

Fostering Empathy for Animals

A Conservation Psychology Webinar

THURSDAY, JANUARY 23, 2020 – 12:00-1:00 PM ET

Webinar Q&A

What is the difference between predicting or speaking to an animal's state or emotion and assigning or attributing an animal's state or emotion? What is the best way to use emotion without straying too far into anthropomorphism?

Anthropomorphism can be a useful tool, so I don't want us to discount it outright. Look at your audience, first and foremost – younger learners tend naturally to anthropomorphism and it can be counterproductive to try and avoid or ignore that. As people get older, you can add more information and knowledge. When people assign emotions to animals, my first question is usually, "What do you see that makes you say that?" and turn it into a conversation centered on observing the animal's behaviors. As far as we know, many animals have emotions. I think what's more productive in fostering empathy is getting people to avoid anthropocentrism – not anthropomorphism. Wouldn't it be fascinating if animals could feel emotions that we can't, just like how some of them can see colors we cannot?

Thank you, great presentation. Makes me think: Empathy is how we relate to another individual. How can building empathy for individual animals be useful for conservation when conservation is about securing populations? In some ways, empathy for individual animals can interfere with conservation management decisions at the species level.

We haven't quite figured out the link between empathizing with an individual and empathizing with a species. I would say the best approach right now would be to use individual animals to connect people to larger population conservation stories. It's hard for people to conceptualize the scales at which we are working right now – but how can we talk to people about the life experiences of an animal in our care in a way that fosters empathy, and then use that as a "poster child" for a larger problem? For example, we have an elephant at the Oregon Zoo named Chendra. Chendra came to be in our care after she was blinded and her mother was killed by a palm oil plantation owner. We can use Chendra's story to talk about the complexities of human/wildlife coexistence and also to have people think creatively about ways to help Chendra's wild counterparts. The bridge there ends up being the way in which we are helping this animal at our zoo AND working in Borneo to help other elephants like Chendra.

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In most zoo experiences I've had, empathy has not encouraged by the institutions. The emphasis is on animal physiology and evolutionary history rather than intelligence. It's about animals being interesting, unusual, rare, bizarre, beautiful, etc. — not on their personal experience of life, not on the mental and emotional capacities we have in common.

Which is understandable. Some species are poorly suited to zoo-style captivity, and empathizing with them could lead people to be critical of zoos. Empathy can also expand one's moral circle; you start empathizing with one animal and before long you're empathizing with chickens or pigs or cows — which is not something zoos or conservationists generally want to address. And empathy can be challenging: it's hard to empathize with both prey and predator!

Can you talk more about the complications of harnessing empathy for conservation? Is it desirable to empathize with some animals but not others?

First of all, I think we need to be constantly asking ourselves if the animals in our care are experiencing positive welfare. That is our primary responsibility. In my experience, animal care staff are constantly focused on this, which is heartening. If any animal is poorly suited to being kept in a professional care setting, we probably shouldn't keep that animal at a zoo.

Secondly, I don't know that we want to discourage people from empathizing with their food. A lot of cultures have people who empathize with animals they eventually end up eating — it's part of respecting the animal and the life that they are giving so that we may, in turn, sustain. Temple Grandin is a GREAT example of this — her ability to empathize with farm animals made the meat industry far more humane.

Lastly, yes! Empathy can be challenging — that's why we focus on making sure that you are intentional in your approach to empathy. If you want people to feel empathy for one animal, you have to focus on that animal. For example, we used to do an activity where we fed goldfish to a river otter at the zoo (different times!). We wanted learners to feel positive empathy for the otter — seeing how excited and stimulated the otter was by the goldfish feeding — but we didn't want them to feel empathy for the goldfish. So we focused strongly on the welfare of the otter, what enrichment means, otter behavior, etc.

For us, in this project, we are particularly interested in empathy for animals that people might hate, or might not even consider to be animals — sharks, snakes, insects, barnacles (actually, lots of sea creatures). We're not trying to get them to love these animals necessarily (empathy and love are different, after all) — but we are trying to get people to see these animals as individuals with a unique experience in the world. So yes, empathy is not appropriate everywhere, every time. It is an additional tool in your toolkit to be used (intentionally!) in specific circumstances.

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How much animal empathy research has been done about captive animals (zoos & aquaria) versus those in the wild? Both in the bridge between captive individuals and their wild counterparts as well as those living in the wild (ex: we live with pigeons and seagulls, but few seem to act empathically towards them by chasing, throwing things at them, etc.)

As I mentioned above, the specific link between animals in our care and animals in the wild is currently pretty unexplored. But I can say that through this project, we have done empathy interpretation with both populations. True, most of the work we do is with animals in our facilities, but at the Seattle Aquarium, our biggest empathy project related to our Beach Naturalist program. In Beach Naturalists, volunteers are out on local Seattle beaches, interpreting animals for visitors and also promoting positive beach etiquette. Beach Naturalists use empathy as a way to get beach visitors to think about the animals they're seeing as unique individuals, and sometimes just get them to recognize that creature as an animal in the first place (not a rock or a flower). By using empathy as our framing, we saw people change their behavior to be more positive towards animals, even correcting the behavior of others!

Not really related to Zoos and Aquariums...but I work at a State Fish & Wildlife agency, in which we possess an inherent value system that recognizes hunting & fishing as a conservation behavior.

In this case and in the meta-analysis, does it explore how empathy relates to willingness to hunt/fish e.g.. kill an animal that you feel empathy towards?

I love this question! I would say that hunters are some of the most empathic people I've encountered – they spend a lot of time observing animals, understanding their behaviors, movements, etc. Most of the hunters I know have a tremendous amount of empathy for the experiences of the animals they kill – they don't want to prolong the suffering of the creature.

Remember – empathy doesn't mean love, adoration, etc. For example, people empathize a TON with animals like bees – they just perceive that the bee's "experience" includes a desire to hurt them! Empathy also goes into a lot of end of life decisions, inside and outside of the zoo/aquarium context – knowing what an animal looks like when they're uncomfortable, sick, etc. is a huge part of making those hard calls.

So basically, hunting and empathy can be intimately connected, and empathy can be used to leverage more positive hunting behaviors by those individuals.

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How would you build empathy, for example, for native birds in the face of conflicting empathy for feral domestic cats? There is already competing positive empathy feelings toward domestic cats that can often get in the way of the native bird plight.

This can be a tough one! I would say to focus on building empathy for the bird specifically and not necessarily on diminishing empathy for the cat. Individualize the experience of the bird – talk about what the life of that bird is like and why that life is valuable and interesting. Get students to think about birds as individuals, not just as a group of animals (which is much harder to empathize with).

You could also marry that with empathy for cats in a different way – many people want to let their cats outside because they don't want them to feel cooped up; they want them to be able to exercise and enjoy time outside. Instead, focus on the experience (positive, I hope) of cats in catios or other controlled settings. These can be fantastic for cat welfare, and good for birds too!

Enjoyed your presentation. Thank you.

How much empathy development really requires direct hands on? Many of your images are animals being handled, yet this may not be good for the welfare of those animals (I.e. potential lack of empathy by humans to put animals in such situations).

Yup! We're not taking a stance here on whether or not animals should be handled but suffice to say that you do not need to touch an animal to feel empathy for that creature. What IS critical, however, is the live animal experience. You can absolutely feel empathy from a video (we've all see Planet Earth) but as humans, the "real thing" is irreplaceable for our cognitive and affective processing.

So handling animals is not a requirement by any means – instead, ask how you can promote positive welfare and still get people to have up-close, personal animal experiences that further their connection to that individual. There are so many creative solutions out there!

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