

Bioethical decision making in hippopotamus management

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Framework Sc. 5

Type: Case Study | 05/05/25

OWM No. 5

SUMMARY

This study analyses the different options for managing the hippo population in Colombia. In the 1990s hippos were introduced into the wild following their release from captivity. They bred in the wild and, as non-native animals, have since caused problems for the local ecosystem including pollution of rivers and driving out native fauna. They have also been a mixed blessing for the human population, as the hippos can be dangerous (e.g by causing road accidents) although they have also brought benefits too such as boosting tourism. The Colombian authorities have explored various options for management of the hippos in ways that are ethical and support the welfare of animals, people and the environment. As part of this they have set up a bioethical council comprising multidisciplinary experts to advise on potential policies using a One Welfare approach.

Management options that have been considered are: 1- moving some of the animals to other countries (e.g. to reserves); 2 – surgical castration; and 3 -culling. To date, the main policy adopted has been surgical castration, although this presents logistical difficulties capturing and operating on the hippos and of itself has not been sufficient to bring down the population to manageable levels. The researchers in this study identified additional options that can help drive forward future policy: 1. better education of the local population; 2. carry out research to better inform on the damage to the ecosystem including native fauna and; 3. carrying out an impact assessment of the various control options on hippo and human populations. Subsequently, in 2024, a Government Resolution was enacted, adopting a plan for the prevention, handling and control of hippopotamus.

Case study impacts

- Negative impact on human populations resulting from hippo aggression and harms the environment with implications for the native ecosystem.
- Benefits from greater awareness of hippos and tourism.
- Population control can help manage the human-hippo conflicts.
- Following the research, the Plan for the prevention, control and management of common hippopotamus emerged (Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development - Resolution 0774 of 2024).

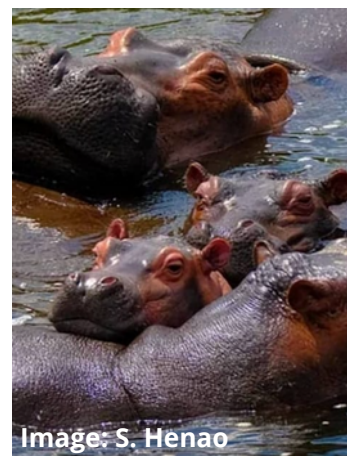


Image: S. Henao

Hippopotamus in Colombian river



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**ONE
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One Welfare Pillars

ANIMAL WELFARE



- Health and welfare of hippos can be improved by better management of the population (less competition for space and resources).
- Welfare of native fauna would benefit from reduced hippo numbers

HUMAN WELLBEING



- Better education of people about hippos increases empathy, can help reduce human-hippo conflict and provides opportunities for positive tourist interactions.

ENVIRONMENT



Physical

- Improved management of native ecosystems and the environment.

Social environment

- Better quality of human-animal relationships, reduced conflict/aggressions, raising public awareness.

Multidisciplinary relevant areas

Animal welfare professionals, environmental specialists, indigenous population representatives, government officials

References / Source

- Bioethical decision making in hippopotamus management in Colombia.. One Welfare Conference Proceedings , Burgos, 2023. ISBN - 139780853583530 ([13https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwEuWdszIKY&t=2504s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwEuWdszIKY&t=2504s))
- National Plan for the prevention, management and control of hippopotamus, Colombia Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development - Resolution 0774 of 2024

