

# How to Help When It Hurts? Think Systemic

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**Abstract:** *To resolve a moral dilemma created by the rescue of carnivorous species from exploitative situations who must rely on the flesh of other vulnerable species to survive, Cheryl Abbate applies the guardianship principle in proposing hunting as a case-by-case means of reducing harm to the rescued animal as well as to those animals who must die to supply food. This article counters that Abbate's guardianship principle is insufficiently applied given its objectification of deer communities. Tom Regan, alternatively, encouraged guardians to think beyond individual dilemmas and adopt a measure of systemic reconstruction, that being the abolition of speciesist institutions (The Case for Animal Rights; Empty Cages). In addition, politics of non-vegan pets and vote-with-your-dollar veganism are addressed as relevant moral dilemmas that highlight the limited utility of individual decision-making within a larger system of speciesism. It is argued that guardians are obliged to work toward the abolition of speciesism, while guardians may, in the meantime, support carnivorous refugees with animal agriculture byproducts given the reality of seller-controlled foodways.*

**Keywords:** *sanctuaries, food, consumption, meat, ethics, vegan theory*

## Introduction

When one vulnerable being requires the killing of other vulnerable beings in order to flourish, how will this conflict be resolved? Philosophers often adopt an individualist approach by examining moral dilemmas case-by-case to provide practical advice for moral agents. In Tom Regan's famous lifeboat scenario, for instance, he suggests weighing the quality of life, awareness, and subjectivity associated with individuals whose interests come into conflict (*The Case for Animal Rights*, 285-286). In his imagined conflict between dogs and humans on a boat too small, drowning neither a human nor a dog for the survival of the others on board would be desirable, but humans, he supposes, have greater opportunities for satisfaction. This greater appreciation for life suggests that humans would be better served by salvation. For Regan, if some groups must suffer and die in a true situation of conflict, let it be those with fewer opportunities for satisfaction.

In 'How to Help when It Hurts: The Problem of Assisting Victims of Injustice', Cheryl Abbate considers a real-world dilemma of this kind that is encountered by anti-speciesist sanctuaries with carnivorous refugees in their care. She develops what she terms a 'guardianship principle' to argue that, in situations of moral conflict, it is sometimes justifiable to hurt one or more innocent subjects-of-life to the benefit of others who have been treated unjustly and are *also* innocent, subjects-of-life.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, she employs an example of large sanctuary-dwelling carnivores (represented by the fictional 'Sophia,' a lion spared from the circus industry) who have been horribly exploited in a human supremacist world. After a lifetime of misery, these animals deserve a chance to flourish. Or, more accurately, humans owe duties to assist them on the grounds of justice. However, the justice owed to Sophia will paradoxically require the regular procurement of animal flesh in order for her to survive healthfully.

Many sanctuaries rely on the bodies of slaughtered animals purchased or donated from traditional human foodways, but sanctuaries are supposed to heal and shelter, not support the suffering of others. In such situations, how to help when it hurts? For Abbate, the answer could lie at the end of a rifle or bow. In line with Regan's philosophy, if someone must die to alleviate the conflict, let it be the one with fewer opportunities for satisfaction. According to this liberty principle, Abbate reckons that free-living deer, having enjoyed a lifetime of freedom, will be less

harmed by death than a carnivore who has been freed from exploitation for the first time. She supports this proposal by supposing that deers<sup>ii</sup> slated for death would be spared a life of disease and hardship in the wild. Injustice is the determining factor here; circus lions have been victims of injustice, but deers have not. At the point of killing, deers would also become victims of injustice, but they, having lived a free life, would be less harmed by death than lions.

The way in which ‘hunting’ is presented as a solution poses a number of philosophical problems, but sociologically speaking, it insufficiently explores the reality of modern food production. ‘Hunting’<sup>iii</sup> (a euphemism for violent killing) may actually cause more hurt than would the purchasing of slaughterhouse byproducts. This essay offers a sociological perspective on this particular moral conundrum, challenging the legitimacy of Abbate’s prescription for sanctuaries to undertake harm against free-living deer communities. First, I deconstruct Abbate’s application of the guardianship principle, noting that its implications for ‘hunting’ are circumscribed and that the objectification of deers made inherent in her solution is not fully acknowledged. Second, I address the sanctuary dilemma with an application of the sociological perspective. Sociology highlights the need to think systemically about social problems and to acknowledge that violence, even in the name of social justice, is problematic and always bound within hierarchies of power. To that effect, I will highlight the role that speciesism plays as a system of oppression and the ultimate problem of positioning humans (such as Sophia’s sanctuary operators) as guardians.

Humans are dubiously privileged in their possession of power, resources, and ability to decide the fate of others. A guardianship principle that takes for granted this hierarchy necessarily ignores the need for system restructuring to reduce, if not eliminate, most cases of moral conflict. Abbate does acknowledge that humans have ‘limited knowledge about the mental and social lives of animals’, and that they are ‘not in a position to make comparable judgements about the lives of nonhuman animals from different species’, (158) but her guardianship principle requires just that. Most importantly, it relies on an individualistic analysis, failing to acknowledge the larger system in which these conflicts transpire as malleable. Abbate does insist that institutions producing vulnerable dependents like Sophia (such as circuses) should be curtailed, but this does not extend to the larger food system that produces

vulnerable dependents such as cows, chickens, and pigs. In other words, she inadequately connects entertainment-based exploitation within the larger system of speciesism and its logic that nonhumans are property that can be owned, used, consumed, and discarded for human want. This logic is sustained by animal-based food production, by far the largest source of nonhuman suffering and death.

Abbate disapproves of tapping into the existing system of animal agriculture to serve the meal requirements of carnivorous sanctuary residents, but I argue that vegan economics could offer a more satisfactory solution. While traditional vegan economic theory, as Abbate applies it, supposes that purchasing non-vegan products will create demand, *sociologically-informed* vegan economic theory sees that producers and governments, not consumers, are the primary arbiters of public consumption (Carolan; Winders and Nibert; Stretesky et al.). Therefore, a plan for systemic restructuring would stem the manifestation of cruelty, abuse, and suffering by fundamentally changing how humans eat and entertain themselves. In lieu of this long-term goal, given that food systems are seller-controlled rather than buyer-controlled, sanctuaries may continue to rely on slaughterhouse products until both obligate carnivore dependents (like Sophia) and slaughterhouse victims cease to be produced for human wants. However, vegan food technology has already presented short-term solutions for obligate carnivores, and this avenue must be explored before the drastic measures of buying and killing Nonhuman Animals for food are undertaken.<sup>iv</sup>

## Deconstructing Abbate's Guardianship Principle

### *'Hunting' in the Lifeboat*

Abbate advocates the addition of her guardianship principle to Regan's theory of Nonhuman Animal rights, which recognizes the inherent worth of subjects-of-life. To illustrate this principle, she suggests that humans, as 'guardians', may be able to 'hunt' to improve a carnivore's quality of life. This tradeoff is suggested as an alternative to traditional 'meat' sources, namely animal agriculture, on the basis that free-living animals are not problematically used as renewable resources as are domesticated food animals (Abbate 151). That is, the system

of ‘hunting’ at least allows Nonhuman Animals a life of independence and liberation before killing, whereas agriculture keeps Nonhuman Animals in a state of suffering and oppression before they are dispatched. There are some key flaws associated with this position that go unacknowledged by Abbate and warrant response. Fundamentally, the responses presented herein derive from the sociological argument that the moral conflicts that concern Abbate and Regan are individualistic in focus and are wielded unnecessarily to justify continued systems of speciesism (specifically ‘hunting’).

Abbate advances the solution of ‘hunting’ to illustrate her argument that, ‘in certain cases, our obligation to assist nonhuman animals who are victims of injustice appears to conflict with our prima facie negative duty not to harm nonhuman animals (142),’ and, that, ‘we are justified, under certain conditions, in overriding our prima facie duty not to harm nonhuman animals in order to fulfill our obligation to assist nonhuman animals who are victims of injustice’ (142). Abbate considers the possibility of scavenging or using ‘roadkill,’ but notes that sanctuaries reject these as food sources given their propensity to carry parasites and disease, thus ‘hunting’ is examined as a practical alternative. Fundamental to Abbate’s argument is the notion that ‘hunting’ avoids treating free-living species as *renewable resources* as is the case with those bound for the slaughterhouse.

The first problem with the ‘hunting’ solution thus arises out of Abbate’s concern with treating nonhumans as renewable resources. Over the course of her life, Sophia will require that perhaps hundreds of Nonhuman Animals be killed for her sustenance, indicating that deers will be consistently relied upon as are cows, pigs, or chickens. Abbate even advises that sanctuaries ‘kill only a certain number of deer each year, so that the population of deer is not decimated’ (162), clearly acknowledging that the population must be maintained such that it can be perpetually available to sanctuaries. Because so many must die, it is clear that Bambi and his ilk would indeed be exploited as renewable resources. Abbate insists that her solution does not constitute a systemic exploitation, but rather a case-by-case series of individual decisions to be made as each sanctuary food supply runs low (161). This interpretation, however, is disingenuous given that deer communities invariably act as a reserve for food at any given time. When a historically oppressed group is imagined as a regular source of value available for

exploitation at the whims of structurally privileged groups (in this case, humans seeking to redress their wrongs), this is indicative of systemic violence, not individual decision-making. For that matter, sanctuaries are fully cognizant of the amount of flesh required for the average feline inmate. If sanctuaries are acting as guardians and thus have to decide to either kill Sophia or kill multiple Bambis, should they choose to become guardian to Sophia, the deers may not be killed at once, but the decision to kill them is made at once. Each time an obligate carnivore is taken in, multiple decisions to harm other animals in the future procurement of food are made in the one individual decision to provide sanctuary to the carnivore.

Second, Abbate suggests that this killing can be justified as many deer communities are overpopulated. Overpopulation is thought to relegate forest inhabitants to a state of suffering which can be alleviated by execution. In fact, overpopulation rhetoric is a trope frequently employed by the 'hunting' community as a rationale for their morally questionable hobby. However, it is rarely acknowledged that wildlife 'management' departments actively control populations to maintain a constant supply of victims for paying customers. 'Hunting' inclusive 'management' programs constitute a multi-million-dollar industry in America (Anderson). State institutions, to be sure, view deers, elks, rabbits, and other animals as renewable resources. In fact, the whitetail deer species had gone extinct or nearly so from large swaths of the United States by 1900 until active reintroduction measures resurrected their communities (Waller and Alverson). Abbate acknowledges this state management as an injustice but concludes that deers are not necessarily made worse off by this manipulation (155). Ultimately, she, too, relies on overpopulation as justification for the killing of deers. Rather than treating deers as individual rights-bearers, they are subsumed within the larger species, and it will be group size, rather than individual experience that will determine their fate. This advice, it should be noted, runs contrary to Regan's rights-based philosophy.

The 'overpopulation' argument is indeed a curious one in this age of biological devastation. Thousands of species in modern society are declining dramatically such that the 'success' of a large animal in shrinking wild spaces indicates that their current population is neither natural nor accidental. It is unclear how sanctuaries that seek to capitalize on this system of artificial population growth can be convincingly positioned as morally absolved. More likely,

sanctuary narratives will only contribute to the ideological justifications propagated by the state and ‘hunting’ interests for continued population ‘management’ should they adhere to Abbate’s recommendation. Sanctuaries would benefit from the active renewal of deer communities for public consumption, even if their decisions to ‘hunt’ were indeed case by case as Abbate recommends. Nevertheless, if present ‘game’ populations are largely a product of human engineering, Abbate’s argument that ‘overpopulation’ is a justification for killing deers for Sophia’s sustenance is undercut. Deers may be infrequently confined to a feedlot or artificially inseminated, but they *are* systematically produced for human use as are cows, chickens, and pigs. The primary difference is that the cost of their production is outsourced to wild spaces and subsidized by ‘hunting’ licenses.

Third, the notion that deers may be better off dead as Sophia’s dinner if spared from overpopulation and starvation is a biological inaccuracy. This inaccuracy constitutes perhaps the most critical chink in Abbate’s application of the guardianship principle. If it is conceded that her guardianship principle is also intended for the benefit of deers and is not simply reserved for sanctuary carnivores, then the principle falsely presumes a need for deers to be cared for in suggesting that they are suffering the pains of overpopulation such that they require ‘euthanasia’ by gunshot. Deers are biologically capable of managing their own population and will not reproduce when environmental conditions are unfavorable (‘hunting’ can actually disrupt this natural system, and ‘management’ efforts artificially encourage increased reproduction) (Miller, Verme). In other words, deer communities are only ‘overpopulated’ from the human perspective, usually when they are determined to be a nuisance in some fashion or a rationale is required to sell ‘hunting’ licenses. They do not necessitate the lethal ‘guardianship’ of sanctuary assailants. What they require is non-interference. This paternalistic decision-making relies on a Eurocentric, colonialist mentality by presuming that free-living species are not capable of self-determination and then tapping that logic as rationale for systemic oppression (Wrenn).

Abbate supports the tradeoff in her presumption ‘that there is reason to believe that these deer might actually be benefitted by a quick, premature death if their alternative option is a drawn-out death from starvation or from being hit by a motor vehicle’ (159). Yet, this begs the question: why should rescued big cats not themselves be killed to prevent their drawn-out

death from starvation? Abbate suggests that, because carnivore survivors are relatively deprived when compared to deers (who have lived much of their life free), they deserve to enjoy a full life as well. If these deers are so miserable with hunger and illness, might they not benefit from sanctuary themselves? How liberatory is such a life if, as Abbate describes, they are so miserable that death would be preferable? It is probably not advisable to begin absorbing free-living communities into sanctuaries, but the existence of wildlife rehabilitation centers necessitates a consideration of the comparable suffering potentially experienced by both deers and lions. The guardianship principle favors Sophia because she not only suffers, but she is a victim of injustice. However, it is unclear as to how a deer and a lion, both suffering, would be cognizant as to the source of that suffering. The awareness to the source is most likely to be experienced by humans, thus suggesting that the guardianship principle is human-oriented, if not human-centered. Although Abbate maintains that both deers and big cats have inherent value, her differential advice based on species identity supports the idea that deers are thought fundamentally expendable, and that expendability relies on human conscience.

As an ethical matter, Abbate's position on the expendability of deers and the salvageability of lions will necessitate further justification. It is telling that humans and more privileged species such as cats and dogs are not offered as potential sacrifices in Abbate's application of the guardianship principle. Big cats may prey on deers, but they are also known to prey on companion animals. With millions of cats and dogs killed in 'shelters' across the country each year, the killing of cats and dogs with the 'expert shots' Abbate recommends (158) might be a more realistic option for Sophia's dinner bowl. While companion animals are not identified as potential victims, she does entertain the possibility of utilizing ailing or elderly humans. She does not accept that humans would be acceptable substitutes, but her rationalization for sparing humans (that they should be given the benefit of a doubt regarding their capacity for subjectivity) is not extended to other species who also have capacity for subjectivity. Furthermore, while she dismisses disability as grounds for killing humans, she uses it as justification for killing deers in her advice that: 'perhaps wildlife sanctuaries should be instructed to kill only those deer who will suffer a painful death, such as those who are sick, those who are malnourished, those who will endure brutally cold winters, or those who live in overpopulated areas' (162). Millions of



humans currently face similar circumstances and might *also* be relieved of their suffering if we ascribe to this reasoning (consider Jonathan Swift's 1729 satirical *A Modest Proposal* which encouraged poor, colonized Irish families to sell their children to privileged British consumers). That only traditionally devalued animals (and never humans or their 'pets') are designated for systematic killing speaks to a substantial bias within this application of the guardianship principle.

There are a number of logistical issues that also arise from this prescription. For instance, what would become of rescued carnivores living in areas of the world where 'game' species as identified by Abbate are not realistically obtainable? Which species will be sacrificed in these instances? Abbate acknowledges that, in geographies that deer communities call home, sanctuaries should abide by kill caps, but she says nothing about areas absent of deer communities altogether. Neither does Abbate question the dangerous implications that 'hunting' has for humans and other non-target animals (including the 'hunters' themselves). Stalking and killing with high-powered equipment is dangerous for all involved. This presumes, too, that 'hunters' would be able to reliably locate the injured, starving, and elderly deers that Abbate has slated as suitable for sacrifice, a difficult task in itself. In any case, demanding that free-living species 'pay' for the costs of human speciesism seems unfair. If violence is to be condoned to remedy human injustices, why should the burden not fall on humans themselves? It is unclear why deer families must be accountable for a crime unrelated to them except that they have been historically marginalized and oppressed and are thus especially vulnerable to humanity's lethal reparation efforts.

### *Deers as Persons*

The presentation of free-living animals (especially those traditionally viewed as food) as less morally worthy subjects-of-life, simply because they have enjoyed some degree of liberty, is an inconsistent maneuver in the ethical arena. Abbate determines that deers can be killed in an appropriate way (the details of how this gory deed will be undertaken and by whom is not explored in detail beyond her recommendation for a skilled executioner) in order to feed obligate carnivore refugees who are never given the chance to flourish as free-living deers might

have. Indeed, these secondary subjects are referred to in mass terms as ‘deer,’ or, equally objectifying, as ‘the deer’ for the majority of Abbate’s thought experiment. That deers are also seen as food in human society – things or products to be consumed – only underscores their status as objects. In perceived conflicts of interest and situations of emergency, it is generally the most marginalized who will suffer first and suffer the most. Objectification aggravates this vulnerability. Sophia and other large carnivores are at a distinct advantage as they represent species that are frequently granted some semblance of personhood and reverence in many cultures and rarely are they categorized as a normative foodstuff.

It is problematic that sick or malnourished deers might be considered suitable victims because their quality of life is presumed low, but a sick or hungry lion is presumed both to be worth saving and worthy of killing for simply due to the intention behind that harm. Certainly, an ailing Bambi may have enjoyed a chance to flourish unlike that available to Sophia; perhaps humans owe Bambi some special consideration due to his sickness instead of using that sickness as a justification for execution. Indeed, the discriminatory disability politic lurking within Abbate’s prescription will be addressed toward the end of the article. Sickness aside, many anti-speciesism theorists argue that free-living animals deserve some degree of guardianship as they are *also* highly vulnerable to human activities and exploitation (Donaldson and Kymlicka; Hall). Along this reasoning, it is questionable as to how liberated deers actually are. Their freedom to roam is sharply curtailed by fencing, roads, cities, and general human encroachment. Their ranges of motion are always determined by humans except in the most remote of areas. Is this restricted liberty not also a human-caused injustice?

It is also unclear how Abbate’s proposal to kill old, suffering, and diseased deers to meet the Sophia’s dietary requirements (159) will be an improvement over the ‘roadkill’ solution already rejected by sanctuaries due to health concerns. Abbate cites parasites and ticks as reason not to utilize these carcasses (148), but even healthy deers are laden with parasites and ticks, so much so that environmental scientists use ‘hunter’ kills as samples in measuring a region’s parasite load (Baer-Lehman et al.). After all, parasites and ticks do not simply materialize at the point of death; they are part of the ecosystem. Climate change has been

creating an increase in parasitic attacks on free-living animals as well (Léger et al.), and this, too, would complicate the utility of ‘hunting.’

In Abbate’s scenario, both illness and liberty are simultaneously commissioned to construct deers as a resource to meet human needs (specifically, the human need to rectify human-caused harms to carnivores), underscoring their marginalized status in the system. As Regan famously allows for a million dogs to go overboard in his metaphorical lifeboat, so, too, does Abbate cast off a million deers. What these philosophies fail to examine sufficiently, however, is the system from which this conflict manifests. The metaphorical dangerous ocean and the small boat traversing it, both products of human supremacy, are presumed an unfortunate tragedy instead of a malleable system that can be restructured to prevent or reduce moral conflicts. Anti-speciesism employed by a strong vegan ethic can keep all sentient beings safely on shore, with little threat of drowning, starving, or ‘hunting’, at least at the hands of humans.

### **The Importance of Thinking Systemically**

It is unavoidably a paternalist and human supremacist action for volunteers, activists, and theorists to undertake the privilege of determining the worth and eligibility of rights for various species, well-intentioned though it may be. Although Abbate concedes that playing the ‘worth’ game is problematic given humanity’s limited understanding of other animals’ experiences, the ample attention her theory dedicates to attempting to do just that points to the inherent problem of humans appointing themselves as judge, jury, and executioner for nonhumans. This point has been addressed by ecofeminists, who posit that environmental ethics miss the forest for the trees, so to speak, by focusing on moral dilemmas rather than examining root problems (Kheel). While moral dilemmas are useful in determining action in situations of conflict, too often they exhibit a narrow outlook that obscures the larger environmental forces that initially manifest the conflict and constantly shape the field in which the dilemma operates.

While guardianship is sometimes a moral obligation that humans owe to some other animals who are dangerously dependent and vulnerable in a human supremacist system,

guardianship is in and of itself a manifestation of a speciesist power differential. It relies on a hierarchy of authority and worth, with humans as guardian *subjects* and other animals positioned beneath them as the guarded *objects* to be manipulated. While Abbate acknowledges some of the objections I have outlined herein, it remains her assertion that obligate carnivores who have been victimized by humans be granted special consideration. The difficulty of her argument lies in its focus on single-issues created by an oppressive system *without offering a substantial critical analysis of the system itself*. So long as the system remains unaddressed, human guardians will be burdened with unending moral dilemmas, few of which will be addressed satisfactorily for all parties involved. For this reason, Regan is heavily invested in an abolitionist position, as are legal philosophers (Hall) and sociologists (Nibert; Torres; Wrenn). In the abolitionist perspective, dismantling speciesist institutions, rather than seeking to reform and repair them, is positioned as a prerequisite to the meaningful consideration to nonhumans.

#### *False Consumer Agency in a Non-vegan Food System*

Abolition will be a long time coming, however, and Sophia still needs to eat. Human ‘guardians’ must, in the meantime, determine how to address a problematic system without becoming lost in a sea of endlessly emerging single-issue conundrums. It is my position that utilizing flesh products from industrial animal agriculture would be a sufficient, if temporary, solution to the conflict of interest identified by Abbate. This may seem counterintuitive, but this position is based on the reality of speciesism as a system and locus of control. Abbate presumes that feeding farmed ‘meat’ to Sophia would support the unjust killing of farmed animals. This concern aligns with that of the Nonhuman Animal rights movement, which advocates reducing consumer demand for animal products. The assumption is that the speciesist supply will decline accordingly and harm will be reduced. Ethicists might therefore be concerned about increasing demand (and thus supply) if sanctuaries were to feed industrial animal agriculture products to their carnivorous residents.

However, this presumption falsely identifies consumers (sanctuaries included) as the perpetrators of the speciesist food system. In his 2013 publication *Meatonomics*, David Robinson

Simon demonstrates that the ‘supply and demand’ argument to reducing harm to food animals is overly simplistic given the industrial and political control of markets. Corporate elites control both supply *and* demand, making consumer power minimal within a system that is designed to promote and protect speciesist consumption patterns. Government checkoff programs provide millions of dollars each year to ‘meat’ and dairy industries to promote their product through advertisements, scientific research, and the legitimacy granted by government support. These industries are also granted considerable tax breaks and enjoy limited regulation. The United States Department of Agriculture, which is responsible for promoting ‘meat’ and dairy, is also charged with creating nutritional advice for the country, creating misleading health requirements for the populace. Finally, food disparagement regulations, ‘ag gag’ laws, and the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act all work to legally suppress efforts to challenge animal agriculture. The result is that ‘meat’ and dairy are forced on American consumers in ever-growing quantities under the coercive effect of artificially low prices, heavy advertising, and misleading nutritional advice (Winders and Nibert). Americans consume large quantities of animal products for the same reason they consume large quantities of unhealthy processed foods: these items saturate foodways to such an extent that they are practically inescapable.

Over-confidence in consumer agency is well-documented in sociological explorations of food and environmental reform. Food systems analysts have referred to the consumer-based approach to challenging problematic food production as the ‘defetishization thesis’, as it is premised on the belief that commodity fetishism can be undermined by withdrawing consumer support (Gunderson). In the case of vegan advocacy, it is presumed that the vegan boycott will defetishize animal products, thus leading to a decline in their production. However, market realities thwart such a strategy. Economic boycotts are no match for the capitalist system’s well-oiled treadmill of production. This treadmill is artificially maintained in high operation with the full support of the state. A whole body of psychological research also supports that consumer ‘choices’ are artificially manufactured through heavy, targeted marketing (including neuromarketing) to sustain capitalism’s relentless demands (Yarrow). When American markets saturate, the industry invents new products or uses to absorb ever-greater quantities of animal matter. They also expand into new markets, as is now happening in Asia and Africa.

Social movements have particular cause for concern due to the high potential for capitalist ideologies to subsume radical agendas for social change. Bitch Media founder Andi Zeisler has documented this trend in the feminist movement, while others have identified it in the gay rights movement (Chasin) and in the environmental movement (Wallis). Caring consumers are encouraged to ‘vote with their dollar,’ under the premise that a groundswell of consumer demand will change systems, without recognizing that systems may simply exploit this fervor to increase sales of similar products only labeled as ethical. The Nonhuman Animal rights movement, for instance, has invested at least two decades into the denunciation of ‘meat’ and dairy consumption, only to be faced with a major spike in the popularity of ‘humanely’ produced animal products (Scrininis et al.). Corporations ultimately remain in control, reabsorbing consumer desires in the maintenance of existing food systems. In fact, corporations are known to act ahead of consumer demands such that they will be positioned to anticipate and control the shape of the dialogue and regulations (Dauvergne and Lister).

Ultimately, the consumer model for change optimistically places the power in the hands of individuals, overlooking the disproportionate power retained by corporations. Consumption is constructed and controlled and is only minimally a consequence of free choice. The consumer model presumes a fair playing field, yet, as sociologists and movement leaders have emphasized, consumer choices are not likely to feed structural change. Instead, they fall in line with traditional capitalist channels, the same channels that uphold social inequality. Vegan sociologist Bob Torres distills these issues in his advice to activists, ‘You cannot buy the revolution’ (123).

The system described here is highly unlikely to be influenced either way by individual cases of moral conflict as manifested in the handful of carnivore-harboring sanctuaries in human society. As such, utilizing industrial animal agriculture products to feed carnivorous nonhuman victims of human exploitation is not likely to aggravate the injustice already done to food animals, who, regardless of sanctuary procurement decisions, will continue to suffer and die so long as systemic conditions remain unaltered. What I wish to emphasize is that animal agriculture exists primarily to serve *humans*. It is human capitalists who protect it, not the nutritional needs of tiny populations of sanctuary refugees. In fact, more consumable ‘meat’ is disposed of as garbage than is fed to individuals like Sophia. Food justice nonprofit Feeding

America reports that 72 billion pounds of perfectly edible food is wasted each year.<sup>v</sup> A good portion of this is animal protein. North American retailers waste about 4% of their ‘meat’ products, while consumers waste 12% of ‘meat’ and 17% of dairy they purchase (Gunders). Abbate makes mention of edible surplus flesh destined for disposal as a potential resource. This might act as a more reliable source if tapped appropriately. Indeed, a network of university campuses in the United States systematically redirects surplus unwanted food to food pantries in their communities. Sanctuaries might feasibly employ a similar program.

### *Lessons to Learn from Non-vegan ‘Pets’*

In the grand scheme of animal agricultural production, sanctuaries may not present a significant market for farmed ‘meat’ as Abbate fears, but the institution of ‘pet-keeping’ might. The moral quandary of feeding ‘meat’ to ‘pets’ offers additional support for the need to embrace a systemic perspective. Researcher Hank Rothgerber considers this conflict as it relates to non-vegan cats who live as companion animals to vegans. Many vegan activists argue that human ‘guardians’ first have a moral obligation to switch a domesticated obligate carnivore in their care to a fortified vegan diet. If this is unachievable, however, humans will *still* have a moral obligation to feed their carnivorous companions, even if it entails purchasing industrialized animal agriculture products. Rothgerber’s findings indicate that vegans cope with the guilt of supporting non-vegan production by medicalizing their cats’ need to eat flesh (that is, keepers’ will rationalize that cats biologically require flesh to flourish). If vegans can justify supporting non-vegan cats with farmed animal flesh, why would sanctuaries be unable to justify supporting non-vegan refugees with the same? Both vegans and sanctuaries have pledged to help other animals and do not wish to cause harm. There is no evidence to support the idea that vegans are interested in hiring ‘hunters’ to kill for their ‘pets,’ and there seems little reason to expect such an extreme solution for sanctuaries either. Perhaps the difference between purchasing slaughterhouse byproducts formulated into ‘pet’ food and ‘hunting’ deer communities lies in the romanticized notion that lions and other big cats must feed on ‘wild caught,’ ‘hunted’ prey to serve their primal essence. ‘Meat’ is ‘meat,’ however, whether it comes from a slaughterhouse or a forest. To presume that

big cats must dine on ‘hunted’ food to achieve satiation only reinforces speciesist and irreverent stereotypes about big cats and their domesticated relatives.

In any event, focusing on the carnivore’s requirements for survival in a human-controlled and human-benefiting system is to *individualize* what is inherently a *systemic* problem. The conflict of interest embodied in non-vegan ‘pets’ and sanctuary residents is a false one because it is one that humans create. It is not inevitable, but rather a changeable conflict that could be resolved if humans were not to engage in the unnecessary exploitation of other animals. So long as the oppressive system continues to exploit cats as ‘pets’ and cows, pigs, chickens, and others as ‘food’, these conflicts will continue to arise. Presuming that these conflicts are unavoidable and formulating analyses that lack a systemic critique ignores the fundamental problem and misses an important opportunity to advocate for significant reduction in suffering through the resistance to speciesism. Of course, moral dilemmas will not cease to exist in a vegan utopian future. Caring for Nonhuman Animals, for instance, is responsible for considerable environmental damage (Okin), and some Nonhuman Animals will still require human care after the abolishment of ‘pet-keeping’ and ‘zoo-keeping.’ However, conflicts would be dramatically lessened should the systematic exploitation of other animals for food and entertainment be curtailed.

In the meantime, an application of the guardianship principle that identifies the needs of entertainment refugees as cause for ‘hunting’ misses the most wide-reaching solution in failing to think systemically. Purchasing ‘meat’ from cows, pigs, and chickens pulls from an existent system of harm, whereas ‘hunting’ creates *additional* harm. ‘Meat’, dairy, and eggs fed to Nonhuman Animals in human institutions primarily derive from food systems designed for human consumption. First, humans nurture a speciesist society that purpose-breeds carnivorous companion animals and large cats, both of whom are used for entertainment purposes. Their existence in human society is not inevitable, and their existence in it can be manipulated. Second, and this is a point not acknowledged by Abbate, the speciesist society in which all life is supported by industrial animal agriculture for human consumption purposes. Byproducts of this industry are sold as Nonhuman Animal food to improve profitability. Companion animals (and entertainment animals) are products of speciesism, just as ‘meat’ and ‘dairy’ are products of



speciesism. The production of both is morally problematic and symptomatic of the larger system of capitalist oppression. Rather than negotiate within the structure by initiating new lines of oppression, taking advantage of preexisting oppression is preferable, assuming that this strategy transpires in the service of the loftier goal of societal restructuring. Again, sanctuary purchases are not evidenced to increase demand, as animal agriculture artificially gluts the market with the help of government subsidies. Billions of pounds also go to waste.

### *A Vegan Systemic Change*

Because a vegan world is a long time coming, it is tempting to look for shortcut compromises. For instance, Abbate suggests the utilization of in-vitro ‘meat’ (also known as ‘clean meat’ or ‘lab grown meat’) should it become commercially viable, but this, like her ‘hunting’ option, also unsuccessfully attempts to shuffle oppressions while leaving the problematic system itself intact. In-vitro ‘meat’ relies on animal agriculture for base materials, entails vivisection, and symbolically normalizes oppressive behavior toward other animals (Cole and Morgan).

The ‘pet’ food industry, in the meantime, has already developed nutritionally-sound plant-based diets proven to healthfully sustain cats (Wakefield et al.). Explains veterinarian Andrew Knight:

For cats, as for all other species, the key requirement is that their diets be nutritionally complete and balanced. It is also essential that they be provided in sufficiently palatable and bioavailable forms. There is absolutely no scientific reason why diets comprised entirely of plant, mineral, and synthetically based ingredients cannot meet all of these requirements, and several commercially available diets indeed claim to do so. (512)

If the technology already exists to sustain cats healthfully without resorting to ‘hunting’ or supporting animal agriculture, it follows that resources and research might be better invested in developing tastier and more affordable products for the large appetites of big cats. In a meta-analysis of research conducted on the nutritional suitability of plant-based companion animal food that was conducted in tandem with a survey of a dozen producers, Knight and Leitsberger have determined that vegan diets can be suitable for felines, big cats included, although regular

urine acidity checks are recommended. It has been documented that caretakers can successfully sustain big cats. For instance, Little Tyke, a lion cub who refused to eat the flesh provided her, was raised instead on grains and dairy (Westbeau). Until vegan products reach a satisfactory level of palatability and accessibility, an even better alternative to purchasing or repurposing flesh from animal agriculture would be to at least provide a partially plant-based meal plan for big cats as was the case with Little Tyke.

Veganism offers a long-term strategy for alleviating these unfortunate, but predictable conflicts. To be clear, the limited control that citizens have over supply chains in a corporate-controlled state means that veganism will necessitate more than a simple abstinence on the part of individual consumers. The exploitation of nonhuman animals is a direct consequence of economic conditions, but abstaining from consumption is primarily important only as a political protest as it relates to other animals. This is because, as explained above, consumer choice is not especially well-suited to dismantling the speciesist system given governmental and industrial control. Therefore, abstinence must be engaged in in tandem *with an active effort to dismantle the economic system that perpetuates this conflict of interest*. A guardianship principle that fails to consider social and material restructuring will inevitably contend with an endless stream of hungry Sophias and painful moral compromises to adjudicate. Abbate may be critical of maintaining sanctuaries as permanent solutions to species inequality, but she offers no such economic analysis.

Sanctuaries surviving on the outskirts of this system are hardly to be blamed so long as they are actively engaged in challenging the system as well. Subsequently, I argue that Abbate prematurely rejects the justifiability of feeding industrial animal agriculture products to carnivorous domesticates and refugees. Her suggestion of introducing ‘hunting’ to sanctuary services *increases* harm to vulnerable free-living nonhumans and perpetuates a system of oppression, but using industrial products of animals already destined for death in a human supremacist system is not likely to increase harm given the minimal control consumers actually have over economic trends and supply chains. Human exploitation of Nonhuman Animal bodies is always objectionable, but the utilization of byproducts is significantly less harmful than ‘hunting’ because it capitalizes on harms that will be committed regardless of sanctuary choice.

If sanctuary consumption were found to measurably increase the killing of Wilbur, Daisy, and other food animals, then it would warrant further examination. The reality of corporate control over the Western food system and the glut of animal products it forces on society, however,

makes this unlikely. Existent vegetarian or vegan alternatives must also be investigated. Surely, the procurement of plant-based, carnivore-friendly foodstuffs will be no less cumbersome than would be the establishment of a ‘hunting’ regimen.

### *A Sanctuary in the System*

Finally, the focus on sanctuary sheltering over systematic restructuring illustrates the problem of mitigating conflicts of interest in an inherently unequal social structure without advancing a means of overhauling that structure. Sanctuaries are designed to offer asylum to refugees in an oppressive world, but, without addressing the structural problem of speciesism, they become limited sites of resistance and maintain symbolic value only, offering respite for an infinitesimally small percentage of nonhuman survivors. It should be considered that Abbate’s concession that sanctuaries are in of themselves good and worth (temporarily) preserving has also been criticized by vegan theorists. These spaces recreate an idealized and romanticized relationship with other animals, often harkening on imaginations of caring farmers, rolling fields, and content nonhuman residents living on the premises of their own free will. In fact, sanctuaries are, as Donaldson and Kymlicka identify, *total institutions*, which maintain a system of full control over nonhuman inmates. As such, they replicate human dominance by relegating Nonhuman Animals to the whims of human guardians. In a bid to increase donations and visibility, many sanctuaries invite the public to spectate. Consent is not possible given that the inmates are restricted and confined to at least some extent, and, while some sanctuaries offer room to roam and hide, some degree of human contact is usually expected. In many cases, Nonhuman Animals have no recourse but to endure the daily stress of forced human interaction. Visitors, especially children, routinely disregard the personal space of the beleaguered animals on display.

While it may be unpleasant to acknowledge, it should be considered that many visitors of sanctuaries are of the same mindset of those who patron ‘zoos’ and circuses. Comments one captive animal law enforcer, ‘It seems that we desperately want to believe that we can both be ethical and still enjoy the thrill of getting up close and personal with a wild animal’ (Winders 162). Even sanctuaries have difficulty avoiding circumventing this relationship of dominance.

While the educational value may be considerably greater and the goal of the sanctuary may be to improve the condition of Nonhuman Animals, the relationship remains the same: human subject as the viewer and nonhuman objects as the viewed. Some sanctuary operators have expressed concern about the potential consequences of granting humans permission to spectate without the guilt: ‘the “feel good” view of captive wildlife sanctuaries could also serve as a way for people to normalize and feel better about captivity, rather than acknowledging its inherent limitations for the animals’ (Doyle 74). From this perspective, it should be considered whether or not Sophia’s sanctuary residence is truly in her favor, or if it is instead designed to meet human interests.

The public’s positive association with sanctuaries also sustains an industry of ‘zoos’ and pseudo-sanctuaries that purport to offer refuge for Nonhuman Animals while actively breeding or otherwise exploiting them for a variety of profit-making ventures (Doyle, Winders). Many of these facilities have come under fire for the abysmal living conditions they provide. For those sanctuaries which take up arms against free-living deer communities slated as ‘food,’ their status as a ‘sanctuary’ is even more suspect. Far from ‘ethically responsible’ as Abbate describes it (164), such a system would be complacent with systemic oppression. Researchers have also identified that big cats (and other wide-ranging carnivores) demonstrate the highest levels of psychological distress in captivity, leading to the conclusion that they are, ‘inherently likely to fare badly in zoos and similar establishments’ (Clubb and Mason 474). Indeed, animal behaviorists point specifically to their inability to range and hunt as risk factors for distress (Kroshko et al.). For a number of reasons, namely the legalities of releasing big cats into the environment to forage and the low likelihood that refugees from the entertainment industry would be equipped to hunt successfully, sanctuaries are ill-prepared to provide a good quality of life for big cats. Abbate does recognize this point in arguing that sanctuaries are not ideal, but she does hold that they remain functional for educational purposes, although the ability for sanctuaries to achieve this is, as outlined above, debatable. Explains Abbate:

It is not enough [ . . . ] for animal sanctuaries to be content with providing so-called restitution to nonhuman animals who have been harmed. Animal sanctuaries should seek to educate visitors about the innocent blood that must be shed in the course of rescuing

of obligate carnivores and they should remind the public that the mere existence of animal sanctuaries is indicative of a moral tragedy. [ . . . ]

Hopefully, the recognition that fulfilling the duty to assist obligate carnivores comes with an enormous cost will inspire wildlife sanctuaries to aim at their own obsolescence, for instance by drawing awareness to the inherently unjust treatment of nonhuman animals such as the use of nonhuman animals in circuses or the selling of ‘exotic’ animals for ‘pets,’ which necessitate the existence of wildlife sanctuaries in the first place.

(Abbate, personal communication, December 21, 2017).

Thus, sanctuaries are argued to be insufficient for prolonged use, but precisely sufficient for achieving justice for Nonhuman Animals via the spectacle of suffering lions and the harming of deers, both of which are maintained as teaching tools. The wellbeing of the animals involved is not centered so much as is the reception of the presumed human audience.

#### *Ableist Rhetorics*

Sanctuaries must therefore negotiate living quarters, visitor access, and tour narratives to ensure that the public’s learning experience is consistent with anti-speciesist values, while also contending with the inherently deleterious nature of confinement for big cats. Abbate’s premise that rescued big cats living in sanctuaries are finally enjoying ‘freedom’ is unsupported by behavioral science. Subsequently, it should be considered that free-living deers likely experience quality of life higher than that of well-fed rescued cats. According to Abbate’s reasoning and Regan’s prescription for coping with situations of moral conflict, both of which grant precedence to subjects-of-life who more greatly appreciate life, would it not be the case that deers’ lives would be better saved instead of those of big cats who suffer in captivity whether or not they have access to ‘meat’? Both lions (as survivors of the entertainment industry) and deers (as targets for ‘hunting’) experience injustice after all.

This point requires a critical examination of the relationship between ‘well-being’ and right to life in the animal ethics discourse. What it means to be ‘well’ is ultimately subjective, but, historically, able-body-privileging institutions (including medicine, science, ‘zoos,’ and

sanctuaries) have determined the parameters of wellness with oppressive consequences. The disabled community has been subject to a variety of horrific injustices because disabled persons have been determined to appreciate their lives less than the able-bodied. Ethicist Peter Singer has even suggested that a disabled life is not worth living (Lewiecki-Wilson). All humans and nonhumans are subject to temporary disability at some point in their lives, and most will experience prolonged or even chronic disability as well. Even if using disability as a justification for killing was not ableist, it would not be very useful given that disability is so widespread. Not surprisingly, vegan disability scholars have soundly criticized the philosophies of Regan and Singer that position cognitive or physical impairment as evidence to a life less worthy (Taylor). Suggesting that illness or disease are grounds for the destruction of big cats *or* deers implies a devaluation of non-able bodies and speaks to the ubiquitousness of ableism in moral claims-making.

## Conclusion

This paper has addressed Abbate's guardianship principle as it is applied to conflicts of interest arising from human supremacy. Specifically, she identifies the moral dilemma created by rescuing large cats from abusive entertainment industries for the purpose of offering them a well-deserved restful life in a sanctuary. These cats must eat, and the guardianship principle allows that the strategic and mindful killing of sick, old, hungry, or otherwise vulnerable free-living animals who have enjoyed liberty and relative freedom from human harm is justifiable given the extreme harm that was unfairly faced by those animals exploited for entertainment. These cats, Abbate contends, deserve a shot at a happy life, while some deers must be shot at to provide it. Nonhuman Animals killed for food in the slaughtering system, meanwhile, are rejected as appropriate resources under the presumption that sanctuary purchases would increase the demand for slaughter and thus increase the number of individuals suffering and dying. Deers are differentiated in that they are supposedly not to be treated as renewable resources and are not victims of injustice.

This article first deconstructed inaccurate presumptions about ‘hunting’ presented in Abbate’s argument, namely, that some free-living ‘game’ species are not already products of systemic human exploitation, that ‘hunting’ can be accomplished without extreme pain or danger to targeted *and* non-targeted individuals, and that ‘game’ species are suffering such that they require ‘euthanasia’ at the hands of hired assassins. Second, this article revisited an alternative that Abbate rejects, that being the acquiring of ‘meat’ from animal agriculture to feed obligate carnivores in sanctuaries. Abbate’s rejection is based on the false presumption that consumers ‘vote with their dollar,’ and, thus, sanctuaries would increase harm to farmed animals through the procurement of ‘meat’ for their inmates. However, the reality of Western food systems prevents meaningful consumer impact on supply chains, thus alleviating moral agents from the fear that the animal products purchased for carnivorous dependents will increase suffering in slaughterhouses. ‘Meat’ and dairy production is artificially high and is forced into the food system regardless of consumer desires.

Sanctuaries would be better morally positioned to take advantage of animal agriculture to support dependent carnivorous refugees given that the system is elite-controlled, not consumer-controlled. To illustrate this argument, the nourishment of non-vegan ‘pets’ was presented. Animal-based ‘pet’ food creates a conflict of interest on a much larger scale than animal-based sanctuary rations. Many vegans, however, are satisfied in feeding their ‘pets’ non-vegan diets as they persist in their goal of anti-speciesism. The large amount of edible ‘meat’ and dairy waste produced in the United States each year was also revisited as an appropriate source of nutrition, thus circumventing the potential that purchasing animal products may increase the killing of farmed animals, however small that potential may be. Lastly, the case of Little Tyke and scientific advancements in vegan cat food demonstrate that sanctuary residents might be reasonably sustained on a plant-based diet.

This paper argued that addressing moral dilemmas by relying on ‘hunting’ or slaughterhouses was insufficient. Feeding obligate carnivores from slaughterhouse byproducts was advocated based on the premise that animal agriculture is minimally impacted by consumer choices, but it was also advanced as an argumentative tool to address the need to think beyond individual conflicts to acknowledge the role of systems. Abbate advocates ‘hunting’ under the



mistaken belief that ‘hunting’ is not already a systemic form of exploitation and that sanctuaries would only employ it in individual cases. Likewise, her position is also premised on the assumption that the animal agricultural system is supported by a sum of individual choices. Both ‘hunting’ and slaughtering, however, are embedded into the social structure; using flesh procured from hunting will not avoid this systemic participation. Nonhuman Animals are killed in slaughterhouses regardless of sanctuary feeding choices, but sanctuaries moving to the ‘hunting’ model will create a measurable increase in speciesism by specifically killing deers to feed sanctuary inmates (and likely non-target species, humans included, given the highly dangerous nature of ‘hunting’). If both deers and farmed animals are, in fact, treated as renewable resources in human society, it is preferable that sanctuaries not effort themselves to increase the death toll by ‘hunting.’ Slaughterhouse products are at least regulated and, in the interest of sanctuary carnivores, more sanitary.

It is argued that a guardian would be better positioned to make the best of already existent ‘meat’. However, leaving the system intact would not address the dilemma either. *The system itself* must be attacked so that the number of animals killed and in need of rescue will gradually lessen and cease to exist in appreciable numbers. Such a strategy would entail largescale collective action and the political reform of agricultural management practices to increase democratic access to decision-making in food supply chains. With power removed from corporations and redistributed among consumers, systemic change can be realized. Thinking systemically also requires a critique of sanctuaries, which are demonstrated to perpetuate speciesist attitudes and behaviors. It also requires attention to disability politics. The focus on individually-experienced illness and disability to justify harm is disingenuously relegated to case-by-case guardianship deliberations given the historic, systematic oppression of disabled bodies which invariably shapes ethical decision-making.

Typical of oppressive systems, speciesism stifles the imagination for alternatives. It also supports a false reality in which current structural arrangements are presumed natural or unavoidable. As a result, conflicts of interest perpetuate, and proposed solutions remain in line with prevailing epistemologies of inequality. This paper encourages a critical reassessment of the status quo speciesism that typically shapes solutions to conflicts of interest. For sanctuaries with an interest

in applied philosophy that Abbate rightly champions, plant-based alternatives should be explored. In the meantime, conventionally sourced ‘meat’ from animal agriculture is the preferred short-term adaptation. Most importantly, sanctuaries and their supporters must *also* relegate resources to systemic change. The facilitation of a vegan world can reduce the political and cultural demand for animal agriculture *and* animals as entertainment, thus curtailing future painful moral dilemmas. A guardianship principle that guards some at the expense of other, more vulnerable and equally sentient beings, is not sound.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> More precisely, this principle is explained as such: ‘Provided that all those involved are treated with respect, and assuming that no special considerations obtain, a guardian is obligated to harm other innocents when doing so is required to avoid making a vulnerable and dependent victim of injustice at least as worse-off as the innocents so harmed are made’ (Abbate 2016, 152).

<sup>ii</sup> I intentionally refrain from mass terms to honor the individuality of those who are often obscured with abstract terms.

<sup>iii</sup> Euphemisms such as ‘hunting’ and ‘meat’ will be placed in quotation marks to denote their problematic usage and to resist their ability to normalize oppression.

<sup>iv</sup> I intentionally capitalize the term Nonhuman Animals to denote their status as a distinct demographic identity.

<sup>v</sup> See <http://www.feedingamerica.org/our-work/our-approach/reduce-food-waste.html>

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## **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank Cheryl Abbate for her feedback on this manuscript.