

## Opinion

### **In the interest of hippos: Reflecting on the interests of the Colombian hippo population and their management**

### **Por el interés de los hipopótamos: reflexión sobre los intereses de la población colombiana de hipopótamos y su manejo**

In 2009 an individual *Hippopotamus amphibius*, colloquially known as “Pepe”, was killed and later photographed with by members of the Colombian military. Garnering both national and international attention, this resulted in any further cullings being put on hold. This hippo was part of a growing population that came from drug trafficker Pablo Escobar’s estates’ private zoo at Hacienda Nápoles where four were trafficked over in the 1980s from the US. After Escobar’s death and the hippos were abandoned, concerns have been raised that this population could increase to over 1000 by 2035 (**Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development**, 2023). This merits particular concern due to the wider environmental harm they are causing, as well as the risks of human-animal conflict associated with the species, which resulted in them being officially labelled an invasive species in 2022.

The debate surrounding managing this population has grown with discussions including politicians, conservationists, and ecologists exploring strategies for control and the wider impacts the hippos are having on the environment. Legal challenges have also arisen on behalf of the population by Colombian attorney Luis Domingo Gómez Maldonado with the legal case (Case No.: 25000234100020200044400) being brought forward to argue on behalf of hippos as an interested party. This case was to be taken into account when considering how the species should be managed, stipulating that previous decisions such as the euthanasia of the hippo in 2009 did not coincide with the interests of the hippos. The case was further supported by the 2021 deposition case based out of an Ohio court in the US in which two witnesses were to give testimony to support the initial Colombian case. This was done under 28 U.S. Code § 1782, used to assist foreign and international tribunals and litigants before such tribunals. In this case, it was raised due to allegations that the Colombian courts were not considering all available evidence and to help further the interests of the hippos in their management. Taking this and wider environmental and sociopolitical factors into account, this all culminated in the announcement by the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development in November of 2023 of guidelines for the hippos’ management including the beginning of the surgical sterilisation of hippos alongside exploring both translocation and euthanasia strategies all working together (**Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development**, 2023). The question this raises is whether this management strategy has considered the interests of the hippos and what are the challenges of doing this?.

### **Species rights and interests of the hippos**

Green criminology explores criminal offenses as well as harms and risks to the environment and animals regardless of legal status. This critical lens is used due to many harms against the environment not being recognized under criminal law. Under the majority of jurisdictions, the environment and non-human animals are often not seen as a priority with legal systems taking an anthropocentric stance (**Nurse & Wyatt**, 2020). Concepts of species justice sit within this, arguing that the rights and protection of species should not be based on anthropocentric values but instead on sentience and species’ interests

(Benton, 1998). As such, the management decision and the Colombian hippos' case can be explored from this perspective. This raised interesting debates regarding the reality of invasive species management and just how feasible it is to maintain the interests of the hippos while protecting the environment and human populations.

To varying extents, all three components of this strategy: euthanasia, translocation, and surgical sterilisation, consider species interests and rights. The most controversial and heavily debated aspect of this strategy is ethical euthanasia. This aspect will explore the killing of an unconfirmed number of hippos and work alongside the other two strategies. The term of ethical euthanasia and what this entails has not been clarified, however, it does suggest that the methods involved would be as painless as possible in comparison to previous hippo killings. Although this is not in the interest of the species and there is still the possibility of pain depending on the decided method, at least on the surface recognises them as living beings. From a species justice perspective, this goes against the interests of the hippos. Recognized as a sentient species, hippos live on average for between forty and fifty years which they would be deprived of under this part of the strategy. Sentience of species is recognized under Colombian law 1774 of 2016, however, this is complicated by the invasive nature of the hippos. Additionally, an argument could be made that these hippos are indirect victims of the drug trade with the species being introduced as a result of Pablo Escobar's collection of exotic species and the profits the Medellín cartel made. By viewing them as victims, arguments could be made to explore these species' justice perspectives in management strategies.

Secondly, the sterilization process will be conducted on both male and female hippos aiming to sterilize around 40 per year. This part of the strategy poses some risks to the species with these procedures being complex. However, as an alternative to killings, this is more in line with concepts of species justice by recognizing their interest in life. There are still risks, including death, to the species due to factors such as chemical imbalance (Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, 2023). Furthermore, some animal rights activists are fundamentally against the sterilization of animals, as any interference with wildlife is seen as problematic (Simberloff, 2015). The final part of this strategy is the translocation of some of the hippos to other countries. In the November announcement, India, Mexico, and the Philippines were mentioned and at least 60 would be sent to India. From a species justice perspective, this is the one most in line with the interests of the hippos by preserving life and not limiting reproduction. This demonstrates how the management strategy is making a conscious effort to at least consider the interests and well-being of the hippos.

However, the challenge surrounding building species justice approaches into the management strategy is the wider issues that emerge from it, with both the rights and interests of the humans who live near the hippos and the environment and native species being put at further risk. Firstly, the recognition and debate regarding building the interests of the species into the management process takes a long period of time. For instance, the initial court case took place in 2020, the deposition in 2021, the declaration of being an invasive species in 2022, and the control decisions in 2023, all allowing the hippo population to grow further.

Although Colombia does recognize animal sentience globally, there is no consensus on animal rights. Discussions have increased since the 1960s, however, attempts to pass UN declarations have failed due to lack of political will, challenges of what these rights could look like, and which species get which rights all hindering progress (Nurse & Wyatt, 2020). Furthermore, some components of the strategy are not quick fixes. The sterilization component will only slowly reduce the population on its own, hippos will still reside in the region, and translocation planning takes time. This creates further risks for environmental destruction and harm to human beings. Invasive species in many cases have been found to pose significant risks to native species and the wider biosphere. The hippos are no exception with significant environmental challenges resulting from their growing population,

including the deaths of fish species and water pollution as a result of the initial increasing population, which may persist at a smaller level as the population slowly declines due to their management. In addition, although at the time of writing no human deaths connected to the hippos have been reported, there are reports of destruction of property, and injuries. With hippo populations potentially persisting this could pose further risks to local areas and communities. However, it should also be noted that some animal rights activists would see any form of interference as problematic. Many cases involving the control of invasive species have been opposed citing arguments that humans do not have the right to kill animals besides having issues with the methods used (Simberloff, 2015).

In addition to these collective risks, the costs of incorporating decisions more in line with the interests of the species are higher than the more commonly used methods. As part of the sterilization plan, 808 million pesos have been invested with each sterilization likely to cost around 40 million pesos. This is in sharp contrast to wider conservation initiatives which generally have far smaller budgets or struggle to maintain funding. Also, quotations regarding the relocation part of the strategy have been estimated to reach \$3.5 million US dollars. In comparison, ethical euthanasia is seen as the cheaper and less resource-draining part of the strategy. This reveals the expensive nature of considering species interests and further supports the high-profile nature of this case.

In short, none of the strategies are fully in the interests of the hippos or fit neatly into the species justice framework demonstrating the challenge of building species interests into control measures. The combination of all three prongs of the strategy has at least considered the hippos' interests whilst protecting the Colombian ecosystem. This case demonstrates the possibility of considering species interests in decision-making regarding invasive species control and elements of good practices from a species justice perspective (Doornbos, 2023). Doing this opens the way to exploring wider species management options in certain cases, particularly given the difficulties related to predicting which species will become invasive and the ethically questionable practices some management schemes utilize (Simberloff, 2015). However, the hippos are a rather unique case as an invasive species. Among many other factors, being recognized as a charismatic megafauna and the consistent media attention have likely influenced this case. These are generally not seen with other invasive species globally such as with wild boars and lionfish. Furthermore, as a megafauna species, the hippos have had a relatively slow reproduction rate. In contrast, other smaller species reproduce quicker with a higher risk of causing damage to the biosphere and, as such, may need to be managed quicker (Simberloff, 2015) creating challenges in considering their interests. Overall, a pragmatic balance between the interests and rights of the species vs the wider environment and human residence needs should be struck.

The management of this hippo population provides a unique case in which the control of an invasive species has garnered international attention. From a species justice perspective, considering the interests of the hippos does demonstrate areas of positive practice in the control and management of species which may be explored in other management cases where possible. However, it should be recognized that an invasive megafauna species such as the hippos poses unique challenges regarding their control. If species interests are to be more widely considered in management, this would need to be taken on a case-by-case basis with some species likely being more challenging than others (Doornbos, 2023). Where wildlife protections have consistently been based on anthropocentric notions of value, recognizing the interests of species in decisions of their management from a legal perspective should be seen as a positive. However, these interests have to be weighed against wider environmental and sociopolitical factors to balance the interests of the species whilst also safeguarding the biosphere.

#### **Elliot Doornbos**

School of Social Sciences, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK  
[elliot.doornbos@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:elliot.doornbos@ntu.ac.uk)

---

## References

- Benton, T.** (1998). Rights and justice on a shared planet: more rights or new relations? *Theoretical Criminology*, 2, 149-75.
- Doornbos, E.** (2023). Colombian Hippos and Species Management: Exploring the Legal Case Surrounding the Management and Control of the Colombian Hippos from a Species Justice Perspective. *Laws*, 12, 29.
- Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development.** (2023). Sterilization phase of the management plan to control hippos in Colombia begins (online) <https://www.minambiente.gov.co/inicia-fase-de-esterilizacion-del-plan-de-medidas-que-busca-controlar-la-poblacion-de-hipopotamos-en-colombia/>
- Nurse, A. & Wyatt, T.** (2021). *Wildlife Criminology*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Simberloff, D.** (2015). *Invasive Species: What everyone needs to know*. Oxford University Press.