Non-human animals in corporate social responsibility? Evidence from companies in the Nordic region

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Abstract

Corporations wield considerable influence over the lives and well-being of diverse non-human animal groups through practices like land and material utilization. Responding to burgeoning societal expectations, there is a heightened emphasis on incorporating Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) into corporate actions and reporting, encompassing Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) considerations. However, the specific attention given to the lives and well-being of individual non-human animals within this framework remains relatively limited. This paper scrutinizes the quality and scope of representations of non-human animals and in sustainability reporting within the Nordic countries. These include discussions on the moral status of non-human animals, incorporating considerations of the degree of rights that animals are seen to possess as well as the system levels of such approaches. Additionally, it examines the diverse categories of animal groups under discussion. The analysis draws from annual or sustainability reports from the 30 largest corporations in the Nordic region in 2022, spanning six distinct business sectors: (1) Food Industry; (2) Natural Resources; (3) Trade and Well-being; (4) Energy and Fuels; (5) Industry and Construction; and (6) Communication and Transportation. The analysis shows how the intrinsic-level approaches are typically tied to system level framings concerning ecosystems and biodiversity, whereas welfare is discussed mostly by the Food industry in the context of farmed animals. Yet the instrumental approach is present across the sectors, where nature and non-human animals are generally seen as valuable human resources. Overall, the reports define the value of non-human animals almost completely on a system or species level instead of discussing individual animals' interests.

Keywords: interests, right, species, welfare

Introduction

Corporations hold significant sway over various non-human animals in using them as materials or through land and other resource use. To meet evolving societal standards, there's a growing focus on integrating Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) into business practices, covering Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) factors. Nevertheless, the level of concern for the welfare or rights of individual non-human animals within this framework remains relatively low. There is also discussion suggesting non-human animals should be incorporated as business stakeholders to better take their perspective into account (Freeman and Ferrero, 2022). Prior studies have shown that a minority of large corporations recognize non-human animal aspects globally (Janssens, 2016), and that less than half of the major food companies have comprehensive animal welfare policies (Sullivan *et al.*, 2017). Hence, the theme seems like an emerging one, but the potential expansion to mainstream has remained so far speculative.

This article investigates the acknowledgment and framing of the role of non-human animals in society by corporations across various business sectors, examining their impact and responsibility in sustainability reporting within the Nordic countries. The Nordic region, renowned for its commitment to high-performance societies in environmental goals, social justice, and well-being, serves as a compelling regional context. This suggests that other realms of responsibility may also be pertinent.

Theoretical approach

Non-human animals have traditionally been classified in Western natural scientific tradition by their taxonomic position in biological and ecological contexts. A less well acknowledged viewpoint is to consider their proximity and interactions with humans and what that would imply and reveal regarding their moral and political status (e.g. Cochrane, 2018; Donaldson and Kymlica, 2011). Here non-human animals can be classified as being wild, liminal or domesticated, but these groups can also further be divided into various subsections. For example, domesticated non-human animals can include those used for food production, companions, utility, and entertainment, among others.

These various classifications can be positioned from moral and political perspectives in various ways. Typically non-human animals have been considered mostly as human property where certain cultural and juridical concepts of welfare have framed their treatment (Garner, 2013). Another, critical position has discussed animal rights, which typically include the idea that non-human animals have an inherent value to exist on their own, and hence their utilization by humans should be abolished and different interactions minimized overall (e.g. Milligan, 2015). This approach is also linked to the perspective of different interests and capabilities that non-human animals have, which define their interaction with humans (see e.g. Cochrane, 2018).

There seem also to exist both more individual and system centric approaches to discuss the position of non-human animals in the society. The former emphasizes the approach that has classically been deployed in the discussion of non-human animals' moral value, as exemplified above. In other words, this ethical approach acknowledges the moral value of each individual as a starting point for analysis in considering the moral worth of subjects. A rather different perspective, in turn, is taken in ecological approaches, where the moral unit of interest is not individuals but biodiversity that is manifested on three levels: genetic, species and ecosystems (see e.g. Palmer *et al.*, 2023). In this context the individual worth of non-human animals is not seen as a point of interest as such.

To sum up, Figure 1 depicts the analytical framework through which we study how non-human animals are represented in the corporate reports. The framework is organized along two axes: the horizontal axis indicates whether non-human animals are discussed as part of a system, as species or as individual actors. The vertical axis indicates whether non-human animals are seen to possess instrumental or intrinsic value. Hence, the upper left-hand end in the figure indicates a deep ecological viewpoint, where the inherent value of non-human animal populations and species are acknowledged. The middle left-hand end suggests a 'shallow' ecological view that sees non-human animals as having value in sustaining species and populations and as providers of various ecosystem services. The upper right-hand end depicts an animal rights perspective that considers non-human animals as individual actors that have intrinsic value, while the middle right-hand end describes a welfarist view, where non-human animals are seen as individuals with interest and rights to certain welfare principles but still utilizable by humans. Lastly, the lower end on both left and right sides of the figure depicts nature and non-human animals as resources for human use where no other interests are taken into account.

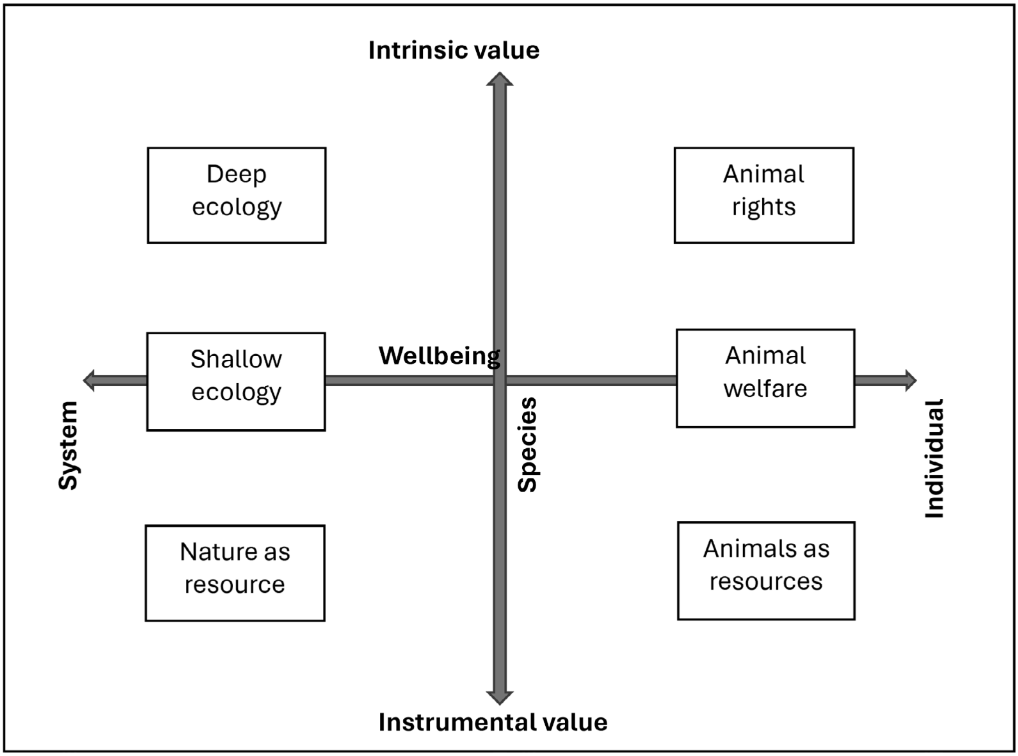

Figure 1. Framework for analysing the representation of animals in corporate reporting.

Data and methods

Sustainability reports of the 30 largest Nordic corporations within six different business sectors from year 2022 were included into the analysis. Their size was measured by annual operating revenue (turnover) in USD from the last available year. The data were acquired from the Orbis database. The business sectors were (1) Food Industry; (2) Natural Resources; (3) Trade and Well-being; (4) Energy and Fuels; (5) Industry and Construction; and (6) Communication and Transportation. With this sectoral approach, it was possible to include also corporations from the food sector that are typically smaller compared to, for example, those in the energy and industry sectors. The Banking and Investment sector was excluded from the data.

Ten corporations were part of larger international corporations or other corporations in our list, and were hence excluded from the analysis. Moreover, two corporations were excluded due to limited availability of reporting. The largest corporation was Fortum Oyj (annual revenue 200 billion USD), and the smallest Mowi ASA (annual revenue 5 billion USD). The number of corporations by country were: Sweden 11, Denmark 8, Finland 6, Norway 5, and Iceland 0. If a sustainability report was not available, an annual report was analyzed instead, which all included sections discussing sustainability.

The data were coded by looking for certain key words that would cover the frame of interest. Firstly, various classifications of fauna were sought on a general level (such as animals, fish, bird, mammal, cattle, livestock, pet) and in detecting specific species (such as cow, chicken, pig, and salmon). Regarding the conceptual frame (Figure 1) for this study, both the intrinsic — instrumental and individual — system axes were approached by looking for the former words that would describe individual animal-centered perspectives (e.g. rights, integrity, respect for life, inherent value) and individual human-centered perspectives (e.g. welfare, health, wellbeing, pleasure, pain, meat, dairy, leather). For the latter axis the focus was on either framing the issue to certain animal species and individuals or on taking a more system level approach (biodiversity, ecosystems, habitats, organisms, wildlife).

Results

Instrumental value — Animals and nature as resources

The system level framing for instrumental values was found in statements where nature or biodiversity was seen as a business resource, framed in many cases through the ecosystem services that are seen as vital for the corporative actions. On the other hand, there were also cases where the companies outlined that since their own actions were not seen relevant in contributing to such phenomena as biodiversity loss, these discussion were considered as irrelevant concerning corporate responsibility.

From a more individual perspective, there is richer discussion of animals in the reports, which is mainly due to animal-based products being the core of business practices particularly in the Food Industry sector but also in the Trade and Well-being sector. The species mentioned were various experimental and farm animals and fish. Here animals are typically discussed though the economic utility they can produce.

Besides economic aspects, there was also a strong emphasis on environmental and public health targets and threats, where the interests of animals can be rather sidelined. On the other hand, these can be meshed, and also in ways where different animal species 'clash', so to speak. Yet in many cases the animals themselves were absent from the text, and the discussions focused merely on the products that they can provide. Further, one remarkable category of animals outside the farm animal classification featuring in this context were invasive wildlife species. Here animals are seen through the effect they can have on ecosystems.

Wellbeing — Shallow ecology and animal welfare

Regarding the interest of animals in one way or another featured in every corporate report where animals were directly used as resources. In this case it was more common to acknowledge the species level compared to mentions of individuals. In addition to discussions on welfare principles of specific species, such as cows and pigs, animal welfare was also discussed on a rather general level, which was also meshed with discussing the animal-based product categories.

In turn, other business sectors were discussing the topic on a more systemic level. Here the frame for the statements and actions was typically set by other stakeholders, hence positioning animal interests as something that should be acknowledged because the corporate playing field demands that a company should do so. However, this trait was also visible when discussing the development of plant-based products, where, despite them having a favorable effect on animal welfare, were not necessarily framed as such but instead through their (human) public health or environmental benefits.

Intrisic value — Deep ecology and animal rights

Discussions of intrinsic values were most commonly connected to protecting ecosystems and biodiversity, and featured across the business sectors. Here the framing can be such as to take into account some of the areas that were in close vicinity of the key business actions. Another featured approach was to focus on the effects of pollutants that corporations produce. On the other hand, some corporations had more all-encompassing evaluations and programs to map and analyse the impacts that the companies have on ecosystems and biodiversity.

When certain species were discussed, birds and fish were the most typically mentioned, in addition to which pollinators and squirrels were featured on some occasions. However, this was done in the manner of discussing the benefits for species and ecosystem protection, and not for the individual animals' interest as such.

The corporations involved in processing or selling food seemed to have a more detailed, practical level approach in developing tools that would take into account the companies' effects on nature. However, this could also put the interests of farm animals in contrast to such aims, and particularly in the case of marine ecosystems the framing changes remarkably depending on the systemic level chosen.

Here developing and promoting more plant-based products to consumers was also seen as something that would promote the state of nature and ecosystems. Interestingly, however, the interests of the farm animals that such products could spare in changing consumption volumes were not discussed as such. It was also common to find these intrinsic, system level approaches meshed with more practical business interests simultaneously.

Much less discussion was found regarding approaches that would specifically value individual animals intrinsically so as to grant them rights that would not subject them in instrumental relationship to humans. However, there were some passages that could indicate such framings, yet, as these were often discussed in the context of biodiversity or other types of nature conservation targets, the framework could be interpreted to focus more on species conservation instead of individuals as such. For some species the tone of discussion was, however, more easily interpreted as taking also the interests of individual animals into account.

However, the closest examples of intrinsic framings were found in some occasions when pets were discussed in the reports. Though these were rather rare examples, they formed a unique approach to animals in the reports in that their framings came close to acknowledging animals even almost as equals to humans.

Discussion and conclusions

As discussed, it was not always straightforward to distinguish the species and individual level approaches based on the rhetoric and framings utilized in the reports. Additionally, demarcation between wellbeing and intrinsic dimensions was also hazy, as, among other things, the language used in the reports tended to be formulated so that it gave room to different interpretations. This in itself is not surprising, as these types of reports are typically aiming at delivering messages to various groups of stakeholders who may have differing values and expectations. This phenomenon can also at least partially explain why there often were different framings of animal positions even within single reports, as described above (see also e.g. Cho *et al.*, 2015).

Overall, the analysis points out that the data tended to be richer in describing the system level framing of non-human animals in discussing nature and ecosystem conservation. This could often be seen as emphasizing the intrinsic value of nature or at least underlining the wellbeing approach. However, there were also evident instrumental elements in this discourse, where nature was seen as a source of resources or a provider of different ecosystem services to humans. This was also a discourse that focused heavily on wild animals and was found amongst those corporations whose main business was not related to food, medicine or clothing.

Other non-human animal groups, in this case various farm animals, were in turn often mentioned in these latter sectors. Here the framings were a mix of instrumental and wellbeing approaches. Even though the tone of discussion was here more towards individuals than systems, these animals tended to be represented more through the species level than as individuals as such. Examples of intrinsic and individual framings were much harder to find overall, and these tended to be found concerning either wild animals or pets and were mentioned only rather occasionally in the data.

Even though our main aim in this analysis was to detect different non-human animal classification and value framings from the data, it was also interesting to note how there were some reports were non-human animals did not practically feature at all, whereas others talk about them lavishly. This shows how non-human animals are not automatically seen as something that should be taking into consideration within CSR (see also Janssens, 2016).

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