

Ignoring Nature: Why We Do It, the Dire Consequences, and the Need for a Paradigm Shift to Save Animals, Habitats, and Ourselves

Marc Bekoff¹

**Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology
University of Colorado
Boulder, Colorado
and Institute for Human-Animal Connection
Graduate School of Social Work
University of Denver**

Sarah M. Bexell

**Institute for Human-Animal Connection
Graduate School of Social Work
University of Denver**

What in the world is happening to our planet and why?

We live in a wounded world that is in dire need of healing. We all should be troubled and terrified by what we have done and continue to do. Humans have made huge and horrific global messes that need to be repaired now. The overriding sense of turmoil is apparent to anyone who takes the time to pay attention. Researchers and non-researchers alike are extremely concerned about unprecedented global losses of biodiversity and how humans suffer because of our destructive ways. We are animals and we should be proud and aware of our membership in the animal kingdom. However, our unique contribution to the decimation of the planet and its many life forms demeans us.

Humans are big-brained, invasive, and omnipresent mammals who seem to think they can do almost anything they want. Individuals in most cultures claim to love nature and other animals but then go on to abuse them in a multitude of ways. Clearly, our relationship with the rest of the world is a very confused one and our actions are often contradictory and paradoxical. Why do we ignore nature when the messages about our abusive and excessive behavior are abundantly clear?

One would have to be a hermit not to hear about the damage we are causing on the planet, yet we continue our harmful ways as if we're living in oblivion. Sadly, most people do not have access to information that will help them understand our place on Earth and the consequences of our behavior. Most people are also unable to do much if anything about the dire situation in which we find ourselves.

We are here, there, and everywhere and this isn't good for us or other species because our peripatetic omnipresence and short lifespan have removed us from the nuances — the ups, downs, and timelessness — of natural cycles. Our glob-

al presence is a problem because we are able to trespass at will even when we're not physically present, and there aren't any ecosystems in which we're not present and intrusively damaging. Truth told, we're a species whom almost all other species could easily live without. We breed too much and over consume as if it's the thing to do. To wit, The Global Footprint Network reports the world's 6.7 billion humans are now consuming all resources 30 percent faster than the sustainable rate of replenishment. In the United States, people are consuming resources nearly 90 percent faster than the Earth can replenish them (http://www.worldpopulationbalance.org/wpb_newsletters/wpb_newsletter_2009aug.pdf)

Humans have an interesting past. We evolved in a world unimpeded by "human progress" and then we began tripping over our own feet. Once, we were alert to and in tune with nature and the other beasts with whom we shared space. There was competition for survival but also reverence and respect, and we knew that coexistence and sustainability were necessary even before science told us this was so (as evidenced by remnant indigenous cultures). When did we begin ignoring nature? Why did we start ignoring our need for untainted and healthy food, clean water, clean air, and reasonable shelter? How did we become so disconnected from nature and an understanding of basic ecological processes? What allows us to tolerate human-induced losses in biodiversity? What can we do about the distance and alienation from nature and other animals that allows us to be so damaging? While it may be that some early humans lived unsustainably (e.g., Easter Islanders) and life back then is easy to romanticize, it is not only our peripatetic nature and mobility but also our ability to deal with situations using technological fixes unavailable to early humans that allows us today to live out of synch, in abusive ways, with natural rhythms and other species, at least for

now. Our escape into technological fixes, many short and superficial, gives us a false sense of security that all is okay. Clearly it isn't.

Among the main reasons for our disconnect centers on our ignoring the fact that we are not exempt from ecological principles that we accept for all other species. Our big-brains also allow us to come up with short-lived band-aid solutions that diminish our unsustainable and destructive habits. One way we clearly ignore nature is in our purchasing practices. Buying something is a vote for the production and sale of that product and in some cases implicitly grants permission to abuse animals, destroy forests, rivers and oceans, support child labor in sweatshops, and more. For example, people who know about the humane and ecological effects of, for example, factory farming, but dismissively say "Oh, but I love my steak", must be shown that this behavior significantly contributes to the demise of Earth and other animals (Bekoff 2010). People who over-consume by buying gas-guzzling cars and SUVs or trophy homes need to be shown how easy it is to change their ways and still be happy, in fact, probably happier.

Where have all the animals gone?

Researchers and non-researchers alike are very concerned about unprecedented global losses of biodiversity. Questions concerning how we interact with other species are at once extremely challenging and frustrating, and among the most important with which we must deal in a time when losses in biodiversity, for the most part anthropogenic, are staggering and threaten our own survival. Ecosystems and webs in nature are being recklessly and routinely destroyed. Animals are dying and vanishing before our eyes — even as you read this essay — and concerned citizens all over the world are asking, "Where have all the animals gone?" We are deep in a serious crisis out of which it will be difficult to emerge successfully.

As far as animal species are concerned there are a number of strategies (including reintroduction and captive breeding often in association with reintroduction, translocation, and establishing protected areas) that are used to try to "recreate" or to "restore" viable populations in the native or historical range of the imperiled animals. Success is rare, people disagree on what "success" means, and we need to ask if these strategies are still useful in the midst of the current crisis. We also need to ask why there have been relatively few proactive and preemptive attempts to curtail losses in biodiversity although a good deal of time and effort and many words imply that this is not the case.

Although we are in a dire situation, individuals in societies play a vital role in trying to right the wrongs and start the healing. One thing we must do is spread the message outside our circles and comfort zones and get the mass media not

only to report on what is happening but also to suggest simple and viable solutions to remedy the situation. Researchers also need to be good role models for the general public and more importantly for countries in which it is difficult to make changes because of economic constraints. Currently the United States is like the spoiled child of the planet, demanding every comfort, luxury and over-indulgence. Other countries recognize our greed yet at the same time strive for it. Who wouldn't?

A cross-disciplinary and ambitious effort to deal with the decline of biodiversity and what's being done and not being done to curtail these losses is imperative and pressing. As people involved in conservation issues and the human condition, we must ask ourselves why we stick our noses to the grindstone and continue work on many band-aid projects that the media then uses to placate policy makers and the general public. This is not to say that these projects are not important, however, we must effectively deal with a number of significant issues such as human overpopulation, over-consumption, the lack of adequate protection for most species other than ours (while we are also seriously failing the majority of humans), losses of habitat, the lack of awareness of what is actually happening, and cross-cultural perspectives on the nature of human-animal relationships. We must also consider how speciesism influences how we interact with other species and their habitats and why we continue to trump their interests. Humans are not "better" or "higher" than individuals of other species. We share many similarities but we're also different, but different doesn't mean better.

We should also be concerned about what future generations of people will say about our efforts to protect animals and habitats and to curtail biodiversity losses. Climate change influences the viability of animal populations and biodiversity losses. Concerning the price that future generations will pay for our indiscretions and the lack of long-term solutions, a recent summary of climate change policy notes, "the idea of ensuring justice between those generations responsible for the effects of climate change and those who will have to pay the heaviest price for it, is still not being adequately reflected in climate change policy, with world leaders instead choosing to focus only on solutions that can accommodate their short-term national interests." (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/8374965.stm>)

Conservation psychology and conservation social work

It's rarely a lack of knowledge and concrete data that result in missed opportunities to preserve biodiversity or that inform decisions about who lives and who dies (animals and ecosystems). Rather, losses are typically due to problems of human psychology and social and cultural factors that result in the inadequate protection of animals and their habitats.

Therefore, we must address the important psychological and social/cultural issues that support our poor stewardship of Earth, our only home, and psychological barriers that prevent people from facing and addressing these complex, frustrating, and urgent issues that are human-induced (anthropogenic). (The importance of the social sciences in dealing with climate change serves as a nice model; <http://www.apa.org/releases/climate-change.pdf>) We need to extend efforts to inform people as part of a social movement that is concerned with losses in biodiversity and the implications of these losses for animals and for us.

The new and emerging fields of *conservation psychology* (<http://www.conservationpsychology.org/>) and *conservation social work* (<http://www.humananimalconnection.org/>) are addressing various questions about why and how people do some of the unconscionable and destructive things they do, what we can do to change our behavior, how the inclusion of the natural world is important in the social sciences and hands-on social work, and how our own well being is influenced by how we interact with animals and the environment (e.g. Norton 2009). We can ask, for example: Why do people estrange themselves from nature and other animals? What are the effects of this disconnection from the natural world? Why do humans break appropriate regulations and laws that could work for the benefit of animals and us? Of course some do it for survival, still others for financial gain and/or to increase their professional status, but perhaps they (and others) do not really understand the damage they are doing that also threatens our own survival. At the local level laws are often broken because there is a lack of awareness of existing regulations and laws, enforcement of the laws is not possible, or because a huge number of impoverished people are simply trying to survive.

Fundamental to the field of conservation social work is the acquisition of the knowledge and skills to be effective in all areas of the human condition, including a comprehensive understanding of the critical importance of nature, animals, and healthy environments and the ways in which environmental forces create, contribute to, and address problems experienced in the everyday lives of people (the person-in-environment construct that is central to social work; Norton 2009). We must encourage and empower people to gain an understanding of the interrelationships among themselves, their families, and communities, including the natural environment and its non-human inhabitants. Humans need an ecological understanding of their place in natural environments to promote personal health and well being as well as environmental awareness, sustainability, and advocacy. It is imperative that we draw on the wealth of knowledge we possess in the biological and social sciences to form the basis of a social movement that will make positive and enduring differences in the future.

So that academics and non-academics alike can gain a deeper understanding of what is being attempted, most often in futility, to curtail losses in biodiversity and why so many humans today ignore nature, we propose that interdisciplinary groups work in concert with each other to address the major points that need to be discussed among people from different disciplines and various cultures. While biologists, including those specializing in conservation, ethology, and ecology are needed, we also need social scientists, conservation psychologists, conservation social workers, conservation and humane educators, and philosophers to engage in the discussions that will and must inform action. It is important to stress that the loss of animal species must be presented in a direct manner. Even if people do not want to face up to the fact that we are the major (some would say the only) reason for declines and extinctions, the facts show clearly that we are. We are truly living in the “anthropocene” a latter part of what is called the “sixth extinction” (<http://www.actionbioscience.org/newfrontiers/eldredge2.html>).

So, what do we need to do?

It is important to revisit some of the things we need to do to correct the current situation because of our continued inability to deal with all that is happening globally. To respond effectively, we should:

- Discuss our inability to address the serious issues that are the result of over-population (but see Mazur 2009) and why curtailing our breeding is so hard for humans to accept. It is a very sensitive topic, yet this is one of a number of major ways in which we clearly ignore nature. Human cultures try to define their world through their own special interests, in turn losing the overall perspective of the needs, and limitations, of our species. For thousands of years, humans have struggled for survival against a hostile natural world along side other struggling organisms, and as a result many traditional values and institutions favored the growth of human numbers (Cassils 2004). However, today it is in the interest of humanity to act with anticipatory intelligence and to override our predisposition to reproduce (Mazur 2009).
- Alert people about the level of on-going losses in biodiversity and the grave implications of these losses for human and non-human animals.
- Get scientists to act as concerned citizens (see the excellent essay on this topic in *New Scientist* in March 2009 “We need another kind of scientist to save the world”; <http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg20127003.000-we-need-another-kind-of-scientist-to-save-the-world.html>, as well as get citizens to act as responsible stewards.

- Bring together those who are interested in animal protection, in which the focus is on *individual* animals, with those whose main concerns are in conservation and environmental issues where the main focus is on higher levels of organization such as populations, species, and ecosystems. A unified collective approach is sorely needed to make positive changes.
- Discuss why humans are so fixated on technological fixes and being “heroes” for cleaning up what we ourselves have done after we’ve redecorated the habitats of animals.
- Consider how who we are, or who we perceive ourselves to be, influences how we intrude into the lives of other beings. Here, ethical questions from the animal protection movement and the field of conservation ethics need to be discussed in a motivated way.
- Reach out to mass media and help them share the truth about the global situation and encourage them to be voices for the animals by assuring they represent animals as who they are not who they want them to be (Ross et al. 2008; Freeman 2009).
- Ask what we can do to make the world a better place for animals and children. We must teach our children well. They care about animals and we can all too easily take that compassion and empathy away from them (Bexell 2006, Bexell, Jarrett, Xu and Feng 2010).
- Get the necessary global social movement started (see Johns 2009).

While this list is only a beginning, many examples of what can be done when people from different disciplines talk to one another and bring in community members are included in Susan Clayton and Gene Myers’ *Conservation Psychology* (2009). Similarly, in a developing program in Conservation Social Work at the University of Denver’s Institute for Human-Animal Connection (<http://www.humananimalconnection.org/>) academics (including ourselves) and non-academics are working together to foster change in people’s attitudes towards animals and nature. An excellent example of what needs to be done concerns the role that researchers from different disciplines and community members are playing to reduce the slaughter of African elephants who are destroying the precious land (and sometimes the animals themselves) of extremely poor people whose animals need it for grazing (Bradshaw 2009). Another concerns efforts to reduce conflicts between people and much-maligned wolves (Musiani, Boitani, and Paquet 2009). While these are local issues they can inform how we approach larger issues worldwide in that they provide good examples of the social movement that is

needed to change how we interact with animals and act on their behalf.

In many ways those interested in making positive changes — AKA activists — are also social workers. The much needed paradigm shift demanding a change in our behavior is a social movement requiring everyone to discuss harmoniously what must be done to make the world a better place for all beings and *act* so that peaceful coexistence and habitat protection are the norms rather than the exceptions (see also Clark, Rutherford, and Casey 2005, Herda-Rapp and Goedeke 2005, Corwin 2009, Goodall 2009, Minter 2009, Taylor 2009, Bekoff 2006, 2010, and Crist and Rinker 2010).

Where to from here? We need a revolution in thought, heart, and action

Michael Soulé (2002), founder of the field of conservation biology, perhaps said it best: “We’re certainly a dominant species, but that’s not the same as a keystone species. A keystone species is one that, when you remove it, the diversity collapses; we’re a species that when you add us, the diversity collapses. We can change everything, dictate everything and destroy everything.”

Soulé is right. As big-brained, invasive, and frequently self-centred and arrogant mammals, we can do just about anything we want anywhere, anytime, and to any other beings or landscapes. We must recognize that this unprecedented power comes with enormous and compelling ethical responsibilities to be good stewards. Let us remember that in most cases we can do better; and in all cases we have an obligation to strive to do far better than the current norm.

Clearly, we need a paradigm shift, a revolution, in how we think about and educate people on biodiversity losses, over-population, and over-consumption and what we can do about our destructive ways. We need to make room for animals in our lives and in our hearts so that we stop wantonly redecorating their homes for our, and not their, benefit (Bekoff 2006, 2010, Fox and Bekoff 2009). We have an obligation to expand our compassion footprint to other animals and to other humans (Bekoff 2010).

For our interactions with animals, a good beginning is to call attention to the “safe operating space for humanity” (<http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v461/n7263/full/461472a.html>; <http://www.grist.org/article/2009-09-22-scientists-identify-safe-operating-space-for-humanity-nature>). Recently a team of 28 scientists identified ten separate biophysical systems that are crucial to humanity’s flourishing. For each system they identified a “safe operating boundary” including levels of biodiversity within which humanity must remain if it wishes to maintain the basic environmental conditions in which it evolved. We have already violated these boundaries

and this is very dangerous.

In the near future, there likely will be fewer people who will actually be able to make a positive difference in our relationships with animals and ecosystems. Joel Cohen (2009), head of the Laboratory of Populations at the Rockefeller University and Columbia University, offers the sobering fact that the difference in the population numbers between less developed areas of the world (the have-nots) and more developed regions of the world (the haves) will have increased from two-fold in the 1950s to about six-fold by 2050. This means that it is imperative — perhaps it is truly a moral imperative — that those who have the resources to do something good for animals and earth do it, and that they not succumb to the inevitable disappointments, frustrations, and burnout that are associated with animal and environmental activism (Bekoff 2007a,b, 2010, van Dernoot Lipsky and Burk 2009).

People who care about animals and nature should not be considered “the radicals” or “bad guys” who are trying to impede “human progress;” in fact, they could be seen as heroes who are not only fighting for animals, but also for humanity. Biodiversity is what enables human life as well as enriches it. It is imperative that all of humanity reconnects with what sustains the ability of our species to persist and that we act as a unified collective while coexisting with other species and retaining the integrity of ecosystems. There are no quick fixes and we need to realize that when animals die, we die too.

Endnote

1. marc.bekoff@gmail.com

References

- Bekoff, M. 2006. *Animal Passions and Beastly Virtues: Reflections on Redecorating Nature*. Temple University Press, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
- Bekoff, M. 2007a. *Animals Matter*. Shambhala, Boston, Massachusetts.
- Bekoff, M. 2007b. *The Emotional Lives of Animals*. New World Library, Novato, California.
- Bekoff, M. 2010. *The Animal Manifesto: Six Reasons For Expanding Our Compassion Footprint*. New World Library, Novato, California.
- Bexell, S. M. 2006. Effect of a wildlife conservation camp experience in China on student knowledge of animals, care, propensity for environmental stewardship, and compassionate behavior toward animals. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Georgia State University.
- Bexell, S. M., Jarrett, O. S., Xu, P., and Feng, R. X. 2010. Humane Education, Animal Welfare, and Conservation. In M. Bekoff (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Animal Rights and Animal Welfare*. Greenwood Press. Santa Barbara, California. Pp. 320-323.
- Bradshaw, G. 2009. *Elephants On the Edge: What Animals Teach Us About Humanity*. Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut.
- Cassils, J. A. 2004. Overpopulation, sustainable development, and security: developing an integrated strategy. *Population and Environment* 25(3), 171-194.
- Clayton, S. and Myers, G. 2009. *Conservation Psychology: Understanding and Promoting Human Care for Nature*. Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, New Jersey.
- Clark, T. W., Rutherford, M.B., and Casey, D. (eds.) 2005. *Coexisting with Large Carnivores: Lessons from Greater Yellowstone*. Island Press, Washington, D. C.
- Cohen, J. 2009. Human population grows up. In Mazur, L. (ed.) 2009. *A Pivotal Moment: Population, Justice & the Environmental Challenge*. Island Press, Washington, D. C., pp. 27-37.
- Corwin, J. 2009. *100 Heartbeats: The Race to Save Earth's Most Endangered Species*. Rodale Press, Emmaus, Pennsylvania.
- Crist, E. and Rinker, H. B. (eds.) 2010. *Gaia in Turmoil: Change, Depletion, and Earth Ethics in an Age of Crisis*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Van Dernoot Lipsky, L. and Burk, C. (eds.) *Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, California.
- Fox, C. H. and Bekoff, M. 2009. Ethical reflections on wolf recovery and conservation: A practical approach for making room for wolves. In Musiani, M., Boitani, L., and Paquet, P. C. (eds.) 2009. *A New Era for Wolves and People: Wolf Recovery, Human Attitudes, and Policy*. University of Calgary Press, Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Pp. 117-139.
- Freeman, C. P. 2009. This little piggy went to press. *The Communication Review* 12, 78-103.
- Goodall, J. 2009. *Hope for Animals and their World: How Endangered Species Are Being Rescued from the Brink*. Grand Central Publishing, New York.
- Herda-Rapp, A. and Goedeke, T. L. (eds.) 2005. *Mad About Wildlife: Looking at Social Conflict Over Wildlife*. Brill, Boston, Massachusetts.
- Johns, D. 2009. *A New Conservation Politics: Power, Organization Building and Effectiveness*. Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, New Jersey.
- Mazur, L. (ed.) 2009. *A Pivotal Moment: Population, Justice & the Environmental Challenge*. Island Press, Washington, D. C.
- Minteer, B. A. (ed.) 2009. *Nature in Common? Environmental Ethics and the Contested Foundation of Environmental Policy*. Temple University Press, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
- Musiani, M., Boitani, L., and Paquet, P. C. (eds.) 2009. *A New Era for Wolves and People: Wolf Recovery, Human Attitudes, and Policy*. University of Calgary Press, Calgary, Alberta, Canada.
- Norton, C. L. 2009. Ecopsychology and social work: Creating an interdisciplinary framework for redefining person-in-environment. *Ecopsychology* 1, 138-145.
- Ross, S. R., Lukas, K. E., Lonsdorf, E. V., Stoinski, T. S., Hare, B., Shumaker, R., and Goodall, J. 2008. Inappropriate use and portrayal of chimpanzees. *Science* 319, 1487.
- Soulé, M. 2002. History's Lesson: Build Another Noah's Ark. *High Country News*. Vol. 24. No. 9. May 13, 2002. Available at http://www.hcn.org/servlets/hcn.Article?article_id=11219 (accessed September 26, 2009).
- Taylor, B. 2009. *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*. University of California Press, Berkeley.