

Are we justified in our fights to save endangered species?

October 4 2012, by Angela Herring



In a new book, associate professor of philosophy Ronald Sandler argues that efforts to preserve species endangered by climate change is a costly and ineffective protocol. Credit: Brooks Canaday

Even under the most optimistic climate-change scenarios, species loss may reach 30 percent by the end of the century, according to Ronald Sandler, associate professor of philosophy in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities.

In "[The Ethics of Species](#)," a new book published by Cambridge University Press, Sandler argues that rapidly changing ecosystem conditions make it unfeasible and ethically inappropriate to maintain species preservation as a primary ecosystem management goal.

"In many cases, the more justified thing to do is to let systems transition

and reconfigure," said Sandler, the director of Northeastern University's Ethics Institute.

Many of the current conservation efforts remain appropriate, according to Sandler, including protecting the wilderness and establishing wildlife corridors. But he said efforts to preserve species endangered by climate change are a costly and ineffective protocol.

This stance is part of the book's broader discussion of the value of species and the ethical significance of species boundaries in the areas of environmental conservation and biotechnology. In the latter case, issues of species modification and the creation of new species through genetic engineering are essential.

"There is nothing intrinsically problematic with genetic modification," Sandler said. "The important ethical question isn't 'Is it genetically modified,' but rather other issues like human rights and public health."

To explain his viewpoint, he used the example of two distinct genetically modified organisms with vastly different social implications. The first is a genetically modified grass created to improve golf fairway conditions that's resistant to herbicide and can quickly spread to other areas. The organism has the potential to be ecologically disruptive and benefits golfers almost exclusively.

On the other hand, a genetically modified yeast strain created to produce artemisinic acid, a precursor to an effective antimalarial drug, helps people in low-income countries by addressing their basic health needs.

When you look at the complete ethical picture of biotechnologies, Sandler said, "the fact that they are genetically modified is not that significant."

With respect to humans, many people have argued that the Homo sapiens species has special moral significance that sets it apart from other species. Sandler, on the other hand, believes that value is found in the cognitive and psychological characteristics of human beings and not in the species itself.

Suppose a new species were to emerge through biomedical research that had comparable abilities to empathize, think, feel and understand the way humans do. For Sandler, this bioengineered species would be considered as valuable as the human [species](#).

"What matters are the capacities that individual human beings have," he said. "The reason we should be more concerned about the welfare of a human being isn't because it's Homo sapiens but because of their cognitive and psychological capacities."

Provided by Northeastern University

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