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If Animals Could Talk: Reflection on the Dutch Party for Animals in Student Assignments

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Abstract

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Keywords

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1. Introduction

Environmental education journals have addressed the role of animal welfare and animal rights within the broad areas of sustainability and ethics (for example, Bell and Russel; Myers et al.; Kopnina and Cherniak; Kopnina and Gjerris; Spannring ‘Animals in Environmental Research’ and ‘I and Animal Thou’; Russell). The Animals and Society Institute (ASI) has emerged with the aim to ‘expose students to the study of human-animal relationships in order to create safer and more compassionate communities for all’ (ASI n.d). Simultaneously, environmental education emphasizing ecological literacy and ecological citizenship in relation to animals (or more broadly, nonhuman organisms – which will be generalized in this article as ‘animals’) has emerged (Orr; Kahn; Berkowitz et al.). Ecological citizenship is concerned with the political representation of and advocacy for animals and the environment in democratic societies (Eckersley; Dobson; Baxter; Gray and Curry). The notion of ecological citizenship aims at expanding understanding of ecosystems as well as the needs of nonhuman-species, unifying ethics of care for animals and sustainability (Orr; Berkowitz et al.). In environmental education, this translates into understandings of animals’ needs in relation to values underlying environmental care (Myers et al.) and the framing of ecological systems as well as relationships with animals through care and empathy (Russell).

The terms ‘animal welfare’ and ‘animal rights’ have become prominent in academia from the 1970s onwards (Singer; Regan). While at times these terms are used interchangeably, ‘animal welfare’ usually focuses on humane treatment and avoidance of unnecessary suffering, while ‘animal rights’ challenge any right to the instrumental use of animals for human consumption, entertainment or any other ends (Kopnina and Cherniak, ‘Cultivating a Value’). Both animal rights and welfare can be linked to intrinsic values associated with deep ecology (Naess), referring to the dignity of all living organisms. According to PETA (n.d.), while animal welfare concerns centre around the assumption that animals have interests that need to be considered in their treatment by humans, these interests can be subordinated to certain human benefits that are thought to justify that subordination, as in the case of medical testing. Animal rights proponents reach further than this, holding that like humans, animals have interests that

cannot be sacrificed just because it might benefit humans. However, it is also understood that different species' rights are not 'absolute' and can conflict, as in the case of natural predation. Animal rights proponents prohibit the use of animals for food, clothing, entertainment, or experimentation, while animal welfare allows these uses as long as the animals are treated 'humanely'. This article addresses the political implementation of these broad issues in human and nonhuman ethics through the case study of the Dutch Party for Animals

By contrast to deep ecology (Naess), the concept of sustainable development has been characterized by the so-called 'pragmatist' (and largely anthropocentric) environmental ethics (Eckersley). This tendency is present in much of education for sustainable development or ESD in converging economic, social and environmental interests (Kopnina 'Education for Sustainable Development'). Anthropocentric pragmatists tend to emphasize congruency between environmental and human interests through the 'convergence theory' that assumes that anthropocentric or self-interested motivation is sufficient for environmental protection (Norton). Disputing this approach, Katz has pointed out *that human-centred and instrumental approaches to the environment* only work in situations dealing with artificial human-made phenomena such as water pollution and greenhouse gases that have clear impacts on human health or agriculture. 'Leftover' species that are functionally 'useless' to humanity are thus condemned to extinction (Crist 'Abundant Earth and Population'). A similar case can be made for animals where better welfare may actually have a negative economic and at times environmental impact (better animal lives require more territory and healthier feed, simultaneously raising the price of meat, as well as increasing emissions due to longer lives).

The common philosophical underpinnings of 'good lives' requires a more inclusive framework that embraces both sustainability and ethical concerns (Waldau). Sykes argues that both the protection of environment and attention to animal welfare are guided by a 'moral code in our interactions with other forms of life' (62). This code recognizes value related to the 'good-of-itself' of an animal, rendering 'each organism morally considerable in its own right' (65).

This moral code is crucial to the conceptualization of animal welfare and rights, or biophilia – an innate tendency to seek connections with nature and other forms of life (Wilson), which are increasingly recognized in society. However, this recognition is not necessarily reflected in politics and law (for example, Bisgould ‘It’s Time to Re-evaluate’; Borràs; Sykes). There is a large attitude-behaviour gap in relation to animal welfare/rights when it comes to food production (Carrigan and Attalla; Grandin; Verbeke) and pharmaceutical industries (Post; Bisgould ‘Power and Irony’). Particularly striking is the contrast between the perception that animal welfare has improved (in Western societies) and the increase in the industrial scale of meat production and animal testing in laboratories (Crist ‘Ecocide and the Extinction of Animal Minds’; Bisgould ‘It’s Time to Re-evaluate’).

In part as a response to these inconsistencies, the concepts of ecological citizenship (Dobson) and inclusive pluralism (Kopnina and Gjerris; Kopnina and Cherniak ‘Neoliberalism and Justice’) have emerged. Ecological citizenship literature is based on the theory of ecological justice or justice between species (Baxter; Kopnina, ‘Environmental Justice and Biospheric Egalitarianism’). In eco-democratic societies, the voice of nonhumans, as well as ‘environment’ in general, is channelled through human representatives (proxies) with the support of citizens (Eckersley, Lundmark; Jagers and Matti; Gray and Curry).

Exemplifying such eco-democratic representation, the Dutch Party for Animals (Partij voor de Dieren or PvdD) was founded in 2002 and since then chaired by Marianne Thieme. According to its platform, the PvdD puts an emphasis on the entire planet and all living beings, uniting animal welfare and animal rights as well as socio-economic concerns. PvdD claims to be ‘part of a global and growing movement that is committed to the interest of animals, nature and the environment in politics and public administration’ (<https://www.partyfortheanimals.nl/>). By 2012, the PvdD had two seats in the House of Representatives supported by 182,162 voters. In 2017, the number of seats in Parliament has increased to five. Increase in support for PvdD can be explained by a number of factors that underlie public concern in The Netherlands (Kopnina, ‘Animal Representation in the Dutch Media’; ‘Verkiezingen’).

This article focuses on students' reflections on political, legal and ethical issues in regard to animals – a largely ignored subjects in environmental education. The students were in their second year of Bachelor studies at the International Business Management Studies (IBMS) department of The Hague University of Applied Sciences. While worldviews on the environment in general and on animals in particular differ according to the demographic background and social status, education targeted at an increasing appreciation of nature seems most effective in young people (Boeve-de Pauw and Van Petegem; Wray-Lake et al.). Surprisingly, however, the understanding of the complexity and the scope of human-animal relationships has so far attracted little interest among educational practitioners and researchers (Kopnina and Gjerris; Spannring 'I and Animal Thou'). Only limited research has been done examining factors that influence student beliefs about the environment in general or animals in particular (Boeve-de Pauw and Van Petegem; Spannring 'I and Animal Thou'). This lack of interest is especially surprising given the evidence that education can influence the cultural reproduction of human-environment relationships (Spannring 'I and Animal Thou') and environmental studies (Wray-Lake et al.). Complementing emerging studies that tackle human-environment relationships in education, this article discusses how students perceive relationships with animals by comparing and contrasting three case studies of different cohorts.

The sections below explore how concern about animal welfare and animal rights relates to ecological citizenship by analysing student assignments about the PvdD. Presentation of assignments is followed by a reflection on the political representation of animals and the role of education in fostering ecological citizenship.

2. Methodology: Case studies: 2013, 2014, 2017

Since it was assumed that the exploration of students' worldviews reveals larger patterns in ethical reasoning about the human relationship with animals, the assignments were intended in part as a practice of 'learning from students'. The courses discussed here were taught by the lecturer and author of this article in 2013, 2014 and 2017 at IBMS. The students in the first two

cohorts have taken a Sustainable Business minor (elective course). Pedagogical objectives of the minor were to address broad issues connected with sustainability and ethics in the context of business studies. In 2017 a Business Ethics and Sustainability course was introduced for all second-year IBMS students with the aim of introducing contemporary issues related to environment and business.

All IBMS classes consisted of a majority of European students, with 40% Dutch majority, roughly equal male/female ratio, between 20 and 23 years old. In 2013, there were twenty-three, in 2014 twenty-five students, and in 2017 thirty-six students. While the minor students had chosen the course, Business Ethics and Sustainability was a required subject. This presented an opportunity to compare whether supposedly 'self-selecting' elective course students were more interested in environmental issues and/or animal welfare and rights than students from the general 'business' group. The researcher's hypothesis was that students who selected sustainability course would care more about animal welfare/rights and ethics associated with environmental protection.

The written assignments in 2013 and 2014 were all part of the guest speaker module of the Sustainable Business minor. The minor focused on the relationship between business, environmental and social policies in an international context with topics ranging from Corporate Social Responsibility and global supply chains to human rights and green investment. In five modules of the minor, the students were introduced to the guest speakers from different industries and non-governmental organizations, addressing sustainable development, Cradle to Cradle and circular economy. The PvdD was chosen in order to engage students in the discussion about animal-related issues.

In 2013 the guest speaker was substituted by website analysis to gauge student opinions, and in 2014 the lecture by Marianne Thieme presented opportunities for interaction and deeper reflection. The assignments written in 2013 and 2014 were presented in the form of 'guest speaker reports', which needed to include the main content of website or presentation, and reflection on what students have learned (for example, how the presentation relates to other courses, what was missing).

In 2017 the students were introduced to a number of topics related to the PvdD's platform, including inconsistency between increased public concern about animal welfare and (corporate) practice. While attention to the treatment of individual animals may have increased, Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFO's) have become normative (Crist 'Abundant Earth and Population'). The inconsistency is illustrated in one issue of *The Economist* journal, describing the recent drastic 'shift in attitudes towards animal welfare' ('When Fun was Cruel' 79). Prior to this shift, supposedly, 'cats were variously burned, stuffed into barrels, nailed to trees and head-battered, bears were tethered and attacked by dogs, and otters and porcupines hunted and stabbed' (79). In the Science and Technology section of the same journal, the advances of using snake poison for its blood-congealing qualities as tested on rats are discussed. The researchers made incisions and induced bleedings in rats' livers, to see which specimens will survive the operation ('Snake Charm'). In one case, animal suffering is seen as gratuitous, in another case as necessary (Holt). As animal rights lawyer Lesli Bisgould ('It's Time to Re-evaluate') has noted, the 'necessary' of suffering is determined by whatever suits our interests.

Another example includes the mention of animal research in the widely used undergraduate textbook *Psychological Science* (Gazzaniga et al.). In the section titled 'Ethical issues to consider in research with animals', the question is posed: 'Is it fair to the animals to study them to improve the human condition?' (Gazzaniga et al. 59). The authors write:

Some species have similarities with humans that make them good 'models' for particular human behaviours or conditions... the human brain has a region called hippocampus, and people with damage to this region suffer from memory loss. It would be unethical for researchers to reproduce hippocampal damage in people... However, many animals also have a hippocampus, and they display similar types of memory loss when this region is damaged. As a way to help humans, researchers thus may find it necessary to conduct animal research. (61)

Following a brief discussion on this topic in class, the students were asked to react to the party's website after being introduced in class to key debates in environmental ethics and animal rights/animal welfare. All students were told that their honest opinions and ability to be critical

rather than defending a position that may be desirable by the lecturer would count toward a higher grade. The lecturer has acknowledged her own ‘bias’ in supporting attention to animal welfare issues but emphasized that this personal belief should be used as an example for students to openly express but also learn to justify their own opinions. Although assignments were not submitted anonymously, the lecturer/researcher assured students that the text segments used for analysis would be kept anonymous and that those who still objected to their assignments being used would be excluded from research.

Qualitative analysis was used in the following way: first, all segments from individual assignments, except for the ones that were excluded from the analysis due to student requests (1 in 2013, none in 2014, and 2 in 2017), were pasted into one Word document without student names. The document was then searched for recurrent words and topics. These topics were colour-coded and arranged in themes, with coloured quotes consequently moved to separate sections. Original grammar and spelling were retained.

3. Assignments 2013

Some students reflected that prior to reading about the party’s platform on their website, they had assumed this party was a joke. One student who has expressed his support for the party wrote:

I could not fight the feeling that it was being laughed at by other parties. That could be due to the fact that caring about the environment and its inhabitants often times is not taken seriously. Another reason could be the usage of downgrading of the party as a political weapon. Whatever it is I hope that the PvdD will have a major impact in strengthening animal rights and saving the environment. If I was a Dutch citizen I would most likely give my vote to the PvdD since I share an ideology with them.

Another student reflected that judging from the website, the party is likely to be understood as a ‘guinea pig police’. Issues such as the prohibition on round fish bowls and a ban on cutting horses’ tails were found to be a mix between ‘confusing and amusing’. Another student

remarked that the party is a ‘basket case’ of all kinds of issues, big and small, boasting of achievements ranging from support of celebrity Paul McCartney and association with the Dalai Lama, Marianne Thieme’s ‘Meat-free Monday’ hat, or research into meat substitutes. The latter initiative was described by this student as more significant than the former ones.

A number of students felt that the party was mostly concerned with one issue, animal welfare. Students saw socio-economic issues as more important than the ‘single issue’ represented by PvdD:

I think that the PvdD focuses too much on their love for animals, and neglects other matters in the process. Being the only party in the world that mainly fights for animals can be something to be proud of, but at the same time it brings up the questions of *Why are there no other parties taking the same initiative?* Is the PvdD incredibly progressive or do they need to set their priorities straight?

I would not vote for PvdD as I just do not think it is more important than other issues that we are currently dealing with.

Society should already have these inner ethical norms that would promote respect towards any living creature, including animals. The political party should not forget to take into consideration human rights, either – rights to choose and rights for sensible laws and regulations...

I do not believe that the PvdD fights for the main priorities that need to be taken care of in our society. Sure, animal rights are important, but not as the main goal of our government; there are far more pressing matters to be discussed.

Ultimately, I think that the PvdD fights for a just cause, but I do not think that their main goals necessarily solve the most pressing matters in our current society.

I'm not really sure what to think of a political party dedicated to the rights of animals, it is, of course, an important thing but in politics and running a country I believe there are more important things to take care of.

I suppose that PvdD has a lack of knowledge and maybe also a lack of interest in other important political topics. So, in my opinion, politics is so complex that a party should not just focus on one or two issues if they want to represent for instance me personally. Of course, there are also voters which focus on specific topics of PvdD and therefore it is important that there is a party like that. I also think that it is good for democracy if such a party is represented.

Increased representation would take away from other equally important sectors of government. Even in terms of an ecological viewpoint, animal rights is a very specific and limited focus, which completely disregards larger issues such as national security, and economic development.

This party addresses only one of those [social] problems, so if there would be some other party addressing some broader topic I would vote for the other party. They have some good points which I agree upon how animals should be treated, but I think that people will in the future eat fewer animals either way since to grow them will become much more expensive and aim for the plant-based diet.

This party has to move away from the image that it is a one-issue party if it really wants to grow. Thanks to this party some laws have been passed already that increase animal welfare. Who doesn't want animals to have a better life? The problem still is that the name causes the impression that this party has no intention to deal with any other political matters than animal welfare.

One student was actually concerned about PvdD having a say in broader socio-political matters:

There are no programs regarding for instance pension, taxes and student loans. Since the PvdD is active within the Dutch government's decision-making organ 'the second chamber,' they also get a vote in these issues. I find it rather strange that this political party gets a say in this when they have not established their position and guidelines regarding these issues.

One student noted that the PvdD actually has a distinct focus that has not yet been presented by a mainstream green party in his native Germany:

Being very fond of animals, in general, I immediately sympathised with the intent of doing politics. Also, this mindset of a political party was new to me as in Germany there is solely a Green Party which cover a wide range of ecological concerns and I, for one, have never heard them talking about animals.

A few students felt that the party should be included in a broader 'sustainability' party:

Sustainability is also very important to the party as it is a vital part of protecting animals and of course nature itself. The whole way our modern society interacts with the environment and nature should be changed so that we can be proud of the way we treat animals and nature as a whole and of course, we should make sure we sustain our environment for future generations to enjoy and live off.

A few students reflected that all parties, and not just ‘environmental parties’ should deal with the issues of animal welfare and sustainability.

I believe that it is better to have political parties, which take into account the right of animals, instead of having a whole party simply devoted to the animals. I believe that animals are vital to our existence and thus are to be represented by every political party.

Other students have noted that PvdD actually does get involved in broader socio-economic questions. One student shared this personal experience:

I actually have relatives that work for the Dutch department of agriculture, het Ministerie van Landbouw, Natuur en Veehouderij (LNV). After discussing this political party with them, they said that this party definitely keeps them very busy. When PvdD raises questions regarding agriculture regulation, this department is responsible for conducting research and creating appropriate laws. From what I heard, this number of questions can be as much as twenty a week.

Some students thought that PvdD can only exist in a rich society. One student wrote that in ‘African countries where human rights are still a big issue, this would be unimaginable’.

Responding to whether they would vote for PvdD, 4 students responded affirmatively (with only one of them being a Dutch citizen and able to actually vote). The rest asserted that either they would not vote for the party or would only vote if certain objections were met.

I appreciate that there is a party that sees other aims and needs that reach beyond the humans and I understand that the food industry has become very detached from any feelings toward animals. However, I think that such a party should probably be a part of an environmentalist party, not only the welfare of the animals. The majority of issues

discussed in the parliament are concerned with humans and I don't think that PvdD should have a vote in such questions since I am not convinced of their competencies and expertise in those fields.

The PvdD follows, in my opinion, a good and important target. The party has a clear vision of how to respect animals, nature and the environment. I support their opinion absolutely, but I wouldn't give it my vote because I think that the area of interest is too one-dimensional. I am talking about economic problems, the employment rate and energy transition. Would the PvdD also have an opinion in those areas it would be possible for me to vote for it? A country needs a party which thinks about human and animal rights and not only about one of it.

There are parties aiming at bigger issues than the rights and treatment of animals. But it is important that such a party exists. The political landscape reflects the composition of the people. The more parties the more diversification of the political landscape. Which would result in a more satisfying politics for the people?

I would probably vote for them. Because I do feel that the Dutch government should adjust current regulations regarding agriculture and environmental policies.

3. Assignments 2014

A few students responded positively to the presentation of Marianne Thieme and the video about concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) she has shown.

The video... with the cow actually disgusted me, which is exactly what she expected. She wanted a reaction from the class and made us aware of what's really going on, so we can act against it. And I think it worked well!

Thieme also presented figures regarding the treatment of animals in many industries ranging from agriculture to medicine. The students reflected that this presentation made them aware of the connection between social and economic sustainability and ethics:

She explained how animal welfare relates to bigger issues such as destruction of our environment, extinction of plant and animal species.

The fact that in 2050 four earths are necessary to feed the world's population demonstrate that a revolution in food provision is essential. Meat is too inefficient as food because during the process of formation you have an 80% loss. With 1kg soil, you can get for example 0.3 kg chicken or 3kg of a similar product with the same content of protein etc. produced by machinery. Therefore, the mindset has to change from animals as a food producer to food produced by new technologies.

Marianne gave us another example to show the interrelationship between meat and greenhouse gases. Therefore, a 6 million budget was given to search for meat alternatives.

...she has shown... that if Dutch people refuse to eat beef only one (!) day a week; this equals one (!) million cars less a day on Dutch roads. 'Being vegetarian saves 50 % of greenhouse gases, that's rather better than driving a Toyota Prius.' This comparison showed a very easy and understandable example.

Factory farming causes problems for the whole planet: biodiversity is seriously threatened and if we don't act, 2025 is expected to be the turning point.

One student thought that 'man-centred thinking' explains both unsustainability and the poor treatment of animals. This student noted:

I am female, well educated and in my twenties. I am a vegetarian and I don't have my own car. At home, I have a big garden where I grow herbs, tomatoes and salad and most of my clothing is bought second-hand. I value the fact that PvdD raises awareness for the topic of mass production of meat and bad treatment of animals. Thieme has to be as strict in her opinion towards this whole animal issue. In my opinion, it is important to have a party like this to force the 'big players' to take up the 'animal topic' in their own programs.

Another student felt that the issue of anthropocentrism was exaggerated:

Thieme started because she believed men were not the centre of the world, and that they neglect other species. She said that the people that realized these issues didn't trust politicians, but now they vote for her party. In my opinion, there are some true aspects, but I believe that society does not neglect these issues as much as she argues.

Reflecting on the ideological underpinning of the party, one student has reflected:

Thieme noticed that 'animals are not treated like human beings'. Politicians think that money is the most important thing. She says: 'we cannot eat money. We have to revalue the things that really matter'. That is why she aims to protect these animals against human 'neglect'. When people first heard about it [PvdD], they made fun of it and called it 'another liberation movement'.

One of the students was not sure about the solutions offered for humans.

It was a bit unclear about the solutions they have for the economy or social issues. Interesting but too focused on the animals, I agree that it is important to protect them but we also want to have some solutions for our own future!

Some students suggested that the real problem lies in massive demand for products such as meat:

If there is demand, then you need supply. Farmers ... are growing chickens and bovine as fast as possible. They just satisfy the demand of society. If the government not going to make any changes in this situation, then no one regulation or law will not resolve this problem.

Meat has to be cheap for people who are poor or in developing countries to afford it. Justice for poor people needs to be represented.

A few students reflected that they felt alienated from the party's explicit support of vegetarianism:

I can understand her point of view but for me, I wish she said something about people who do eat meat but care about animals.

Most of us don't really care about animals because we don't see what happens to them we just buy meat and milk at the supermarket no questions asked... I am still a meat lover until the day comes that a meat substitute with the same flavour as meat I will be happy to stop eating meat...

Some students reflected that concerns for animals are a uniquely rich country phenomenon:

There are no so many countries where a party like this will be elected. For example, if we looking in Europe, there are mostly right and left-wing parties which are fighting to defend human rights.

If there would be a party that has been really successful in economic and social terms in the past, a coalition of this party would probably be a great step for the Netherlands as a modern society.

Others felt that ‘the poor are most disadvantaged by things like climate change’ and thus could profit from PvdD’s focus on sustainability. It is actually poor people, another student reflected, that feel closer to animals because ‘they are equally discriminated and understand the suffering of others’.

4. Assignments 2017

In 2017 the students of the Business Ethics and Sustainability course were first presented with a number of topics related to animal welfare in relation to corporate social responsibility and then asked to reflect upon the program of PvdD. To introduce students to the subject of animal welfare and animal rights, they were involved in a role-playing game involving corporate decision-making in animal welfare questions. The students were also asked to write a position paper on the subject of the proposition ‘Justice for people should come before justice for the environment’, styled after the televised debate (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oldnYTYMx-k>).

Out of 36 students, 7 asserted that they would vote for the party, with 3 categorically opposing it, and the majority remained in doubt. For some connection between socio-economic and environment/animal issues was clear, for example, ‘of course, some of the human issues are directly related to animals because we eat them, and to the environment, because of we breathe the air’. As one student put it, ‘it will be bad for people to ignore animal issues and environment, so defending them is in our self-interest’. Another student wrote that in fact ‘economy cannot be based on nothing – it is based on natural resources or the environment, so if we ignore the environment, we ignore the economy’.

Some doubted how PvdD can participate in Parliamentary debates that do not directly involve environment and animals, having to do with national security or migration policy, for example. As one student remarked sarcastically, in regard to some ‘animal-unrelated’ issues the

party members seem to vote for ‘whatever Marianne says’. For others, the largest doubt stemmed from the perceived lack of clear priorities in the party platform:

I think the party is right to say it is not one issue but a billion issues party as it cares about billions of living beings, but I don’t see how they make their choices about which animals are more important than others. Like they care about pigs and cats, but what about worms that may be more important for keeping the ecosystem sustainable?

I think they need to have central issues and less central issues and explain to the electorate which ones are most important and why. Like they talk about anaesthetic before slaughtering animals, and also about methane emissions from the same animals, or prohibiting recreational fishing. Then about freeing animals from circuses, but not about what to do with them afterwards as they are large animals like elephants and they are tame and cannot be returned to the wild... Then there is a prohibition on zoo animals – but then no children will ever see and learn to care about wild animals... I have a feeling other parties and people get all twitchy – now we get this, and now we get that...

Some students felt that responsibility of a political party towards nonhumans is both admirable and justified, calling the party ‘brave’ and ‘remarkable’. Perhaps due to being exposed to the corporate responsibility, students felt that the role of the party should be primarily in ‘controlling the companies’, ‘restricting firms that keep mistreating animals’, and ‘expanding their visual surveillance [of factory farms]’. Many students in this cohort felt that it is consumers and voters that carry the greatest responsibility:

We can say that the party is responsible for everything when things go wrong but I think it is up to us to make these decisions. Sometimes I think that citizens get lazy and just blame the government for not doing things... if we elect a party, we expect that it will represent our interests but we have to keep looking whether they do.

If we [consumers] do not perceive the need to give something back, we just take and take, we cannot talk about our connection with animals but our exploitation of animals. We talk about how some people get discriminated but we don't talk about how all non-humans are discriminated or even tortured and killed. Voters in this country keep arguing about how much taxes poor people pay, which migrants should be allowed in and it all sounds very moral but they forget about the cost [to non-humans].

Other have doubted the extent of this consumer responsibility:

The party can have my vote but what I worry about that for a whole country to make the right choices you need educated and moral voters. By moral I mean the ones that care about animals, not just to secure their welfare but also go as far as granting them rights. We are not there yet.

I don't assume that I can make choices that change the world, even if I become a vegetarian. When I go to the store and buy all this nice labelled [certified] food, like Fairtrade or products good for animals, I see another guy loading up on cheap meat. Nobody in the store regulates it, the government gives all these choices... I think PvdD should talk to those guys that buy cheap meat and not to people who are already converted.

This cohort of students was adamant in supporting the democratic credentials of PvdD, stating that 'democracy should include many voices, also of other species' and that 'representation of animals is a new liberation... a kind of revolution... that needs to be supported in democratic societies'.

5. Reflection on assignment themes

A number of themes emerged out of student assignments that offered a few insights into strategic choices that eco-advocates and animal representatives in general and PvdD in particular can take on board.

5.1. *Socio-economic versus animal issues*

In all cohorts, the students recognized that humans are dependent on animals and environment ('of course we should make sure we sustain our environment for future generations to enjoy and live off'; 'I believe that animals are vital to our existence'; 'if we ignore the environment, we ignore the economy'). The students in all cohorts were divided on how animal welfare was related to socio-economic and sustainability concerns. Some students recognized the congruity ('it will be bad for people to ignore animal issues and environment, so defending them is in our self-interest').

One of the key themes that emerge from the assignments of the first two cohorts is that socio-economic priorities are seen as normative in politics ('The majority of issues discussed in the parliament are concerned with humans'). Some students felt that socio-political issues discussed in the Dutch Parliament, including terrorism, migration or domestic taxation, had little to do with party focus. 'Interesting but too focused on the animals... we also want to have some solutions for our own future!'). While one student has noted that the party 'has a clear vision of how to respect animals, nature and the environment', the same student remarked that this 'area of interest is too one-dimensional'. While one of the students noted that 'some of the human issues are directly related to animals because we eat them, and to the environment, because we breath the air', not all policies are related to animal welfare. Thus the party's position was seen as arbitrary or as 'whatever Marianne says'.

This opens up an interesting possibility of discussing direct and indirect environmental impacts (Stern). For example, migration from low consumption to high consumption societies can lead to higher per capita consumption. Yet, prohibiting migration can lead to accusations of

protectionism and even violation of human rights (Pevnick et al.). Also indirectly, pension fund investment has a significant effect on sustainability (for example, Dutch pension funds used to invest heavily in fossil fuels). As Stern has noted, ‘behaviours that affect international development policies, commodity prices on world markets, and national environmental and tax policies can have a greater environmental impact indirectly than behaviours that directly change the environment’ (408). PvdD could do more to involve citizens in discussing how such direct and indirect socio-economic policies factor into its vision of animal and environmental protection.

Some students felt that the party could not exist in poor countries as it only appealed to those with higher socioeconomic status. Yet others felt that because the poor are most disadvantaged by ‘things like climate change’, PvdD’s strong focus on sustainability makes it more appealing and important for the disadvantaged groups. As to the observation of a student that the poor people are ‘equally discriminated’ against and thus better understand the suffering of animals, this is supported by an observation by Deemer:

Analysts suggest that the greater privileges and resources associated with belonging to the upper class encourage self-centred thinking which leads to lower concern for others. Studies find that concern for animals and concern for people is highly intertwined, which suggests that self-centred thinking may also explain why the haves care less about farm animal welfare than the have-nots. (2)

5.2. *A relationship between sustainability and ethics*

Assignments from 2013 and 2014 show that it was unclear for students whether the party is dealing with sustainability, ethics, or both, and how sustainability and ethics link to ‘human’ issues. In the earlier cohort of students, the feeling that ‘It was a bit unclear about the solutions they have for the economy or the social issues’ formed an impression that PvdD represents ‘one issue’. The website of the party has led one student to conclude that their platform was ‘revolutionary’ and thus a threat to the political establishment. Others found it was ‘confusing

and amusing' and 'basket case'. The students from earlier cohorts have conflated ecology, sustainability and ethics and still felt that the party was too limited. Students were confused about how the party gets involved in socio-economic issues.

Some students noted that the reason why the party was initially sneered at had to do with issues that some people found unimportant or inconsistent. Indeed, the case of 'moral schizophrenia' regarding animals (Francione 2009) is present. Prioritization of ethical treatment of pets in relation to other (ecologically more important) animals was emphasized ('they care about pigs, chicken, cats and dogs but don't talk about how Dutch farmers oppose the idea of even one wolf returning to Holland'; 'What about worms that may be more important for keeping ecosystem sustainable?'). As Bisgould has noted:

Our relationship with the others in the animal kingdom is confused indeed. On the one hand, there are some animals whom we love quite personally: we give them names, bring them into our homes and spend billions of dollars treating them to such luxuries as booties, yoga and daycare. On the other hand, there are many more animals to whom, instead of giving such care, we cause tremendous harm – on a daily, institutionalized and very profitable basis. ('Power and Irony' 21)

Discussion of trade-offs and bottlenecks could help classification of complex ethical choices such as the educational benefits of zoos (Vining), as one student noted observed about the prohibition of zoo animals ('then no children will ever see and learn to care about wild animals'). Indeed, animal welfare invites questions regarding which animals can be seen as warranting protection (Sykes).

Another ambiguity stems from the party's platform's apparent convergence of animal rights and animal welfare. While 'welfare' is more socially acceptable, 'rights' might require greater effort ('not just to secure their welfare but also go as far as to grant them rights'). Indeed, earlier cohorts of students did not even notice the more weighty moral implications that the idea of 'rights' might demand of society, especially if its definition is used in a similar way that 'human rights' are (Bisgould 'Power and Irony'). Another omission is the understanding of the actual bottlenecks and the trade-off between the better treatment of animals in the food

industry and greater pressure on the environment (as better welfare requires larger territory and longer lives to ensure better living conditions for farm animals, which increases water and feed use and methane emissions).

5.3. *Attribution of responsibility*

One student found the party's focus to be too individual- or company-based, recognizing that many decisions are made because of mass demand ('If there is demand, then you need supply'). Another student felt that it is the popular demand and market mechanisms that will regulate meat consumption as the meat will 'become much more expensive'. Responsibility for the transition was variably put on consumers ('it is up to us to make these decisions') or technology ('revolution in food provision is essential'). The students in 2014 reflected on larger obstacles such as the 'mindset' of consumers and the role of technology in mediating change ('the mindset has to change from animals as a food producer to food produced by new technologies'). Some students have noted the complexity of acceptance of consumer responsibility, which enables governments to devolve responsibility for environmental welfare and move further away from environmental regulation in favour of voluntary market-based mechanisms (Isenhour) and neoliberalism (Kopnina and Cherniak 'Neoliberalism and Justice'). Even when taking personal responsibility in buying 'responsible' products, as one student noted, he can 'see another guy loading up on cheap meat'.

The focus of 2017 assignments on government responsibility was well summed up by statements like 'controlling the companies' and 'restricting firms that keep mistreating animals'. An added accent was on the responsibility of citizens ('if we elect a party, we expect that it will represent our interests but we have to keep looking whether they do') as well as limitations ('Nobody in the store regulates it, the government gives all these choices'). Despite concerns that the reliance on the market logic of 'responsible citizen-consumers' actually favours the removal of state regulation (Isenhour), students' faith in responsible citizenship offers an insight as to how citizens can meaningfully engage in sustainability and animal rights/welfare issues. The embrace of civic duty is based on the assumption is that well-informed and ethically conscious

citizens will make ‘good’ choices (‘educated and moral voters’). As one student has perceptively noted, however, it might be impossible for the individual consumer to ‘make choices that change the world’ without governments, corporations, and other citizens taking an equally engaged stance.

5.4. Animal representation and democracy

In the first two cohorts, while some students have postulated that it was good for democracy to have PvdD, others felt it was a threat to representing more important priorities (‘Increased representation would take away from other equally important sectors of government’). In reflecting on whether a party like PvdD belongs in democratic systems, only one student in 2013 has stated that ‘it is good for democracy if such a party is represented’.

In 2014 there were more students that felt that ‘it is important to have a party like this to force the “big players” to take up the “animal topic” in their own programs’. However, a persistent obstacle to the recognition of ecologically or animal-centred rights, notwithstanding a burgeoning body of laws developed, among others, by PvdD, is that there is still no legally binding agreement that explicitly recognizes this right (Higgins). Typically, the terms ‘justice’ and ‘representation’ were applied to vulnerable groups (‘Justice for poor people needs to be represented’), and not in relation to justice between species (Baxter 2005) or inclusive representation of nonhumans (Kopnina and Cherniak ‘Cultivating a Value’).

A significant shift has occurred in 2017 when students stated that the representation of animals signifies a new phase in the liberation movement and similar to other social ‘revolutions’ needs to be supported in democratic societies. Anthropocentrism is openly identified (‘We talk about how some people get discriminated but we don’t talk about how all non-humans are discriminated or even tortured and killed’). The fact that 7 students have stated unambiguously that they would vote for PvdD demonstrates the difference with the first two cohorts. One of the students in 2017 asserted that PvdD is a ‘billion issue party’. However, the question of which ones of these billions should be offered greater protection presents new challenges for

animal representation.

6. Discussion: Reflection on three cohorts

The difference between 2013 ‘website’ assignments and 2014 ‘guest speaker’ assignments are marked mostly by greater sympathy for the aims of PvdD and greater comprehension as to how socio-economic issues interact with ‘animal’ priorities. Both cohorts’ willingness to vote for the party is roughly in proportion to voters in the larger Dutch electorate (350, 530 PvdD voters out of a total ten million voters).

All three cohorts expressed that they felt ambiguous about prioritizing or ‘representing’ some animals over others, as related to the subject of the case of ‘moral schizophrenia’ regarding animals (Francione). The discussion about prioritizing of farm animals and pets over wild animals, or iconic species over cornerstone species was noted (‘Even in terms of an ecological viewpoint, animal rights is a very specific and limited focus’). This observation finds ground in the literature discussing differences between animal welfare versus ecocentric ethics (for discussion of these perspectives see Waldau; Kopnina and Gjerris).

One of the largest points of contention in both cohorts was the tension between socio-economic and animal-focused issues. In particular, the over-arching issue preventing recognition of animal welfare as a legitimate concern as evident from the assignments of the first two cohorts is the fact that human-centred politics remains normative (Washington et al.).

The difference between the more pro-PvdD stance of the last cohort is all the more remarkable because 2017 is not ‘self-selected’ as is the case for the minor students. While business students that followed the Business Ethics and Sustainability course were not necessarily initially interested in sustainability and ethics, evaluations of the course showed that they have greatly appreciated it. The majority ranked the course as ‘very good’ or ‘excellent’ and stated in their evaluation comments that they found it useful for their personal development and understanding of broader issues beyond corporate responsibility. Apparently, the effort of introducing the topics of animal rights and welfare has initiated ecological citizenship in the

quest to contest, debate and potentially resolve complex issues related to sustainability and ethics.

The most common position expressed in all three cohorts supports the convergence hypothesis (Norton 1997) – assuming that human-environmental interests correspond. Intrinsic value acceptance is less acknowledged. This convergence is somewhat troubling. The opinion that humans *are dependent on* animals but *not inter-dependent* was common in the first two cohorts. Thus, while the anthropocentric motivation for protection of animals is acknowledged, inherent or intrinsic rights of nonhumans are marginalized by the first two cohorts of students. In 2017, however, the idea of an imbalance in this relationship has emerged (the need to ‘give something back’).

The students’ views on animals, sustainability and political representation suggest ways in which the educational curriculum could be improved to support environmental sustainability and the ethical treatment of animals. Pedagogical strategies to further develop students’ appreciation of animal rights/welfare and ecocentrism need to draw on students’ understanding of human dependency on nature, and the interconnectedness of social and ecological concerns. Also, understanding of student perspectives calls for pedagogical strategies that employ both empirical case studies as well as theoretical frameworks that strengthen students’ understanding beyond entrenched socio-political ideologies. One way of deepening understanding as to how this concern may be addressed could be through a discussion of the political representation of animals as part of the existing sustainability-related curriculum.

One key aspect that emerged is that the nuanced positions on the anthropocentrism-ecocentrism continuum are recognized by the majority of students. Some students also demonstrated compassion and the ability to critically rethink their place within larger environmental systems. Hence this writing exercise can be valuable for political parties acting on behalf of animals, or for educators who care about these issues in getting students to think about the necessity to weigh the benefits of mutual resolution of unsustainability and injustice for people *as part of* their environment.

7. Conclusion

This article has aimed at explaining the connection between ‘animal welfare’, ‘animal rights’, and ‘ecological citizenship’ on the basis of student assignments. A number of themes that came up in student assignments reflecting on the Party for Animals were presented in all three cohorts and included rationales for prioritizing animal issues over socio-economic ones; exploring the relationship between sustainability and ethics, attributing responsibility for unsustainable or unethical practices, and advancing support for animal representation and democracy. Explored themes indicate that ecological literacy gains from reflection on animal representation, environmental integrity and care for individual animals. Analysis of student assignments reveals that simply put, respect for animal welfare and rights can be learned, but requires the deepening of the debate that opposes but also connects sustainability and ethics, humans and environment.

Since one of the objectives was to ‘learn from students’ and examining different cohorts allowed comparison of elective course students with students from the general ‘business’ group, a number of observations can be made. Despite researcher/lecturer’s expectations, there was no marked difference in expressed support between the elective course and business groups. This offers three possibilities. First, educational efforts fostering pro-environment and or animal welfare/rights are effective in convincing all groups. Second, it is possible that preferences and predispositions, including biophilia, maybe individual and evenly distributed among all groups independent of their course of study. The third possibility is a combination of both learning and innate predispositions.

Subsequent research could delve deeper into these possibilities to better understand the motivation of students whose worldview remains anthropocentric and simultaneously support those that are sympathetic to nonhumans. This subsequent research with the expressed aim of focusing on educational efforts that foster ecocentrism or biophilia could serve as an opportunity to rethink human-animal relationships. Environmental education theory and practice would benefit from a broader understanding of how students and citizens view complex animal-human–nature relationships. The studies reported above exemplify how ‘informed and moral’ citizens willing to listen to a billion of silent voices represented by eco-advocates in inclusive democracy can be engaged, within and outside the classroom.

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