

1 **The virtue of compassion in compassionate conservation**

2 **Running Head:** Virtue ethics and harm

3 **Keywords:** Compassionate Conservation, virtue ethics, compassion, killing

4 **Article Impact Statement:** Compassionate conservationists should accept that the virtuously
5 compassionate person may adopt intentional harm-causing conservationist policies and that this
6 is compassionate.

7 **Abstract:** “Compassionate conservationists” argue in favor of a proscription on, or at least a
8 strong presumption against, the adoption of conservation policies that intentionally harm animals.
9 To be compassionate is to care about animals and it is antithetical to caring for animals to
10 intentionally harm them. Compassionate conservationists thus criticize existing conservation
11 practices on the grounds that they harm animals. This paper shows two things that together
12 challenge the foundation of compassionate conservation. First, virtue ethics, which
13 compassionate conservationists appeal to to ground their theory, allows for exceptions to moral
14 rules, and so, there cannot be an in principle proscription on adopting intentional harm-inducing
15 policies. . . Not all compassionate conservationists advocate for a prohibition against intentionally
16 harming animals, only a strong presumption against it. This leads to the second point, namely,
17 compassion can motivate a person to adopt a direct harm-inducing conservation policy when
18 doing so is the best available option in a tragic situation, a situation in which no matter what policy
19 she adopts, animals will be harmed. This decision is not cruel; rather, it is motivated by
20 compassion in a tragic situation. Combining this insight with the empirical observation that the
21 conservationist regularly finds herself in a tragic situation, we arrive at the conclusion that the
22 compassionate conservationist may regularly advocate for some harm-inducing policies from
23 compassion.

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3 **Introduction**

4 The “compassionate conservation” movement argues in broad strokes that
5 conservationists should recognize the interests of all sentient creatures in practice and that doing
6 so supports the adoption of non-lethal, non-harming conservation practices and policies (Ramp
7 et al. 2013; Ramp 2013; Bekoff 2014; Ramp & Bekoff 2015; Wallach et al. 2015; Wallach et al.
8 2018; Wallach et al. 2020; Wallach et al. 2020; Batavia et al. 2020; Batavia et al. 2021). Since
9 compassion is a virtue that generally precludes intentionally killing or otherwise harming animals,
10 it is argued that many existing conservation programs are morally wrong because they inhibit the
11 free movement of animals, kill some in the name of conservation, and promote stress in animals
12 (University of Technology Sydney, 09 July, 2019; Wallach et al., 2018; Wallach et al. 2020;
13 Batavia et al. 2020; Ben-Ami, 2017). The idea is relatively straightforward. To be a compassionate
14 conservationist is to “avoid deliberately harming sentient beings in conservation programs”
15 whenever possible, which many compassionate conservationists believe is always or more often
16 than not (Wallach et al. 2020). This movement stands in opposition to conservationists who prefer
17 more consequentialist decision-making procedures. On this view, conservationists should seek
18 to dispassionately maximize animal welfare or some other value, and doing so may involve the
19 adoption of lethal conservation policies (see Driscoll & Watson 2019; Johnson et al. 2019; Oomen
20 et al. 2019; Hampton, Warburton, and Sandoe 2019). A difference between the two camps can
21 be heuristically captured by noting that compassionate conservationists focus on human
22 motivations, e.g., whether they manifest compassion toward non-human creatures and individual
23 animals, whereas consequentialist conservationists focus on weighing the interests of all animals
24 affected by a policy. Compassionate conservation has been criticized along various grounds. It is

1 argued that conservation is already compassionate to animals (Russell et al. 2016; Driscoll and
2 Watson 2019); that emotions are unreliable or biased (Griffin et al. 2020; Santiago-Avila & Lynn
3 2020; Callen et al. 2020); that compassionate conservation will lead to a greater amount of animal
4 harm (Callen et al. 2020; Hayward et al. 2019; Johnson et al. 2019); and that the program is
5 speciesist (Santiago-Avila & Lynn 2020; Hampton, Warburton, and Sandoe 2019). Defenses of
6 the movement have been offered (Wallach et al. 2020; Batavia et al. 2021). The debate continues.

7 The assumption underlying and permeating the compassionate conservation movement
8 in its various iterations is that the virtuously compassionate person is motivated to refrain from
9 killing or otherwise harming animals in the name of conservation, and only rarely and in extreme
10 cases will she adopt a policy that involves the conservationist in causing intentional harms to
11 animals. There is thus a strong presumption, if not outright prohibition, against adopting a
12 conservation policy that advocates for human beings intentionally harming animals, coupled with
13 the belief that this can be achieved in many, if not all, situations. Wallach and colleagues (2020)
14 argue for compassionate conservation on the grounds that sentient animals are persons, and so
15 share the same or similar moral status as human beings. They argue that “the interests and
16 agency of all sentient beings should be protected in conservation practice” (2020; see also Ramp
17 & Bekoff 2015). Batavia and colleagues, by contrast, argue for compassionate conservation on
18 the grounds that sentient animals suffer and compassion involves “suffering with” another
19 (Batavia et al. 2021). They conclude that when compassion is cultivated into a virtue and becomes
20 an integral part of conservation it leads the mind to recoil at the suggestion that it might be
21 appropriate for conservationists “to kill or intentionally harm certain kinds of beings in certain ways
22 to meet certain objectives” (2021). However it is argued for, proponents of compassionate
23 conservation agree that compassion is a virtue--a morally praiseworthy, good character trait--and
24 since it is evidently antithetical to compassion to intentionally harm another, the compassionate

1 conservationist is motivated to avoid adopting conservation policies that directly harm animals
2 and--practically speaking--this can be done in many, if not most, situations.

3 The aim of this paper is to critically assess the assumption that the virtue of compassion
4 will in fact lead a conservationist to regularly advocate against conservation policies that involve
5 human beings in harming animals. The argument of this paper is that proponents of
6 compassionate conservation neglect two points that directly bear on the virtue of compassion and
7 virtue ethics. First, because virtue ethics, which compassionate conservationists appeal to to
8 ground their theory, is situational in nature, not apodictic, there cannot be an in principle
9 prohibition against adopting direct harm-inducing policies. . There are exceptions to moral rules,
10 and so, compassionate conservationists who propose a prohibition against killing animals are at
11 odds with the theoretical underpinning of their account. Not all compassionate conservationists
12 support the adoption of a prohibition against causing intentional harm to animals, however; some
13 argue that compassion supports the adoption of a strong presumption against intentionally
14 harming animals in the name of conservation, and this presumption entails a reimagining of many
15 conservation policies that harm animals. This leads to the second point, namely, compassion can
16 motivate a person to adopt a harm-inducing conservation policy when doing so is the best
17 available option in a tragic situation, a situation in which no matter what policy she adopts, animals
18 will be harmed. This may appear callous to observers because harming animals is callous in
19 ordinary circumstances. However, the virtuous person is motivated by compassion, not cruelty, in
20 this tragic situation. Combining this insight about compassionate killing with the empirical
21 observation that the conservationist regularly finds herself in a tragic situation, we arrive at the
22 conclusion that the compassionate conservationist may regularly advocate for some intentional
23 harm-inducing policies and that doing so is compassionate.

24 **The Virtue of Compassion in Virtue Ethics**

1 According to virtue ethics, the locus of moral evaluation is the person, not a person's
2 conformity to a moral rule or the outcomes, and this is precisely because morality is too complex
3 to be captured by moral rules (Hursthouse 1999, 2006, 2011; Swanton 2003; Annas 2007). For
4 instance, adherence to rules overlooks the role of emotions, feelings, the importance of our
5 situational relation to others, as well as our reasons for acting as we do. The emphasis of virtue
6 ethics is the cultivation of a good character that manifests itself in virtuous action. The virtues are
7 morally good, praiseworthy character traits acquired through rationale training. They are
8 imbedded in the person's "make up", so to speak, inclining her to think, reason, feel, and behave
9 in excellent and praiseworthy ways. The virtues thus encompass the whole person, from her
10 thoughts and judgments to her emotions and behaviors. When the virtuous person performs a
11 compassionate act, for example, she acts *from* compassion: her cognitive appraisal correctly
12 assesses what compassion calls for in the situation, and she feels and behaves appropriately in
13 response. That virtues are holistic illuminates how they relate with one another. When the virtuous
14 agent finds herself in a situation in which compassion calls for one action while justice calls for
15 another, the virtuous person's prudence discerns what the appropriate response to the situation
16 is, and she responds accordingly. There might be conflict about what to do, but prudence—the
17 virtue responsible for identifying the appropriate response to the situation--fosters unity in the
18 virtuous person's character.

19 The focus of virtue ethics on excellent character traits can ground an account of the
20 rightness or wrongness of actions, and accordingly, virtue ethics can be action guiding in much
21 the same way that consequentialism and deontology are. Following the work of Rosalind
22 Hursthouse (1999; 2011), we can say that an action is right if and only if it is the action that the
23 virtuous person would characteristically perform in that circumstance; an action is wrong if it is an
24 action that the virtuous person would not characteristically perform in that circumstance. While
25 consequentialism tells us to look at the consequences of an action and deontology tells us to look

1 at the principle or rule, virtue ethics tells us to look at what the virtuous person would
2 characteristically do in the situation in question. That rightness and wrongness of actions is
3 grounded in what the virtuous person would characteristically do in a given situation given their
4 skills, abilities, positions, and so on highlights the contextual nature of moral actions. Consider
5 two soldiers on the battlefield. Both ought to be courageous, but what is courageous for a well-
6 trained soldier in battle might be different from what is courageous for a less well-trained soldier
7 in the same situation. This means that the courageous action for the well-trained soldier might be
8 a rash action for the less well-trained soldier. This is often taken to be an upshot of virtue ethics,
9 namely, it accommodates the intuition that the application of some moral rules is not always rigid.
10 For example, it is a general moral rule that lying is wrong. This is a rule because the virtuous
11 person in ordinary circumstances is honest. Honesty is the virtue related to disclosing and
12 withholding information, and in most ordinary circumstances honesty involves telling the truth. .
13 However, this is not to say the virtuous person will never lie. If a virtuous person is hiding Jews
14 in her attic, she might lie to those trying to find the Jews in order to kill them. She sees that it is
15 not a matter of honesty to provide useful information to someone who intends to kill another. The
16 right thing to do in this case is to not disclose the information. In this case, the virtuous person
17 does a *typically* wrong action, and--importantly--the virtuous person does not do anything morally
18 wrong in this extraordinary situation.

19 With a picture of virtue ethics before us, I turn to the virtue of compassion. The virtuous
20 person is compassionate and compassion involves a particular affect, proper judgment, and
21 motivation to act (Batavia et al. 2021; Batavia et al. 2020; Gilbert 2017; Crisp 2008; Abbate 2014;
22 Alvaro 2017a, 2017b; Palmer 2010; Sandler & Cafaro 2005). Compassion is grounded in our
23 shared relation to others, allowing ourselves to be affected by the suffering of others. The
24 compassionate person not only recognizes the suffering of another, she also feels anguish or pain
25 at their misfortune; and rather than ignore the suffering of the other, the compassionate person is

1 motivated to act so as to help the other in the right kind of way and in the right amount. It might
2 be pointed out that, historically, compassion has not been directed to non-human suffering in the
3 virtue ethics tradition. However, this is not a good reason to think that the virtuous person will not
4 respond to non-human suffering with compassion. To be indifferent to animal suffering is callous,
5 especially when one is in a position to prevent it or otherwise minimize it. The compassionate
6 person not only cares about how her own actions directly affect animals; she also cares about
7 unintentional harms. While she cares about whether conservation policies intend animal harm
8 (e.g., killing off invasive predators), she also cares about whether conservation policies involve
9 unintended harms (e.g., harms resulting from overpopulation). To be indifferent to all of the harms
10 animals experience in the world is callous and cold, not compassionate, especially when she is
11 in a position to mitigate the harms. More nuance can be added to compassion, but this serves as
12 a mutually agreed upon foundation from which to proceed.

13 **The Compassionate Conservationist in a Non-Ideal World**

14 We can all agree that the virtuously compassionate person cares about promoting animal
15 flourishing and ending animal harms, both intentional and unintentional, (Hursthouse 2011, 2006;
16 Alvaro 2017a, 2017b; Nobis 2002; Hursthouse 2006; Vucetich and Nelson 2007; Bekoff 2014;
17 Batavia et al. 2021; Wallach et al. 2018; Wallach et al. 2020). The issue is how compassion
18 manifests itself in conservation practice. Specifically, would the virtuously compassionate person
19 refrain from adopting policies that intentionally harm animals? Proponents of compassionate
20 conservation say that compassion should lead us to adopt a “first-do-no-harm” principle (Bekoff
21 2014), an “individuals matter” point of view (Wallach et al. 2018), or a value of peaceful co-
22 existence (University of Technology Sydney, 09 July, 2019). Batavia et al. explain that “destroying
23 other lives to achieve conservation goals should not readily present itself as an option” (2021).
24 Wallach et al. (2020) note that compassion toward animals motivates one to minimize animal
25 suffering, “but not by intentionally harming” them.

1 Some compassionate conservationists, although not all, advocate for a prohibition against
2 adopting a harm-inducing policy toward animals (Wallach et al. 2020). The problem with this is
3 that it is not well grounded in virtue ethics, the ethics many compassionate conservationists
4 appeal to (Vucetich and Nelson 2007; Ramp 2013; Ramp & Bekoff 2015; Wallach et al. 2018;
5 Wallach et al. 2020; Batavia et al. 2021; Santiago-Avila & Lynn 2020). In other words, there is a
6 conflict between what virtue ethics claims and what compassionate conservationists who
7 advocate for a prohibition against animal harm claim. To begin with, it is important to remind
8 ourselves that virtue ethics is situational, not apodictic, in an important way. There are moral rules
9 according to virtue ethics, but they are grounded in the actions and behaviors that the virtuous
10 person characteristically does in ordinary circumstances (Hursthouse 1999). In extraordinary
11 circumstances, the virtuous person may characteristically perform a different action, and when
12 she does so, she is neither violating a moral rule nor acting out of character. Consider eating
13 animals. Since a virtuous person in an affluent society does not need to eat meat, and knows that
14 animals suffer on farms, she will refrain from eating meat: gustatorial pleasure does not justify the
15 raising and slaughtering of an animal (Alvaro 2017a, 2017b). The virtuous person does not eat
16 meat in ordinary circumstances because doing so is unjust, intemperate, and uncompassionate.
17 However, this is not to say that eating animals is always and in principle wrong. As Hursthouse
18 reminds us, “an action such as eating meat, which is exactly what a virtuous agent
19 characteristically refrains from doing in many circumstances, may nevertheless be something
20 that, in other circumstances, a virtuous agent does do” (2011). She gives the examples of
21 someone stranded in the Australian outback who needs to eat a rabbit in order to survive and of
22 people in certain parts of the world who need to consume bush meat to survive (2011). That these
23 people consume animals does not mean that they are not virtuous; what the examples show is
24 that what virtue demands of a person depends on the situation that person is in. That virtue ethics
25 is situational reveals that the guiding principles of compassionate conservation--e.g., first-do-no-

1 harm--are violable in ways that are not at odds with compassion, and importantly, there cannot
2 be a prohibition against intending animal harm.

3 Compassionate conservationists can reply that they allow for the adoption of conservation
4 policies that involve the harming of animals in some, albeit rare, situations. They advocate for a
5 strong presumption against adopting policies that involve conservationists in intentional harm and
6 believe that this presumption can be met in many cases (Bekoff 2014; Batavia et al. 2021). This
7 leads to the second point. In an ideal world, everyone agrees that we should refrain from
8 needlessly killing animals and instead seek viable non-lethal options. Unfortunately, the
9 compassionate conservationist does not live in an ideal world. It is often the case that, no matter
10 what the virtuous conservationist does, animals will die or otherwise be harmed either intentionally
11 or unintentionally (Callen et al. 2020; Hayward et al. 2019; Johnson et al. 2019). Here are two
12 examples. Consider a cattle ranch in Australia. The cattle live together, are well fed, and are free
13 to roam around. Being situated on the frontier, however, means that there are wild dogs in the
14 area that try to eat the cattle. The rancher has limited options (Allen and Hampton 2020): do
15 nothing, build a fence, shoot the predators, use poison bait, or deploy guard animals. To do
16 nothing benefits the predators but harms the cattle; fencing obstructs local environments, requires
17 the removal of predators from within the target area, and often proves ineffective; shooting
18 predators harms predators and is ineffective in large areas; poison baiting harms predators and
19 non-target animals; guardian animals harm predators and may themselves be harmed. No option
20 presents itself as harmless to animals. Similarly, consider invasive species such as feral camels
21 (*Camelus dromedarius*) in Australia (Hampton et al. 2016; Griffin et al. 2020). The conservationist
22 can adopt a lethal strategy, which harms camels, or a non-lethal strategy, ranging from doing
23 nothing to catch and release or contraception. Non-lethal strategies are not harmless, however
24 (Callen et al. 2020; Johnson et al. 2019; Hampton, Warburton & Sandøe 2019). Doing nothing
25 strains the environment, leading many more animals--camels and others--to die by starvation.

1 Catch and release strategies take time to have an effect, leading to ecological strain, not to
2 mention the harms involved in catching and releasing. Likewise, castration policies harm the
3 castrated animals and may lead to more animal suffering in the short term: predators increase in
4 numbers before dying off as result of lower numbers of prey (Callen et al. 2020; Palmer et al.
5 2012). The point of these two cases is that there is evidently no conservation option that is
6 harmless to animals. Policies that do not involve the conservationist in intentional harm may still
7 harm animals in foreseeable ways, and it might be that these unintentional harms are greater than
8 the overall harm resulting from the adoption of a policy that involves intentional harm.

9 I refer to situations in which no matter what the compassionate conservationist does
10 animals are harmed as “tragic situations” (Griffin et al. 2020; Wallach et al. 2020; Batavia et al.
11 2020). Other examples include endangered island foxes being eaten by federally protected
12 Golden Eagles, overcrowded animal shelters, pending amphibian extinction in Panama, wild
13 rabbit pests in Europe, and animal research (Minteer and Collins 2005; Conde et al. 2013; Callen
14 et al 2020; Abbate 2014). These tragic situations demand that the virtuously compassionate
15 person decide which policy to adopt in the full knowledge that no matter what decision she makes
16 animals will be harmed. Under ideal circumstances, she would refrain from adopting a policy that
17 involves her in directly harming animals. However, these are not ideal circumstances and
18 decisions have to be made. Since the virtuous person is prudent, she recognizes two things about
19 the tragic situation: (1) a proscription on harming animals may in fact lead to a significantly greater
20 amount of animal suffering, and (2) that compassion in a tragic situation motivates her to make
21 the decision to minimize animal harm. To be clear, the virtuous person does not turn into a
22 consequentialist interested in maximizing certain outcomes; rather, the virtuous person is
23 motivated by compassion to minimize tragedy in a non-ideal situation. She would appear callous
24 or cruel if she adopted a proscription on intentional animal harm knowing or reasonably believing
25 that it would create significantly more animal harm, as Cheryl Abbate (2014) explains: “An

1 uncompassionate person is one who would maintain" that countless animals "should endure a
2 painful life in the name of a negative duty to not kill or cause harm to beings with inherent worth."
3 When she adopts a conservation policy that directly harms animals, she does so because she
4 wants to prevent a greater tragedy from occurring; she is not motivated by cruelty. To do nothing
5 is to license significant harm to a significant number of animals, and she cares in the appropriate
6 way about all animals and all types of harm. To be sure, she does not enjoy adopting a harm-
7 causing conservation policy. The virtuous person acknowledges and responds appropriately to
8 the harm, even when it is right to adopt a policy that intentionally harms animals. She
9 acknowledges the tragedy of animal harm and the loss involved.

10 The virtuously compassionate person therefore approaches each conservation issue by
11 evaluating the range of conservation options available to her and their associated harms and
12 benefits (Fraser & Macrae, 2011; Minter and Collins 2005; Rohwer & Marris 2019). She weighs
13 the evidence to see whether there is a harmless policy that benefits animals. Unfortunately, as
14 critics of compassionate conservation are apt to point out, it is rarely the case that there is a policy
15 that involves no animal harm, intentional or otherwise, and indeed, there is good evidence that
16 adopting a policy that involves *some* intentional animal harm in various cases actually minimizes
17 overall animal harm (Russell et al. 2016; Hayward et al. 2019; Hampton et al. 2019; Hampton,
18 Warburton, and Sandoe 2018; Callen et al. 2020). The virtuously compassionate person would
19 likely find compelling the evidence that blind adherence to a 'do no harm' approach to
20 conservation threatens biodiversity and promotes greater animal suffering through overpopulation
21 and resource strain (Callen et al. 2020; Abbate 2014; Hayward et al. 2019). She would look at the
22 nuance in each situation. For instance, Allen and Hampton (2020) systemize "the various harms
23 present in a common predation management scenario" and suggest that overall consideration of
24 animal welfare, both of livestock and wild predators, supports the targeted lethal control of
25 predators. Importantly for present purposes, since there is evidence that, in some cases, lethal

1 measures maximize animal welfare, the virtuous person would adopt lethal measures *from*
2 *compassion*. Compassion for animals, not cruelty, may lead to the adoption of lethal practices.
3 To be sure, there is disagreement over which policies maximize animal welfare (Reddiex &
4 Forsyth 2007; Dubois et al. 2017; Doherty et al. 2019; Wallach et al. 2020). But this is beside the
5 point. The virtuously compassionate person who attends to the relevant research may adopt a
6 lethal practice if the evidence suggests that doing so is the best option available to her.

7 **Responding to Misconceptions**

8 What the preceding shows is that, according to virtue ethics, compassion may lead a
9 conservationist to adopt lethal measures when doing so is the best option in the situation. It might
10 be thought that a compassionate person who advocates for killing off an invasive species, say, is
11 acting callously. After all, it seems peculiar to hold that killing an animal can be a compassionate
12 or respectful act toward that animal. Wallach et al. (2020) insist that this “is not how the term is
13 applied in compassionate conservation”. The problem with this line of reasoning is that it
14 overlooks the non-ideal nature of the situation the compassionate conservationist finds herself in,
15 not to mention that there are no apodictic rules in virtue ethics prohibiting the killing of animals
16 outright. Hursthouse explains that the virtuous person in such a non-ideal, tragic situation “may
17 well do something that in different circumstances would fall under the prohibition of a vice-rule”
18 (2011). She gives the example of the virtuous person wringing the neck of a wounded bird. This
19 is an action that the virtuous person otherwise avoids and it certainly appears to be a cruel action.
20 However, in certain situations, say a situation in which a bird is injured with no hope of recovery,
21 this is precisely the action that is called for. This action appears callous to others because in
22 ordinary circumstances it is a callous action. But this is the compassionate action in this particular
23 situation, which is not to say the virtuous person enjoys killing the bird or that she does not feel
24 sorry about doing so. Similarly, in an ideal world where conservation efforts do not need to involve
25 intentional animal harm to be effective, the virtuously compassionate person would refrain from

1 adopting practices and policies that intentionally harm animals. But we do not live in an ideal
2 world, and so, the virtuously compassionate person is motivated to adopt the conservation policy
3 that results in the least amount of animal harm, which in some--if not many--cases is a
4 conservation policy that involves some intentional animal harm. This might appear callous to
5 observers, but it need not be callous in these circumstances, the non-ideal circumstances in which
6 the compassionate conservationist currently finds herself in.

7 It is important to dispel another misconception found in the literature. Wallach et al. (2020)
8 object that, just as the compassionate person would not entertain the lethal control of human
9 populations, so also the compassionate person would not entertain the lethal control of non-
10 human populations. The problem is that this comparison does not hold because not all living
11 things are morally on par, and so compassion is applied in different degrees to different kinds of
12 beings (Alvaro 2017b; Palmer 2010; DeGrazia 2008). Wallach et al. (2020) point to sentience as
13 the grounds of moral considerability, claiming that if a creature is sentient it counts as a person.
14 They fail to appreciate however that sentience is scalar--the sentience enjoyed by non-human
15 primates is much greater than the sentience enjoyed by mice, and this is precisely why non-
16 human primates are thought to have greater moral considerability than mice. Compassion for
17 non-human primates requires more of us than compassion for mice. This is not to say that mice
18 lack moral status. What this means is that how humans relate to one another is quite different
19 from how humans relate to other animals, and specifically, how they relate to distinct kinds of
20 animals. A virtuous person stranded on an island would not murder another person to eat in order
21 to survive but she just might well kill a fish to eat in order to survive. The picture can be
22 complicated further, for compassion toward animals is intuitively owed in different degrees
23 depending on how those animals relate to us and our role in causing their suffering. Clare Palmer
24 (2010) argues that what compassion requires of us regarding the suffering of animals varies
25 depending on whether the animal is a pet or wild, whether we cause the harm or not. Compassion

1 toward a family pet requires more of a person than compassion toward a wild animal. Moreover,
2 the compassionate conservationist is often placed in a tragic situation in which *not* adopting a
3 lethal control policy will knowingly lead to a greater amount of suffering among animals. To be
4 passive in the face of such suffering is unbecoming of the virtuous person. No one would blame
5 a person for trying to kill off pests and rodents that threaten her village's crops, nor would anyone
6 blame a person for eating a fish in order to survive.

7 Finally, it is important to emphasize that when the virtuous person, acting from virtue,
8 adopts a conservation policy that intentionally harms animals, she is not performing a morally
9 wrong action. Batavia et al. suggest that the compassionate conservationist who attends to the
10 complexity of a particular situation and judges that it is appropriate to kill an animal is implicated
11 "unavoidably in some measure of moral wrongdoing" (2021). Wallach et al. suggest that "it is not
12 clear that any decision can be made with moral impunity" in these circumstances (2020).
13 According to virtue ethics, this is the wrong way to see the situation for reasons already
14 mentioned. The rightness or wrongness of an action is grounded in what the virtuous person
15 characteristically does, not in the virtuous person's actions conforming to moral rules. The virtuous
16 person's actions come first, moral rules second. Virtue ethics is not deontological ethics. The
17 virtuous person respects and cares about animals, and it is precisely these virtues that may
18 motivate her to adopt conservation policies in certain situations that advocate for the killing of
19 some of them. Just as Hursthouse explains how a virtuous person who wrings the neck of a bird
20 does so from compassion, so it is the case that the virtuously compassionate person who adopts
21 a lethal conservation policy in a tragic situation does so from compassion. This is not to say the
22 virtuous person is cold and heartless. She acknowledges the harm and responds appropriately to
23 it, even when it is right to cause it: she grieves the loss and tragedy of the situation when
24 appropriate. Importantly, by definition, her act of adopting this particular policy is not disrespectful,
25 cruel or otherwise morally wrong, and because rightness and wrongness is grounded in what she

1 *qua* virtuous agent does, her adoption of a lethal conservation policy in the name of conservation
2 is morally right or at least morally permissible and compassionate.

3 **Conclusion**

4 Many can agree with Batavia et al. (2021) that “compassion should animate and inspire
5 conservation actions, intentions, and interactions”. Most conservationists care about animals and
6 are to some extent motivated by compassion, as critics of the compassionate conservation
7 movement are apt to point out (Driscoll and Watson 2019; Russell et al. 2016; Hayward et al.
8 2019). The problem, however, is that, while proponents of compassionate conservation advocate
9 for conservation policies that do not directly harm animals, this view is not well grounded in virtue
10 ethics. We live in a non-ideal world, a world in which it regularly happens that one invasive species
11 threatens another or a proscription on direct animal harm would result in more animal suffering.
12 Since virtue ethics is situational, and the compassionate conservationist cares about all animal
13 harm, she might well be motivated to adopt lethal or other harm-inducing policies. Since we live
14 in a non-ideal world in which it is often the case that there is no harmless option, it is reasonable
15 to suppose that compassion may motivate the adoption of policies that permit intentional animal
16 harm more often than compassionate conservationists would like to admit.

17 The upshot of this paper leads to an important insight. Compassionate conservationists
18 advocate for similar decision-making considerations as other conservationists in tragic situations.
19 The virtuously compassionate person cares about animals and responds appropriately to harms.
20 In a tragic situation, however, when she has no harmless option available to her, she will weigh
21 the associated costs of inaction (how many animals will be harmed by a hands off approach) to
22 action (how many animals will be harmed by approaches A, B, and C). Her compassion toward
23 animals will motivate her to select the course of action that promises to minimize animal harm. If
24 inaction will lead to significantly greater harm to greater numbers of animals, say through

1 overpopulation and sickness, then she will adopt a course of action, a course of action that
2 invariably involves her in some animal harm. Her decision-making procedure, while motivated by
3 compassion and prudence, closely mirrors the decision-making procedure of consequentialists.
4 Internally, of course, there is a profound difference, for the virtuous person is grieved about the
5 animal harm and does not enjoy being in such a situation, while the consequentialist need not be
6 so conflicted. Still, it might be that at the end of the day, compassionate conservation and
7 consequentialist conservation are more similar in their practical application than previously
8 thought.

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