

LETTER

The killing of wild birds in research revisited: nature, numbers, speed and ethics

In a recent editorial in the journal *The Condor*, Walsberg (1994) raises some important issues concerning bureaucratic inefficiency of which most people are aware. He is especially concerned about what he claims is the inefficient way in which collecting permits are issued to those who want to study various aspects of avian biology. However, Walsberg's essay, that centres on the killing of wild birds in research (collecting is a synonym for killing; Bekoff 1993), contains assertions that need considerably more clarification, scrutiny and support before they can be used to make policy about how collecting permits are issued. There are many ethical issues that he glosses over which are directly related to animal welfare. For example, it is not clear how his comparison between predation rates and the number of birds killed by Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*) and the number of birds killed by scientists, supports Walsberg's argument that more streamlined permit processing is needed. On the one hand, Cooper's Hawks (and other non-human predators) are natural born killers who do not behave according to a code of ethics; they are not moral agents who are responsible for their actions. On the other hand, most scientists who kill birds are not natural born killers. It seems reasonable to assume that they are moral agents who are responsible for their actions (for discussion see Bekoff and Hettinger 1994). In my view, the comparison between the predatory habits of wild animals and the killing habits of humans does not lend any strong support to arguments that there should be more rapid permit processing.

Walsberg also writes about 'essentially innocuous transgressions of collecting regulations' (p 1119). Here, we need to

know more about what the term 'essentially innocuous transgressions' means. Are these transgressions innocuous because the ignoring of extant regulations merely results in the killing of only a few animals, perhaps far fewer than would be killed by a natural predator? Furthermore, Walsberg states that '. . . scientists may find conditions attached to their permits that are biologically unreasonable' (p 1119). Walsberg once again appeals to numbers and complains that current regulations stipulate only small numbers of individuals can be killed even for species for which there are numerous living representatives. An appeal to numbers does not adequately support Walsberg's assertion. Ethical considerations also need to be taken seriously. Killing any individual is not an innocuous transgression on that individual or on the lives of others. Taking another life, even if there are numerous conspecifics who remain alive, is a difficult position for which to argue.

Walsberg is also concerned with how scientists are perceived by the general public. Here he includes scientists taken as a group, not only those who collect birds or other animals. Walsberg asserts that 'Popular perceptions of scientists have rarely been realistic and the public view of our studies with animals has become remarkably distorted' (p 1120). Indeed if this is the case, we *do* need to educate the public, as Walsberg notes. But, where are the data? The lumping of individual scientists who engage in vastly different activities into a single group requires justification. The question of how scientists and science are perceived by non-scientists (and also by themselves) is a complex one that does not submit to simple answers (for discussion see Rollin 1989). Furthermore, open-minded scepticism about science is healthy and, rather than being anti-science or anti-

intellectual, asking difficult questions will make for better and more responsible science, even if some scientists feel uncomfortable with those types of enquiries (Fumento 1993). In many instances scientists have not delivered the goods that they claim they have, and there are valid reasons for the non-scientists to be sceptical of the enterprise of science (Fumento 1993).

In conclusion, the notion that scientists should not be forced unnecessarily to jump over numerous hurdles in order to do their work is one with which most feel comfortable. However, for the case at hand it is not at all clear that the current way in which killing permits are processed is truly 'harming both scientists and science' (p 1120). Perhaps the passage of a little time between applying for and receiving a permit will make for better and more thoughtful science. Indeed, patience among scientists should be expected, for many are accustomed to waiting for long periods of time before learning about funding. Fast science, like fast food, does not readily translate into higher quality goods and, in this case, it is animals' welfare that may be seriously compromised.

If Walsberg and others wish to argue convincingly for the idea that scientists and science would be less harmed if more streamlined permit procedures were used, then they need to do their homework and present convincing data for this assertion. For science (at least to some) is all about hard empirical data, and Walsberg's editorial lacks the force that is expected in scientific endeavours. Some might also view as self-serving, scientists' assertions that they would be better off if only those who control or oversee their efforts would make it easier for scientists to do their jobs. While I am sympathetic to some of

Walsberg's concerns, I remain unconvinced that scientists and science will be better off with the more efficient handling of killing permits. Appeals to the supposed brutality of nature and to numbers, together do not do the work that Walsberg wants them to do. The intentional killing of individuals requires careful supervision/control, for hasty and uninformed decisions can result in the irreversible misuse of animals who are unable to speak for themselves.

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References

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