

# Buddhism and the Ethics of Species Conservation

Simon P. James

February 2006

# Contents

Abstract . . . . .	3
Keywords . . . . .	3
1. . . . .	3
2. . . . .	4
3. . . . .	6
4. . . . .	8
5. . . . .	11
Notes . . . . .	13
References . . . . .	13

# Abstract

Efforts to conserve endangered species of animal are, in some important respects, at odds with Buddhist ethics. On the one hand, being abstract entities, species cannot suffer, and so cannot be proper objects of compassion or similar moral virtues. On the other, Buddhist commitments to equanimity tend to militate against the idea that the individual members of endangered species have greater value than those of less-threatened ones. This paper suggests that the contribution of Buddhism to the issue of species conservation should not, however, be discounted. It argues, on the contrary, that Buddhist traditions, in reminding us of the moral significance of the suffering of individual animals, add an important dimension to debates concerning the ethical justification of efforts to conserve endangered species.

## Keywords

Buddhist ethics, species, suffering, wildlife conservation

### 1.

The conservation of endangered species of animal is one of the most prominent environmental concerns, and one of the main objectives of the most influential environmental organisations. Furthermore, the conservation of such species is generally thought to be an ethical issue, meaning that the imperative to conserve pandas, for instance, or Californian condors tends to be regarded as a moral imperative. In saying that one ought to conserve endangered species, that ‘ought’ is usually considered to have a moral force.

None of this should be contentious. It should also be uncontroversial to note that Buddhism, for its part, is widely believed to be an especially ‘green’ or ‘eco-friendly’ religion. To be sure, the justification for this belief has been questioned (see Harris 2000); nonetheless, the Buddhist teachings have, on the whole, been perceived to be largely in line with the concerns of environmentalists.

With these observations in mind, one might initially be led to suppose that Buddhist environmentalists would wholly endorse the proposal that endangered species<sup>1</sup> ought to be conserved. Matters are, however, more complicated. For my part, I became aware of some of the complexities of this issue when, in 2002, I spent some time in Thailand

---

<sup>1</sup> I will only be considering endangered species of animal, which is not to deny that environmental organisations often aim to conserve species of other kingdoms. Moreover, I am primarily referring to those species that environmental groups are concerned to protect — pandas, blue whales, Californian condors, and the like. I am not referring to those species whose existence poses a significant threat to human health. So I will not be discussing the question of whether it would be a good thing if, say, *Entamoeba histolytica* (the cause of amoebic dysentery) were to become endangered.

interviewing Buddhist environmentalists. In these conversations I was struck, on several occasions, by the indifference, even hostility, of the people I spoke with towards the idea that the members of endangered species had greater value than those of less-threatened ones. Such a principle, I was told, was at odds with the Buddhist teachings, and ought to be rejected. One interviewee, for example, argued that to say that a rat had less value than a panda would be like saying that the life of someone from an overpopulated country was worth less than the life of an individual from a less populous nation.<sup>2</sup>

I record these views by way of an informal introduction to the topic of this paper. They are not, I admit, the results of a quantitative empirical survey of the views of Buddhists on these matters.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, there is of course a danger in speaking of Buddhists in general, as if the religion were always univocal; and it is certainly not my aim in this paper to suggest that *all* Buddhists are hostile to the conservationist agenda.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, it is surprising to find even some environmental thinkers drawing upon Buddhist teachings to *criticise* efforts to conserve endangered species of animal.

How is this phenomenon to be explained? One suggestion would be that those Buddhists who object to the conservation of endangered species do so because such practices cannot be justified in terms of the Buddhist teachings. This is the suggestion I will examine in this paper.

## 2.

So, is it possible for Buddhism to sanction the conservation of endangered species, indeed to see it as a moral imperative? One argument for holding that this is *not* possible runs like this: The idea of a species is of recent origin, the fruit of the modern science of biology. Therefore, one ought not to be surprised at the absence of references to the moral value of species in ancient Buddhist texts any more than one should be taken aback by the fact that no mention is made of oxygen molecules or ultraviolet radiation. A moral concern for species is a distinctively modern concern.

The first thing that can be noted about this charge is that it assumes that there *is* a modern idea of a species. But that assumption is, at the very least, questionable. For there has been a great deal of debate among both biologists and philosophers of biology over how a species may be defined as such, and indeed over whether any such definition is even possible. As a result, there are several distinct definitions of the term ‘species’ currently on the market (see Aitken 2004: Chapter 6). So, in view of this, one might want to reformulate the original objection: the various conceptions of a species,

---

<sup>2</sup> It seems likely that my interviewee was conflating endangered with rare, assuming, that is, that a rare species must be in danger of extinction.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on these results, please contact the author.

<sup>4</sup> For examples of Buddhist writers more sympathetic to such concerns, see Cooper and James (2005: 134).

one might say, are all of recent origin; therefore, a moral concern with species must be a distinctively modern concern.

But this revised charge still fails to find its mark. The problem is that it assumes that the moral issue of the conservation of species necessarily depends on a biological definition of species. But that is not the case. The moral issue centres on the question of whether types of animal may be considered proper objects of moral concern, regardless of whether those types are labelled as species, or sub-species, or breeds, or varieties, or whatever. ‘Species’, in this sense, simply means a type of organism. And it is clear that one does not need an education in modern biology to distinguish between species, understanding that term in this loose, non-technical sense. After all, children can recognise that sunflowers are a different kind of organism from dandelions, or that rabbits differ from squirrels. Moreover, it seems likely that, for the most part, these common sense distinctions based on morphological differences map onto the distinctions recognised by biologists (Aitken 2004: 102).<sup>5</sup>

It is clear that many Buddhist texts acknowledge the existence of different types of organism. For example, *the Jataka* tales concerning the Buddha’s former lives have a cast of almost 70 different species of animal (Chapple 1997:145–6). Indeed, in the *Vasettha Sutta* the Buddha makes a point of noting the various marks by which different kinds of plant and animal may be distinguished from one another (Saddhatissa 1994: Verses 600–11). His purpose is to show that whereas other living beings are differentiated into various kinds, differences between humans are only conventional. To be sure, this passage is not primarily concerned with taxonomy, the differentiation of kinds of organism. Instead, it would appear to be an attack on the *varna* system of class or caste, the Buddha arguing that the differences between Brahmins, warriors, producers and servants are merely conventional in a way in which differences between kinds of nonhuman being are not. Nonetheless, the passage clearly shows an awareness of the differences between types of animal. Consequently, the argument that Buddhism can have no sense of the moral significance of types of animal because its canonical literature is oblivious to the existence of what modern biologists call species can be rejected.

But this response might seem to miss the point. For one could argue that, even if the Buddhist texts are aware of differences between kinds of animal, they are nonetheless not aware that any of these particular kinds are in danger of *extinction*. And perhaps, the argument continues, *that* is why Buddhism is inimical to the idea of the conservation of endangered species.

---

<sup>5</sup> This isn’t always the case, of course. When giraffes were first brought to Rome in 46 B.C., they were thought to be the fruit of the rather improbable union of a camel and a leopard (a mistake registered today in the animal’s genus, *cameleopardalis*). Or, to give another example, when Europeans first came across the Tasmanian predatory mammal, the thylacine, they mistook it for a species of dog (the Tasmanian wolf), when later, more discerning, taxonomical studies revealed it to be a marsupial, and so quite unrelated to the canids. But such misclassifications are the exception rather than the rule.

In support of this contention, it could be argued that the notion that certain species of organism might, as a direct result of human actions, be eradicated from the face of the earth is a distinctively modern phenomenon. Consider, for example, Hume's claim, in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, that 'as far as history or tradition reaches, there appears not to be any single species which has been extinguished from the universe' (1993: 109). Hume was writing only two and a half centuries ago, but around two millennia after the time of the ancient communities within which Buddhism developed. I would not be surprised if those early Buddhists were similarly unaware of the possibility that certain species of animal might have been in danger of extinction. (And this, of course, might have been because at that time few kinds of animal were in fact in danger of extinction.)<sup>6</sup>

These speculations are, however, best left for historians. In any case, they have little bearing upon the central aim of this paper. For we are concerned with the question of whether Buddhism can sanction a moral imperative to conserve endangered species of animal. And the possibility that such an imperative was not recognised in the ancient societies in which Buddhism developed is not a good reason for answering that question in the negative. For, after all, the general teachings set out in the canonical literature of Buddhism might have implications for various modern issues, even if they do not speak to those issues directly.

### 3.

So if the Buddhist teachings are indeed at odds with the conservationist agenda this is not because the idea of a species — or, more narrowly, that of an endangered species — is a distinctively modern phenomenon. For a more compelling explanation one must consider the specific nature of Buddhist ethics.<sup>7</sup>

In order to reveal the connection with ethics, it will be necessary to make a distinction. So far, I have been referring to the conservation of endangered species as a single issue. Yet there are in fact two distinct, yet related, issues here. On the one hand, there is the question of whether species, as abstract entities, can properly be considered objects of moral concern. On the other, there is the issue of whether individuals of certain endangered species should be accorded a special moral value solely by virtue of the fact that the species of which they are members are classified as endangered.

---

<sup>6</sup> That said, there is evidence that in some ancient Buddhist communities the conservation of certain species was an issue. The *Khuddakapatha*, for instance, tells the story of how monks pleaded that tigers return to a wood, both in order that the wood not be felled and so that the animals might keep their home (Kabilsingh: 8). In this connection, it is also worth noting that the emperor Asoka (third century B.C.) banned the killing of many species of animals (Harvey 2000: 158). In neither of these cases, however, is it clear that the animals were protected in order to save their species from extinction.

<sup>7</sup> It might seem dangerous to speak generally of Buddhist ethics at this point. Nonetheless, the very general principles I will identify would, to my knowledge, be endorsed by all Buddhist traditions.

To address the first of these questions, it may be helpful to step back a little to consider the nature of Buddhist ethics in general. And the key thing to recognise here, I suggest, is that the main focus of Buddhist ethics is the suffering (*dukkha*) of beings. An acute sense of that suffering both motivates and sustains altruistic concern in Buddhism, the concern expressed in the key virtues of compassion (*karuna*) and lovingkindness (*metta*). The upshot of this is that it would seem that for Buddhist ethics only those beings capable of suffering, only sentient beings, are morally considerable.

What, then, of an endangered species such as the Indochinese tiger? Well, individual tigers can suffer, and so they are morally considerable, which is to say that according to Buddhist ethics one ought to exercise compassion, loving-kindness and other moral virtues in one's dealings with them. But what of the species *Panthera tigris corbett*?<sup>8</sup> The species is an abstract entity. It cannot suffer any more than it can chase deer or slink unnoticed through the grass. To think of it as sentient is, one might say, to make a category mistake.

Since species are not sentient, it is difficult to see how, within the context of Buddhist moral thought, they could be regarded as morally considerable. That is to say that when Buddhists advocate extending moral concern — compassion, lovingkindness, and so on — to other living beings, they would seem to be thinking of individual living beings, rather than any such abstract entity as a species (see Schmithausen 1991: 32).

So much for species per se. What of the individual *members* of endangered species? Is it possible, within the frame of Buddhist ethics, to accord them a special value? The short answer, once again, is that this is not possible. According different values to beings on the basis of whether the species they represent are endangered would seem to be at odds with Buddhist conceptions of equanimity (*upekkha*). For that teaching would seem to militate against the kind of moral discrimination that would justify ascribing a panda or condor a higher moral value than a rat, say, or a starling (cf. Harvey 2000: 183).<sup>9</sup> By the lights of Buddhist ethics, *dukkha* is *dukkha*, regardless of whether it is the suffering of a member of an endangered species or a member of a more common one.

It would seem, then, that Buddhist conceptions of sentience and equanimity are at odds with the moral imperative to conserve endangered species. Before considering the implications of this, it is interesting to note that in several respects the Buddhist position on these matters resembles that advocated by certain Western moral philoso-

---

<sup>8</sup> In fact, this is a subspecies. Nonetheless, it still counts as a species according to the non-technical definition of that term given above.

<sup>9</sup> The Buddhist commitment to equanimity might not seem to be at odds with species conservation if it is cashed out in terms of equal consideration, rather than equal treatment as such. So it could be argued that extending equal consideration to members of endangered species requires that one treat them unequally, giving them more help than the members of less threatened species. The problem with this suggestion, however, is that, although an endangered species requires extra help in order to remain extant, it is by no means clear that the individual members of that species have special sufferings that would warrant their unequal treatment.

phers. Here I am thinking of those writers, like Peter Singer and Tom Regan, who argue that nonhuman animals are morally considerable, and morally considerable for the same reasons that humans are. Singer, for his part, equates moral considerability with the capacity of a being to suffer. Species cannot suffer, and so they are not proper objects of moral concern. Moreover, since there is no reason why the suffering of any one being should be considered to have more weight in our moral deliberations than the like suffering of any other being, he would see no reason why the suffering of, say, a panda should count more than the like suffering of a rat (see Singer 1993: 57ff). So, in these respects at least, Singer's position is close to the position I am here ascribing to Buddhism. Regan, for his part, arrives at similar conclusions, though by means of a rather different line of reasoning. Unlike Singer, Regan pitches his case in terms of rights, arguing that certain beings have a right to be treated with respect purely because they are what he calls experiencing subjects-of-lives. Species, however, are abstract entities, and so cannot be considered to be experiencing subjects. Consequently, we are not obligated to treat them with respect. Moreover, like Singer, and indeed like Buddhists, Regan is committed to a standard of equality in his ethics, according to which all those beings that have moral value have it equally (Regan 1983:240–1). For Regan, as for Singer and for Buddhism, the panda has no more moral value than the rat.

#### 4.

I do not want to go into too much detail in making these comparisons. It will suffice to note that the Buddhist position on the conservation of endangered species would seem, at first sight, to have some affinities with the positions advocated by Singer and Regan. The crucial question is whether, given this ethical foundation, it is possible to justify a moral imperative to conserve endangered species. So: is it possible for a Buddhist to retain her views on the importance of sentience and equanimity in ethics and yet nonetheless consider the conservation of species a moral imperative?

One response here would be to maintain that even within the context of Buddhist ethics the members of some species may be regarded as instrumentally valuable to the extent that their continued existence reduces the amount of suffering in the world. Consider, for instance, the idea of a 'keystone' species, that is, one whose effect on the integrity of the ecological communities of which it is a member is disproportionately large relative to its abundance (see Smith and Smith 2001: 393). The loss of the members of such a species from a particular ecological community has a knock-on

effect, undermining the integrity of the community as a whole.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps, one could argue, their disappearance would therefore cause a great deal of suffering.

There are several problems with this suggestion, however. First, many species do not play such pivotal roles. The loss of these species would therefore not have any significant deleterious effects for their wider ecological communities. Second, although the relation between keystone species and certain ecological communities is well documented, the relation between the flourishing of those communities and the aggregate suffering of their sentient members is not clear. The possibility that the total suffering in thriving communities might be higher than that in declining ones cannot be ruled out. Third, this response seems to rely on an apparently utilitarian concern with minimising the net suffering in the world. Whether or not such a concern is legitimate in its own right, it is at the very least questionable as an interpretation of Buddhist ethics (see Cooper and James 2005: 85–88).<sup>11</sup>

But perhaps — and this would be another response — the problem of reconciling Buddhist ethics with a commitment to species conservation is really no problem at all. Perhaps the distinction between conserving species and protecting individuals is purely academic. For, after all, in real-life situations the protection of species tends to be a natural corollary of the protection of individuals. If one is concerned to protect the individual members of a particular species, then one’s efforts will usually have the welcome side effect of conserving the species of which those individuals are members.<sup>12</sup>

At first sight, this option would seem to be available to the Buddhist. As Peter Harvey points out, ‘Buddhist principles might not strongly support saving “the” whale, but they support saving whales!’ (Harvey 2000: 183). So it would seem that Buddhists would endorse efforts to conserve species, so long as those species were regarded, not as abstract entities, but as collections of individuals. In this connection, it is interesting to note that the open-billed stork would be extinct in Thailand but for the fact that its last remaining breeding ground is within the sanctuary of Wat Phai Lorn, a Buddhist temple near Bangkok (Kabilsingh: 1). I do not know whether the monks of this temple are actively concerned to save the stork’s species; perhaps they only care

---

<sup>10</sup> A classic study of this phenomenon was that of Robert T. Paine, who showed how the removal of the top predator, *Pisaster ochraceus* (a starfish) from a rocky intertidal community on the Pacific coast of the U.S. resulted in the original community of 15 species being reduced to 8 (see Smith and Smith 2001: 393).

<sup>11</sup> These last two points also militate against the following, related argument: (1) Preserving endangered species promotes biodiversity; (2) A biodiverse world includes less suffering than a more uniform one; (3) Suffering ought to be minimised; Therefore (4) all things being equal, one should preserve endangered species.

<sup>12</sup> Conversely, the eradication of a species will tend to involve the suffering and death of individual animals. To be sure, it is possible to conceive of situations in which a species could, in a sense, be eradicated without adversely affecting any of its individual members.

Maybe this would be the case if the species existed only as a DNA sample stored in a test tube which was then irretrievably lost or destroyed. However, in real-life situations, the extinction of species tends to involve the suffering and death of individual animals.

about the birds. Nevertheless, it seems that their playing host to the stork population has contributed to the conservation of that species.

Now this suggestion might work for Singer and Regan. Both those thinkers would have no objection to conserving species, so long as that result came as a by-product of a concern for individual animals. Yet from a Buddhist standpoint this line of argument seems to present certain difficulties. And these difficulties, for their part, become apparent if one considers Buddhist conceptions of animal life. For Buddhists sometimes maintain that animals lead peculiarly unhappy lives due to the various sufferings they have to endure — the constant danger of being eaten by other animals, for instance, or of dying through starvation or disease. This aspect of the Buddhist teachings was brought home to me on a visit to Wat Bowonniwet in Bangkok, the headquarters of the Thammayut sect of the Thai *Sangha*. Although it was situated in the centre of Bangkok, the temple was a place of striking natural beauty, an oasis of green amidst the noise and pollution of the city. The whole complex was shaded by the boughs of tall, tropical trees and interlaced by a network of cool streams. Wildlife was everywhere: lizards, darting up and down the trunks of the trees, or across the paths connecting the temple buildings; turtles, paddling in the streams, or blissfully sunning themselves at the water's edge; birds, flitting about in the dark shadows of the canopy. Yet my interviewee, a monk and long-term resident of the temple, was no romantic nature-lover. Upon being complimented on how wonderful it must be to live so close to all this wildlife, he politely demurred. 'All this is suffering,' he said. The meaning of this statement, he later explained, was that the lives of the animals weren't as carefree as they might seem. On the contrary, their lives, like those of all unenlightened or 'samsaric' beings, were marked by suffering, by *dukkha*. The birds, for instance, weren't 'playing' — they were being driven from branch to branch by hunger. The lizards scuttling up and down the tree trunks weren't frolicking — they were constantly on the lookout for predatory birds. As for humans, so, even more so, for animals: in the eyes of the sensitive Buddhist, even the fairest natural idylls serve as further testimony to the truth of *dukkha*.

The connection between this rather downbeat conception of animal life and the issue of species conservation becomes apparent if one considers the Buddhist conception of rebirth. For, from a Buddhist standpoint, if a certain species exists, then the possibility remains open that beings might be reborn as members of that species. Now, to be sure, if such a rebirth was, on the whole, a happy one, then it might make sense from a Buddhist perspective to ensure that the possibility of being reborn in that station remained open. Lambert Schmithausen, however, has argued that if such a rebirth is seen as being peculiarly painful, as involving a great deal of suffering, then it is hard to see why one ought to make efforts to ensure that the possibility for that kind of rebirth remains open (1991: 33–4, see also 16). After all, if the Indochinese tiger or the panda were to become extinct, that would mean that, in the future, beings would be spared the ordeal of having to live out the unhappy lives characteristic of these rebirths. So Schmithausen has argued, in effect, that in terms of Buddhist ethics the conservation

of a certain species of animal should not, in fact, be thought of as a ‘welcome side-effect’ of protecting individuals at all.<sup>13</sup>

I do not find Schmithausen’s argument convincing. More precisely, I think it can be shown to be out step with Buddhist conceptions of rebirth and *karma*. After all, allowing a certain species to become extinct would not *reduce* the suffering of any beings since, on account of the workings of *karma*, any beings that would have been reborn as members of a now-extinct species would be reborn at equivalent stations on the wheel of rebirth and so would have to endure comparable levels of suffering. So, for instance, the being that would have been reborn as a dodo, were any dodos still in existence, would nevertheless be reborn in some equally inauspicious station, as a common or garden pigeon, perhaps.

## 5.

So, in the real world, protecting individual members of an endangered species will, all things being equal, tend to conserve the species of which those individuals are members. And, *pace* Schmithausen, I do not think that one would be justified in repudiating such efforts on the basis of the Buddhist teachings. Nonetheless, we have seen that efforts to conserve endangered species are, in certain respects, at odds with some fundamental tenets of Buddhist ethics. In terms of Buddhist ethics, all things being equal, a member of an endangered species has no more moral worth than a member of a less threatened species. Indeed, the very intention to conserve a particular species of organism could, in some circumstances, be criticised from a Buddhist standpoint. That would be the case, for example, if that desire took the form of a refusal to accept that that species, like all ‘things’, is impermanent, and so destined eventually to dwindle and fade away, like a castle in the sand or an eddy in a stream (cf. Ho 1990: 132).

Is it a bad thing that Buddhism is, in these respects, at odds with the conservationist agenda? Given the common perception that environmentalism is and ought to be primarily concerned with conserving species, the Buddhist take on these issues might indeed seem objectionable. But this reaction would be misguided, and in the remainder of this section I will try to show why.

I should reiterate at the outset that, having rejected Schmithausen’s argument, I can see no reason why Buddhist ethics should be categorically opposed to efforts to conserve species, for the simple reason that efforts to conserve endangered species will often involve the protection of the individual members of those species. Nonetheless, even in these cases, too much focus on conserving the species might lead one to overlook the value of the individuals concerned. One might be led, that is, to see those individuals

---

<sup>13</sup> Schmithausen supports this contention by noting that animals are sometimes said to be absent from the heavenly ‘pure lands’ envisaged in texts such as the Larger and Smaller *SukhavatTvyuha* (ibid. 33–4; see also 16). None of the inhabitants of these Buddhist heavens have to suffer rebirth as nonhuman animals. One could say that in these Buddhist paradises, all animals are extinct.

merely as tokens or placeholders, representations of a type, where it is that type which is the focus of ethical concern.<sup>14</sup> In this case, one could rightly be accused of having been seduced by the abstraction represented by the species, and of overlooking the value of the individual creatures (c.f. Aitken 2004: 110–11).

That might not be considered too great a sin, however, on account of the fact that while regarding individual animals as tokens in this way might evince a blindness to their value, it would nonetheless result in practical measures to promote their welfare. The individual animals might not be respected, but they would be protected, and taking a consequentialist view of matters, one might conclude that that would be a wholly satisfactory result, morally speaking.

But efforts to conserve species do not always promote the welfare of individual animals. Indeed, a desire to conserve a particular species can sometimes serve as a putative justification for violence towards the members of a less popular species. As Regan writes: 'If people are encouraged to believe that the harm done to animals matters morally *only when* these animals belong to endangered species, then these same people will be encouraged to regard the harm done to *other* animals as morally acceptable' (1983: 360; emphasis in original).

That such a possibility is real has been amply confirmed in a current debate concerning the British squirrel population. In Britain there has recently been a good deal of attention focused on the conservation of red squirrels, the population of which has been severely depleted as a result of the success of an introduced species, the more adaptable grey squirrel. In an effort to revive red squirrel populations, various environmental organisations — wildlife trusts, and the like — have embarked upon a policy of culling, which has resulted in the massacre of vast numbers of grey squirrels.

Here a concern to conserve a particular species has been roped in to justify the deliberate harming of individual creatures. Moreover, that same concern has served to create and sustain a climate of anti-grey feeling in which violence against that species is positively encouraged. Browsing the Internet one finds a number of sites devoted to the eradication of grey squirrels. One calls the creatures 'a plague on society', and concludes that one should 'kill grey squirrels in any which way you can. The more violent and bloody the better'.<sup>15</sup> Another grey-hater confesses that, for dispatching the creatures, her 'favourite method is still the good old automobile ... there's something about that crunch and squirmy feeling under the tires'.<sup>16</sup>

My purpose in discussing the case of the grey squirrel is neither to imply that such unpleasant views are the norm, nor to suggest that efforts to conserve endangered species are to be condemned, wholesale. In the majority of cases such efforts are, I am sure, the expression (or perhaps an extrapolation) of a laudable concern for the

---

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Holmes Rolston III: 'The individual represents (re-presents) a species in each new generation. It is a token of a type, and the type is more important than the token' (in Dale Jamieson (ed.), *A Companion to Environmental Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p.409).

<sup>15</sup> Egnogg at <http://www.u-magazine/articles.php?articleid=557>

<sup>16</sup> Emily at <http://www.frizzylogic.org/archives/000334.html>

welfare of individual animals. Instead, I mean to draw attention to the consequences of detaching a desire to conserve species from a concern for individual animals. For, as I have argued, that separation can engender an indifference or even animosity towards the individual members of a particular unwelcome species.<sup>17</sup>

In the light of this possibility, conservationists would, in my view, do well to consider Buddhist ethics. For although, like other religions, Buddhist traditions have sometimes become preoccupied with abstractions — doctrinal disputes, and the like — for the most part, they have retained their focus on the practical problem of how best to respond to the suffering of beings. They would therefore be wary of the possibility that more abstract concerns — with the conservation of species, for example — might blind us to that suffering. In my view, the danger that that might happen is real, and so Buddhist reservations about the conservationist agenda are to that extent justified.

## Notes

I would like to thank the Leverhulme Trust for a research grant which enabled the research on which this article is based. I would also like to thank Ashgate Publishers for permitting me to reprint sections from *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*. I have also benefited from the helpful comments made by two anonymous referees on an earlier version of this article, and for this I am also grateful.

## References

- Aitken, Gill 2004. *A New Approach to Conservation: The Importance of the Individual Through Wildlife Rehabilitation*. Aidershot: Ashgate.
- Chapple, Christopher Key 1997. ‘Animals and Environment in the Buddhist Birth Stories’, in Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan RyUken Williams (eds), *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), pp. 13–8.
- Cooper, David E. and James, S.P. 2005. *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*. Aidershot: Ashgate.
- Harris, I. 2000. ‘Buddhism and Ecology’, in D. Keown (ed.), *Contemporary Buddhist Ethics* (Richmond: Curzon), pp. 113–36.
- Harvey, Peter 2000. *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ho, Mobi 1990. ‘Animal Dharma’, in A.H. Badiner (ed.), *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology* (Berkeley, Ca: Parallax), pp. 129–35.

---

<sup>17</sup> My thinking on this matter has been greatly influenced by Gill Aitken’s recent book, *A New Approach to Conservation: The Importance of the Individual Through Wildlife Rehabilitation*.

- Hume, David 1993. *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion*, translated by J.C.A. Gaskin. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kabilsingh, Chatsumarn. 'How Buddhism Can Help Protect Nature', <http://www.4ui.com/eart/166eartl.htm>
- Regan, T. 1983. *The Case for Animal Rights*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Rolston, Holmes III 2001. 'Biodiversity', in Dale Jamieson (ed.), *A Companion to Environmental Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 402–15.
- Saddhatissa, H. 1994. *The Sutta-Nipata*. Richmond: Curzon.
- Schmithausen, Lambert 1991. *Buddhism and Nature: The Lecture delivered on the Occasion of the EXPO 1990, An Enlarged Version with Notes*. Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies.
- Singer, Peter 1993. *Practical Ethics* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, Robert Leo and Thomas M. Smith. 2001. *Ecology and Field Biology* (6<sup>th</sup> edn). (San Francisco: Benjamin Cummings).

The Ted K Archive

Simon P. James

Buddhism and the Ethics of Species Conservation  
February 2006

Environmental Values, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp. 85–97.

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/30302067>>

2007 The White Horse Press

**Author affiliation:** Department of Philosophy, Durham University, Durham DH1  
3HN, UK

**Author correspondence:** [s.p.james@durham.ac.uk](mailto:s.p.james@durham.ac.uk)

**[www.thetedkarchive.com](http://www.thetedkarchive.com)**