

Animals and forced migration

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Harm to animals resulting from forced migration of people is intricately interwoven with and contingent upon the simultaneous suffering of humans.

Forced migration's harmful impact on the lives of non-human animals (henceforth, 'animals') tends to be grossly under-reported. While an examination of the lives of animals other than humans is worthwhile in itself, there are many anthropocentric reasons to consider the effects of forced migration on animals.

The generally accepted categorisation of animals by their utility to humans – as 'companion animal', livestock, wild animal, and so on – shapes the way in which particular species are treated in a given culture and, therefore, an understanding of cultural attitudes towards animals is needed for an examination of the effects of forced migration on animals. The emotional toll on some displaced people, for instance, is exacerbated by the sometimes unavoidable abandonment of companion animals and of domesticated animals en masse. Affected people often have little time and few options when making preparations for the animals

under their care. The initial time frame of displacement can be vague and uncertain, leading affected peoples to believe they are leaving dependent animals for a manageable period of time – only later to learn that return is forbidden, dangerous or impossible. Conversely, many affected people are simply not allowed to leave with their animals when unexpected disasters occur, when government-sanctioned evacuations remove populations or when they flee across borders.

Abandoned animals may be tied up or else left inside yards, homes, barns and fenced-in pastures, or they may be abandoned to roam on depopulated streets and in derelict buildings. Whether in urban or rural landscapes, abandoned animals may be absorbed into or constitute new feral animal populations. For all of these animals, death is common by dehydration, starvation, disease and injury. Domesticated animals may also be killed and eaten by starving displaced people, especially in situations

where there is a limited humanitarian aid effort. For example, in October 2013, Syrian clerics issued a *fatwa* allowing Syrian displaced people to eat cats and dogs.

Animals displaced with people

Most of the animals that migrate with displaced peoples are considered as subsistence and/or work animals. Often carrying people or laden with the personal belongings of displaced people, these animals can develop injuries from the weight of and prolonged friction from their cargo. Furthermore, they often have inadequate access to food and, especially in arid climates, to water. Consequently, many animals die from exertion or deprivation during migration.¹

Many impoverished people who become forced migrants do not have access to basic vaccinations for their animals. In addition to the stress of travel and unhealthy subsistence, animals often become vectors for disease, bringing animal illnesses to refugee camps and spreading disease amongst animals that border refugee-occupied areas.

This is currently a big issue for Lebanese farmers and their subsistence animals because the Syrian refugees fleeing to Lebanon have been accompanied by thousands of unhealthy goats, sheep and cows – unvaccinated as a result of the conflict – potentially threatening the economic stability and survival of Lebanese farmers. In August 2013, the Lebanese Ministry of Agriculture initiated an emergency programme to dispense vaccinations in order to curb a potential epidemic. While diseases affecting animals often go unrecorded and unremarked, they are extremely painful for the afflicted animals and may also be spread to feral animals, thus endangering native animal populations.

In addition, where displaced people's camps occupy areas which were previously unused by humans, they may deprive wild animals of critical habitat for hunting, foraging, migration and procreation. The surrounding land may be degraded as

habitat through deforestation and erosion and wildlife may be hunted or poached by refugees for consumption or for trade.

These elements are compounded when refugees settle within conservation areas, as occurred notoriously in 1994 when Rwandan refugees were relocated to the Virunga National Park, and this highlights a tension between the efforts of conservationists and of human rights workers. There are 34 identified biodiversity 'hotspots' worldwide, characterised by their high levels of biodiversity and the compromised status of their integral ecosystems, especially for endangered species. Over 90% of major armed conflicts between 1950 and 2000 occurred within countries containing biodiversity hotspots, and more than 80% took place directly within hotspot areas.² Today, the Horn of Africa and the Mediterranean Basin hotspots are highly affected by the displacement of people and other anthropogenic causes.

According to Jason Mier, executive director of the non-governmental organisation Animals Lebanon, the influx of Syrian refugees in Lebanon has challenged his organisation's ability to enact desperately needed animal welfare laws. With virtually no animal welfare laws in Lebanon, animal abuse is rampant, and the captive endangered species trade has flourished within Lebanese borders. This is simply another illustration of how costly, intersectional and complex the violence against animals as a result of forced migration can be.

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1. Julie Andrzejewski (2013) 'War: Animals in the Aftermath', in Nocella, Anthony J, Colin Salter and Judy K C Bentley (eds), *Animals and War*. Lanham, Md:Lexington Books.

2. Hanson et al (2009) 'Warfare in Biodiversity Hotspots', *Conservation Biology*, Volume 23, Issue 3, pp578-587. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1523-1739.2009.01166.x/abstract>