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Ethics and Moral Reasoning

Module 10 — What should we do, and who counts?

NRES 315: HUMAN DIMENSIONS OF FISH AND WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

Last updated: October 26, 2026

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A spring creek and two hundred bass

Sable Creek holds the only known population of the **Sable darter**.

Since illegally stocked bass arrived in 2023, the darter catch has fallen from **410 to 97**.

Every option MDWP has costed kills different animals, or none.

What should MDWP do, and on what grounds?

Source: Friday Case Brief 10; Chapter 11

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What you should be able to explain

- Separate descriptive from prescriptive claims in a management argument.
- Show why an ethical conclusion needs a fact and a value.
- Apply five ethical theories to the same decision.
- Distinguish moral agents from moral patients, and who counts from how much.

Source: Chapter 11, §11.1

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The questions carry forward

Module 01: Which outcomes do people consider desirable?

Module 03: For whom are fish and wildlife held in trust?

Module 09: What benefits and costs follow from each choice?

Module 10: Which of those claims *ought* to decide it, and why?

Source: Chapters 1, 3, 10, and 11

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Ethics is already in the mission

The Wildlife Society's vision (as of July 2024):

> "A world where wildlife and people thrive in resilient ecosystems."

Why should wildlife thrive? Because it is useful to people, or because it matters for its own sake? What counts as **resilient**?

The statement cannot be carried out without answering ethical questions.

Source: Chapter 11, §11.2

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Many routine choices are ethical choices

Challenge	One ethical question it raises
Restoration	Restore a state, a process, or a relationship?
Exotic species removal	When does the moral cost of killing exceed the benefit?
Population viability	How much risk is too much?
Hunting	Where should the burden of proof lie?
Sustainability	What counts as a human *need*, or a *healthy* ecosystem?

Source: Chapter 11, Table 11.1

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Isle Royale: when even "natural" is unclear

Wolves on Isle Royale were nearly lost in the early 2000s, mainly because of climate change.

The National Park Service hesitated. Was bringing in new wolves the right way to offset human impacts, or did it violate the principle of interfering with natural processes as little as possible?

The answer depends on what a **healthy ecosystem** means.

Source: Chapter 11, §11.2

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Describing the world versus prescribing action

Descriptive statements say what *is*. "Deer density has doubled since 2015."

Prescriptive statements say what *ought* to be. "There ought to be fewer deer on the landscape."

Most of the sciences study descriptive claims. **Ethics** analyzes prescriptive ones: claims about how we ought to act, value, or relate to the world.

Source: Chapter 11, §11.2.1

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Sort these claims

1. Darter catch fell from 410 in 2021 to 97 in 2026.
2. MDWP should remove the bass from Sable Creek.
3. Fish can experience pain during electrofishing.
4. We should not cause animals unnecessary suffering.
5. A state agency ought to protect species found nowhere else.

Which are **descriptive** and which are **prescriptive**?

Source: Chapter 11, §11.2.1; Friday Case Brief 10

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An ethical conclusion needs a fact and a value

Premise 1 (fact): Fish can experience pain and suffering caused by catch-and-release fishing.

Premise 2 (value): We should not cause unnecessary pain and suffering.

Conclusion: We should refrain from catch-and-release fishing, or electrofishing, unless it is necessary.

Science can test premise 1. It cannot, by itself, establish premise 2.

Source: Chapter 11, §11.2.1, Key Point: Ethics Requires Facts and Values

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Build the Sable Creek argument

Fill in the structure for **one** alternative.

Fact: something in Exhibit A or B of the brief.

Value: a principle about what MDWP owes, and to whom.

Conclusion: "MDWP should …"

Then ask: if the factual premise turned out false, would you change the conclusion?

Source: Chapter 11, §11.2.1; Friday Case Brief 10, Exhibits A–B

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Ethics and morals are not the same word

Ethics: social standards of right and wrong within a culture or group, and the discipline that studies them.

Morals: an individual's own compass of right and wrong.

An agency acts within professional and public ethics. Each biologist on the crew also brings personal morals.

Source: Chapter 11, §11.2.1, Did You Know

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Four objections to taking ethics seriously

- "Ethical disagreements are intractable."
- "Ethics is subjective; only science is rational."
- "Right and wrong are only true from one culture's point of view."
- "Ethics is a way to tell other people what to do."

Chapter 11 answers each: ethics, like science, depends on rigorous argument and can reach consensus.

Source: Chapter 11, Box 11.2

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Five theories ask different questions

One question from §11.3: when an agency sets an annual fish harvest, what should drive it?

- **Consequentialism:** which allocation produces the best outcomes?
- **Deontology:** which duties and rights must be honored?
- **Natural law:** which allocation follows natural processes?
- **Virtue theory:** what would a good professional do?
- **Relational theory:** what do our relationships require?

Source: Chapter 11, §11.3

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Consequentialism: judge the outcome

An action is right or wrong because of its **outcomes**.

Utilitarianism: the greatest utility or happiness for the greatest number.

Pragmatism: judge ideas by their practical results.

Two hard questions: *whose* outcomes count in the sum, and how do we weigh outcomes we cannot predict?

Source: Chapter 11, §11.3.1

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Deontology: honor the duty

An action is right if it fulfills a **duty**, regardless of its outcome.

Duties include treating others as you wish to be treated, respecting inherent rights, and following moral rules.

The Endangered Species Act grants species a **right to exist** regardless of economic value or the consequences of protecting it.

The hard case: **duties conflict**, as when killing one species protects another.

Source: Chapter 11, §11.3.2

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Natural law: is "natural" the same as good?

Natural law holds that what is natural is moral and what is unnatural is immoral. Divine command theory finds morality in a deity's instructions.

Box 11.3 raises problems for natural law:

- Can "natural" be defined objectively?
- Is natural automatically **good**? (the naturalistic fallacy)
- On Isle Royale, extinction *and* predation are both arguably natural.

Source: Chapter 11, §11.3.3 and Box 11.3

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Virtue theory: what kind of professional?

Instead of "What is the rule?" or "What is the best outcome?", ask **"What kind of person should I be?"**

Virtues include generosity, humility, respect, care, and courage.

Compassionate conservation treats compassion as a foundational virtue: respect for individual sentient animals and practices that avoid causing them direct harm.

Source: Chapter 11, §11.3.4

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Relational theory: what do our relationships require?

Obligations depend on the **relationships and history** we share with other species and places.

Domestic animals and wild animals call for different obligations.

We may owe more than avoiding harm: a duty to **restore broken relationships**, such as with species people displaced or extirpated.

Source: Chapter 11, §11.3.5

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One case, five questions

Theory	What it asks about Sable Creek
Consequentialism	Which option produces the best expected outcome, counting whom?
Deontology	What does the duty to conserve require, and what rights limit it?
Natural law	Is non-intervention "natural" when people introduced the bass?
Virtue theory	What would an honest, humble, caring agency do here?
Relational theory	What does our history with this creek and these fish require?

Source: Chapter 11, §11.3; Friday Case Brief 10

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Pair check: name the theory

Which theory is each speaker in Exhibit C closest to?

1. "This fish lives nowhere else. … for every generation after us."
2. "Choose the way that kills the fewest animals."
3. "Bass eat darters. That is nature."
4. "We will not support any method we were not in the room to help choose."

Source: Friday Case Brief 10, Exhibit C; Chapter 11, §11.3

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Moral agents and moral patients

A **moral agent** can extend moral consideration to others.

A **moral patient** deserves moral consideration from others.

A typical adult human is both. A newborn infant is a moral patient but not yet a moral agent.

Which non-human beings are moral patients is the open question.

Source: Chapter 11, §11.3.6

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Who counts, and how much?

Moral consideration: which beings belong in the moral community, and what justifies their membership?

Moral significance: once they belong, how do we weigh their claims when those claims conflict?

Saying the bass count morally does not decide whether they can be removed.

Source: Chapter 11, §11.4

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Instrumental and intrinsic value

Instrumental value: useful for achieving some end, such as human needs.

Intrinsic value: valuable in and of itself.

Pinchot: "There are just two things on this material earth—people and natural resources."

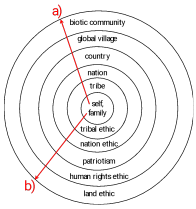
Leopold: humans are "plain members and citizens" of a biotic community.

Source: Chapter 11, Box 11.1

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The circle has grown before



Source: Chapter 11, Box 11.5

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An ethic of reciprocity

Chapter 11 describes an Indigenous environmental ethic built on **reciprocity**: survival is an undeserved gift, which creates a lifelong duty to give back.

- **Seventh Generation:** decide for people seven generations ahead.
- **Mitakuye Oyasin, "all our relations":** humans are within the natural world, not above it.
- **Humility** and **knowledge pluralism.**

It does not ban harvest: "Never take the first. Never take the last."

Source: Chapter 11, §11.5

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Ethics also concerns how a decision is made

Since 2021, federal and state agencies have increasingly required Tribal consultation and the integration of Indigenous Knowledge in co-stewardship.

In Sable Creek, MDWP's policy says to consult **before** decisions that may affect Tribal interests. The options were sent **after** they were drafted.

What would honoring that policy require before December 10?

Source: Chapter 11, §11.5; Friday Case Brief 10, Exhibit C

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Ethical reasoning versus winning an argument

Political debate asks who wins and who loses.

Ethical reasoning asks what is **right or wrong**, and **why**.

A defensible management choice states its premises, names who counts, and answers its strongest objection.

Source: Chapter 11, §11.6

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Wednesday, October 28: no class meeting

Work through **Week 10 Wednesday Preparation: Who Counts, and How Much?** in Canvas, about 50 minutes, on your own.

It covers the four ways of drawing the moral community, consideration versus significance, and the ethic of reciprocity.

It ends with a **moral community map** of the Sable Creek comments. Bring it Friday. Nothing from the preparation page is submitted or graded.

The **Week 10 Reading Quiz is due by 11:59 p.m. Wednesday**.

Source: Week 10 Canvas module

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Prepare for Friday, October 30

Re-read the **Case Brief** and find your preassigned group and role.

Submit the role record and four sections: **facts and values; who counts; recommendation and objection; process and revision**.

Due before 10:50 a.m. Shared response: **80 points**. Every present member completes the private **Group Check: 20 points**.

Any allowed option, including D, can earn full credit.

Source: Friday Application 10 and Group Check 10

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Exit check

In one sentence:

Name one claim in the Sable Creek case that science could settle, and one that it could not.

Source: Chapter 11, §11.2.1

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Reference: inclusive ethics in the real world

Box 11.4 reports that more than **80%** of the public supports granting wildlife intrinsic value.

Long-term research also reports a shift from **domination** (wildlife used primarily to benefit humans) toward **mutualism** (wildlife as part of one's social network, worthy of care).

Recall Module 07: wildlife value orientations.

Source: Chapter 11, Box 11.4

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Reference: has The Wildlife Society's ethic shifted?

2012 vision (excerpt): "…a world where people and wildlife coexist, where biological diversity is preserved, and decisions … are made after careful consideration of relevant scientific information and with the engagement and support of an informed and caring citizenry."

2024 vision: "A world where wildlife and people thrive in resilient ecosystems."

Does the change signal a different ethical position? Why or why not?

Source: Chapter 11, §§11.2 and 11.7, review question 1

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Reference: the ethics of an Honorable Harvest

Selected guidelines quoted in Chapter 11 from Robin Wall Kimmerer:

- Ask permission before taking and abide by the answer.
- Never take the first. Never take the last.
- Take only what you need.
- Harvest in a way that minimizes harm.
- Give a gift, in reciprocity, for what you have taken.

Source: Chapter 11, §11.5

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