The principle of Reverence for Life grounded Albert Schweitzer’s thought and guided his life. For us today, it has implications not only for how we treat our fellow human beings, but how we treat all of life, especially other-than-human animals. I became interested in the life and thought of Albert Schweitzer in the late 1990s, and was particularly captivated by his idea of Reverence for Life, as this idea applied to human–animal relationships. In this chapter, I discuss Reverence for Life in relation to animals because I believe Schweitzer’s relations to animals have not been fully appreciated in the context of his theory. I begin with analyses of several incidents where Schweitzer developed his sense of compassion for and connection with animals. Two popular books bring together passages of his work that concern animals (Free, 1988; Schweitzer & Joy, 1950). I discuss passages of these books in relation to education about animals, developing further ideas that I explored initially in my book on Schweitzer and education (Rud, 2011). I then make an argument for an expanded sense of human interaction and relation to other-than-human animals by connecting the idea of Reverence for Life to John Dewey’s pragmatic naturalism (Hickman, 2013) and to the movement called “rewilding,” and I conclude with a meditation upon the possibility of a reverent, rewilded, sustainable future where human animals exist alongside non-human animals rather than over them. I present reasons to reject anthropocentrism in Schweitzer’s Reverence for Life, Dewey’s pragmatic naturalism and natural piety, and in the new idea of rewilding.
Reverence for Life

The principle of Reverence for Life grounded Schweitzer’s thought and centers his life’s work, but it did not come easily to him. Schweitzer struggled to focus his life on his ideals and to do something constructive rather than to be part of the end-of-century pessimism. To him the struggle for a moral foundation “felt like someone who has to replace a rotten boat that is no longer seaworthy with a new and better one, but does not know how to proceed” (Schweitzer, 1998, p. 154). He sought a core principle to affirm civilization and to make it whole from the inside out, not merely from the outside in terms of science, progress, and power. Thus, Schweitzer’s Reverence for Life moves one outward from the self to a connection with a larger whole that encompasses nature and other living beings. This is what Schweitzer meant when he said that “(man) experiences that other life in his own” (Schweitzer, 1998, p. 157, emphasis added). Furthermore, Reverence for Life extends to nature and all life forms.

Such reverence is also reflected in John Dewey’s idea of natural piety, developed from Wordsworth, where human beings are seen as being part of nature, not separate from it (Dewey, 1934/2008, pp. 9–36). That is, we recognize that we are nested in nature, not only joined to it, but constitutive of it in our reciprocal relations. Toward these relations, we should have a sense of awe, wonder, and reverence, an orientation that for Dewey is “religious.” At the end of this chapter, I will return to this thought, which connects Schweitzer and Dewey to my main point about a reverent, rewilded, sustainable future on this planet.

Schweitzer talked about the principle of Reverence for Life as a discovery that came to him in a moment on the Ogouée River where he was “lost in thought.” Many commentators have characterized this event as an epiphany that revealed the core of ethics and a way of life for Schweitzer. Much thought came before this flash of insight, and for Schweitzer this thought was a sense of being responsible for the world, and not harming it. This attitude he developed from a young age and in particular during his interactions with animals.

Schweitzer’s Interactions with Animals

Schweitzer recalled interactions with animals vividly and connected his own incipient consciousness about the plight of human life with that of other creatures around him. A reflection later in life drawn from childhood shows how other-than-human animals prompted Schweitzer to this kind of reflection: