Is it right to spend money on 'endangered species' when human beings world-wide are dying of preventable diseases?

(Some sources: ***NDCE*** entries: ***Animals, Environmental Ethics***; ***The Puzzle of Ethics*** (Vardy, Grosch), *chapters 15, 16, 17*; ***TYE,*** *pp 91-3*)

Points to elaborate:

- Is it simply pitching the value of humans against the value of another non-human species and asking for some decision?

- Should we consider the practicalities of allocating money?
  It is more likely that money will be better spent if given to groups working to prevent the extinction of endangered species than if given to charities working to prevent human diseases. One reason for this is that a group working overseas must secure the good will of the government of a particular nation before it may attend to its main work in that nation; governments of the oppressive kind are apt to make political pawns out of people rather than animals. So, for example, a dictator might create major obstacles for a medical charity seeking to improve health care in an area held by rebels. These obstacles would cost time and money to surmount.

- Shouldn't we consider the unjust system that causes environmental degradation (and therefore the loss of habitat for endangered species) *and* many to live in poverty and disease?

- Of course, if we view the question as an 'endangered species versus humans' situation, we have to consider some of the ethical theories propounded of late which deal with the question of how we should regard and treat our environment and the species therein.

- For those who are Hume's school of thought, the jump from 'species are in danger' to 'we ought to prevent their extinction' is logically invalid - a move from 'is' to 'ought', from description to prescription, from epistemology[1] to ethics. That is not to say they would find no sense in the argument, simply that a description of the 'way things are' is no real basis for ethical propositions. *Do we need to mention this here?*

- However, many environmental ethicists see a connection between epistemology and ethics, arguing that *'because we <u>are</u> an inevitable part of the overall ecosystem, we <u>ought</u> therefore to examine our impact upon it, and if such an impact is damaging then we <u>ought</u> to do something about it'* (Vardy, Grosch, p 214). What would 'All animals are equal' advocates, like Singer, have to say on this matter? What would the position of holists be?
  What about conservation ethicists?

- What insights does the Judeo-Christian tradition bring to the debate?

A Sample Answer (not a perfect answer, and not the only answer)

The question seems to beg for a debate along the lines of 'humans versus animals' (some would have it: 'human animals versus non-human'), but before we broach this it is important to mention relevant perspectives other than that of the value of non-human life relative to human.

We should note that we could replace 'endangered species' in the above by innumerable other ones - care of listed buildings, support for the Arts, and so on - which seek help through fund-raising. None of these worthy causes may *directly* address urgent human need and so we may well ask: *Is it right to spend money on the Arts/Architecture/ etc. when human beings worldwide are dying of preventable diseases?* One may extend this to enquire: *Is it right to spend money on extras for oneself or one's family when human beings worldwide ... ? W*hether or not it is right, people dispose of their resources in a variety of ways, many unconnected with answering urgent human need. I would uphold the right of people to dispose freely of their resources in the way they think best. Whether on a personal, communal or national level, we wish to support ourselves, our kin, and human *flourishing* , as well as address basic human need. With this in mind, the protection of endangered species could been purely in terms of its contribution to human flourishing; we should all feel the poorer for the loss of the Siberian Tiger, the Californian Condor, the Okapi, and other endangered species. I would imagine that of those who donate money to help endangered species the majority do so out of a vague *conservation ethic* - the loss of a unique species somehow 'hurts' us.

A second perspective sees the above as the *wrong* question to ask. In pitching endangered species against humans dying of preventable diseases we miss what is perhaps a crucial connection: the prevailing political-economic operating conditions of the world accelerate environmental degradation (and the loss of unique species) as well as contribute to human poverty (with all the preventable diseases that are associated with abject poverty). So why not dwell on how we might promote fairer systems of government and trade, the absence of which seems massively contributory to both human distress *and* environmental degradation, rather than on how limited funds (themselves the product of a flawed system) should be allocated? As a Christian, I would argue that the redemption of humankind necessarily is the redemption of the cosmos in which they subsist: God's plan *'to bring all creation together, everything in heaven and on earth, with Christ as head'* (Ephesians 1:10). To my mind, the solution lies with promoting kingdom values - and thus the right ordering of creation - rather than with the allocation of funds, an implicit acceptance of the *status quo*. I believe we were created essentially dependent on the rest of creation, thus when we give genuinely in response to human need we give to the environment in which the needy humans subsist. Practically, a response, say, to an outbreak of cholera, a preventable human disease, takes in efforts to secure clean water, to provide health education, to promote long term self-help with a commitment to sustainable agriculture, and so on. A community's implicit regard for the environment and for fragile ecosystems goes hand in hand with its sense of dignity and ability to be self-sufficient. Indigenous peoples despoil their environment, and threatening endangered species thereby, only when they are desperate.

Given the world as it is, we move to consider whether it is right to give money to help protect endangered species when the same could be used to provide health care for those dying of preventable diseases. When these situations occur, how should we act when the needs of animals and humans both lay claim to limited resources? We may consider dire human need absolutely to override the needs of animals - even of endangered species. A utilitarian calculus might support this, especially if we subscribe to J.S. Mill's valuing of the higher pleasures which humans may experience: *better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied*. Still, the calculus, already problematic, is further complicated by the fact that we are not only counting the death of animals but the death of species; this must weigh more heavily in favour of their preservation, if only because we, as humans, delight in variety and regret the loss of it in the animal world.

A conservation ethicist, for whom the environment and non-human life has instrumental value, would presumably argue for the protection of endangered species along these lines. Furthermore, there is also the argument that money which could vitally contribute to preserving endangered species would make no more than a tiny contribution to meeting the need of humans dying of preventable diseases.

'Deep' environmentalists do not approach the issue from the stance of human self-interest; they might argue that all sentient species have an equal right to uninterrupted existence (Singer *et al*), or that the inter-relatedness and variety of life are things in themselves to be valued, quite apart from what contribution they make to humanity (Lovelock *et al*). Singer's school of thought condemns as speciesist any attempt to discriminate in favour of one species (the human species) against another; thus the death of humans from preventable diseases, though never to accepted indifferently, must still nonetheless be accepted in the effort to prevent the extinction of another sentient species. The argument is strengthened when it is considered that the dire situation of the endangered species is almost always as a consequence of years of speciesist behaviour on the part of humans. Though I would agree with Singer's initial assertion: *'If a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration'*, I cannot follow him to the conclusion that all sentient animals are of equal value, equal members of the moral community. To do so would be to reject the Judeo-Christian belief of humanity at the pinnacle of Creation, exercising dominion over the rest of Creation, entrusted with its stewardship. But even an atheist could question Singer's line of argument; he appeals to human intelligence and rationality when propounding his ideas and yet neglects to give these very characteristics significance when reaching final conclusions about the relative value of human and non-human life. If I am only as valuable as any other animal why can I not pursue my interest with the same ferocity of another animal? Why should I have regard for a sentient animal over which I have power if that same animal, given power over me, would have no such regard?

There is another argument: the unnatural loss of a species is a grave wounding of the ecosystem as a whole; the species and the unique way it relates to other species and to the environment cannot be replaced. An injury is done to the inter-relatedness and variety of life - things of *intrinsic* value according to *holists* among environmental ethicists. As humans, we are a strand in a giant web of life whose workings we can only dimly understand. We ought to preserve life in its variety since this variety, this inter-relatedness, has intrinsic value. If we can prevent the death of another species, even in the face of preventable losses to our own, we ought to, since life is more to be valued than human lives. For me, this approach is essentially wrong-headed. I agree with the concept of the inter-relatedness of life yet I believe that humans' very ability to impose themselves on the rest of life - for good or ill - imparts to them a kind of grave stature. As a Christian, I believe that our intellect and will is witness to our imaging God in a way no other creature does, and on this our dignity and responsibility rests. The holist would try to divest themself of an *anthropocentric* approach to environmental ethics, yet philosophical and moral deliberation are profoundly human occupations; how can any ethics be other than anthropocentric?

To conclude, then, I would justify the protection of endangered species as complementary to a duty to my neighbour - near or far. The fact of there being so many species on the endangered list, and of there being so many humans dying from preventable diseases, testify to a lack of stewardship of the environment and of love of neighbour. I believe it is always possible to contribute money in such a way as to promote the well-being of humans in their environment. I do not deny that animals have worth - *'not one sparrow is forgotten by God'* (Luke 12:6) - but I believe that a proper love for one's neighbour promotes the right ordering of creation. In fact, I would go so far as to assert that there will always be endangered species as long as injustice to humans by humans persists. As regards the rights of animals, I believe they have none. Rights belong to the human being, the moral animal, as do responsibilities for the good stewardship of Created Order.