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Brushtail possums and species-inclusive social work in Aotearoa New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: The distinction between pest control and cruelty blurs for brushtail possums in Aotearoa New Zealand. All members of society are encouraged to participate in possum pest control, which fosters a culture of potential cruelty. This article explores how social work can mitigate possum cruelty and promote a more species-inclusive approach through *actually-humane education.*

APPROACH: This article critiques the lack of concern social work has paid to the (mis)treatment of marginalised species of animals, using possums as a case study. As attitudes towards animals in Aotearoa New Zealand are complex, the intersection of concepts of *nativity, controllability*, and *worthiness* are examined in more detail. Green social work and an ecofeminist ethic of care assist in how conservation education can interrogate what *humane* means in conservation, moving towards the concept of actually-humane education. Attitudes to species in Aotearoa New Zealand are influenced by how native, controllable, and worthy they are.

CONCLUSIONS: This article argues that conservation education, using green social work and an ecofeminist ethic of care, can employ actually-humane forms of education. By critiquing the definition of humane and recognising the role of species belonging, actually-humane education can positively impact how animals are treated. In using this, social work can build towards a more socially just and species-inclusive conservation education that not only reduces abuse but engenders compassion and kindness in humans.

Keywords: Actually-humane education, green social work, compassion, violence, cruelty

Aotearoa New Zealand is the worst place in the world to be a brushtail possum (herein: possum). They are described as "evil, habitat-destroying, bird-eating, Australian bastards. If you see a possum on the road, you run the little f***er over" (Poms Away, 2015, para. 1). Possums, who were introduced to Aotearoa New Zealand from their native Australia in 1858, are scapegoated as villains of the nation for their impacts on native species of flora and fauna, as well as their status as vectors of bovine tuberculosis (Bekoff, 2017; Potts et al., 2013). The species, along with rats and stoats, are targets of eradication campaigns like "Predator Free 2050" (Department of Conservation, n.d.). To achieve this, governmental campaigns and organisations encourage every member of society to participate in the removal of these pests. As such, children are recruited to engage in the hunting, trapping, and baiting of possums through school and community-sanctioned events. These activities normalise

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and desensitise young children to extreme forms of cruelty and violence, for which their participation is rewarded.

This culture of desensitisation poses a grave concern for children's healthy development of empathy and has significant ramifications for the future of social work in Aotearoa New Zealand. While existing research has investigated abuse of non-human animals, the focus is normally reserved for companion species and ignores non-domesticated animals (Taylor & Signal, 2009), especially so-called pest species. Previous research has more been to understand how the prevalence of abuse can have grave impacts on children's empathy development (Arluke et al., 1999; Flynn, 2012) and not so much for the inherent experience of the animals themselves. The unique hatred of possums positions them as exceptions to the rule, creating a grey space where cruelty to possums is ignored or often not even considered as cruelty.

Attitudes to animals in Aotearoa New Zealand can be illustrated through the intersection of three overarching human-defined values: nativity (i.e., species not introduced by humans and deemed to 'naturally' belong in a particular place), controllability (i.e., ease of controlling a species, whether through physical containment, habitat modification, or selective breeding, for example), and worthiness (i.e., perceived value to human beings and extent to which they are morally considered by humans). These anthropocentric values play a central role in the vilification of possums and have isolated them from receiving appropriate consideration in conservation (Major, 2023). For possums, the intersection of being non-native, difficult to control, and morally unworthy puts them at risk of maltreatment and cruelty. To counter this, green social work and an ecofeminist ethic of care can encourage actually-humane forms of education in both social work practice and policy. The implications of this not only ensure more ethical treatment for possums but also assist children with a healthier growth of empathy that can benefit both the human and non-human members of society.

Before continuing, several terms are important to discuss. Introduced previously, "actually-humane education" refers to the intentional interrogation of what is deemed to be humane treatment of non-human animals in conservation education. "Pest", with intentional apostrophes, is deliberately written this way to recognise the social and cultural construction of the word. The term, *animals*, also specifically refers to non-human animals; however, this lexical designation is recognisably lacking as humans are animals and placing a boundary between the two further reinforces the human/non-human binary. It is also relevant to specify this upcoming discussion critiques *mainstream* Pākehā (New Zealander of European descent) attitudes to possums and conservation, not the indigenous Māori or Moriori perspectives, which are markedly different. Referencing Pākehā attitudes as mainstream does not diminish the relevance and importance of Māori perspectives but recognises the colonial dominance of these attitudes.

Social work and animals

Social work focuses on meeting the diverse needs of human beings, their communities, and wider society (Segal et al., 2004). It aims to empower individuals and strengthen their wellbeing by proactively addressing factors such as discrimination, marginalisation, oppression, violence, inequality, and social injustice. Social justice is a core tenet of social work as it considers the impacts of, and solutions for, institutional oppression and domination. This is poignant as oppression and domination are what breed social injustice in the first place (Young, 2014).

Non-human animals are often ignored in this discussion; however, if they *are* discussed, the concern is normally relegated only to certain species, such as companion animals or those used as instruments for animal-assisted therapy (Taylor et al., 2014). They are valued more for the benefits they offer humans than for who they are as distinct individuals. The consideration of animals as more than just

companions or resources is not typical in mainstream social work.

This mainstream perspective regards the human–animal bond as "lightweight, cliché, or sentimental" and not "substantial" enough (Emmens, 2007, p. 9); however, scholars have begun to critique anthropocentrism within social work (Bozalek & Pease, 2020; Fraser & Taylor, 2024). This is reinforced by the Cartesian dichotomy of separating humans from animals (Dupre, 2002), whereby animals are used as tools for human therapy without considering they have needs and desires of their own (Taylor et al., 2014). This humanist approach, where human issues are seen as the only kind of social issues (Payne, 2011), is deficient, especially for a field that seeks to be intersectional to reduce oppression and nurture empathy (Bell, 2020; Fraser & Taylor, 2024). Currently, animal rights within social work are peripheral concepts, though species-inclusive scholarship is increasing (Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2013, 2014; Taylor et al., 2020).

The anti-oppressive value system that social work seeks to emulate often ignores the role of species in oppression, discrimination, and violence (Silberberg, 2023). This deficit stems not only from attitudes that position humans as superior to animals but is compounded by the lack of social work training and education which rarely considers animals as individual victims that need consideration (Hanrahan, 2011; Risley-Curtiss, 2010). This argument is not to further criticise or strain an already under-resourced profession but contends that mainstream social work is missing an important aspect of oppression by not considering animals (Wolf, 2000).

Social work has a social and moral obligation to consider invisibilised and underserved groups in society, including non-human animals (Witkin, 1998; Wolf, 2000). Matsuoka and Sorenson (2014) detailed four developments in human–animal relations that justify this, such as the introduction of animals in social work (i.e., using animals in therapy or interventions), the recognition of "the link" (i.e., where violence to animals is connected to violence to humans), the increased understanding of animal capabilities (i.e., animals' social, cognitive, and emotional experiences are now better understood), and the emergence of the animal rights movement which has further developed theories about marginalisation, oppression, and social justice to all living beings. They note the role of speciesism, which is species-based discrimination (Ryder, 2010; Singer, 1975), in social work, where people who are social justice advocates against discrimination only extend this consideration to human animals and not non-human animals within society (Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2014). This is reflected in the various codes of ethics for social work associations that outline their priorities based on what they emphasise and, more interestingly, what they do not.

There are differences in how social work approaches animals depending on context (Andrews, 2019; Graham et al., 2012); however, there are similarities across social work organisations. For example, the United States National Association for Social Work (NASW) excludes animals from their code of ethics, which Silberberg (2023) argued is the "antithesis of the very principles that guide the NASW and the profession at large" (p. 74). While animal abuse is a concern for the profession, the distinction is more on the presence of what that cruelty signifies about humans rather than the animals themselves experiencing cruelty (Chalmers et al., 2020). The code of ethics for the Australian Association for Social Work only notes that "an animal engaged as part of social work practice is protected" (AASW, 2020, p. 13). Similarly, the latest Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers code of ethics noted that they "recognise the sentience of animals and ensure that any animal engaged as part of our social work practice is protected" (ANZASW, 2019, p. 11). Neither stated what 'protected' or 'engaged' means, though the latter acknowledges animals are sentient; however, recognition of this does not assure compassionate treatment.

This was not always the case. Early social work connected the issues of abused children and animal welfare (LeBow & Cherney, 2015), with several organisations at the time recognising the connection between protecting both groups (Faver & Strand, 2008). Theorists argued that how people treat animals is indicative of how they can, by extension, treat human beings. The potential for abuse to animals to indicate abuse to humans is a concept colloquially known as "the link" (Ascione, 1993, 2008; Beirne, 1995). While the strength and effectiveness of the link are debated, evidence suggests that the exploitation and abuse of animals relate to the exploitation and abuse of humans (Adams & Donovan, 1995; Nibert, 2013).

We know that animals suffer—so why is social work not imminently concerned with preventing and ceasing their suffering? This question is peculiar as social work aims to promote social justice for vulnerable populations, and animals have been argued to be the most vulnerable individuals in society (Ryan, 2014; Satz, 2017). Animals exist within anthropocentric structures that benefit from their exploitation, though they are ascribed little to no agency or voice. Ignoring this suffering of animals reduces our ability to be compassionate (Faver & Strand, 2008). Until mainstream social work stops valuing animals as instruments, it will be difficult to consider them as individuals with their own rights and considerations. If considerations are made, it may not be for the animal victim per se, but more about the wellbeing of the (human) person who engages in this cruel behaviour, the (human) victims, and to consider the wider impacts on (human) society. For Wolf (2000), social workers ought to consider animals, not only for the profession and the people they serve, but for the animals themselves as members of society.

This vein of anthropocentrism is creating a blind spot for which cruelty and violence are left unchecked. This not only harms possums, who, as will be detailed in the case study below, are victims experiencing cruelty in the name of conservation but can also impact people who are being taught that care and compassion are context- and species-specific. Knowing that violence against animals is connected to violence against humans, we need to be concerned with how members of society treat animals—regardless of species or status. Animals are not normally considered, in social work at least, as a part of this social milieu (Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2014). However, animals are inextricably bound to human societies, whether they wish to be or not, and are key subjects within these societies. Their absence in these discussions reinforces that their interests, rights, and considerations are not important or relevant (Ryan, 2011). However, Regan (2004) argued that "what happens to [animals] matters to them" (p. xvi), which is one of the core reasons why social work should care about these beings who are *subjects of lives*.

The following case study discusses why social work should care about the treatment of pests in Aotearoa New Zealand. The arguments are heavily influenced by Critical Animal Studies (CAS), which aims to remove all forms of oppression and domination for all living beings (Nocella et al., 2014). CAS builds upon the idea that social work must consider every species of animal if the field truly wishes to target the systemic nature of oppression. Social work has a moral and social responsibility to assist in alleviating cruelty towards possums by advocating for more humane forms of education. This education can be supported by green social work and an ecofeminist ethic of care to benefit both humans *and* possums as members of New Zealand's society.

Animals in Aotearoa New Zealand: Where being 'cute' isn't enough

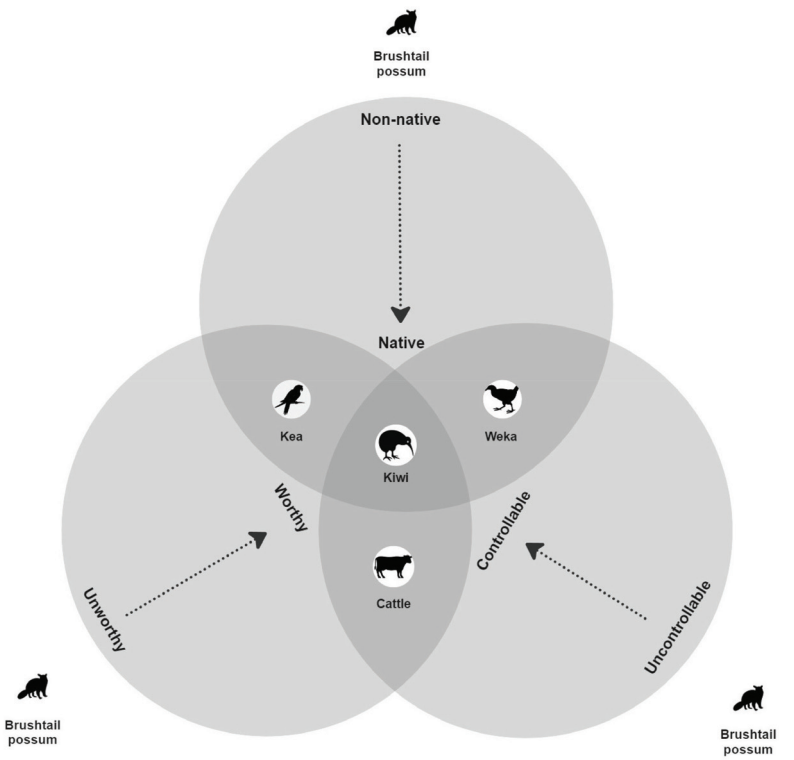
A society's relationships with, and subsequent treatment of, animals are historically situated (Cudworth, 2011). The attitudes towards animals are contextually bound to place, identity, and belonging (Philo & Wilbert, 2004; Urbanik, 2012). This concept is particularly pronounced for both native and introduced species in Aotearoa New Zealand. For many

New Zealanders (particularly Pākehā), their relationships with animals depend on the species and whether that species belongs which is decided through a consideration of their usefulness, controllability, and nativity (Major, 2023).

The landmass that would eventually become Aotearoa New Zealand was one of the few places on Earth known as a bird's paradise as it was almost entirely mammal-free before human settlement. The arrival of humans radically changed the environment through a series of intentional and unintentional introductions of foreign species. Some species, such as cattle and sheep, were introduced by settlers for their contribution to the nation's primary industries. Other species, such as rabbits and possums, were also deliberately introduced to create fur industries (King & Forsyth, 2021). While initial attitudes towards these species were favourable, they flourished without predators and became pests as they competed with native species. Some species are liminal depending on their status. For example, domestic cats are fiercely protected as family members and companion animals, whilst feral or wild cats are persecuted as pests (Farnworth et al., 2010; Palmer & Thomas, 2023).

Acceptance for a species depends on the intersection of nativity, controllability, and worthiness. Species that are deemed worthy and are easy to control can be given social licence to exist in Aotearoa New Zealand, regardless of their nativity status; however, if a species is difficult to control and considered not worthy, they are at risk of maltreatment. To illustrate the complexity of species belonging, a diagram was created for this paper to show the consequences of these three anthropocentrically defined (Pākehā) values in a New Zealand context (see Figure 1). As the definitions of *value*, *worth*, *controllable*, or even *native* are subject to perspective, this diagram may change.

Figure 1: Species Belonging Diagram



The most revered species in Aotearoa New Zealand are those who inhabit the centre of this diagram, where they are native, controllable, and worthy (such as kiwi). The species most despised are those on the periphery, where they are non-native, difficult to control, and not worthy (i.e., possums). Kiwi are unique tokens of rarity, which offers them inherent worth, but as flightless birds, they are also easily controllable. Their behaviour fits within society's expectations without becoming too much of a nuisance as other native birds can be, such as weka. Flightless weka are controllable, but their omnivorous diets and cheeky behaviour can make them less socially valuable. Belonging depends on whether the species is also controllable and adds (rather than detracts) value. While native status would assume the species has some inherent worth, there are some species, such as kea, which can be difficult to control and can be seen as pestilent depending on context. These species, based on their positioning in the diagram, are favoured less in society than kiwi.

Ultimately, belonging hinges on being controllable *and* valuable, with nativity status being an extra, but not necessary, benefit. For instance, sheep and cattle, vital to New Zealand's economy and pastoral identity (Potts et al., 2013), are easily controlled and valuable due to their role in agriculture. For them, being non-native does not preclude them from being seen positively in society. This positive attitude is anthropocentric and does not mean they are seen as subjective beings that are treated with compassion or empathy; rather, it points to their (lack of) social status and objectification. Other introduced species, such as possums, are treated differently as they are not as easily controllable—even if they hold some potential value (for example, their fur or flesh). Species like these that lie outside the accepted parameters are at increased risk of mistreatment and cruelty as social concern for them dissipates.

Possums exist outside the spheres of belonging for most New Zealanders. While they are valuable as a resource, they are not easily controllable. This combination, along with their status as vectors of bovine tuberculosis (which can potentially decimate Aotearoa New Zealand's beef and dairy industries), has relegated possums as pests, with government-sanctioned campaigns seeking to eradicate them by 2050. These sociocultural attitudes have led some people in Aotearoa New Zealand's society to treat them with cruelty as possums are culturally positioned as *anti-animals*—animals who are framed in opposition to nature, rather than being a part of it (Holm, 2015). For possums, who are charismatic mammals with large eyes and traditionally cute features, being cute is not enough to overcome the hatred and cruelty towards them.

Animal cruelty is defined as "socially unacceptable behavior that intentionally causes unnecessary pain, suffering, or distress to and/or the death of an animal" (Ascione, 1999, p. 51). However, cruelty to possums is framed as *not* cruelty, rather, cruel behaviour toward them is justified as a necessity for native species protection (Major, 2023). While not every person who believes in conserving and protecting native species will participate and rejoice in cruelty, there is increasing research that demonstrates those who do are individually at risk and, furthermore, that acceptance of these cruel behaviours also poses a risk for our societies more generally (SPCA LA, n.d.). For example, children who are raised to see "pest" animals as less-than will be more likely to engage in behaviours that would otherwise be seen as unacceptable if the animal in question were another species (McGuire et al., 2023). Unfortunately, there is little research on whether "pest" status correlates to increased abuse. This gap does not mean abuse does not occur, but suggests it is currently not a research priority.

Animal abuse (and the subsequent link to human abuse) in New Zealand was first identified in social work literature in 2012 (Roguski, 2012; Walker et al., 2015); however, the research is more concerned about the

abuse being an indicator of potential harm to humans. Animals, and their mistreatment, are relevant for social work given the connections between animal abuse and human abuse. Aotearoa New Zealand has the highest rate of family violence in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and animals are often weaponised as pawns in these abusive environments (Jury et al., 2018). Social work must address this moral imperative to combat cruelty and social malaise, extending its concern beyond pets to all animals—including pests.

Previous research and social commentaries have critiqued current approaches used in the name of "conservation" (Potts, 2009; Souther, 2016; Tulloch, 2018), such as the hunting and trapping "Predator Blitzes" (Auckland Council, 2017), school fundraising events, like the "Marsupial Madness Challenge" (James, 2023), and "pest"-hunting playgroups for preschoolers (Wise, 2023). These activities often include young children, their families, and wider community members to participate in hunting and trapping contests with prize categories such has the heaviest "pest" caught, highest number caught, and top hunters under specific ages (Paparoa School, 2023). For example, the North Canterbury Kids Hunt (2024) has three age groups of top hunters (under 6, under 11, and under 16), with prize values up to $350 per winner. These events are often considered community bonding exercises and are framed in the media as "all fur good cause" (*Bay of Plenty Times*, n.d., title). This use of puns is a prime example of how dark humour and misinformation are used in the media to justify the mistreatment of possums, which occurs with little to no consideration of how possums are being framed as villainous pests and the cruelty they sustain is problematic (Major, 2024). This has resulted in reports of events and activities that desecrate possums and their bodies in ways that are disrespectful and cruel, such as dead possum dress-up competitions (McQueeney, 2012) and possum-throwing contests (South, 2010; Tulloch, 2018). These events encourage community members, including children, to combine "pest" control with the winning of prizes, which may further gamify violence if not enough care is taken. These children, while being taught about gun safety and safe trapping, are not often learning about the importance of being respectful and kind to the targeted animals. While some organisations and community hunts are now including statements that killing should be "humane" (North Canterbury Kids Hunt, 2024), there is no description of what humane refers to and suggests the inclusion is more a box-ticking exercise.

This normalisation and desensitisation to violence has led some children to participate in cruelty disguised as conservation (Tulloch, 2018). For example, teenagers at Drury School's possum hunt were witnessed drowning joeys in a bucket of water after they were removed from their dead mothers (Tulloch, 2017). Drury School was initially insistent that the joeys were not deliberately harmed, but have since agreed to work with the SPCA to ensure "animal welfare requirements are met in future so that the focus is returned to the commendable intent of the fundraising itself" (Nightingale, 2017, para. 11). These events oversimplify conservation by teaching who is "good" (i.e., the humans and the native species being protected) and who is "bad" (i.e., the possums, stoats, and rats who deserve to die) (Morris, 2022).

The following section details why social work should care about possums and discusses some practical and theoretical steps forward that are informed by green social work and an ecofeminist ethic of care.

Possums, actually-humane education, and new social work approaches

Given the increasing evidence that cruelty to animals is individually and societally imperative it is important that social work consider other animals. This consideration must also include the treatment of pests who

are often victims of some of the worst kinds of socially sanctioned cruelty.

The gamification of conservation, where the human is the superhero against the villainous possum and prizes are given for winning (i.e., killing), engages children in conservation education, despite it posing serious ethical concerns for the field of social work (Willing, 2022). The compartmentalisation of who is good or bad can have discernible differences in treatment towards a species, "pest" or not. The possum has been aptly described as "the poster child for abused introduced species" (SAFE, 2024, para. 6). Conservation education should employ "actually-humane education" (Major, 2023). Inspired by Muller and McNeill's (2021) "actually-autistic" CAS discourse, actually-humane education is a dedicated form of anti-speciesist praxis that critiques and improves upon existing humane education and considers the role of both positive empathy and compassion in making education *actually*-humane. This approach, which is theoretical at this stage, seeks to clarify what humane means in the context of animals and their rights and aims to produce tangible, socially just outcomes of compassion and empathy in those who participate in these initiatives.

The importance of this to social work is paramount as social workers are likely to encounter people who exhibit violent social behaviours such as animal abuse. Abuse can be directed towards any species, though the social responses to this cruelty are often species-specific. This narrative reinforces certain beings, such as possums, are less deserving of compassionate and kind treatment because of their species membership. This bias operates much like how abuse and mistreatment are, or have been, taught about race, sex, age, or dis/ability. These statements do not mean that every person who engages in conservation will act with deliberate cruelty; however, they signify that a social hierarchy imbued with speciesism can allow cruelty to fall under the radar.

Actually-humane education supports anti-speciesist thinking to critically consider what humane means in an educational context, moving away from forms of education that are purely motivated by andro- and human-centric ideals. Current approaches humane-wash their marketing so these activities appear more considerate for the targeted animals than they actually are. For example, a biodiversity research report that investigated the humaneness of "pest" control in Aotearoa New Zealand referred to "relative welfare impacts" rather than "humaneness" as they recognised "truly humane control methods are rare" (Landcare Research, 2010, pp. 2,4), though they fail to delve into the moral and ethical implications of disregarding these methods.

Social work in Aotearoa New Zealand has already started to recognise the importance of training frontline social workers to recognise cruelty to animals as a predictor of deviance and potential cruelty to humans (Gullone, 2014; Roguski, 2012). Abuse towards any being is an explicit demonstration of power, dominance, and control (Gullone, 2014). Many instances of animal cruelty in social work literature exclusively highlight abuse towards animals within the family unit, such as cats or dogs (Faver & Strand, 2008; Risley-Curtiss, 2010). These companion animals are statistically the most often abused, though this could be due to their proximity to the home (Bègue, 2022). This closeness can also mean that abuse of companion animals is treated as more serious than abuse of wild animals, for example (Wong, 2023). The danger of this specific example is that the abuse of possums is constructed as necessary—and is therefore normalised—for conservation.

Cultures around the world favour certain species over others, signalling a blind spot where cruelty can be given a pass if the species is despised enough. In Aotearoa New Zealand, there are some exceptions to this rule in extreme cases of possum cruelty. For instance, in 2018, a video was shared on social media of a Waimate man violently punching

a possum off a fence while his friends cheered him on. Some local commentaries posed the question of whether the video was "animal cruelty or simply a case of "pest" control" (Leahy, 2018, para. 5). At the time, the national and international backlash was immediate, claiming this treatment was undoubtedly cruel; however, more casual forms of cruelty to possums are socially sanctioned and not responded to in the same way. Out of curiosity, I followed up with the SPCA to inquire about whether anyone was subsequently charged with animal cruelty in the Waimate case. Unfortunately, no one was found or prosecuted despite it being filmed. The fact the animal was a possum likely played a role in the silence that protected the abuser from facing prosecution in either the legal or public courts of justice. Countering this requires collaboration to support actually-humane education which nurtures empathy, compassion, and kindness in society. There are several approaches, such as green social work and an ecofeminist ethic of care which can be beneficial in supporting the integration of actually-humane education in social work.

Green social work and (eco)feminist ethic of care

"Green social work", which has also been called "environmental social work" (Dominelli, 2012; Teixeira & Krings, 2018), recognises how the environment plays a central role in social wellbeing and health (Dominelli, 2018). The increasing degradation of the natural environment and accelerated rate of climate change is causing increased strain and pressure on communities, particularly those who are vulnerable or marginalised as they are the first to feel the effects. Social work theorists argue that ecological impacts on communities should also be considered if social work aims to evolve with the changing planet and social needs (Gray et al., 2012; Shaw, 2013). This *environmental turn* for social work is not necessarily a new concept, though the inclusion of animals and their rights (i.e., an *animal turn*), has yet to perforate mainstream discussions of green social work. A significant amount of the green social work material is human-centric (Dominelli, 2012). Animals are often excluded in social work research unless the information is coming from intersectional scholars who already recognise animals as sentient beings that are a part of the fabric of society (Walker et al., 2015). Given animals—regardless of their species—are members of society and are impacted by changes in the environment, they should inherently be included in social work and its green initiatives.

An ecofeminist ethic of care can also be beneficial for social work and actually-humane education. A feminist ethic of care prioritises emotion in how we approach animal ethics and questions how oppression, domination, and exploitation are influenced and supported by androcentric values from the patriarchy (Donovan & Adams, 2007). Adams and Donovan (1995) previously argued that the domination of women was modelled after the domination of animals, so this connection between feminism and speciesism is important to investigate further. My intentional reference here to an *eco*feminist ethic of care—rather than just a feminist ethic of care—is to explicitly consider how care should consider more than just gender. Ecofeminists prioritise contextual relationships and emotions (a feminine approach) over abstract reasoning and logic (i.e., a masculine approach). They recognise how patriarchy and speciesism are social systems which are set up to favour men through the exploitation of women and nature (Giacomini et al., 2018). The intersectional approach of combining feminism and the environment assists with addressing social work's key objective of targeting oppression.

Fraser and Taylor (2024) argued that incorporating a feminist ethic of care into social work can offer a wider framework to examine social justice and ethics. While Fraser and Taylor did not specify an *eco*feminist ethic of care for social work, the environment undoubtedly plays a fundamental role in the facilitation of oppression, exploitation, and domination, and is thus crucial to consider. These values of care and emotion can be treated as inferior to reason and logic

where the human is the primary focus. The profession needs to consider how to pivot to become species-inclusive rather than species-exclusive social work (Fraser & Taylor, 2020, 2024). Matsuoka and Sorenson (2014) argued:

> Animal issues are not simply sentimental concerns … they are political-economic matters fundamental to the most pressing social issues ... social justice cannot be achieved without addressing institutional contexts that perpetuate systemic oppression: that is addressing trans-species social justice. (p. 76)

Trans-species social justice is defined as "consideration of interests of all animals (including humans) in order to achieve institutional conditions free from oppression and domination" (Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2014, p. 70). These ideas hinge on being intersectional. Theorised initially by American law professor, Kimberlé Crenshaw (2005), intersectionality recognises how oppressions can overlap to create new forms of domination and exploitation. While Crenshaw wrote about the intersection between sexism and racism, the role of species can also be used for countering oppression imposed on marginalised groups. Moving forward to encompass trans-species social justice, social work ought to "encourage its students, educators, scholars, and practitioners to become informed about environmental, political, and economic issues connected with treatment of animals" (Wolf, 2000, p. 91). This discussion should not prioritise specific species of animals, but consider all species, including marginalised species like possums. Only until then can social work continue to target the very nature of oppression.

Conclusion

Social work has traditionally prioritised social justice for society, where *society* typically refers to human beings. However, animals are just as much a part of society as humans—and given this, they should also be considered within the objectives of social work. This article explored social work within Aotearoa New Zealand and argued that species-inclusivity is required if social work truly seeks to reduce societal oppression and cruelty. Possums, who are pests to the nation for their threat to primary industries and perceived impacts on flora and fauna, were introduced as a case study to illustrate how cruelty can be disguised as "pest" control. There are concerning impacts on the field of social work if the abuse of animals deemed to not belong is left unabated. To articulate species belonging, a diagram was created that illustrates three intersecting values: nativity, controllability, and worthiness. The consequences of these human-defined values are dire for possums as they are not only non-native, but they are difficult to control and are largely deemed unworthy by mainstream society. This juncture can foster a culture of cruelty that is enacted in the name of conservation. To address this, actually-humane education, which seeks to critique the definition of humane, is a possibility that should be considered. Actually-humane education can benefit from the incorporation of green social work and an ecofeminist ethic of care as these approaches offer proactive solutions for engendering empathy and compassion which can benefit, not only possums, but individual people and wider society.

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