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Environmental Ethics for Wild Animals in Maharashtra: A Framework for Conservation, Welfare and Human–Wildlife Coexistence

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Abstract
Environmental ethics examines the moral relationship between human beings, animals, and the natural environment. In wildlife conservation, it provides an important framework for addressing biodiversity protection, ecosystem integrity, animal welfare, and the intrinsic value of individual wild animals. Ethical conservation therefore requires consideration of both ecological sustainability and the welfare of wildlife, while also recognizing the social and livelihood needs of human communities. Maharashtra provides an important context for examining these ethical dimensions because of its diverse wildlife habitats and growing human–wildlife interactions. Habitat fragmentation, agricultural expansion, infrastructure development, and other human activities have increased interactions between people and wildlife in several regions of the state. These dynamics create complex ethical challenges involving wildlife protection, animal welfare, human safety, livelihood security, compensation, and equitable sharing of conservation benefits. This review-based study examines environmental ethics regarding wild animals in Maharashtra, with particular emphasis on intrinsic value, animal welfare, ecological integrity, human–wildlife conflict, environmental justice, community participation, and responsible wildlife tourism. It highlights the need for conservation strategies that integrate scientific knowledge with ethical considerations for both wildlife and local communities. Habitat protection, maintenance of wildlife corridors, preventive conflict-mitigation measures, appropriate compensation mechanisms, community participation, and responsible wildlife tourism are key components of an ethically responsible conservation approach. A coexistence-based framework that balances ecological protection, animal welfare, and human well-being can contribute to sustainable and socially responsible wildlife conservation in Maharashtra.
Keywords: *Environmental ethics, wild animals, Maharashtra, wildlife conservation, animal welfare, human–wildlife conflict, biodiversity, ecological integrity, coexistence, environmental justice.*

1. Introduction

Environmental ethics has emerged as an important field for understanding the moral responsibilities of human beings toward nature and other living organisms. Traditionally, many human activities have evaluated wildlife according to its economic, recreational, or utilitarian importance. However, environmental philosophers and conservation scientists have increasingly questioned whether nature should be valued only according to its usefulness to humans.

Leopold (1949) proposed the concept of a land ethic, arguing that humans should understand themselves as members of an ecological community rather than as masters of nature. His approach broadened ethical consideration from human society to soils, waters, plants, and animals. Later, Soulé (1985) provided an influential ethical foundation for conservation biology by identifying biological diversity, ecological complexity, and evolutionary processes as values requiring protection.

Ethical consideration of wild animals has since expanded beyond species and ecosystem conservation. Santiago-Ávila and Lynn (2020) discussed the relationship between conservation and animal welfare. They emphasized that individual wild animals possess moral significance and should not be ignored when conservation interventions cause suffering. Similarly, Wallach et al. (2020) and other scholars associated with compassionate conservation have argued for greater consideration of individual animal welfare in conservation practice.

The Indian context provides a particularly important field for environmental ethics because wildlife conservation frequently occurs alongside densely populated human landscapes. Berti (2019) examined animal welfare, animal rights and conservation debates in India and showed that different groups—including environmental lawyers, animal activists, conservationists and government institutions—may hold different understandings of the moral and legal status of animals.

Maharashtra contains extensive forest landscapes and a large diversity of wild animals. Tigers, leopards, sloth bears, wild dogs, gaur, deer, wild boar, primates, birds and numerous other species occur across different habitats. However, wildlife conservation is increasingly complicated by habitat fragmentation and interactions between wildlife and human settlements.
A significant Maharashtra-specific contribution was provided by Athreya et al. (2020), who studied leopard impacts on livestock and human injuries in a human-use landscape. Their research demonstrates that the relationship between leopards and local communities cannot be understood simply as a conflict between wildlife and humans; rather, it requires analysis of the ecological and social characteristics of the landscape.
Similarly, Habib et al. (2022) investigated human–wildlife conflict in Chandrapur and identified factors including shrinking forest cover, agricultural expansion, human population growth, and developmental activities as contributors to increasing interactions between people and carnivores.Therefore, environmental ethics is highly relevant to Maharashtra because wildlife-management decisions involve competing moral considerations: the safety and livelihood of people, the welfare of individual animals and the protection of ecological systems.

2. Literature Review

The literature on environmental ethics and wildlife conservation can broadly be divided into ecological, animal-welfare, and justice-oriented perspectives.

Leopold (1949) provided one of the earliest influential ecological approaches through the land ethic. He proposed that ethical responsibility should extend to the broader biotic community. According to this perspective, humans are not separate from nature but are members of an ecological system.

Soulé (1985) subsequently provided an ethical foundation for conservation biology. He argued that conservation biology contains normative principles concerning biological diversity, ecological complexity, evolution, and the intrinsic value of biodiversity. His work strongly influenced modern conservation science.

The concept of intrinsic value has subsequently been examined by several conservation philosophers. **Curry (2006)** discussed ecological ethics and the moral consideration of non-human life, while **Washington et al. (2017)** examined the importance of intrinsic value within contemporary conservation thinking. Their work indicates that nature can be considered valuable independently of its direct economic usefulness to humans.

The animal-welfare dimension received greater attention through the development of compassionate conservation. **Santiago-Ávila and Lynn (2020)** explained that compassionate conservation seeks to integrate conservation objectives with concern for the welfare of individual animals. The approach emphasizes minimizing unnecessary suffering and recognizing the moral importance of individual wild animals.

Wallach et al. (2020) further discussed the relationship between compassion and conservation ethics. They argued that conservation decisions often involve competing claims between humans, individual animals and ecological communities. Their work suggests that compassion and justice should both be incorporated into conservation decision-making.

The Indian context was examined by **Berti (2019)**, who described the different ways in which animals are represented within Indian public debates involving animal welfare, environmental law, conservation and animal rights. Her work demonstrates that the ethical status of animals in India is influenced by legal, cultural, environmental and social perspectives.

For Maharashtra specifically, **Athreya et al. (2020)** investigated leopard interactions with livestock and people. Their findings demonstrate the importance of understanding the actual scale and characteristics of wildlife impacts before adopting management measures.

Habib et al. (2022) studied human–wildlife conflict in Chandrapur and emphasized the relationship between habitat fragmentation, human expansion, and carnivore conflict. Their research demonstrates why wildlife conservation in Maharashtra must extend beyond protected-area boundaries.

More recently, **Batar (2026)** proposed a transformative conservation framework for human–wildlife relationships in India. He emphasized that human–wildlife interactions should be

understood through ecological, social and institutional factors rather than focusing exclusively on direct conflict such as crop damage, livestock loss or retaliatory killing.

Thus, the literature demonstrates a gradual transition from wildlife conservation based primarily on species and protected areas toward approaches incorporating animal welfare, human livelihood, environmental justice and coexistence.

3. Research Work

3.1 Research Approach

The present study is a review-based conceptual research study based on published scientific literature and research concerning environmental ethics, animal welfare and human–wildlife relationships, with particular attention to Maharashtra.

The analysis incorporates the ethical perspectives of Leopold (1949), Soulé (1985), Berti (2019), Santiago-Ávila and Lynn (2020), Athreya et al. (2020), Wallach et al. (2020), Habib et al. (2022), and Batar (2026).

3.2 Intrinsic Value of Wild Animals

The intrinsic value of wild animals represents an important principle of environmental ethics. **Leopold (1949)** argued that humans should regard themselves as members of the ecological community. This principle means that animals should not be valued exclusively according to their usefulness to humans.

Soulé (1985) similarly emphasized the intrinsic value of biological diversity as one of the normative foundations of conservation biology.

From an ethical perspective, therefore, a tiger, leopard, sloth bear, wolf or deer should not be considered valuable only because it attracts tourists or provides ecosystem services. These animals are components of ecological communities and possess biological and ecological significance.

3.3 Animal Welfare in Wildlife Conservation

The welfare of individual wild animals is another important ethical consideration. **Santiago-Ávila and Lynn (2020)** argued that conservation should give appropriate moral consideration to individual animals and should avoid unnecessary harm.

This principle is particularly relevant during rescue, capture, translocation and rehabilitation. Wildlife-management authorities should evaluate whether an intervention is necessary, scientifically justified and proportionate to the problem.

An animal should not be captured merely because it has been observed near human habitation. Instead, its behaviour, circumstances and actual threat should be evaluated. Where preventive methods can safely reduce conflict, these may reduce unnecessary stress and disturbance to wildlife.

3.4 Human–Wildlife Conflict in Maharashtra

Human–wildlife conflict represents one of the most important ethical issues in Maharashtra.

Athreya et al. (2020) examined leopard-related livestock losses and human injuries in a human-use landscape in Maharashtra. Their study provides evidence that human–leopard interactions need to be understood using local ecological and social information rather than assuming that the presence of a leopard automatically represents a severe threat.

In Chandrapur, **Habib et al. (2022)** documented patterns of human–wildlife conflict and identified habitat fragmentation, agricultural expansion, human population growth and developmental activities among factors contributing to increasing interactions between humans and wildlife.

From an ethical perspective, such conflict cannot be viewed entirely from one side. Human communities have legitimate concerns regarding personal safety, livestock and agricultural livelihoods, while wildlife has ecological requirements for habitat, food, shelter and movement.

Consequently, ethical wildlife management should seek to reduce risks to people while also minimizing unnecessary harm to animals.

3.5 Environmental Justice

Environmental justice is concerned with the fair distribution of environmental benefits and costs.

In wildlife conservation, communities living near forests may experience costs such as livestock depredation, crop damage, restrictions on resource use, or risks associated with wildlife. At the same time, society as a whole receives benefits from biodiversity conservation.

Batar (2026) argues that human–wildlife relationships should be examined through social, ecological and institutional dimensions and emphasizes more inclusive approaches to coexistence.

Therefore, ethical wildlife conservation in Maharashtra should include transparent compensation systems, community participation, livelihood support and opportunities for local people to benefit from responsible conservation-based tourism.

3.6 Habitat Fragmentation and Ethical Responsibility

Habitat fragmentation creates an ethical problem because human development can reduce the available space and movement routes of wild animals.

Habib et al. (2022) identified forest-cover reduction, agricultural expansion and developmental activities as important factors influencing human–wildlife conflict in Chandrapur.

This indicates that conflict should not always be considered solely as an animal-management problem. Land-use planning, habitat conservation and maintenance of wildlife corridors are also important ethical responsibilities.

Preventing habitat fragmentation may reduce the need for later interventions involving capture, translocation or removal of individual animals.

3.7 Community Participation

Community participation is essential for ethical wildlife conservation. Local communities possess knowledge regarding animal movements, seasonal changes, livestock practices, and conflict locations.

Aiyadurai (2023) and colleagues have emphasized the importance of ecological relationships, human–animal interactions, and ethics of care in understanding conservation and local ecological relationships. Her research interests specifically include human–animal relations, community-based conservation and environmental justice.

Consequently, Maharashtra's wildlife-management programmes can benefit from involving residents in awareness programmes, monitoring systems, conflict reporting and preventive measures.

3.8 Responsible Wildlife Tourism

Wildlife tourism provides opportunities for environmental education and economic development but also creates ethical responsibilities.

Animals should not be deliberately disturbed for tourist photographs or entertainment. Excessive vehicle movement, loud noise, feeding wildlife and approaching animals too closely can negatively affect natural behaviour.

Environmental ethics therefore requires wildlife tourism to prioritize animal welfare and habitat protection over short-term entertainment.

3.9 Ethical Principles for Wildlife Conservation in Maharashtra

Based on the reviewed literature, the following ethical principles can be proposed:

Respect for the intrinsic value of wild animals — wildlife should not be treated merely as a human resource.

Protection of individual welfare — unnecessary suffering should be minimized.

Protection of ecological integrity — habitats and ecological processes should be conserved.

Scientific decision-making — interventions should be supported by reliable evidence.

Human safety — legitimate risks to people must be addressed.

Environmental justice — communities bearing conservation costs should receive appropriate support.

Community participation — local people should participate in conservation planning.

Prevention of conflict — preventive measures should be strengthened before conflict becomes severe.

Responsible tourism — tourism should not compromise animal welfare.

Intergenerational responsibility — wildlife should be conserved for future generations.

4. Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this study demonstrates that environmental ethics has become increasingly important in wildlife conservation. Leopold (1949) established an ecological ethical perspective by viewing humans as members of the broader biotic community, while Soulé (1985) provided normative foundations for conservation biology based on biodiversity and ecological integrity. More recent scholars such as Santiago-Ávila and Lynn (2020) have emphasized the importance of individual animal welfare, while Wallach et al. (2020) have highlighted the importance of compassion and justice in conservation decision-making.

Maharashtra presents a particularly important case because wildlife conservation occurs within landscapes where forests, agriculture, infrastructure and settlements overlap. Athreya et al. (2020) demonstrated the complexity of leopard–human interactions in Maharashtra, while Habib et al. (2022) documented the importance of habitat fragmentation and human development in Chandrapur.

The ethical solution is therefore neither unrestricted human use of nature nor conservation that ignores human communities. Instead, Maharashtra requires a balanced approach based on scientific evidence, animal welfare, ecological integrity, human safety, environmental justice and community participation.

Environmental ethics can ultimately help transform wildlife conservation from a system focused primarily on controlling animals into one focused on responsible coexistence. As Batar (2026) suggests, human–wildlife relationships should be understood through broader ecological, social and institutional processes rather than only through isolated conflict events.

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