

HUNTING WITH HOUNDS

A Briefing Paper

This Briefing Paper does not represent the policy or formal position of the Church of England.

The Church is asked to comment and make moral judgements on many issues. In responding to such requests the Church encourages its members to draw on the resources of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason to enable them to engage, prayerfully and intelligently, with the matter under debate. It is neither surprising nor reprehensible that Christians will, in good faith, reach different conclusions on particular issues. The Board for Social Responsibility's Briefing Papers are provided as resources to enable Christians to think through difficult moral issues for themselves.

1. The question of the acceptability of hunting with hounds raises fundamentally a question about the proper consideration which humans owe to animals. It is often claimed that fox-hunting contributes significantly to the economy of rural areas, providing employment in a variety of ways, thus helping to preserve traditional communities and patterns of life which are properly highly valued. The truth of claims about the economic and social benefits of fox hunting is not, of course, something on which Christian teaching or experience throws any particular light. It is clear, however, that there is a prior question about fox hunting which Christians will want to address whether or not they are persuaded that it has these benefits; that is, whether it is compatible with the consideration which humans arguably owe to animals. If it is not compatible, then it is doubtful that economic or social factors would serve, by themselves, to justify it. To take an analogy: the production of weapons might play an important role in certain economies of certain towns or cities, but this fact alone would not serve to justify their manufacture.
2. Answers to the fundamental question about the moral consideration which humans owe to animals are likely to be shaped by reflection on two related issues. The first issue concerns what we might think of as the character and quality of animal life, and the second concerns the relationship between humans and animals.
3. In relation to the first issue, historically some took the view that animals do not feel pain and are incapable of suffering in other ways. Such a view is no longer seriously supported. We now recognise that human life is itself an instance of animal life, and that many of the capacities and characteristics of human bodily and even mental existence are possessed in varying degrees by other species. However extensive those similarities may be, it is generally taken for granted that animals have a capacity for

pain and suffering; UK legislation in relation to experimentation on animals, for example, extends a degree of protection to all vertebrates (even in embryonic form) and to some invertebrates. It thus rests on the assumption that animals are capable of experiencing pain and suffering and for that reason are deserving of consideration.

4. The second issue concerns the relationship between humans and animals. The Book of Genesis pictures God as granting human kind 'dominion over the fish in the sea, the birds of the air, and every living thing that moves on the earth' (1, 28), a dominion which is also arguably presupposed in the second creation story and symbolised in Adam's naming of the living creatures. Most believe, however, that these texts cannot be read, either in themselves or within the wider Biblical context, as understanding by 'dominion' an absolute and unfettered grant of power. The lordship which humans exercise is a delegation of power from a God who exercises his power with justice, love and mercy. Thus even if it is supposed that animals can in some sense be thought of as given by God for human use, it does not follow that any and every use of animals is acceptable, since, where it is recognised that animals have a capacity for pain and suffering, it may well be that certain uses are considered unjust, oppressive or cruel.
5. Of course some Christians deny that animals are given for human use of whatever kind. They may argue that a proper recognition of the integrity and worth of the created order requires that animals should not be used, even humanely, for human purposes. Someone who took this view would probably object to the domestication of animals, for example, and would certainly object to fox-hunting. Such views are deserving of careful consideration, but since it may be that even those who accept some use of animals for human advantage will find reasons for doubting the acceptability of fox-hunting, it may be sufficient to consider the question of hunting from this less radical point of view.
6. It seems unlikely that anyone would now argue for the defensibility of fox-hunting on the ground that foxes, along with other animals, are incapable of feeling pain. It is often claimed, however, that hunting and being hunted is part of a world of God's creation, that the fox is part of this natural world, and that urban dwellers, out of touch with the ways of nature, tend to find objectionable what is for country dwellers simply and rightly a part of everyday life.
7. Is this argument convincing? Human suffering is, after all, a part of this same world, and yet few have thought it proper to contend that humans should tolerate, let alone cause, human suffering simply because it belongs to the way things are. Instead, whilst finding the fact of such suffering a mystery or even a very real problem, Christians have understood themselves bound not to cause suffering to fellow human beings, except in the gravest of circumstances, such as for self-defence. Once we have rejected the view that animals are incapable of suffering, shouldn't this same principle apply to animals?
8. Supposing that that principle does apply to animals, a case in favour of fox-hunting might still be made, taking one of two forms. It might be maintained that the suffering caused to foxes is minimal, or alternatively, if it is thought to be more serious than that, that a consideration of the wider circumstances warrant it. The two arguments should be considered in turn.

9. The view that the suffering caused to foxes is minimal relies on arguments similar to those mentioned in paragraph 6. Here the point might be, however, not that the fact of animal suffering in the wild renders morally acceptable the causing of suffering to animals, but rather that a modern unfamiliarity with the natural world may cause us to overestimate the suffering which fox-hunting, for example, causes. All wild animals live by their wits, struggling against harsh conditions which may impose upon them severe hunger, thirst, tiredness and so on. Judged against this background, fox-hunting may not seem so very severe, especially if, as is often claimed, the killing of the animal is very quick.
10. Attempts have been made to establish scientifically the degree of distress caused to stags during a hunt, and presumably similar studies might be undertaken for foxes. If such studies were to suggest that the animals were not seriously distressed, then the case against fox-hunting would be weakened. But in the absence of conclusive scientific evidence one way or other, it would be wrong to conclude that fox-hunting is unobjectionable. Might it not be said that where there is any uncertainty, a proper moral caution would give the benefit of the doubt to animals which may suffer considerable distress?
11. The second argument might concede that hunting may cause significant suffering to animals, but would claim that in the circumstances this is justified by the need to control the number of foxes. Because of the loss of other species which may have been its natural predators, the fox has been left unchecked. This means that its numbers have increased dramatically and that it has become a nuisance to farmers and a threat to lambs and poultry. In addition, this lack of control is bad for the fox population itself, since it will generally be weakened by over-breeding, and sick and elderly animals will be subject to death by starvation. It is pointed out, therefore, that the interests of the farmer and the conservation of the fox demand the culling of animals, and that hunting provides one of the most satisfactory methods of controlling numbers.
12. This argument is an important and weighty one. It takes seriously the principle that it is wrong to cause suffering to animals without good cause by providing what is deemed to be a justification for hunting. The potential weakness in the argument lies, however, in the consideration that where suffering is inflicted for a good reason, one might expect the chosen method of achieving that end to be the one which inflicts the minimum suffering on the animals concerned. This raises the question in the present case as to whether fox-hunting is really the most humane way of controlling the number of foxes. The justification of fox-hunting as a means of controlling numbers is also questioned by those who point out that the number of animals killed by this means is insignificant compared with the numbers killed on roads in each year. It would be difficult to justify fox-hunting in these terms if, in fact, it makes no appreciable contribution to the end it is claimed to serve.
13. It is probably the case that those who live in the country and those who do not have different perceptions of many of these issues, though surveys suggest that a majority of country-dwellers, like the majority of the general population, is opposed to hunting of foxes with hounds. It is sometimes contended that those who live in towns have no right to dictate to the country, or more generally that fox-hunting is a matter of individual conscience and should be left to individuals to decide for themselves.

Indeed it might be argued that the principles of tolerance which underlie our society demand that one section of society, even if a majority, ought not impose its moral beliefs and convictions on another.

14. These contentions, however, are not unproblematic, since the decision to hunt foxes is not personal or private in the way that a decision to smoke, for example, might be thought to be. If animals deserve moral consideration, then their treatment is no more a private matter than is, say, the treatment of children - and this is just what the existing legislation in relation to cruelty to animals presupposes. For this reason it would not be a sufficient justification of hunting simply to argue that it is a widely enjoyed and traditional sport for individuals to take up or not as they see fit.
15. Having said that, however, those who hunt may feel that any attempt to prohibit hunting is unfair in isolating one issue concerning the treatment of animals when there are others which might equally be deemed morally questionable, such as fishing, the breeding of animals for food or fur, the keeping of animals in zoos and so on. It might be thought that those who are set on criminalising fox-hunting are motivated by its associations with social privilege more than by a concern for the well-being of animals otherwise they would be arguing for, at the least, a critical examination of other practices involving the human use of animals.
16. There are, however, many who feel that the issue of fox-hunting simply raises rather starkly these wider issues and who are indeed concerned that there should be a wider debate. The Church of England will encourage its members to approach the debate about fox-hunting, and about the use of animals in general, carefully and conscientiously, aware that Christians have not always been sensitive to the moral consideration which is owed to animals, and also that the present debate takes place at a time when the countryside is facing a range of social and economic problems, and its needs and views ought not to be overlooked.

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This Briefing Paper has been prepared by Professor Michael Banner on behalf of the Board for Social Responsibility