

"In These Horrific Times, Why Do You Work for Animals?"

Marc Bekoff, Psychology Today/Animal Emotions

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Nonhumans and humans need lots of help and compassion begets compassion.

The question in the title, "In these horrific times, why do you work for animals?" arrived in my inbox a few days ago, along with a nice note emphasizing that the writer—I'll call her Marita—was not meaning to be mean or "in my face." I know I am not the only person to whom these sorts of questions are directed, I didn't take any offense at her query. Below is what I wrote to Marita.

Many thanks for writing to me and for asking why I choose to work with nonhuman animals (animals) rather than with human animals. It's a good question, so here's a brief answer that I hope you find useful. First, I do a good deal of work with humans in need, especially with inmates.¹ I also know a good number of people who work hard for nonhumans and humans. I deeply care about humans, but only have finite time and energy, so I choose to work more with other animals. Working with nonhumans can also help humans. There are some very important links between displaying compassion and empathy and working for social justice in other animals and displaying compassion and empathy and working for social justice in humans. These sorts of efforts easily cross species lines.

Consider, for example, the One Health approach. The Centers for Disease Control characterize the One Health movement as follows: "One Health is a collaborative, multisectoral, and transdisciplinary approach—working at the local, regional, national, and global levels—with the goal of achieving optimal health outcomes recognizing the interconnection between people, animals, plants, and their shared environment. One Health is an approach that recognizes that the health of people is closely connected to the health of animals and our shared environment. One Health is not new, but it has become more important in recent years. This is because many factors have changed interactions between people, animals, plants, and our environment."

The University of Denver's Dr. Sarah Bexell, who has been a leader in this movement, correctly notes if we harm one of the three pillars of the One Health movement—humans, other species, and the natural environment—all three are harmed. The pillars are closely interlinked. On the positive and hopeful side, when we work to protect one pillar, all have a better chance of positive outcomes and surviving. So, working with nonhumans doesn't exclude helping humans.²

Also, consider the situation now, during the COVID-19 pandemic, of what's happening to numerous humans working in meat-packing slaughterhouses in which animals butchered after living horrific lives on the way to their deaths. There have been a number of COVID-19 cases because of the horrific unsanitary working conditions in these hellholes.³ And it's possible intensively farmed and severely abused pigs may play a role in spreading COVID-19.

Of course, opting for a plant-based diet would go a long way toward curtailing and putting an end to these outbreaks. So, simply cutting back on, and hopefully putting an end to, the consumption of animals and animal products would go a long way toward helping other animals including humans. The personal choices people make about their meal plans can have incredibly far-reaching and often unanticipated consequences. It's also important to keep in mind that what happens in meat-packing plants and on killing floors doesn't begin to tell the story of how these animals brutally suffered from birth and on the journey to the end of their lives.⁴

I don't want to bore you, but let me write about one more very interesting scenario. Imagine what nonhumans would ask of us if they could gather together and converse among themselves and with us about how they would like to be treated. In his original and visionary book *Animal Envy: A Fable*, political activist, author, lecturer, and attorney Ralph Nader wrote about what he called "The Great Talkout." By using a digitally converted language that is understandable across species, diverse nonhuman animals—from insects to whales—are able to communicate with one another and also with human animals. In this global assembly, a panoply of animals not only tells us who they really are and what they want and need to flourish, *but also show how they can be of great benefit to us*—a win-win for all. Mr. Nader also notes the dangers of zoonotic diseases being transmitted to humans.

Compassion begets compassion

I hope you can see that choosing to work with nonhumans doesn't exclude a concern for humans. These are not mutually exclusive choices. Compassion can easily spread across a group of individuals of different species. In an essay called "Compassion Made Easy" Dr. David DeSteno notes, "This idea is often articulated by the Dalai Lama, who argues that individual experiences of compassion radiate outward and increase harmony for all." Dr. DeSteno also notes that the spiritual understanding of compassion is also scientifically accurate.

Many thanks for writing and asking a very important question. People who work for nonhumans and those who choose to work with humans have nothing to defend. And, these are not mutually exclusive choices and everyone can benefit from these efforts. Think of how caring for dogs, for example, can help people bridge the "empathy gap." Other animals also can be "gateway species" who help is to expand compassion and empathy across species. And, while I sometimes have little good to say about humans, in the end human bashing doesn't get the work done. I'd rather work *for* nonhumans and not put energy into working against humans. It costs too much and decreases what I can do for other animals.

When done right, everyone—nonhumans and humans alike—can benefit from work that is done for one group that can easily spill over into caring for individuals in other groups. So, rather than criticizing someone who chooses to work with nonhumans, appreciate that what they're doing can help humans. And if you choose to work with humans that's just fine. article continues after advertisement

I like to imagine huge umbrellas of compassion and empathy that cross species' lines, and research show cross-species compassion and empathy can be closely related. So, let's all work together, make the world a better place for all, and expand our compassion and empathy footprints. It's not that hard to do. Our wounded planet and countless residents need all the help they can get, even more so during this pandemic pandemonium. Thank you again. Please feel free to share this exchange.

References

Notes

1) Here are some links for the work I do in jail. I often make it clear that working with nonhumans can spill over to compassion with humans, and many inmates have said that learning about other animals "softened them."

[Boulder Art Behind Bars](#); [Roots and Shoots: A unique program at Boulder County Jail has inmates learning from nature](#); [Inmates, Animals, and Art: Creative Expressions of Hope](#); [Nature Behind Bars: Animal Class Helps Prisoners Find Compassion](#); [Art Behind Bars: Animals, Compassion, Freedom, and Hope](#); [The Healing Power of Animals: Moon Bear Has a Place](#); [Among Homeless People, Dogs Eat First and "Absorb Empathy,"](#)

2) These three interviews along with some links make it clear that working with nonhumans doesn't exclude helping humans. [The World Becomes What We Teach](#); [Jane Goodall Explains the Importance of Living in Harmony](#); [The Great Healing: 5 Compassions That Can Save the World](#).

3) For detailed information about COVID-19 outbreaks in meat-packing plants click [here](#).

4) [The Mistreatment of Female "Food Cows" Includes Sexual Abuse](#); [The Scary Facts of Dairy Violate the Five Freedoms](#); [The Grass Library Makes Us Think About Who Animals Truly Are](#); [Babe, Lettuce, and Tomato: Dead Pig Walking](#); [The World According to Intelligent and Emotional Chickens](#); [Stairways to Heaven, Temples of Doom, and Humane-Washing](#); [Going to slaughter: Should animals hope to meet Temple Grandin?](#)

Bekoff, Marc. [Why People Should Care About Animal and Human Suffering](#).

_____. [One Health Stresses Working Together to Heal a Broken Planet](#).

_____. [The Animal Manifesto: Six Reasons for Expanding Our Compassion Footprint](#). New World Library, Novato, California, 2010.

_____. [Compassion Begets Compassion](#). (Science shows this to be true and we knew it all the time.)

_____. [In Ralph Nader's New Book, Animals Speak for Themselves](#).

_____. ["State of the Animals 2016": An Interview With Ralph Nader](#). (The interview can be found [here](#).)

Sinha, Rajeshwari. [COVID-19: Possible link between virus, intensive pig farming, says study](#). DownToEarth