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Animal welfare is increasingly important in the understanding of how human activity affects wildlife, but the conservation community is still grappling with meaningful terminology when communicating this aspect of their work. One example is the use of the terms “humane” and “inhumane.” These terms are used in scientific contexts, but they also have legal and social definitions. Without reference to a defined technical standard, describing an action or outcome as humane (or inhumane) constrains science communication because the terms have variable definitions; establish a binary (something is either humane or inhumane); and imply underlying values reflecting a moral prescription. Invoking the term “humane,” and especially the strong antithesis “inhumane,” can infer a normative judgment of how animals ought to be treated (humane) or ought not to be treated (inhumane). The consequences of applying this terminology are not just academic. Publicizing certain practices as humane can create blurred lines around contentious animal welfare questions and, perhaps intentionally, defer scrutiny of actual welfare outcomes. Labeling other practices as inhumane can be used cynically to erode their public support. We suggest that, if this normative language is used in science, it should always be accompanied by a clear, contextual definition of what is meant by humane.

Key words: animal welfare, ethics, procedural documents, science communications, social norms.

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