

# Should Large Animals be Rescued?

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## Abstract

Several lines of argument are presented to support the notion that hooved animal rescue is justified, however expensive and controversial. The work of Singer and McNamee is discussed. The article concludes that various breeds have distinct arguments in their favour when it comes to rescue.

Websites and other social media exhibit no shortage of organizations devoted to the rescue of large animals – not merely variations on the local humane societies concerned with cats and dogs, but hooved animals, such as horses, cattle and goats. One might think that these were manifestly worthy causes, and reports of donations (and rescues) tend to indicate that the work with large animals – which, after all, are expensive to care for – is a more popular activity than some might believe.

But the rescue of horses, in particular, is an activity that requires some moral investigation, for horses are intimately entwined with human activity in the same way that dogs are, but unlike dogs, horses require much more work, and the activities that horses typically engage in are themselves foci that require training both for the horses and the humans involved. The question then becomes whether, overall, it is morally appropriate for persons to, for example, rescue former Thoroughbred racehorses, whose lives revolve around the track, and the training of which is an intricate and difficult matter. Can former racehorses truly be rehabilitated? Is it in itself, for example, humane to turn a former racer into a

pasture horse? These questions are often left unaddressed by those involved in the work.

The expense and time consumption involved in the attempted rescue of large animals – be they horses, burros or cattle – is often not obvious to those who only hear about the work, and some may make the mistake of analogizing these rescue efforts to those involving smaller animals. But this sort of work poses problems of its own.

## I

With respect to horses, much of the work that is done in humane rescue brings to light a set of topics that is related, but not usually involved in actual rescue. Just as the notion of a gene pool and the saving of such a pool has received international attention because of the climate crisis and enormous depredations on such animals as elephants and rhinos, some work has been done for the retrieval of ancient breeds of animals that are deemed to be at risk, especially dogs and horses. It is horses, because of their size and their status as animals involved in human social growth, that are of the most interest here. For example, a great deal of work has been done on trying to keep alive such



breeds as the Cleveland Bay, which historically had much to do with the growth of towns and other settlements in England and the United States, but which is seldom used today because the breed was primarily a working breed.

Two analogous areas, then, present themselves for consideration: how worthy a goal is horse (or large hooved animal) rescue in the cases in which the animal rescued will be unable to do anything like what a healthy animal of its breed would do? And how concerned should we be, in any case, that some breeds that have limited use – such as the Standardbred – may be more in need of rescue simply because many of these horses are difficult to retrain for riding? These two questions then link (especially for a breed such as the Standardbred or Cleveland Bay) to the overall question of whether we ought to preserve the breeds because of their historical value, even when it is clear that it is expensive and time-consuming to do so.

Much of the set of conundrums around rescue efforts for horses and other large animals revolves

around adoption rates and the place that the animal has in traditional human societies. There is not nearly as much controversy about the rescue of dogs and cats, for example, because these smaller animals are easily adoptable as pets, and, at least in the case of dogs, have something like a 100,000-year history of involvement with humans. But adoption rates for horses are much lower, and not simply because of the expense of feeding a horse. Veterinary costs are also higher – in some locales, there are very few large animal vets – and what horses do historically for humans not only does not go back as far in recorded history, but represents a very limited set of tasks (most horses are not kept simply as pets, for example).

Thus, although it would be difficult to formulate an argument against small pet rescue – time and money as contestable items are not really in dispute here, presumably – the situation is the other way around with horse and large animal rescue. Some of the animals have an adoption rate that is so low that it is a virtual given to

those who work in these circles that the animals will not be placed. (Burros, for example, are notoriously difficult in this regard.) So again there is a set of ethical questions that is related to horse rescue: what are the chances, in any given case, that the animal can be placed or moved to a home? And if the animal cannot be placed, what is the morality – given triage efforts and limited amounts of finance for almost all rescue organizations – of keeping a horse on a pasture indefinitely when the horse cannot be ridden, cannot be adopted, and in some cases is pulled away from the task for which it was originally bred? Some animals simply are not candidates for rescue at all – other hooved animals tend to get short shrift. And yet horse rescue proceeds apace.

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When we discuss the placement of animals as ‘pasture buddies’, we run into a host of problems. Although horses that were originally intended as school horses, or were owned by small children and possibly ridden mainly on trails or in local events, may easily make the transition to simple

pasturing, a number of other types of horses may find this transition very difficult. The situation is made even more complex when we take into account, as mentioned earlier, that many of the rescues involved horses that were intended for specific tasks, and that in many cases the animals were, indeed, performing those tasks at an earlier point. A wide variety of breeds of horses are so specialized in their gaits that they can be ridden only with difficulty, or would be placeable only to homes where individuals were already familiar with the breed and had an interest in it. It is not only Standardbreds who fall into this category – Tennessee Walkers and American Saddlebreds require knowledgeable riders, and draught horses of all types are extremely difficult to place, partly because of their size and partly because of the fact that, again, in general, draught horses are working animals.

The set of tasks performed by any designated breed would not be the difficulty that it is, were it not for the fact that, in general, horses bred for specific tasks are often not functioning well if they cannot perform those tasks. Just as some have objected that too many owners take large dogs, originally intended for hunting, and turn them into house pets, trying to retrain horses bred for certain gaits, which may scarcely be suitable for riding, is a dangerous and difficult task, and although it may on some level be preferable for some horses to be pastured, the opposite argument can be made. Walking horses and gaited Saddlebreds may still retain their gaits even when older, and yet many riders who might be tempted to adopt such a horse know little about the gaits, and probably have little interest in learning to work with them. Draught horses are so accustomed to working that many ‘retired’ draught horses seem to object to not being able to do their accustomed tasks.

So, one might enquire, aside from general humaneness, what are the arguments that would support the adoption and saving of large hooved animals? Here we run into a variety of paradoxes. On the one hand, we do not want to euthanize any animals unnecessarily – this line of argument also helps fill in the blanks on why the wild horse controversy is the issue that it is. (Some, of course, have contended that these

animals should be euthanized.) Another line, as indicated above, has to do with the actual saving of a rare breed, in and of itself. Breeds as divergent as the Cleveland Bay, the Hackney and the Dartmoor pony are becoming increasingly endangered – and although one could claim that the perils of losing man-made domestic breeds do not in any way parallel the loss, for example, of the panda, some people are concerned that the loss of these breeds represents the loss of an important aspect of human history. One of the interesting facets of this paradox has to do with some of the material on the reintroduction or saving of species themselves.

## II

If a parallel can be made with working on breeds – which in and of itself is related to the notion of humanely saving horses of all kinds – then it is intriguing to discuss work that has been done on various biological species, their reintroduction and their preservation as a gene pool. Although many supporters of ecologically active organizations seem to think that the reintroduction of species into given areas is proceeding apace, reintroduction in general is no simple matter. For large mammals, it has turned out to be a very difficult project, in many or most cases. Research done on the reintroduction of the wolf to Yellowstone, for example, has shown that virtually every aspect of the wolf life cycle, including the all-important aspect of breeding and giving birth to pups, is adversely affected by the activities surrounding reintroduction (see McNamee 1998). Female wolves will not, for instance, build dens properly in areas unknown to them, and the trauma of attempting to place the females in a given area may throw off their ability to breed completely. Similar problems attended efforts to save the condor.

All of this reminds us of attempts to salvage, for example, Standardbreds, Saddlebreds or the Percheron. One of the important points made about these breeds is that they represent important human efforts at establishing animal lines – but it must be remembered that this is not the same sort of argument as that made for saving, for example, the rhino. Although we might be

tempted to think that saving breeds that have endured for decades (if not centuries) is an important part of historical restoration and preservation, most would argue that the saving of naturally occurring species is more important.

But the entire line of argument about breed preservation is related to the points made earlier – most of the horse breeds that are currently endangered are selectively bred for the ability to perform specific activities. Many of these activities require that the horse be sound and rideable – or at least drivable (in the case of the Hackney, for instance, it is the latter point that is important). Rescue efforts often involve sums of money that could be spent in other ways and also often involve, as we have said, rescue of the very animals that normally are associated with specific tasks. This is why it is, for example, that a retired Standardbred may be virtually unrideable, even by an experienced rider, and why it is also that many of these retired animals are simply in pasture. The types of ethical analysis often used by philosophers – consequentialist lines of argument – would then ask us to consider total outcomes involved in the rescue efforts, and whether those outcomes are worth the overall costs and expenditures.

Although his work might not seem immediately relevant, Peter Singer is one theorist whose writings might be cited in this context. Singer is not only concerned about animal liberation on the whole, but he is also concerned about net suffering (see Singer 2011). But the difficulty with the type of consequentialist ethics that Singer routinely espouses is that they can be used to buttress and support several lines of argument. Even Singer himself seems concerned that the slippery slope that is started by much of the argument in *Animal Liberation* is a difficult set of moves to navigate. The fact that Christopher Stone, for example, had argued for legal standing for trees years ago simply propels the notion that a rights analysis can be constructed for almost any entity, if enough argument is adduced. Even taking into account Singer's overall concern for welfare, we are driven back to the original paradox with which we started: the care and feeding of large hooved animals is so time-consuming and expensive – and in some cases so difficult for the animal involved –

that it is hard to know how to proceed, especially if it looks, in the case of horses, that the animal will not be rideable, or that whatever it is that the animal will be trained to do is completely different from the set of tasks for which it was originally bred, and may involve attempting to change its gait.

## ‘Is it in itself, for example, humane to turn a former racer into a pasture horse?’

As indicated at an earlier point, we can learn from some of the examples of attempting to save a species where the saving of the animal life involves extraordinary time, effort and expense. As mentioned earlier, we can also think, for instance, of the attempts to save the raptors like the condor, especially in their early stages. Much of the public did not know that, in order to boost the condor population to something like sustainable levels, interventions were required that in some cases were actually dangerous for the birds involved and certainly detrimental to the environment. Some of the work bordered on the comical; other parts of it, especially due to the cost, were less than humorous. In order to induce the birds to lay extra eggs in a clutch where one egg was missing (it had been noted that they often replaced lost eggs), helicopters were used to move into a given area and workers wearing latex gloves had to get to the nests in order to remove the eggs. Of course, not every attempt was successful. Even given the fact that the bulk of the retrieved eggs were taken to the San Diego Zoo, many did not make it through the normal hatching period, and in some cases the chick died at an early point.

But the downside to both reintroduction and rescue efforts is not only that they frequently turn out to be much more costly than an individual could have expected, they also turn out, in some cases, to have damaging consequences for the animals (or the species), and even more

frequently to have grave consequences for the environment. The condor rescue attempt meant, inevitably, that some birds became frightened or worse, eggs were dropped, and of course the presence of helicopters and their concomitants in the high country simply meant that all of the surrounding environment was disturbed. As indicated, the hand-rearing of the birds posed its own set of problems. In the cases of the large rescue animals – particularly, as we have indicated, animals that were originally bred for a specific task, or that exhibit gaits that may pose difficulties even for experienced riders – the rescue in and of itself may do little harm, but the rest of the analogy comes from the activities in which the animal engages after the rescue. Because so many are deemed to be not rideable, they often are pastured or housed, sometimes for long periods of time, in other areas. This, of course, causes its own set of problems.

### III

Much of what we think about when we try to theorize about rescue and species restoration has to do with preservation issues in general. In other words, we can use the term ‘preservation’ as much as we like, but we often fail to ask ourselves if the various activities that we have in mind for such efforts are not more harmful than helpful. The types of issues that fall under the rubric of preservation, for example, often fail to note the distinction between preserving the non-living – a landscape, for instance – or an entire species.

Again, we might want to indicate that it is Singer’s overall stance that remains controversial – it’s not simply that he favours rights, but that it is somewhat unclear what all of this amounts to. Taking into consideration the number of living beings on the planet, one could, for example, make an argument for the moral status of plants and trees. Nevertheless, however difficult many of the preservation issues are, at heart there is the same paradox that we addressed at an earlier point – it is the dispute between those who favour preservation of species only, and those who would want to work on man-made breeds. This dispute is larger than some might be tempted to think.

Insofar as the preservation of species is concerned, there is ample reason to think that the

biodiversity of the planet in its original form, so to speak, is extremely important for our future. Thus, as has already been argued, we might want to think of preserving tigers, rhinos or Przewalski's horse before we give any sustained thought to attempting to preserve man-made breeds of horses (or cattle, or other such animals). Given the history of the planet and the ways in which plants and animals have evolved, it can always be argued that we have a moral obligation to try to preserve as much of that history as possible. Thus, where time and money are to be spent, the strong argument is that we should spend it on preservation projects that have to do with naturally occurring items, rather than those that are man-made.

Peter Hay (2002), pulling together a number of strands of environmental theory, writes of this turn, as articulated by Aldo Leopold, as:

[T]he first to argue for a widening of the sphere of ethics to include the natural world ... 'The land ethic,' [Leopold] wrote, 'simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants and animals or, collectively: the land.' *Homo sapiens* ... [has] the obligations of respect for the community and its individual members that membership of a community entails.

Although this line of argument might, as we have just contended, best be used to buttress and support the notion that the preservation of the Belgian draught horse is not of paramount importance, it also reinforces again what it is that species (or breeds) actually do. When we examine our history as humans on the planet, it becomes clear that we have interacted with other species in a number of ways, and in at least some of those cases, the interactions have resulted in our selecting types of animals, breeding them, and then altering the status of the animal in question.

So although having little to do with animal life, yet another version of the stewardship view does, in fact, encourage the preservation of natural sites that might be deemed to be worthy. This is the line of argument that some find repugnant, for this particular line, again, would advance

notions of preservation of non-living things. Writing of this particular concept of stewardship and the old idea of town planning, Passmore says:

Men can ... use their ingenuity to enhance rather than destroy the qualities of a site ... [An individual] can construct his city or road [so] that mountains and valleys are, as with some Alpine roads or the Tuscan hill cities, more strikingly related than before. He will not always choose to make a road smooth or straight, if this involves too extensive a destruction.

How is all of this related to our discussion of the preservation of breeds, and hence at least some of the efforts at humane rescue of horses, particularly members of the less well-established breeds? What it means is simply that there is an honoured tradition in preservation and conservation work that puts anything naturally occurring – be it alive or not, be it a rock formation or an elm – ahead of anything man-made. Thus what supports best the notion that a nineteen-year-old Standardbred that has proven to be unrideable over the years (because it's a pacer, and cannot be retrained) is, ironically, the very sort of notion with which Singer has sometimes been associated – that animals have rights. If we think of the potential rescue not even as a breed representative, but as a sentient being, we are in a stronger position to argue for its rescue, the expense involved and the time, than we are on almost any other basis. There is, unfortunately, no strong line of argument that seems to support the notion of the maintenance of human created breeds, other than one that is not so much linked to either preservation or humane endeavours as it is to notions of preservation of human history.

#### IV

I have been arguing that the notion that large hooved animals should be rescued – more or less despite their condition, and their breeding – is probably more contentious than it might at first appear. Although we are tempted to say that, on the whole, the animals need and deserve rescue, some of the efforts will result in long-scale

confinement of the animals in ways that may not match what it was that the animals were bred to do. In still other cases, even with the alleviation of pain by medication, some animals with recurring tendonitis and other conditions will be kept in long-term facilities.

Part of the argument has been that there are a number of lines of conservationist and preservationist work that point in the direction of asking us to spend available resources on the saving of species, where possible. Although the reintroduction of species is itself controversial, much of what is being done in hooved animal rescue efforts, at least for certain breeds, moves in a direction of concern for man-made breeds, rather than naturally occurring species. Although all of this might be uncontroversial were there an enormous amount of resources for spending, given limited resources, other lines of argument are brought to bear.

What, then, can we conclude about large animal rescue if, in our hypothetical case, we are rescuing gaited horses that cannot be ridden, or draught horses that cannot be used in anything like the way that was intended by those who spent decades, if not more than decades, establishing the breed? Our best argument is similar to the rights-for-animals argument, and is ably articulated by Martha Nussbaum in *Frontiers of Justice* (2006). She writes:

Nonhuman animals are capable of dignified existence, as the Kerala High Court says. It is difficult to know precisely what that phrase means, but it is rather clear what it

does not mean: the conditions of the circus animals in the case, squeezed into cramped and filthy cages, starved, terrorized and beaten, given only the minimal care that would make them presentable in the ring the following day.

The analogy here with horses and other large hooved animals is obvious – many of the animals are found in conditions that, indeed, are very similar to the conditions that Nussbaum describes. The rescue, then, whatever its outcome, is an effort to try to stop practices that, in and of themselves, are morally repugnant and should definitely be stopped.

If the questions surrounding rescue were that simple, there would be no need to articulate other lines of argument. We have already alluded here to the counterarguments about expense, pasturing animals that might not otherwise be pasturable, and so forth. But at some point we must come to grips with what the alternatives are. If we do not make the attempts to rescue horses, for example, that are a staple of the literature, then we are condemning them to live in situations very much like the situations being described in the Kerala High Court brief. Even if we do not subscribe to an animal rights theory, the notion that animals are sentient beings and deserve treatment and relief from pain and unnecessary suffering is an overpowering one. We need to bear in mind the life of the animal. Our consciences as human beings demand that we do no less.

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