

Case #4: Indigenous peoples vs. Endangered Species

In the Amazon rainforest of Brazil, indigenous fishermen kill pink river dolphins for profit. They use the dolphins' meat as bait to catch fish that they sell to customers outside of their community. They also sell the dolphins' genitals as good luck charms and oil from their fat as a treatment for rheumatism. Killing the dolphins is central to sustaining the native way of life. But the dolphins are an endangered species, with around 30,000 remaining and thousands killed every year.¹ Because the dolphin population may become extinct if the killing continues, Brazilian environmental laws make it illegal to kill a pink river dolphin. Indeed, the crime of killing a pink dolphin is punishable by up to four years in prison, setting up a potentially dramatic conflict between ancient culture and animal rights.²

Dolphins may not be the only part of the ecosystem in jeopardy. In recent years, the international community has begun to recognize the plight of indigenous peoples and their central role in ecosystems. Many argue that their cultures must be respected and preserved. Their practices contain potentially vital knowledge about natural food and medicine which has been passed on from generation to generation through the millennia. In fact, in 2007, the UN passed a resolution which recognizes that respect for indigenous knowledge, cultures, and traditional practices contributes to sustainable and equitable development and proper management of the environment. Because the practice of killing the pink river dolphin is not only an integral but also a traditional aspect of the indigenous fishing communities in Brazil, it cannot simply be dismissed as barbaric.

Environmentalists don't deny that indigenous cultures deserve respect, but the plight of the pink dolphin, among other species threatened by indigenous cultures, tests the limits of this respect. Animal rights groups argue that endangered animal species must be protected from the harms resulting from practices of indigenous peoples. While human beings have many different cultures, there is only one pink river dolphin species. They point out that the pink river dolphin is not only a part of the natural ecosystem of the rain forest but also an iconic figure in local folklore. These advocates may support protecting the pink river dolphin—and prioritizing enforcement of the laws that are already in place to protect them—despite the adverse consequences that may be suffered by the indigenous population.

¹ Hotel Arcos Del Real, "Habits and a new path towards sustainable fishing," <http://www.hotelarcosdelreal.com/2011/05/30/>, May 30, 2011.

² "Fisherman in Amazon See a Rival in Dolphins," The New York Times (April 17, 2011), <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/17/world/americas/17dolphins.html>