There Are Two Ways

There are two distinct ways of looking at animals in our modern world. Although they need not be mutually exclusive, a great many people treat them as if they were.

The scientist and the scientifically oriented layperson view animals as species. That makes as great a deal of sense. But the boast often is that when you view animals as a species, you are unemotionally, with emotions and sentimentality. That implies, of course, that emotions and sentiementality are in some way sins against right-thinking biology.

Are scientifically inclined people who view species as species and not at a bunch of individual animals ready free of emotion? Can they view conservation problems, habitat problems, and all of the other quandaries in the battle to save wild animals and wild plants from extinction without passion, with a perfectly clear, scientific state of mind? I doubt it very much. I have seen passions rising and I have seen scientists profoundly depressed over the plight of the California condor. Before her tragic death, Dr. Dian Fossey became very emotional over the fate of the mountain gorillas she so long fought to save. She certainly was not in control. Personally, I would be very happy of a scientist whose eyes were incapable of misting over under the right circumstances. I know very few like that, but the fiction of the steel-nerved brain is a pleasing one for some people to adopt for themselves.

The other way of looking at animals is as individuals. People who work their lives away, slave their lives away, for the benefit of animals must often take this approach. Hunters call them Bandits, is it not true? This is in no way passionate, pure. It is an emotional way, a way in which I find the science of emotion and the sentimentality. It is a way to see the animals that have occupied so much of my life.

I hate to see animals suffer. Once, in Africa, we came upon a very pregnant impala that had apparently been hit by a car. She lay beside the dirt road with both of her hind legs and her spine broken. She was in terrible pain. It was late in the afternoon and in a matter of hours some predator would finish her off and probably eat her to its own young. Still she would be in agony and terror for those hours. We turned back and six miles away found a game warden with a rifle. We spoke enough Swahili and he enough English for him to understand that he was to return with us and shoot the gazelle. I dislike killing animals with a knife, and he did have a perfectly adequate rifle — a .300. He thought we were crazy, since a lion or hyena would get her in three or four hours, but we made it clear that that was not going to be the case. What the predators would get would be carcass. Shooting counts for a lot in Africa, even when the other follow has the gun, and the warden finally went along with us and put the impala out of her misery.

Now that is sentimentality. Impalas in Africa are more than plentiful. They are everywhere you look, like jack rabbits in Oklahoma. But this was not the species. Superficially, the impalas — this was one terribly hurt, terribly frightened animal that would know in whatever way animals have of "knowing" such things that night was falling. As the night voices increased that animal would again "know" that it could not live or defend itself and would have to lie there waiting to die. It would listen for unmistakable sounds and then,
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by Roger A. Caras

because it would not have to be pulled down by predators, it might die very slowly.

All of this has nothing to do with caring habits or connecting to the animals or making the world safe for predators. It is pure Rambles, it is having available pain, it is a dangerous, terrible, and emotional and has little to do with science. But so what? Am I to be exonerated of the scientific community because that impulse is a selfish one? This puts me on the basis of a dirty trick vs. the don't-need-to-be-eaten. The operative words for the conflict are game management. We should, by the way, put the word "game" into historical perspective. Game comes down to us from the Old English from wherein it came from the Old German. In the German of the Middle Ages it was "jagd" and it meant kill. A game animal is one people take glee in killing. The specialists in game management look on Rambles with disdain, generally. And Rambles, individuals who are sentimental about animals one by one, are very often no kinder to species-by-species people, whom they perceive as the enemy. Human workers who see game managers making the world safe for hunters and trophy animals are often less than generous in their appraisal of their fellow men.

The irony, of course, is that both sides are quite wrong in their misapprehension at one another. I have seen cowboys carefully, even tenderly, caring for orphan calves even though they were raising the animals for slaughter. Similarly, I have known scientists, species-by-species people, who cared very much about suffering and the welfare of individual animals. I have also known an enormous number of human workers, cattle-by- animal people, who understood very well the need for the conservation of habitat and the techniques for doing it. Some of the very best conservationists were sentimental about every living creature out there, and some of the best human workers knew mass a breeding, a fight, or any kind of confrontation when species are at stake.

In fact, I am happy to see human workers who do not know enough about the ways nature works to understand that animals and plants have to be kept in the system. In fact, I am happy to see human workers who do not know enough about the ways nature works to understand that animals and plants have to be kept in the system or order. And I do not mean anyone who can't feel for an individual animal and who wouldn't recover an intact elephant running anything closer to the natural world than a fast-food hamburger franchise. I would not trust either person's judgment or ability to make a moral evaluation.

The two basic approaches — species in a whole and animal-by-animal — are at least confrontational, but there is no real polarity. The battle is largely personality problems, and the less battling that is done over this classic compromise the quicker we can get down to the task of saving individual animals and whole species. The words of the battle seldom seen apart. As much cannot be said for our individual egos.

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