



MINDING ANIMALS: AN INTERVIEW WITH MARC BEKOFF

Leading animal behaviour expert **Marc Bekoff** has done much to advance our understanding of how animals think and feel. With the renowned primatologist **Jane Goodall**, he is founder of *Ethologists for the Ethical Treatment of Animals*, an organisation that fights for humane treatment and respect for animals when studying their behaviour. He combines this work with being Professor of Biology at the University of Colorado and is author of hundreds of articles and several books on the subject of the sentience, behaviour and rights of nonhuman animals. We caught up with him to find out a bit more about what drives him and to hear about his most recent work.

Your new book, *Animal Passions and Beastly Virtues: Reflections on Redecorating Nature*, offers readers a way to understand animal behaviours, minds and habits. Can you tell us a bit about your background – how did you become involved in research into nonhuman animal sentience?

M.B. I've always been interested in nonhuman animal consciousness and the capacity of animals to suffer and feel pain. From early childhood I attributed minds to nonhuman animals because I could see from the way they behaved that they were intelligent and sentient. So, I guess that I have always been interested in animal minds and my very compassionate parents tell me that I always loved and 'minded animals'. I feel it's something I was born with.

How do you know that animals have emotions?

M.B. I can feel their feelings, I really can. I can feel their joy, glee, and grief as if it were my own. They tell us how they feel in their behaviour and in their eyes. The eyes tell it all and, if we can stand it, we should look into the fear-filled eyes of animals who suffer at our hands, in horrible conditions of captivity, in slaughterhouses, and in research labs, fur farms, zoos, rodeos and circuses. Dare to look into the sunken eyes of animals who are afraid or feeling all sorts of pain and then try to deny to yourself and to others that these individuals are feeling anything. I bet you can't!

Many people would dismiss such views as projecting your emotions on to animals. How do you defend yourself against the charge of anthropomorphism?

M.B. I believe that anthropomorphism is necessary if we are to understand and explain animal behaviour and empathise with other animals. Animals are just like human beings in many ways and so it is important to note the similarities. Animal emotions and mood swings grab us and it is clear that they are real.

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Nonhuman animals are capable of suffering and they certainly endure horrible suffering at the hands of humans. However, the minds and feelings of individuals other than one's self are private. Access is limited because we can't really get into the head or heart of another being. Sceptics often use this line of reasoning but it really can be a dead-end when practical matters are of primary concern. It makes it all too easy to torture animals.

Of course other minds are private but that doesn't stop us from trying to understand what another human is thinking or feeling and using this information to make future compassionate decisions. We need to do the same with animals. We can always do better in our interactions with other animals and most of the time good welfare isn't good enough. Saying that the lives of food-animals are 'relatively humane' is ridiculous. The lives of food animals, especially those in factory farms, are miserable and they continually suffer horrific pain themselves and by watching, hearing, and smelling the pain and suffering of others. People who work for food companies need to stop putting forth myths about the humane conditions they offer animals.

Your book is about social responsibility and what we can learn from nonhuman animals. What have animals taught you? In what ways should humans adapt our behaviour?

M.B. We must coexist with other animals. Animals have taught me about responsibility, compassion, caring, and the value of deep friendships and interconnections. I've also learned much about who I am, not only in my world but in theirs. Many animals see me and other humans as intruders who don't care about them, while others see us as their caregivers. I want to be a 'consummate companion' to all animals if I can and embrace them for who they are. Often I ask 'just who do we think we are?'

You originally attended medical school but didn't complete your training. What made you change direction?

M.B. My interactions with a cat named Speedo changed my life. I stopped sacrificing - aka killing - cats as part of a doctoral research project when Speedo, a very intelligent cat, looked at me and asked, 'why me?' Frankly, I couldn't really find the words to tell him why or how badly I felt for torturing and then killing him, but relieving him of his pain

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and removing him from his thoroughly undignified existence for which I was responsible was all I could do. I would never do this sort of research again and I dropped out of the prestigious MD/PhD programme in which I was enrolled.

You subtitled your latest book 'Reflections on Redecorating Nature.' Can you explain this idea and what the issues are surrounding it?

M.B. 'Redecorating nature' is a term that I came up with to describe situations in which we move animals around as if they're furniture. 'Oh, wouldn't wolves look good here?' or 'Oh, maybe we should move the lynx there.' When I use the phrase it calls attention to the fact that animals are *not* objects like a couch or a dining room table and that we need to be very careful when we move *individuals* around for our - not their - own good. I'm very concerned about individual animals and question whether we should trade off individuals for the possible good of their species.

Can you talk about your work with Jane Goodall, who wrote the book's foreword? Tell us more about Ethologists for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

M.B. Jane and I have worked together for about six years, during which time we wrote a book, *The Ten Trusts*, and we have worked on many projects through Roots & Shoots, the organisation that Jane founded to promote compassion for animals, people and the environments in which they live.

Our organisation, Ethologists for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, has been very successful for leading to more humane ways of studying animal behaviour, for example, reducing harm that we bring when we study animals, and for making the animals' lives more comfortable when we study them. I do a lot of work for Roots & Shoots and recently was awarded The Bank One Faculty Community Service Award for the work I have done with children, senior citizens and prisoners.

BEKOFF'S BOOKS

Marc Bekoff is author and editor of numerous publications on the subject of animal behaviour and animal rights, including:

- *Encyclopaedia of Animal Rights and Animal Welfare*
- *Strolling with Our Kin: Speaking for and Respecting Voiceless Animals*
- *The Ten Trusts: What We Must Do to Care for the Animals We Love* (co-written with Jane Goodall)
- *The Encyclopaedia of Animal Behaviour*
- *The Smile of a Dolphin: Remarkable Accounts of Animal Emotions*
- *Minding Animals: Awareness, Emotions and Heart*
- *Animal Passions and Beastly Virtues: Reflections on Redecorating Nature*

For more information about the work of Marc Bekoff please visit his homepage at: <http://literati.net/Bekoff>



Sections of this interview are based on extracts from Marc Bekoff's latest book, *Animal Passions and Beastly Virtues: Reflections on Redecorating Nature*, published by Temple

University Press and available from all good bookshops (ISBN: 1-59213-348-7).



Marc, his companion Jethro (left) and their friend Zeke.

As this is the Valentine's edition of *The Vegan* magazine, can you tell us if you believe that there can be love between nonhuman animals?

M.B. Love means preferring the close company of another individual, seeking them out, and if necessary protecting them and caring for them. It means forming and maintaining a strong reciprocal bond and telling your loved one you love them. Animals do this all the time, both with humans and other animals.

My dog Jethro, a 40-kilo Rotweiler-German Shepherd mutt with a large heart, once rescued a baby bunny who he found near my mountain home. He could have gulped the infant down easily but instead he stayed by the box in which I had placed the bunny for two weeks as the bunny gained strength so that I could release him. I had to force him to leave the company of the bunny and for weeks after I let bunny go Jethro would look for him. Jethro also rescued a baby bird years later. I think it's safe to say he loved these animals. His is only one of numerous stories of love between animals of different species and between members of the same species. Anyone who's lived with a dog or watched cows, sheep, or pigs knows that they fall in love. Love surely isn't uniquely human and given our track record it's pretty arrogant for us to think that we know all about love and deny it to other beings. Animals can really show us how to love because their emotions are so unfiltered.

