Anthropomorphism Favors Coexistence, Not Deadly Domination

Marc Bekoff, Psychology Today / Animal Emotions

Research shows that anthropomorphism challenges traditional wildlife management.

"For the longest time, science has depicted animals as stimulus-response machines while declaring their inner lives barren. This has helped us sustain our customary 'anthropodenial': the denial that we are animals. We like to see ourselves as special, but whatever the difference between humans and animals may be, it is unlikely to be found in the emotional domain." —Frans de Waal

“The roots of the wildlife management profession are steeped in a domination ideology,” write Manfredo and Dietsch’s team, who imply that reform is necessary for the profession to survive. 'Over time,' they conclude, 'the institutions that emerge and endure in an open society are a reflection of the values and the related ethics and morals held by its people.'” — Brandon Keim Anthropomorphism, "The attribution of human traits, emotions, or intentions to non-human entities," can help us understand many different aspects of the behavior and cognitive and emotional lives of nonhuman animals (animals) when applied critically and biocentrically (from the animals' points of view). While a dwindling number of people still maintain something like, "We don't really know if other animals are thinking or feeling in the ways in which we claim they are," a rapidly growing database shows that we're not as "bad" or incorrect as they claim in coming up with reasonable and correct interpretations and explanations of what nonhumans are thinking or feeling. All in all, animals aren't merely acting "as if" they're thinking or feeling something. (See "Animal Emotions: Exploring Passionate Natures" for more discussion of the uninformed "as if" disclaimer.)

Many researchers now recognize that we must use human languages when we discuss animal cognition and animal emotions, but if we do it carefully, critically, and biocentrically, we can still give due consideration to the animals' point of view. Being anthropomorphic is doing what comes naturally. No matter what we call it, most agree that nonhumans and humans share many traits including emotions. Thus, we're not inserting something human into other animals, but rather, we're identifying commonalities and then using human languages to communicate what we observe.

Two recent essays on the ways in which anthropomorphism can influence people's values and conservation practices caught my eye. The first is an essay available online called "America’s views on wildlife are changing," in which freelance science writer Brandon

Keim reviews a research essay published in *Biological Conservation* by Michael Manfredo and four colleagues titled "How anthropomorphism is changing the social context of modern wildlife conservation." This essay is not yet available online, however, I was able to read it in its entirety. It is an outstanding piece of work from which I include a few quotations below. Mr. Keim's excellent summary begins, "Until a few years ago, anthropomorphism—attributing human mental characteristics to other animals—was synonymous with unscientifically sentimental. Nowadays, thanks to squee-rich social media and scientific research on animal intelligence, anthropomorphism is both common and common-sense." I couldn't agree more. He nicely summarizes the above research project in which 43,949 adults in the United States were interviewed and asked questions "designed to gauge respondents' level of anthropomorphism, such as whether they believe other animals have intentions, emotions, and minds of their own. They were also asked "if they agreed with statements—such as 'Humans should manage fish and wildlife populations so that humans benefit' and 'I view all living things as part of one big family'—that indicated a bent towards mutualism or domination."

The data show that around 67% of the people questioned in the research study were okay with the use of anthropomorphism, with people in Hawaii being the most anthropomorphic (74.5%) and South Dakota being the least (54.5%). In addition, accepting anthropomorphism and favoring mutualism were highly correlated.

All in all, this research shows that there has been a shift in people's values in the ways in which they relate to nature and wildlife management. Keim writes, "the latter often involves lethal approaches to human-animal conflicts and puts hunting, trapping, and fishing at the center of humanity's relations with wild animals." Importantly, "people who empathize with animals often disagree with these practices but rarely have a voice in government wildlife agencies."

In their study, Dr. Manfredo and his colleagues "view anthropomorphism as an important cognitive characteristic that affects human thought and behavior, and an adaptive response to shifting social conditions." They conclude, "Anthropomorphism, through its effect in stimulating value shift, leads to challenges of traditional approaches to wildlife management. It emphasizes consideration of *individual* animals and the avoidance of lethal control techniques such as is proposed in the concept of compassionate conservation. Further research in other modernized countries with similar cultural characteristics is needed to establish the broader generalizability of our findings." (My emphasis)
To sum up, anthropomorphism favors mutualism rather than an ideology of domination in our interactions with wildlife. The researchers also learned that "income, education, and urbanization were only weakly correlated with anthropomorphism at the individual level." Compassionate conservation stresses that the life of each *individual* matters because they are alive, not because of what they can do for us. One of its guiding principles is, "First, do no harm."[1]

Similarly, in an essay published in 2014 called "Anthropomorphism as a conservation tool," Alvin A. Y.-H. Chan writes, "Anthropomorphism has the potential to aid conservation biologist to conserve target species by developing empathy among the public, effectively promoting considerate practice."[2]

Another essay by Meredith Root-Bernstein and her colleagues is also very important because it calls attention to the need to consider a broad array of nonhuman species. They write, "Limiting the use of anthropomorphism in conservation to prosocial, intelligent, suffering animals risks suggesting that other species are not worthy of conservation because they are not like humans in the 'right' ways. It would also mean overlooking the application of a powerful tool to the promotion of low-profile species with high biological conservation value."

Where to from here? The upside of anthropomorphism

There's a lot of food for thought in the above essays for different brands of conservation biologists ranging from those who think killing other animals is okay and "has to be done", to those who want to take killing off the menu of options, conservation psychologists, and anthrozoologists. Anthropomorphism is a more useful practice than many might have expected. It may very well be that the seemingly natural human urge to impart emotions onto animals—far from obscuring the "true" nature of animals—may actually reflect a very accurate way of knowing. And the knowledge that is gained, the knowledge that is supported by a good deal of solid scientific research, is essential for making ethical decisions on behalf of others in all sorts of situations in which they are used, abused, harmed, and killed.

Of course, inappropriate anthropomorphism is always a danger, for it's easy to get lazy and presume that the way we see and experience the world must be the only way possible. It's also easy to become self-serving and hope that because we want or need animals to be happy, they are. The best guard against the inappropriate use of anthropomorphism is knowledge or the detailed study of the minds and emotions of animals. And, in fact, all sorts of scientific research, ranging from observational studies to neuroimaging projects, strongly support the fact that we're not alone in the emotional arena. (See "Stripping Animals of Emotions is 'Anti-Scientific & Dumb.'")

So, it's time to accept these strongly supported facts and understand that the real question at hand is *why* have emotions evolved, not *if* they have evolved, and learn more about them and use what we know, and have known for quite a long time, on behalf of other animals. The Anthropocene, often called "the age of humanity," really is "the rage of inhumanity," and some people feel very comfortable killing other animals while at the same time claiming to love them.

What makes the field of cognitive ethology—the study of animal minds—so exciting is that there is so much fascinating research to be done. There's no doubt that many animals experience rich and deep emotions. It's important to remember that our emotions are the gifts of our ancestors, our nonhuman animal kin. We have feelings and so too do other animals. Just look into their eyes.

Stand by for further discussions of the importance of understanding and appreciating other animals as the individuals they are, and how this will aid conservation efforts to keep them alive. Naysayers about the usefulness of "being anthropomorphic" and who ignore what we know about animal minds and hearts need to get over it and appreciate the benefits of recognizing its benefits. Their anthropodenial, their "blindness to the humanlike characteristics of other animals, or the animal-like characteristics of ourselves," doesn't work any longer. As time goes on this will be a win-win for all for current nonhuman and human residents, and especially perhaps for future generations of nonhumans and humans who will inherit whatever we leave behind.