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Multispecies Justice and Wildlife Care in the Colombian Amazon: A Framework of University Responsibilities

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Abstract

Wildlife care in the Colombian Amazon raised interconnected cultural, ethical, and legal questions concerning human–animal relationships and institutional responsibilities. This study developed a conceptual framework for university responsibilities in wildlife care, with particular attention to Universidad de la Amazonia. A qualitative critical integrative review combined scholarly literature, Colombian legal instruments, and university documents available through December 31, 2023. Documented controversies served as the units of analysis, encompassing cultural meanings, individual animal welfare, continuity of care, release decisions, and institutional authority. The synthesis formulated four complementary domains of university responsibility: contextual education, oversight of care and research, interdisciplinary deliberation, and coordination of information. It distinguished applicable legal duties, bioethical grounds for responsibility, and proposed institutional arrangements. The framework connected community participation and cultural understanding with the assessment of individual animal welfare while preserving the decision-making role of competent environmental authorities. The proposed traceability arrangements linked custody records, technical assessments, reasons for decisions, and follow-up arrangements. The analysis also distinguished administrative records of interventions from evidence of welfare or conservation outcomes. The resulting framework specified how educational, research, and deliberative capacities could support accountable wildlife care from a multispecies justice perspective. Its contribution remained conceptual and documentary; implementation, feasibility, and animal welfare and ecological outcomes required subsequent empirical evaluation.

Keywords: *Multispecies Justice, Animal Welfare, Bioethics, Environmental Law, Higher Education, Colombian Amazon*

Introduction

Protecting wildlife requires attention to the relationships through which societies understand, use, care for, and regulate other living beings. Anthropology has challenged the presumed universality of the nature–culture divide, demonstrating that understandings of animals are embedded in particular histories and relationships (Descola, 2005/2013). Multispecies ethnography and related scholarship extend this perspective by examining how human lives are constituted alongside other organisms and what responsibilities arise from these interdependencies (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010; van Dooren et al., 2016). These approaches situate wildlife care within a broader cultural, ethical, and institutional inquiry, making it a relevant concern for the environmental humanities and for institutions involved in producing environmental knowledge.

In the Amazon, this inquiry is particularly pertinent because wildlife is implicated in diverse relationships involving food, territory, and community life. Morsello et al. (2015) identified the importance of cultural attitudes in wild meat consumption in Brazilian and Colombian localities, while Ponta et al. (2019) explored Indigenous hunting strategies through a participatory exercise in the Colombian Amazon. Gómez and van Vliet (2018) also identified tensions between separate regulatory regimes for fishing and wild meat and subsistence practices that combine both resources. Together, these studies support context-sensitive interventions that recognize differences among communities and the multiple meanings of human–wildlife relationships. They caution against treating locally situated practices as expressions of a single, homogeneous rationale.

Multispecies justice provides a perspective for examining whose interests receive consideration and how those interests are represented in collective decision-making (Celermajer et al., 2021). Bringing this

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perspective into dialogue with the ethics of care draws attention to dependencies, vulnerabilities, and the material conditions that sustain life. Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) develops the ethical and political implications of care beyond the human, while Barnett (2023) emphasizes the importance of sustaining the relationships that make care possible. Applied to institutional settings, these approaches invite scrutiny of how knowledge is produced, responsibilities are allocated, and decisions affecting animals and human communities are justified.

Such an inquiry also requires conceptual clarity about animal welfare. Fraser et al. (1997) relate welfare science to ethical concerns about biological functioning, subjective experiences, and opportunities for animals to live in accordance with their nature. The Five Domains Model integrates nutrition, physical environment, health, behavioral interactions, and mental state, explicitly addressing the effects of human–animal interactions (Mellor et al., 2020). This focus on individuals complements conservation assessment: Beausoleil et al. (2018) advocate closer integration of welfare and conservation objectives through shared terminology and interdisciplinary collaboration. The ecological value of an intervention therefore needs to be considered alongside its consequences for the individual animals affected.

This integration remains contested. Wallach et al. (2018) advocate compassion and consideration for individual animals within conservation practice, whereas Oommen et al. (2019) challenge the assumptions and implications of particular formulations of compassionate conservation. Their debate underscores the need to articulate evaluative criteria, assess alternatives, and account for context when individual welfare and ecological objectives come into tension. For wildlife held in human care and considered for release, this entails grounding decisions in relevant knowledge about the animal, the receiving environment, and feasible management options. It also requires acknowledging uncertainty rather than assuming that a conservation objective alone establishes the appropriateness of an intervention.

In Colombia, these controversies arise within a legal framework addressing both animal and ecosystem protection. Law 1774 of 2016 recognizes animals as sentient beings, while judgment STC4360-2018 recognizes the Colombian Amazon as a subject of rights (Congreso de Colombia, 2016; Corte Suprema de Justicia, 2018). Their implications require differentiated interpretation: protecting ecosystems and safeguarding the interests of individual animals involve related but distinct legal questions (Stilt, 2021). Research on biocultural rights and the implementation of the rights of nature further demonstrates the importance of specifying participation, representation, and responsibilities when translating legal recognition into practice (Macpherson et al., 2020; Richardson & Bustos, 2023).

Research in the Colombian Amazon gives these tensions concrete institutional relevance. In their assessment of Caquetá, Estrada-Cely et al. (2019) identified limited use of the legally available options for managing confiscated wildlife. Subsequently, Estrada et al. (2023) examined Corpoamazonía records covering Amazonas, Caquetá, and Putumayo during 2019–2021 and identified shortcomings in release documentation and in the information available on habitat assessment, genetic characterization, and post-release monitoring. These findings establish gaps in documentation and uncertainty about outcomes; they do not, by themselves, demonstrate that releases failed. For the present inquiry, they support examining the evidence underlying management decisions and the relationships among knowledge, care, and institutional accountability.

Earlier contributions explicitly connected scientific, ethical, and legal considerations. Estrada Cely et al. (2017) proposed a bioethical methodology for decisions concerning captive wildlife, addressing individual cases in relation to human interests, animal welfare, and ecosystem protection. Estrada Cely (2020) subsequently examined dilemmas concerning quality of life and suffering involving euthanasia, excessive or nonbeneficial treatment, and dysthanasia, understood as the undue prolongation of dying. In education, Méndez Parra and Estrada Cely (2019) proposed bioethical ecopedagogy as an approach to critically examining human relationships with wildlife. These contributions provide an established foundation for investigating specific university responsibilities, connecting ethical deliberation and education with an understanding of local social and environmental conditions. They also require the present study to acknowledge that interdisciplinary integration already forms part of the regional literature.

The educational dimension requires attention to how environmental understandings are constructed. At a school in Belén de los Andaquíes, Caquetá, Sánchez Castillo et al. (2017) identified differences between students' and teachers' perceptions, including understandings that separated humans from nature. In

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Florencia, López de Parra et al. (2021) connected the sociocultural and socioenvironmental dimensions of community-based ecotourism with an educational proposal informed by local participation. Although these studies addressed settings other than wildlife care, they support educational approaches attentive to situated meanings, experiences, and relationships. Their relevance to wildlife controversies must therefore be established through explicit contextual reasoning, with communities recognized as participants in knowledge production.

Universidad de la Amazonia provides a relevant institutional setting for developing this connection. Sánchez Castillo et al. (2016) question whether expanding access is sufficient to ensure higher education quality and relate institutional mission fulfillment to social outcomes. Law 30 of 1992 includes environmental preservation and ecological education among the objectives of higher education (Congreso de Colombia, 1992, art. 6). More specifically, Estrada-Cely (2018) documented the foundations and procedures of the university's Ethics, Bioethics, and Animal Welfare Committee for reviewing research and teaching activities involving live animals. These precedents support examining responsibilities for education, research, and deliberation while distinguishing university contributions from the decision-making powers assigned to environmental authorities.

The convergence of these contributions raises an analytical question: how can cultural understanding, welfare assessment, and legal interpretation be translated into justified university responsibilities in specific wildlife controversies? Existing studies provide assessments of regional conditions, deliberative tools, and educational orientations. Bringing them together requires clarifying whose perspectives should be heard, which interests should be considered, who has authority to decide, and what reasons should be documented. The research need lies in establishing these connections within an Amazonian university context, acknowledging previous interdisciplinary work while distinguishing legal obligations, bioethical criteria, and institutional recommendations.

Accordingly, this article asks: what framework of university responsibilities can guide wildlife care in the Colombian Amazon by integrating anthropological, bioethical, and legal perspectives? Its objective is to develop such a framework from literature and documents published by December 31, 2023, and legal provisions applicable on that date, and to examine its potential application and limitations at Universidad de la Amazonia. The analysis is framed as a critical integrative review combining thematic synthesis and legal interpretation, with attention to controversies surrounding the keeping of wild animals, custody, continuity of care, and possible release. Its intended contribution is a framework linking documented controversies to university responsibilities according to their legal, bioethical, or institutional basis, while specifying relevant actors, conditions, and limits.

Methodology

The study was designed as a qualitative critical integrative review combining scholarly synthesis, legal interpretation, and institutional document analysis. This approach supported conceptual development across heterogeneous sources (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005). The documentary scope comprised academic publications, Colombian legislation and judgments, and publicly available Universidad de la Amazonia documents.

Searches covered SciELO, Redalyc, Dialnet, Google Scholar, publisher platforms, and institutional repositories. English and Spanish search terms combined wildlife, human–wildlife relationships, care, animal welfare, bioethics, multispecies justice, animal law, and rights of nature. Territorial searches added Amazon, Colombia, or Caquetá; foundational theoretical searches remained geographically unrestricted. Official sources supplied legislation, judgments, and university documents. Reference checking complemented database searches, with queries, search dates, and selection decisions recorded.

Eligibility depended on identifiable authorship or institutional provenance, compliance with the temporal cutoff, substantive relevance, and sufficient accessible content for appraisal. Duplicates, incidental mentions, and publications beyond the cutoff were excluded. Empirical studies were assessed for methodological transparency and evidentiary limitations; conceptual works for argumentative coherence; legal sources for authority, applicability, and the distinction between binding decisions and dissenting opinions; and institutional documents for provenance and purpose. Selection and coding disagreements were resolved through team discussion and documented.

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The documented controversy constituted the unit of analysis. An extraction matrix recorded context, actors, affected animals, cultural meanings, welfare considerations, legal rules, decision-making powers, and evidentiary limitations. Thematic synthesis proceeded through coding, descriptive themes, and analytical themes, adapting Thomas and Harden (2008). Initial anthropological, bioethical, and legal categories were refined through comparison across documents, including contradictory positions. Reflexive notes recorded assumptions associated with the authors' institutional connections.

The synthesis linked each controversy to supporting evidence, competing interests, relevant principles, responsible actors, proposed actions, and implementation conditions. The analysis distinguished legal duties, bioethical grounds for responsibility, and proposed institutional actions. Application to Universidad de la Amazonia was examined conceptually against documented activities and institutional powers. The resulting framework constituted an interpretive contribution rather than an empirical evaluation of institutional performance or animal welfare outcomes.

Results

The documentary synthesis connected four decision contexts: human–wildlife relationships and keeping, institutional custody, continuity of care, and possible release. Their comparison produced a framework linking cultural interpretation, animal welfare, legal authority, and university responsibilities. The findings distinguished evidence reported in the reviewed studies from the responsibilities formulated through the present analysis.

Cultural meanings and participation in wildlife care

The reviewed studies revealed heterogeneous relationships with wildlife. Morsello et al. (2015) associated wild meat consumption in Brazilian and Colombian Amazonian towns with cultural attitudes and social relationships. Ponta et al. (2019) showed that participants in a Colombian Amazonian role-playing exercise explained hunting decisions through food preferences, livelihood insecurity, and cultural practices. Their findings concerned situated relationships and participatory scenarios; they did not establish a uniform Amazonian attitude towards wildlife or directly predict behaviour outside the exercise.

In Caquetá, Sánchez Castillo et al. (2017) identified differences between teachers' and students' environmental understandings at an agricultural school in Belén de los Andaquíes. Environmental education remained concentrated in particular subjects, while conservation and production were insufficiently integrated. This school-based evidence supplied a contextual precedent for examining how educational institutions organized environmental knowledge. Its transfer to university wildlife education remained an analytical inference, because the study had not evaluated university practices or animal care.

Across these sources, cultural interpretation emerged as a requirement for defining a controversy before prescribing an intervention. The synthesis therefore distinguished subsistence practices, commercial exchange, keeping animals, and authorized care as situations requiring separate contextual and legal examination. Community participation was incorporated into the proposed framework at the stage of defining problems and alternatives. Recognition of local knowledge was linked to scrutiny of consequences for animals, communities, and ecosystems, without treating cultural explanation as legal authorization.

Individual welfare and the continuity of care

Comparison of the welfare literature identified distinct evaluative concerns. Beausoleil et al. (2018) integrated animals' physical functioning and subjective experiences within conservation welfare. Mellor et al. (2020) related nutrition, physical environment, health, and behavioural interactions to cautiously inferred mental states. Their model included opportunities for positive experiences and the effects of human conduct. These contributions supported examining handling, housing, behavioural opportunities, and staff practices throughout custody, with assessment adapted to species and circumstances.

A regional precedent already connected these concerns with legal deliberation. Estrada-Cely et al. (2017) organized decisions concerning captive wildlife through an ethical framework, interdisciplinary assessment, guiding principles, legal examination, selection of an option, and a written report. They considered individual requirements and feasibility while retaining the environmental authority's final decision. The present synthesis consequently identified documented reasoning and allocation of responsibility as existing foundations on which a university framework could build.

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The comparison also exposed a philosophical difference. The 2017 methodology adopted a humanist orientation that prioritized fundamental human interests, such as life and health, whereas Celermajer et al. (2021) questioned assumptions that automatically privileged human interests within justice. The synthesis retained this disagreement as a matter for explicit deliberation. It required the proposed framework to record whose interests were prioritized, what harms were anticipated, and how competing claims were justified. Within the proposed framework, continuity of care was formulated as a bioethical responsibility to revisit those judgments when an animal's condition, available resources, or feasible destinations changed.

Release decisions and gaps in documentary evidence

The clearest regional evidence concerned the information supporting release decisions. Estrada et al. (2023) examined Corpoamazonía records for Amazonas, Caquetá, and Putumayo during 2019–2021. The release documentation contained limited location information and lacked recorded descriptions of habitat assessment, genetic characterization, and post-release monitoring. Their analysis also connected these processes with the Universidad de la Amazonia wildlife transit facility. These findings established limitations in the records examined and constrained assessment of subsequent outcomes; they did not establish that every release failed or that monitoring never occurred.

The synthesis distinguished three evidentiary questions: whether a disposition had been authorized, whether the intervention and its justification had been documented, and whether its consequences had been evaluated. A recorded release answered only part of this sequence. Accordingly, release totals alone were insufficient evidence of improved welfare or conservation success. The analysis likewise provided no basis for assuming that continued captivity or alternative wildlife uses necessarily produced better outcomes.

Documentary continuity became a specific responsibility within the framework. The proposed case record connected provenance, clinical and behavioural assessment, the alternatives considered, the competent decision-maker, the destination, and arrangements for follow-up. This proposal extended the analytical use of information already required in custody records under Resolution 2064 of 2010 (Ministerio de Ambiente, Vivienda y Desarrollo Territorial [MAVDT], 2010, arts. 5, 7, and 15). It also made uncertainty explicit: information unavailable at a decision point remained distinguishable from an adverse outcome subsequently observed.

Legal protection and the allocation of authority

The legal analysis identified complementary forms of protection with different objects. Law 1774 of 2016 recognized animals as sentient beings and established principles concerning protection and welfare (Congreso de Colombia, 2016, arts. 1–3). Judgment STC4360-2018 recognized the Colombian Amazon as a rights-bearing entity and directed public authorities to undertake protective measures (Corte Suprema de Justicia, 2018). Neither instrument, read alone, established the appropriate destination of an individual animal in institutional custody.

This distinction corresponded to Stilt's (2021) analysis of the connections and tensions between animal law and rights of nature. The synthesis treated individual welfare, ecological protection, and legal competence as related questions requiring separate justification. Recognition of animal sentience was not equated with a general grant of legal personhood, and the Amazon judgment was not interpreted as an authorization for the university to exercise environmental regulatory powers.

Resolution 2064 made the allocation of authority particularly clear. Its preference for release depended on the relevant conditions and assessment of harm to the specimen and receiving ecosystem; release activities were reserved to competent environmental authorities (MAVDT, 2010, art. 12). The resulting framework therefore distinguished academic advice and ethical review from administrative authorization. University activities involving wildlife custody or other regulated interventions required the relevant authorizations and coordination with the competent authority.

University foundations for education and accountable research

The university connection rested on documented educational and procedural foundations. Law 30 of 1992 included environmental preservation, ecological education, regional development, and institutional cooperation among the statutory objectives of higher education (Congreso de Colombia, 1992, art. 6). Sánchez Castillo et al. (2016) connected university quality with research and social engagement beyond

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expansion in enrolment. Together, these sources supported evaluating the proposed responsibilities through their educational and territorial relevance, with activity counts treated as incomplete evidence of contribution.

Estrada-Cely (2018) described an existing institutional mechanism in the Ethics, Bioethics, and Animal Welfare Committee of Universidad de la Amazonia. The documented procedures addressed live-animal research and teaching, alternatives to animal use, anticipated harms, housing, final disposition, and investigator commitments. They provided an organizational basis for reviewing how research and teaching affected animals. The source described responsibilities and procedures; it did not establish compliance rates or demonstrate that committee review had improved welfare outcomes.

The educational literature supplied complementary foundations. Méndez Parra and Estrada Cely (2019) linked ecopedagogy, bioethics, and wildlife conservation through a documentary review. López de Parra et al. (2021) showed how dialogue with community ecotourism actors in Florencia informed educational priorities and revealed practical constraints on participation. Their contributions supported a proposed educational function connecting ecological knowledge, cultural interpretation, ethical reasoning, and legal literacy. Adapting these contributions to university wildlife care required attention to the different settings in which the original work had been conducted.

An integrated framework of university responsibilities

The cross-document comparison produced four complementary domains of university responsibility: contextual education, oversight of care and research, interdisciplinary deliberation, and coordination of information. Table 1 specified their proposed contributions, the basis and limits of responsibility, and the documentary outputs through which implementation could later be examined. These domains were formulated as an analytical framework; their inclusion did not imply institutional adoption or validated effects.

Table 1. Framework derived from the documentary synthesis

Responsibility domain	University contribution proposed	Basis and boundary	Documentary output proposed
Contextual education	Participatory examination of wildlife practices and integration of cultural, welfare, and legal knowledge.	Higher education mission and bioethical recognition; compliance with applicable wildlife law.	Locally informed learning objectives and a record of perspectives and disagreements.
Care and research oversight	Review of animal use, anticipated harms, care arrangements, and responsibilities throughout custody.	Applicable protection duties and ethical oversight within authorized institutional activities.	Assessment of alternatives, welfare considerations, responsibilities, and review points.
Interdisciplinary deliberation	Case-based comparison of feasible options and their consequences for animals, people, and ecosystems.	Bioethical justification and legal review; preservation of the competent authority's decision.	Reasoned assessment identifying alternatives, uncertainties, and grounds for the recommended option.
Information and coordination	Connection of custody records, technical advice, administrative decisions, and agreed follow-up.	Applicable recordkeeping requirements and cooperation within each institution's powers.	Traceable case history and documented allocation of follow-up responsibilities.

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Source: Authors' synthesis of the reviewed literature and legal instruments. The proposed outputs were analytical recommendations, not observations of institutional implementation.

Three grounds for assigning responsibilities remained distinguishable. Legal duties followed from applicable provisions and the institution's role in a specific activity. Bioethical grounds addressed the justification of actions affecting vulnerable beings, including concerns extending beyond minimum compliance. Institutional recommendations translated those grounds into arrangements for teaching, research, documentation, and cooperation. A proposed action could have more than one foundation, but its legal status was not inferred from its ethical desirability.

The framework's integrative contribution lay in connecting cultural interpretation to the definition of the problem, welfare evidence to the assessment of consequences, and legal analysis to the allocation of decision-making authority. It made those connections explicit at identifiable points in the care process. Existing regional contributions supplied the foundations, while the synthesis specified how they could inform university responsibilities. The documentary evidence supported this conceptual application to Universidad de la Amazonia; the framework's feasibility, implementation, and effects on animal welfare remained matters for subsequent evaluation.

Conclusions

This study developed a conceptual framework for university responsibilities in wildlife care in the Colombian Amazon by integrating anthropological interpretation, bioethical reasoning, and legal analysis. The synthesis indicated that responsible institutional involvement depended on understanding the cultural context of human–wildlife relationships, assessing the welfare and interests of affected animals, and identifying the authority associated with each decision. These dimensions provided complementary grounds for examining controversies involving keeping, custody, continuity of care, and possible release.

For Universidad de la Amazonia, the framework connected four functions: contextual education, oversight of care and research, interdisciplinary deliberation, and coordination of information. Its contribution lay in specifying how existing educational and deliberative foundations could inform identifiable responsibilities, documented decisions, and arrangements for cooperation. Community perspectives entered the framework through the definition of problems and alternatives, while welfare assessment directed attention to the consequences of institutional activities for individual animals.

The analysis distinguished applicable legal duties, bioethical grounds for responsibility, and proposed institutional arrangements. This distinction clarified the basis on which each contribution was justified and the limits within which it could be exercised. The framework preserved the decision-making role of the competent environmental authority and situated university contributions within education, research, ethical review, and authorized cooperation. Ethical desirability alone provided insufficient grounds for treating a proposed institutional action as a statutory obligation.

Traceability emerged as a central condition for accountability. The proposed connection between custody records, technical assessments, reasons for decisions, and follow-up arrangements made evidentiary gaps explicit. The synthesis distinguished information about an intervention from evidence of its consequences: an administrative record of release did not establish improved welfare or conservation success, while missing outcome information did not establish failure. This distinction supported more transparent assessment of uncertainty and the identification of information needed for subsequent evaluation.

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