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Editorial: Unveiling the nexus between animal welfare, the environment and sustainable development

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Editorial on the Research Topic

Unveiling the nexus between animal welfare, the environment and sustainable development

The perception that there is a nexus between animal welfare, the environment, and sustainable development has been gaining increasing attention, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic. Likewise, the concept of One Health has reemerged with greater emphasis on the need for an integrated approach to health that encompasses humans, animals, and the environment. Efforts to mainstream the One Health concept into government policies, business practices, and academic studies are advancing. Against this backdrop, in March 2022, the Assembly of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) adopted a resolution calling for an analysis of the nexus between animal welfare, the environment, and sustainable development.

This special edition comes in response to UNEP's call for an analysis of this critical nexus. By inviting authors to explore the conceptual and causative relationships underpinning animal welfare, the environment, and sustainable development, this edition aims to share valuable data and insights that should assist policymakers in designing and implementing measures that simultaneously protect and promote human, animal, and environmental health and well-being. To achieve this, the articles in this edition explore diverse perspectives and case studies that highlight the significance of the interconnectedness between animal welfare, the environment, and sustainable development. Through these contributions, the edition underscores the critical need for integrated frameworks and collaborative efforts to achieve a healthier world for all.

In chronological order of publications, the first contribution comes from Gonzalez's essay "Positive animal welfare in aquaculture as a cardinal principle for sustainable development". Gonzalez observes that the majority of global commercial aquaculture practices are unsustainable. These practices cause widespread health deficiencies, disease outbreaks, antibiotic resistance, and ecosystem degradation. She argues that a One Health

approach should be applied to combine seafood certification with international regulation and regional implementation to promote sustainable development in aquaculture. Such an approach would support food systems capable of separating human benefits of consuming seafood from negative environmental, animal welfare, and societal impacts that have been historically observed in this sector.

The second contribution is an article from Hall entitled “Diffusing the legal conceptions of the global south and decolonizing international law: crystallizing animal rights through inter-judicial dialogue”. In her article, she proposes a transition away from Eurocentric cultural paradigms that perceive humanity as external and superior to Nature. She explores how global environmental law can embrace the global south’s conceptualization of Nature as the subject of rights. The article recognizes litigation as a viable tool to decolonize global environmental law, focusing on the animal rights dimension of the Rights of Nature paradigm. Hall argues that recent litigation conferring rights to animals – primarily in the global south – reflects an evolving inter-judicial dialogue among domestic judges whose interactions can facilitate this new global understanding of Rights of Nature as a platform for enhanced protection of animal rights.

The third contribution is based on a survey among 1054 individuals from 22 Latin American countries carried out by Racciatti et al. In their article, “Links between animal welfare and “One Health”: perception and implementation in Latin America”, the authors explore perceptions, experiences, strategies, and activities linked with animal welfare and One Health. Their findings show that while both concepts are gaining increased attention in the Latin America region, many individuals still lack understanding of the interconnection between these concepts. Academic institutions and non-governmental organizations are spearheading efforts to link the concept of animal welfare with that of One Health, calling for strong public policies to support sustainable strategies.

The fourth contribution is the article “Climate change, public health, and animal welfare: towards a one health approach to reducing animal agriculture’s climate footprint.” The authors Verkuil et al. apply the One Health lens to ongoing discussions about the need to curb greenhouse gas emissions from animal agriculture. They argue that in assessing solutions, policymakers should not only consider the potential for reducing emissions but also the extent to which these solutions negatively impact public health and animal welfare. Their article offers recommendations for a more holistic approach to lower emissions from farmed animals while also preventing trade-offs and promoting synergies with broader societal objectives.

Finally, Yeates’ article argues that the internationally recognized human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment includes a right to healthy animals within it, conceived as animals’ physical, mental and social well-being. The article,

“A human right to healthy animals”, highlights the need to address the protection of humans, animals, and their environments as parts of an interrelated and integrated responsibility.

Together, these articles present compelling arguments for policymakers to view efforts to protect animals as integral components of a coordinated strategy to enhance environmental quality, public health, and sustainable development. Integrative research and policy efforts can lead to more effective solutions that not only prevent or mitigate the impacts of climate change and pandemics but also promote societal well-being and community health. Applying this approach will require overcoming historic specializations and institutional silos to foster the exchange of ideas and information. It will also require thoughtful consideration to ensure that efforts are synergistic rather than duplicative or conflicting, thereby optimizing the use of limited human and financial resources. Ultimately, this endeavor aims to cultivate a shared understanding of the interconnections and interdependencies inherent in the One Health concept. This understanding is crucial for enhancing prevention and protection measures, improving mitigation and adaptation strategies, and accelerating sustainable development. We hope this endeavor is informed by the insights from the papers presented here and by future research that builds upon them, as well as by the understanding that there is an intrinsic nexus between humans, animals, and the environment.

Author contributions

CM: Conceptualization, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. RA: Writing – review & editing. MH: Writing – review & editing. JY: Writing – review & editing.

Conflict of interest

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