

Cleaning Up Our Own Backyard: Racism, Speciesism and the Environmental Crises

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While environmental crises are predominantly caused by the West and industrialized countries, vulnerable groups across the whole world are carrying a disproportionately large burden while they lack the power over decisions that affect their lives. This has been coined environmental racism.

Entangled with racism is the problem of speciesism, as there’s a clear classification of animals. Exotic and charismatic wild animals are given a higher precedence, and both humans and other animals make way for their conservation.

The speciesist and racist tendencies get intertwined and become apparent in our dealing with environmental issues. These have been influencing policies, laws, conservation efforts, and funds.

This post is a commentary. The views expressed are those of the author, not necessarily of Mongabay.

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The EU and Northern countries tend to push for market-based mechanisms to solve environmental crises while Southern countries emphasize the environmental and social risks of these mechanisms (Global Forest Coalition 2010). We need to emphasize the climate debt of industrialized countries who are [responsible for climate change](#).

I reflected on the unease I felt and came to think that what bothered me about our reactions to the crises we face, is that some of our responses tend to be overwhelmingly racist and speciesist. The COVID-pandemic is the perfect example. When the news came out about COVID-19 potentially having started in a wet market in China, from a person who ate a bat, there was an international push for an enforcement of the [ban on wildlife trade](#) (Gorman 2020; Reuters 2020). There were judgments, because eating bats “is cruel,” and there was

disgust, because wild animals were being handled in “unhygienic conditions” at some “shady market.” The reason we felt these things is because we have a belief that we – the “civilized white people” – would never have done such a thing, because eating wild bats is “cruel and disgusting.” I am not suggesting that hunting an animal species that has a superior ability to host a myriad of diseases and selling it at a market with poor hygiene is a great idea, but would we have reacted the same way if the pandemic started at a chicken farm in Switzerland? Would we have judged it so harshly? Would we have advocated for a blanket ban on chicken farming?

Whiteness is the ownership of the Earth (Du Bois 1920). The dominant discourses that drive policies are white. We need to be reflective about understanding which culture is respected above others, and, without romanticizing cultures of the global South as purely ecological, create a [diversity-friendly justice](#).

Entangled with racism is the problem of speciesism, as we surpass our distinction between animals and humans to our distinction between different groups of animals. This explains why some of us will find it intuitively crueler to eat a bat than a chicken. We have a clear classification of animals in the West. Exotic wild animals on top, local wild animals next, farmed animals last.

Exotic wild animals are valued highly. We believe they should have space to live in dignity. We create documentaries on them. Most people have an ambiguous feeling seeing a lion in a small cage. We are uncomfortable with the idea that wild exotic animals are hunted. We try to reintroduce wild animals and enhance their populations by creating national parks and minimizing contact between exotic wild animals and the people who live in or near their habitats. We also try to put laws in place that ban the hunting and trading of these animals, to protect them and to prevent disease transmission between humans and animals. One example of this that I have been exposed to is a gorilla conservation project in Uganda, where a national park was created with [complete access restriction for local people](#) to the park so as to protect disease transmission from humans to the endangered gorillas. However, paying tourists, mostly from Europe and North America, were allowed to enter for a 600-dollar fee, to go see the gorillas at close proximity.



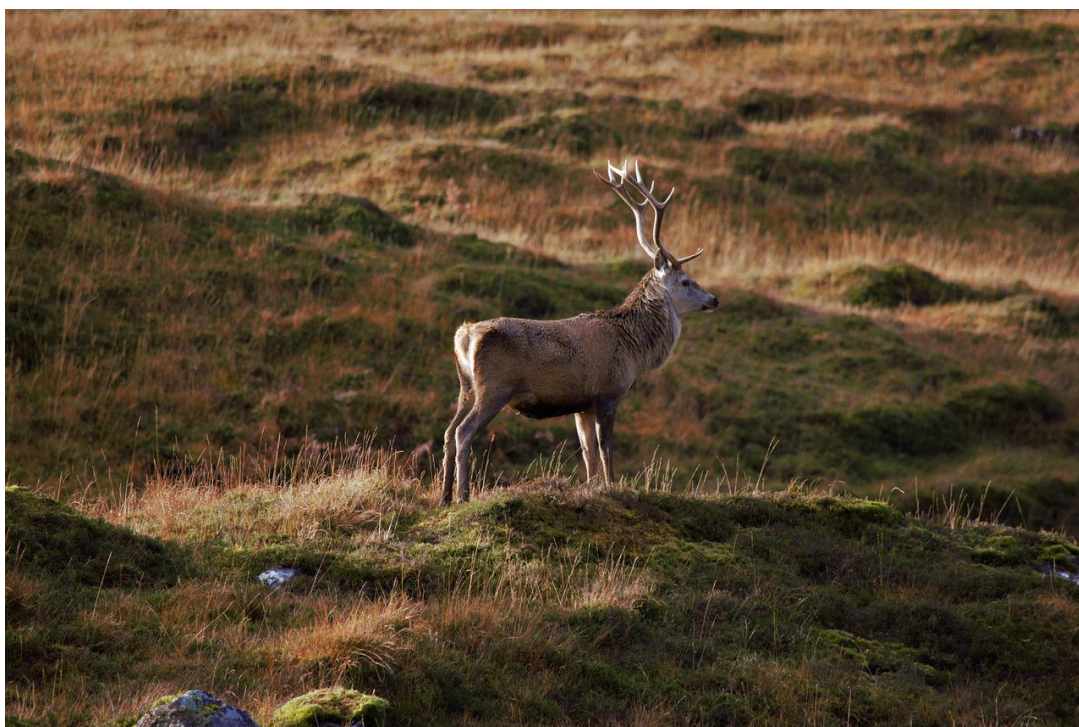
A gorilla conservation project in Uganda, where a national park was created with complete access restriction for local people so as to protect disease transmission from humans to the endangered gorillas, allows paying tourists, mostly from Europe and North America to enter and see the gorillas at close proximity. Image by futureatlas.com via [Flickr \(CC BY 2.0\)](#).

Local wild animals are also valued, but not as much as exotic wild animals. They are hunted locally, but under certain restrictions. In some cases, disease risks arise from either the facilitation of the hunting and eating the hunted animals itself. Most European predators are extinct because of intensive hunting in the past, but we are hesitant to reintroduce predators, as we need to consider the shepherds and farmers who would experience economic losses if we were to do so. We occasionally farm these wild animals (i.e., deer) for consumption. We try to create wildlife corridors, bridges and tunnels so that wild animals do not get killed on the road. Here, we carefully balance the interest of people with the interest of the animals. My PhD research serves as an example. In the Scottish Highlands, a large portion of the land is owned by individuals who run trophy hunting estates. The managers of these estates feed deer in order to keep their populations artificially high, so that paying [customers can shoot deer](#) at a higher success rate. The high deer populations cause tick populations to rocket, and as a result, Lyme disease (which is transferred through ticks to humans) [cases have gone up](#) 10-fold in the last decade. There are no predators to keep the deer populations at bay (Yalden 1999), and the reintroduction of the wolf, once part of the landscape but now hunted to extinction, is being debated since the 1960s. That has not happened though, as the few hunting the deer [are against it](#).

Farmed animals are valued for their products. We make regulations for their humane rearing and killing. We understand fully which environmental and disease risks arise from rearing and transporting billions of animals, and we are preventing disease outbreaks by administering high amounts of antibiotics to animals. We are also aware of the

environmental hazards of animal consumption, including the water usage, the space needed for their rearing and for their feed and the direct [pollution of cows](#) through methane. We are also conscious of the suffering of these animals, but here we also consider our taste buds and nutritional needs. I have not done any personal research in this field, but I have lived through some outbreaks of avian influenza that resulted in the slaughtering of entire farms of chickens. Yet, no bans on chicken farming were introduced as a consequence. Another example is the issue of [antimicrobial resistance](#) we are fighting against, which is a direct result of intensive animal farming.

Speciesism is a form of discrimination based on species (Ryder 1970). First it was formulated to show that we as humans find ourselves superior to other animals, but then speciesism also took on board the differences that people attribute to different species (Sueur 2019). Peter Singer, among others, questions the premise that one species should be prioritized above another, stating that all animals are equal meaning that they should have equal rights (Singer 1995).



A deer in the Scottish Highlands, where their populations are kept artificially high for trophy hunting.
Image via [Max Pixel](#) (Public domain).

The speciesist and racist tendencies get intertwined and become apparent in our dealing with environmental issues. We are very comfortable donating money to charities that provide opportunities or money to local people to stop their unsustainable hunting/agricultural practices that threaten wild animals. We think lions should be protected even on the lands of people who live as nomadic shepherds, because wildlife needs space. We do this in the name of conservation and to prevent disease transmission between wildlife and humans. We are less comfortable putting such policies in place locally. There is plenty of evidence of the negative environmental consequences of [keeping grazer populations high](#) or breeding and [releasing animals](#) to be hunted. We are also fully aware that we hardly have any predators left in Europe and that [ecosystem management](#) is compromised. However, here, we value local wildlife less and local people more. We, therefore, give more consideration to local people. In terms of eating animals, we think it is

fine for us to eat wild and domestic animals, but not so for people across the globe. We think that just because we breed an animal, it is fine to cause it suffering. However, next to the unjustified suffering, we create environmental problems and potential epidemiological risks due to large-scale animal agriculture.

Our way of thinking is infused by speciesism and racism, which are both a product of our current categorization of the world, our current paradigm. We need to unlearn the concept that there are [different cultures](#) that are separate from nature (Kohn 2015; Viveiros de Castro 2014) and the very existence of the [culture-nature divide](#) and relearn to see the world as simply a product of many kinds of human and non-human agencies, none of which is necessarily more important than the other (Bryant 2011).

This is a plea to start with ourselves. To use our privileges for something more meaningful than buying a sweater from a company that will plant a tree for us. To push for stricter climate change and conservation policies in our own countries, cities, neighborhoods, families and friend groups. To hold each other and ourselves accountable for the way we think about conservation and climate change. To value all beings on this planet equally and respect their agency, will to live and right to take up space and have a dignified life, including all humans, animals and plants. And to question every point in this article, so you can make up your own mind.

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Featured image: Earlier this year in northern Tanzania, more than 70,000 Indigenous Maasai residents were evicted from their ancestral lands to make way for trophy hunting and elite tourism. Image by Anita Ritenour via [Flickr](#) (CC BY 2.0).

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