

“Conservation Biology and Animal Rights”

Environmentalism and Non-Violence

There is a generalized assumption at large that environmentalism in its broadest implications suggests that all of the global field and laboratory research, policy advocacy, grass roots consciousness raising and activism are working towards a better world, a softer human presence. We must believe this to be true, if for no other reason than to combat pessimism, and inspire others, even if our techniques are still clumsily evolving, and our consensus gathering mechanisms frequently ill-fated. While this generation has now necessarily begun to appreciate the crisis of biodiversity loss, the value attached to degraded habitat, and any emotional connection to the countless individuals doomed to suffer and/or go extinct, is highly variable. No one has figured out a way to ensure compliance of the heart with matters of conservation and nonviolence, or to consistently engage the global public in serious dialogue. In view of the data pertaining to human violence towards other humans, it is all the more remarkable that some good people actually manage to extend the olive branch of kin altruism to any other species whatsoever.

Individual and Species

One easily discerned insight relating to an individual's ability to empathize with other species hinges upon the connection made at the first tier of relationships, namely, between individuals. The biophilia hypothesis supposes an inherent life force supporting affiliations between individuals of different species. The emotional calling that may help explain the catalyst between species for taking positive interest in one another, might easily come down to the ability of one to identify with the other, whether a human with a dog, or cat, or horse, or an orangutan. The reciprocity of this interest all but ensures a connection of some kind. It is this emotional dividend that might well spell the success or failure of a piece of environmental legislation, research, or enforcement for the very reason that the alpha and omega of any human endeavor devolves to human beings themselves. Laws, science projects, community initiatives, all pivot upon the strength of convictions of individuals.

In looking at individuals, versus populations as a whole, the individual has been equated with “elemental conservation units.”¹ The individual's perception is our *own* perception, our only vantage point. As individuals, we have no means of grasping that which is not taken to be somehow akin to ourselves, or recognized through the lens of our own sensing and cognition; or of imagining any landscape, or behavior therein that does not relate to our own experience. The easiest experiment to prove this situation of our experience is to photograph a rush hour in any megacity of the world. A great photographer like Sebastiao Selgado invariably focuses on one person: a Brazilian mine

worker, or a woman clutching her head with her hands in the famine-ridden Sahel. As the scope of devastation increases, or as the sheer numeric value rises in terms of corpses, or other kinds of devastation, we become benumbed. A rush hour scene undermines the individual connection, and conveys instead a blurred reality somewhere between the individual and the population, or species.

This dialectic, of you will, was the basis of one of the most important philosophical dialogues ever conceived, Plato's *Parmenides*, in which the One and the Many were assessed as to their true connections.²

Our uncertainty and clumsiness as a species guarantees our isolation, but also speaks to the goal of ecological reunion, whereby our faith in nature, our celebration of environmental beauty, and our passion for being outdoors, not "man apart"³ are a force for nature, as opposed to being against it; a force of joyous awareness, however flawed or unequal we may be to the task of true (and biologically unknown) communion. But the waxing of our affiliations is a realm for philosophy and metaphysics, because the science of understanding another species is hampered by nearly everything we are and do. Our neurosciences, cellular biology, genetics, brain and mind research are in their infancy. Behavioral studies of other species remain profoundly biased by centuries of accumulated methodology that continues to view all life forms other than humans as inferior to ourselves. Even the young Socrates, speaking in the *Parmenides*, is not yet prepared to concede much of anything to "mud". At the population level we can more easily contend with objects, rather than subjects; with physiologies rather than biographies, with forests rather than trees. But we tend to ignore fellowship, binding the Other to a brute sum of traits that we may write-off with terse description, as in those myriad numbered shelves at natural history museums containing exoskeletons and nameless creatures in Formaldehyde. Or the traditional ornithological description of a (remarkably complex, as yet largely unknown) bird song, "tweet tweet tweet".

This is the way it has been for thousands of years among most people and cultures, though not all. Ancient Jain monks, for example, paid close attention to dew drops and mud, and proscribed monks from walking during the monsoon so as to prevent the accidental injury to frogs or worms that might be in the mud; as well as forbidding the taking of a meal after dark, noting how easily an insect might fly into one's mouth and be inadvertently consumed by otherwise devoted vegetarians.⁴

A similar sensitivity arises in those who have, for example, engaged in what could be considered very special, or sacred relationships; whether with the spirits of a waterfall, as in the case of Shinto kamis in Japan, or with an individual chimpanzee or tree. This has certainly been the case with students of giant sequoias, or other great individualistic trees throughout the world. And it has also been the modus operandi of those who spend time observing or living with individual animals of any species. For them, there may be vast unknowns separating them from the subject of their love, or admiration, or study, but there is an equally vast treasure trove of knowledge and feeling which they can assert about the Other. Yet, for the majority of humans, our inability to think outside of ourselves poses a daunting predicament, made more alarming, if interesting, by our dual

instincts for survival, and for kindness; selfish genes versus biophilia (interspecies altruism); faith in nature, but possibly far less belief in our own species to collectively do the right thing.

These are provocative issues, in problematic times, made more alarming by our inordinate representation across the whole landscape of other taxa that are falling into oblivion as a result of our ungainly trespass.

Our finitude of conceits maintains an insularity with regard to how our expressions and dreams are ever to be integrated with that which we are not. It means, for example, that a penguin colony appears to us with the same level of interpreted cohesion as any city street teeming with people. It explains how a monk many centuries ago could reflect on ants as being driven by altruism and a sense of efficient purpose. Or how we may deduce maternal instincts, play, humor and fear in other species. In Thomas D. Mangelsen's coffee table book *The Natural World*⁵ he is particularly focused upon analogies with the human story as he intones the saga of polar bears at Cape Churchill, Hudson Bay, Manitoba. Their behavior hinges upon the freezing ice which, in turn, advantages them in their quest to sniff out and consume ringed, and bearded seals without which, the great bears would starve to death, obtaining insufficient nutrients from their summer scavenging. This story telling is an analogue for our own story, but our poetic extrapolations are only guesses.

We know very little about any other species, when it comes down to truly *knowing*. When an aging parrot, living in a human world, begins to physically wear down, we are at a loss to reconcile his/her captivity, diminished capacity as a bird, and the right thing to do. We have a suite of pain and stress-mitigating veterinary drugs, with approximate dosage level guidance, but beyond that are completely at a loss to understand what is happening. Because so much has already preceded this ethical dilemma in terms of the bird's environmental refugee status, we are fundamentally bereft of any equivalent analogue, but the human heart, which –universally speaking, is completely unsystematic and fickle. We may have more kinship with a dog than a tortoise; with a cat than a marmot; or a parrot than a sparrow, but these differences are blurred, a mishmash of sentiment, domestic familiarity and routine, and further undermined by a vast host of human-related personality variations. We have invented the term, pet, and all that it is likely to entail from household to household. It is, ultimately, a human convenience and, hopefully, a mutually comforting arrangement, but it is not always in the best interest of the animal, although pet owners, who think of themselves as “owners” may disagree. Ownership, manipulation, and the subjugation of another being to our own interests combine to make the keeping of pets a problem in Jain tradition. Jains subscribe to the sanctuary movement, *panjorapors*, where injured and abused animals can be convalesced in a loving environment. This, in turn, can easily evolve towards the keeping of pets, as the two realms involve equivalent convalescent nurturance. But the Jains seek to release those animals back out into the wild, if possible. There is no strict science guiding these clumsy ethical impulses, but the goal among Jains is non-interference with the right of other creatures to live undeterred by humans. We are additionally handicapped by an inability to figure anything out, other than a medical ethic more or less analogous to what

we would do with one of our own kind, as they head towards that fateful crossroad of old age.

Art, Science and the Love of Nature

While Mangelsen is magnificently non-intrusive and elevating in his art form, others have been far less so. Swedish artist Bruno Andreas Liljefors (1860-1939), a prominent painter of animals during the late 19th century, exemplified the fallacy of human interventionism. His art form relied upon killing, in a large number of instances. He also held captive many of the creatures he depicted. This aura of death did not seem to impede public appreciation for so called “wildlife” art. The fancy for such painting was abetted by others of the same methodology, John James Audubon, for example, who did not hesitate to kill.⁶ Such painters are not easily psychoanalyzed. It is not enough to apologize on the basis of the customs in their time. Our times and cultures are just as violent, but today a naturalist who everywhere killed the subject of his appreciation would be taken to task, although this is still not the case amongst entomologists, where sampling that involves death to the countless organisms is constantly justified on the basis of the insects’ and spiders’ presumed multiplicity, or short life cycles.

In Audubon’s day, another great naturalist/painter, John Gould, was less keen upon killing that which he revered on canvas. The last known Thylacine, or Tasmanian Tiger, *Thylacinus cynocephalus*, died in the Hobart Zoo on July 9th 1936, though was not declared extinct officially for another 50 years. In Gould’s *Mammals of Australia* (1863) he both rendered a magnificent portrait of the Thylacine, whilst predicting the benighted creature’s extinction. Tasmania, he said, was a small island, and people –who would kill it- were arriving in droves.⁷ New Zealand’s greatest chronicler of avifauna, Walter Lawry Buller (1838-1906) studied mostly dead birds; birds sought after, captured, killed and stuffed for natural history collections. When the first edition of Buller’s **A History of The Birds of New Zealand** appeared in 1873 with hand-colored chromolithographs by painter/naturalist J.G.Keulemans (1842-1912); paintings which the artist could pawn off on the public for no more, typically, than three pounds per painting, New Zealand had already become famed as a capital of bird extinctions. Fourteen species of ground-dwelling moa (*Dinornis* genus), some weighing probably 500 pounds and numbering in the millions of individuals, had been exterminated.⁸ As with the aftermaths of the Mauritius extinction of dodos, the killing of every last Great Auk in the North Atlantic, and the loss of America’s one known endemic parrot species⁹ works like those of Buller and Keulemans underscore the evolution of a sensibility that would look back in its own time with wonder at the rapidity with which creatures could disappear. A. W. Schorger, a leading specialist on the Passenger Pigeon, believed it may have accounted for up to 40 percent of all terrestrial birds in the U.S., thus making it the most prolific Holarctic passerine in the world.¹⁰ John Muir was horrified by his own viewing of a pigeon shoot, though Audubon expressed less concern about the fate of Passenger Pigeons based upon his own assumptions regarding its illimitable numbers.¹¹ This latter prescription fully enshrined the gulf between our perception of individuals, and their larger populations. Inherent to the 19th century ethic of bird collecting was the notion that if there were lots of the animals, they could be sacrificed. Once the sacrifice got out hand, only then was an ethic required. There have been some profound ornithological exceptions to this

contradiction, however. Alexander Frank Skutch, prior to his death in 2004, pointed out that he only once during his entire 70-year career was compelled to harm a single bird, a raptor that was killing off chicks in a nest he had been studying. In the late 18th century, painter Shaikh Zayn-al-din had also categorically rejected violence towards birds as an aid towards studying them. Along with Ram Das and Bhawani Daw, he helped paint birds housed in the Calcutta estate of Sir Elijah and Lady Impey, beginning around 1777. Unlike so many others of his day who thrilled to the hunt, and gravitated towards the still life comprising dead, hanging birds, Zayn-al-din elevated non-violence to an art form that would prove ultimately to be more scientifically precise whilst ethically sustainable.

An Ethical Future?

That ethic might have acquired much currency with the 20th century realization that species were rapidly going extinct. But for millennia there have been communities whose orientation was non-violent towards other species; and ample artistic documents to suggest that many, throughout time, have seen our celebration and reverence for other species, and individuals, as key to our own survival. As the “death of nature” escalates, our ability, or not, to bridge the gap between individuals and whole populations may well prove to be the single most important step we can take to stem the tide of harm that is sapping the earth.

Endnotes:

*1 – “Elemental Conservation Units: Communicating Extinction Risk without Dictating Targets for Protection,” by Chris C. Wood and Mart R. Gross, *Conservation Biology*, Volume 22, No.1, pp.36-47, February 2008.

*2 See **Parmenides sive de Ideis et uno rerum Omnium Principio Platonis Dialogus**, Oxford: E Theatro Sheldoniano, 1728.

*3 -See **Not Man Apart** by Robinson Jeffers, edited by David Brower, with photographs by Wynn Bullock, Steve Crouch and Ansel Adams, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, 1965.

*4 -See **Life Force: The World of Jainism**, by Michael Tobias, Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1991.

*5 - Thomas De. Mangelsen, **The Natural World**, Foreword by Jane Goodall, New York: Channel Photographics, 2007.

*6 - See “Drawn From Nature –Audubon’s Artistic Legacy,” by Laura Harbold, www.neh.gov/news/humanities/2007-03/Aubudon.htm.

*7 - See www.dpiw.tas.gov.au/inter.nsf/WebPages/BHAN-53777B.

*8 - See Buller, London, 1873.

*9 - The last wild Carolina Parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*) was killed in Florida in 1904. Martha, the last passenger Pigeon, died in the Cincinnati Zoo in 1914. That same zoo saw the last two captive Carolina Parakeets, Incas and his mate, Lady Jane, die in 1917 and 1918. To this day, however, *Rhynchospitta pachyrhyncha*, the thick-billed parrot, can still be found in a few places in New Mexico in the wild where it has evidently naturalized. See Florence Merriam Bailey, **Birds of New Mexico**, Albuquerque: New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, Albuquerque, 1928. See also, “Thick-Billed Parrot Brings Birders to Engle,” *New Mexico Wildlife*, June, 2004,

www.wildlife.state.nm.us/recreating/birding/documents/Thick-billedParrotBringsBirdersToEngle.htm.

*10 - See **Extinct Birds**, by Errol Fuller, Tunbridge Wells, Kent: Oxford University Press, UK, 2000, p.188.

*11 - ¹¹ See **Muir Among the Animals –The Wildlife Writings of John Muir**, Edited by Lisa Mighetto, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1986, p.77.

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