

FRI: Research Plans 2016

Research on wild-animal suffering and ways to reduce it

Animals in the wild suffer from various causes, including (among others) malnutrition, thirst, disease, attacks by other animals, psychological stress, extreme weather conditions, injuries and parasitism. Their suffering matters. In fact, life in the wild makes up the greatest source of suffering on the planet.¹ Unfortunately, wild-animal suffering is largely neglected by anti-speciesist advocacy.

Both the Foundational Research Institute (FRI) and its co-founder Brian Tomasik have played leading roles in drawing attention to wild-animal suffering as a moral problem, and in pioneering the research in welfare biology needed to address it. Tomasik's seminal [The Importance of Wild Animal Suffering](#) – first published in 2009 on the website [reducing-suffering.org](#) – inspired numerous animal activists, effective altruists and academics to make the reduction of wild-animal suffering their priority. This piece – in conjunction with writings by other authors, such as Yew-Kwang Ng, David Pearce, and Oscar Horta – led to the emergence of a growing new movement.

Along with the research being conducted directly at FRI, we are raising awareness of wild-animal suffering “on the ground” with FRI's partner organizations: [Sentience Politics](#) publishes articles and policy papers, hosts [talks](#) and [conferences](#) and engages in anti-speciesist (and explicitly “wild-animal-suffering-aware”) movement building; and the fundraising project [Raising for Effective Giving](#) makes large grants to animal organizations, many of which are also working on raising awareness of wild-animal suffering.

Starting in June 2016, FRI is greatly increasing research on wild-animal suffering.

Our call for applications generated many high-quality candidates. The first candidates have already been interviewed and the most promising ones so far have started with their evaluation periods; more candidates have applied and are still being interviewed. Brian Tomasik will be leading the research team, and conducting his own research. Up to three full-time positions are planned under Tomasik's supervision, but whether we will have the funds to continue hiring the best candidates depends on the support we receive.

Our research plans: These plans include both project proposals that people are already working on as part of their evaluations as potential researchers, and proposals that are likely to be given to full-time researchers. An important part of the impact of this research is to establish and advance the field of welfare biology itself in order to inspire larger efforts later. Besides publishing articles on FRI, we also aim for publications in journals.

- **Are vegans/vegetarians more likely to want to help wild animals? (survey):** What is the interplay between traditional vegan/vegetarian advocacy and people's attitudes towards wild-animal suffering? Might vegans/vegetarians be more inclined to leave natural habitats untouched, e.g. due to environmentalist leanings or because they think animals have suffered a lot from their interactions with humans?
- **Assessing the welfare of wild animals (research):** Can cortisol levels tell us anything about the welfare of wild animals? What do such studies indicate about the

wellbeing of wild vs. domestic animals? How often are various animals in various states of distress, like hunger, cold, etc., and how bad are those states?

- **Welfare for elephants? (case study):** David Pearce's article *A Welfare State for Elephants?*² sketches an intriguing large-scale intervention targeted at helping wild animals. The symbolic value of such a proposal – assuming it is detailed and convincing – could be considerable, because it would show that helping wild animals sustainably is possible even with today's technology. How plausible are Pearce's estimates for the costs and feasibility of such a project? What would be the ecological side-effects?
- **Agriculture and wild animals (research):** Which plant foods are best to eat from the perspective of wild-animal suffering? How does pasture grazing or crop cultivation affect wild animals?
- **Risks of spreading animal suffering into space (survey):** Humans might someday decide to spread Darwinian life to other planets. Because population dynamics suggest that the typical life in nature likely contains more suffering than happiness,³ bringing about such an outcome would be rated very bad according to most anti-speciesist ethical views. Do attitudes such as vegetarianism or environmentalism (anti-)correlate with a favorable view on [terraforming](#) or the wish to spread life to other planets?
- **Climate change and wild animals (research):** How will climate change affect wild animals? Will ocean acidification result in chronic suffering for marine animals? What are likely effects on phytoplankton and zooplankton abundances?
- **Insects (expert survey):** How do insects typically die; what limits population size; does crop land contain more or fewer insects than non-crop land? We intend to survey entomologists for their opinions on these and other questions.
- **Moral uncertainty about the consciousness of smaller minds (philosophy):** For some animals (e.g. insects), it is unclear whether they can suffer, and if yes, how much. When using a framework of moral uncertainty, we are presented with a variant of the [Two-Envelopes Problem](#). How do we apply moral uncertainty correctly?
- **Estimating the potential of CRISPR-based gene drives (research):** What is the potential and feasibility of CRISPR-based gene drives applied to wild-animal populations? What are the risks?

Room for funding

We have set up the world's most advanced research effort on reducing wild-animal suffering, and we intend to improve it and scale it further. To fund the full program for **two years**, we need \$180,000 in addition to our current, low financial reserves. This money will secure Tomasik's position as the leading researcher and make sure that we can hire the best candidates after evaluation. Research also benefits from movement building and vice-versa, which is why FRI is collaborating with Sentience Politics to organize the first conference on wild animal suffering in 2017, bringing together researchers and activists. In collaboration with Sentience Politics, we have plans for an additional \$140,000 to invest highly effectively into the reduction of wild-animal suffering. This includes recruiting of researchers, outreach and movement building, and raising awareness in circles where people are already anti-speciesist.

Make a donation

Support us today – please make a bank transfer to our umbrella organisation, the Effective Altruism Foundation, and include "FRI" as payment purpose to earmark your donation for FRI.

IBAN EUR: CH20 0023 3233 1775 4560 D

IBAN USD: CH79 0023 3233 1775 4561 F

IBAN CHF: CH67 0023 3233 1775 4501 N

IBAN GBP: CH08 0023 3233 1775 4562 T

SWIFT/BIC: UBSWCHZH40A

Beneficiary: Effective Altruism Foundation, Efringerstrasse 25, CH-4057 Basel, Switzerland
Bank: UBS Switzerland AG, Aeschenvorstadt 1, CH-4051 Basel, Switzerland

If you have questions about donating to FRI, please refer to our [website](#) or send us an [email](#).

References

¹ Brian Tomasik (2009) "How many wild animals are there?," *Essays on Reducing Suffering* <<http://reducing-suffering.org/>>.

² David Pearce (2015) "A Welfare State for Elephants? A Case Study of Compassionate Stewardship," *Relations. Beyond Anthropocentrism* 3(2).

³ Oscar Horta (2010) "Debunking the Idyllic View of Natural Processes: Population Dynamics and Suffering in the Wild," *Telos: Critical Theory of the Contemporary* 17(1):73-90.