a mass extinction to the mainstream conservation movement, with its [friendliness to capital](#) and often [colonial approach](#) to the Global South. Even worse would be environmentalism co-opted by reactionary xenophobes, like some far-right but “green” [parties](#) in Europe. There is an ugly history of wilderness advocates promoting coercive population and border controls, and fascists going back to the Nazis have gained popularity claiming to protect animals (whether or not they actually did). Formations like La Foresta, part of Italy's neo-fascist CasaPound, accuse nonwhite races of cruelty and ecological destruction to build support for white supremacist ideas, linking conservation to a nationalist conception of defending the homeland. Their social media is an alarming mix of pro-animal content and racist screeds, and in a warming world, these narratives could grow mainstream if not effectively countered. In response, the left must channel the public's pro-wildlife sentiments with a mobilizing vision of our own, serving as a political home for the diverse (and in this country, mostly left-leaning) constituency of animal lovers.

In short, it would be politically foolish to dismiss the needs of wildlife. And it would be morally foolish to deny that the displacement, starvation, and killing of wild animals require a response.

Towards Animal Liberationist Eco-Socialism

Plenty of leftists, [myself included](#), have made [extensive ethical arguments](#) why socialists and progressives should embrace animal liberation. It's pretty straightforward: many animals think, they feel, they struggle. To commodify and discard them is needlessly cruel, oppression at mass scale. If the climate movement

does not embrace some version of animal liberation, we will have missed an opportunity to make the world a kinder and more beautiful place.

That opportunity is now. The impacts of the pandemic, from reduced restaurant visits to supply chain disruptions, have [decreased](#) worldwide per-capita meat intake by almost 3%, the biggest drop of the century. Meanwhile, due to Covid-19 outbreaks in meatpacking facilities, some workers and civil rights groups have actually called to shut down their own workplaces and/or [boycott](#) meat.

The climate movement could use this opening to forge alliances with farmworkers against a destructive industry and fight for a just transition into sustainable plant-based agriculture jobs. But for us to seize this moment, we first need a unified and coherent vision of a healthy, just, and ecologically restorative food system.

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Often, the changes demanded by climate change—less meat, less energy use, less driving, fewer consumer goods—are framed as sacrifice, and certainly, they will be experienced as such for many, especially at first. But, as climate advocates often argue, this can also be a world of less work and greater leisure, natural beauty, and an emphasis on care and restoration. I believe a narrative of animal liberation is key to getting people to not only accept but fight for this new conception of the good life.

On the one hand, there is the story advanced by capitalism, which treats non-human lives as a resource: finite, perhaps, but expendable and exploitable. From this perspective, eating less meat, cutting down fewer trees, or consuming less energy to save the polar bears really is a sacrifice—some belt-tightening now for expected benefits later. But it also clashes with the vast majority's moral intuitions: namely, that animal well-being matters for its own sake.

Alternatively, we could build on this public opinion, sharpening it from a vague general sentiment into an ambitious political project. We could accept the overwhelming scientific evidence that other animals' lives are full and vibrant, distinct from our own but sharing fundamental emotions, cognitive abilities, and forms of agency. Rather than maintain the hierarchies and cycles of exploitation that are harming practically all life, we could develop cooperative, egalitarian systems and structures that benefit all species, and apply consistently the values we claim to hold.

This narrative would be one not of sacrifice but solidarity: not of properly harnessing a resource, but of engaging and working with fellow creatures. This fellow-feeling could spur necessary initiatives such as ecosystem restoration projects, the reintroduction of extirpated animals, and organic permaculture farms where wild insects pollinate and wild birds act as non-toxic pesticide. If it does turn out domestic cows or wild buffalo are needed to sequester carbon in grasslands, we can consider them as care workers and comrades, rather than discard and eat them. Should a genuine cultural and ideological shift begin, people will stop *wanting* to eat meat or destroy habitats, reducing the political challenges ahead of us.

This narrative may be better for humans, too. Scholars of [feminism](#), [critical race theory](#) and [disability studies](#) have all explored how the material and ideological infrastructure of human supremacy also reinforces other social hierarchies; all of our liberation, they argue, may be intertwined.

Of course, not everyone will agree. Some indigenous groups, for instance, offer [worldviews](#) that reject both human supremacy and veganism, and these views must be taken seriously. (Though as vegan Mi'kmaq scholar Margaret Robinson [observes](#), “There is no view on animals that is shared by all Aboriginal people.”) And many, for health or other reasons, cannot immediately stop eating animals, though much of this could be addressed through structural changes to the food system. Policy, ideology, and personal consumption can work in a positive feedback loop, each reinforcing transformations in the others.

Climate organizations need Zoom book clubs to discuss ideas, working groups to develop policies, principles, and strategies on justice for nonhuman animals. Groups can invite local animal rights organizations to actions and meetings to generate goodwill and begin the cross-pollination of ideas, broadening our coalition.

We can fight harder for the political changes we already agree on—an end to factory farming, stronger protection of endangered species, funding to make healthy, sustainably grown produce more widespread and accessible to all. We can organize with slaughterhouse workers and animal farmers against their abusive corporate bosses, for a just transition and green jobs guarantee. And we can try to start consciously thinking of the nonhuman animals in our lives—from the dogs in our homes to the pigeons on the street to the deer in the woods—not as objects but subjects, fellow travelers through an uncertain era whose desires for food, shelter, companionship, and freedom may not be that different from our own.