

WAI public policy program: Planning update

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We are considering launching an additional program to engage more directly with public policy, helping another nonprofit launch such programs, or launching a new organization dedicated to such programs. The plans below are in very early stages, meant primarily to sketch a rough picture of the ideas we are considering in discussions with allies and other experts.

Background

Our focus on academic research has always been driven by the desire to inform policymaking that could improve the lives of wild animals at scale. Our initial hypothesis was that all policymaking would have to wait until more scientific progress had been made. At the 2019 Wild Animal Welfare Summit, participants agreed to hold off on engaging with policy.

When many of the same stakeholders met in January 2021, we decided policy was not only tractable, but also the most promising new direction for the movement.

Three things changed in that time.

First, the movement's messaging had improved. When we framed wild animal welfare in terms of practical applications rather than thought experiments, we found that most scientists found the idea compelling rather than controversial.

Second, the science had improved. While we were still radically uncertain about the answers to foundational questions, we had already identified useful heuristics (like [optimal population density](#)), promising metrics (like [relative telomere length](#)), and almost shovel-ready interventions (like [pigeon contraception](#)).

But perhaps most importantly, our thinking about public policy had matured. We came to appreciate that just as research projects can have field-building value beyond their scientific findings, policy changes can have movement-building value beyond their immediate impacts. Even if there are only narrow policy windows for wild animal welfare today, working on them could open new windows for action in the future. And by working on policy in parallel with science, we can be ready to act on the latest science as it develops.

Visions for growth

A wide range of policy activities could advance the wild animal welfare movement. WAI could pursue any one of them, or a combination of them, or we might decide other organizations are better suited to pursue them. Here are brief introductions to some of the directions we are considering, and what representative hires might look like.

Campaigning

Most concretely, we could campaign for laws and regulations we expect to benefit wild animals, such as funding for wild animal welfare research, restrictions on unusually painful pesticides, or adoption of contraceptive programs that both replace lethal control and prevent juvenile starvation. For example, if we find that OvoControl is effective at managing pigeon populations and improving their welfare, then we could organize grassroots advocates for municipal policy change.

Potential hires could include:

1. **Campaign Director.** Directs public policy campaigns.
2. **Policy Researcher.** Researches both the science and the politics of wild animal welfare in order to select campaign targets and tactics.
3. **Legislative Affairs Manager.** Educates policymakers on wild animal welfare and how they can help.
4. **Grassroots Organizer.** Mobilizes activists outside of academia to support campaigns.

Litigation

Even with limited opportunities to secure concrete wins for wild animals, we could use [public comments](#) and litigation to hold federal agencies accountable to considering wild animal welfare when existing statutes already require them to (consider the broad definition of “take” under the Endangered Species Act; the environmental impact assessments required by the National Environmental Policy Act; or the risk assessments required under the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act). We could also strategically file cases designed to challenge the public’s understanding of what we owe to wild animals and institutionalize it through case law (similar to the [Nonhuman Rights Project’s work on legal personhood](#)).

Potential hires could include:

1. **Litigation Program Director.** Direct our litigation program.
2. **Regulatory Attorney.** Research opportunities to influence federal rulemaking, participate in the public comment process, sue regulatory agencies when appropriate.
3. **Paralegal.** Provide administrative and operational support to legal and regulatory activities.
4. **Press Officer.** Earn press coverage so we can influence public opinion even if we don't win in the courts.

Scholarship

Another approach to public policy would be to replicate our field-building work in the natural sciences. We could produce original legal research and engage legal scholars in thought-provoking discussions about how existing laws could be reinterpreted in favor of wild animals, which new laws could benefit them, or what systems could effectively represent their interests. (Consider, for example, the legal theories proposed in the new book [Wildlife As Property Owners by Karen Bradshaw](#).) In the long term, such efforts could inspire systemic changes, but they could also help in the short term by highlighting gaps in the science needed to inform policy.

Potential hires could include:

1. **Natural Resource and Wildlife Law Researcher.** Investigate intersections between existing wildlife law and wild animal welfare.
2. **International Climate Policy Researcher.** Investigate opportunities to include wild animal welfare in emerging climate policies in the US and abroad.
3. **Legal Inclusion Researcher.** Investigate the history and future of systems to account for the legal interests of individuals who cannot verbally express their needs.