Killing Animals May Increase Deaths Per Unit Time

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Abstract

It's sometimes claimed that killing animals doesn't matter because they would have died naturally, perhaps by a means at least as painful. This analysis ignores the point that killing animals before they would have died on their own may increase "turnover rates", i.e., the number of deaths per unit time. This may increase total suffering.

1 Introduction

Is the suffering caused by killing an animal only the difference between how painful it is to be killed vs. how painful it would have been to die naturally?

2 Factors

The total harm caused by human activity is the difference between the sum-total of animal utilities when the activity occurs and when it doesn't.

2.1 Difference in Pain of Death

The first factor to consider is the difference in the painfulness of death in the two situations. In some cases, human-caused animal deaths are less painful than deaths in the wild. Animals killed by buildings or cars may suffer less than those eaten alive by predators.

2.2 Increase in Total Deaths

The second consideration is, How much does human activity increase the total number of animal deaths that occur? To take an example, suppose that Species X has an average lifespan in the wild of 2 years. A combine comes along and kills 100 members of Species X; the average age of the animals killed was probably around the halfway point: 1 year. Suppose those 100 animals are immediately replaced. Then, the next year, when the combine harvests the field again,

another 100 animals are killed. If instead the combine had not been present, the animals would have lived for about two years before dying (i.e., after 2 years, 100 animals would have died). So when people kill animals before they naturally would have died, they thereby increase the total number of deaths. In this case, the combine caused twice as many animals to endure the pain of death as would otherwise have happened. If death by a combine is anything more than half as bad as death by natural causes, then the combine caused net harm.

2.3 Precluded Utility

What I said above is true only in a special case: when one maintains the assumption of instantaneous replacement. Perhaps this is unrealistic. Perhaps, to continue the example above, when a member of Species X is killed by the combine, it is not replaced until a year later. In this case, the combine doesn't cause a net increase in deaths after all (since only 100 animals die within two years). But this time, there's a different cost: preclusion of a total of 100 life-years for the hundred members of Species X that died early.