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Marc Bekoff Ph.D.
[Animal Emotions](#)

Why People Should Care About Animal and Human Suffering

In the future, we must pay attention to the plight of nonhumans and humans.

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Caring for other species is caring for our own

"The One Health approach is a way of looking at the world that helps humans to see and acknowledge that humans, other species, and the natural environment (the three pillars of One Health) are completely and perfectly interlinked. If we harm one of these three pillars, all three are harmed."

People often criticize those who work on behalf of nonhumans by asking something like, "How dare you work with nonhumans when so many humans need help?" I always say that the life of every individual matters, and in today's challenging world the only way forward is to pay careful attention to the plight of nonhuman animals (animals), humans, and their homes. The University of Denver's [Dr. Sarah Bexell](#) has been a leader in the [One Health Initiative](#) approach that is a way of looking at the world that helps humans to see and acknowledge that humans, other species, and the natural environment (the three pillars of One Health) are completely and perfectly interlinked. (See also "[One Welfare: Ways to Improve Animal and Human Well-Being](#)" for an interview with veterinarian Dr. Rebeca García Pinillos who edited a book called [One Welfare: A Framework to Improve Animal Welfare and Human Well-being](#).)

I wanted to know more about Dr. Bexell's work and also that of the collaborative and multidisciplinary One Health Initiative, so I asked if she could answer a few questions in her otherwise over-busy day, and gladly she said she could. Our interview went as follows.

Please tell us about your long-term work on giant panda conservation and humane education in China and why you decided to devote so many years to this work.

I had the rare and incredible opportunity to go to China in 1999 to study giant panda behavior for five months. The organization that hosted this long-term research by one of my colleagues did not have education interventions or a department established, but they wanted to. The following year, they invited me back and with my colleagues we developed the first conservation education department for wildlife conservation in China. Over the past 19 years, our networks have grown while unreasonable demands from humans on the natural world have intensified. We are now evolving toward the more comprehensive form of educational intervention, humane education.

How does your work in China, at the [Institute for Human-Animal Connection](#) at the University of Denver's Graduate School of Social Work, and with the [Institute for Humane Education](#) follow from your own education and professional background?

introduced (to my horror) to mass human-induced endangerment and the extinction of other species. It was then that I left my dream of being a wildlife biologist because I felt driven to be a voice of reason and respect for the protection of other species and nature. I went on to get a M.Ed. in science education and finally a Ph.D. in early childhood education. I felt strongly that reaching young children before their morals, ethics and behavior patterns had been instilled, was critical in the fight to save other species and the natural world, which allows for the survival of our own species. I feel so lucky to say that all my work today is a really nice reflection of this untraditional academic path and work experience.



Young boy hiking in the woods Source: Sarah Bexell

People often criticize those who work on behalf of nonhuman animals (animals) because there is so much human suffering. Why do you think it's important to pay careful attention both to animal well-being and the state of nature and how does this help humans?

We now live within the Sixth Mass Extinction, the prior five extinctions happened before *Homo sapiens* even arrived on the scene. This mass extinction event is being caused by one species, and that is ours. The survival of our species rests solely on the ability of the natural world to support us and we are inching ever closer to a state of the planet that will be inhospitable to our species. Therefore, it is impossible to protect human rights, well-being and even survival without protecting wild plants and animals whose activities provide what scientists call, ecosystem services - cleaning of our air and water, maintenance of healthy soil, pollination and seed dispersal, and buffering of natural disasters (to name a very few). It is critical to note that Earth and our health and well-being would be better served if we humanely stop breeding domesticated

species who, just like humans in our current behavioral form, do not offer much if anything healthy back to the natural environment. In fact, it is humans and domesticated animals who are driving all Earth's environmental ills. We need to treat every domesticated individual with respect and compassion and let them live out their lives, but not breed them anymore so that they go extinct with dignity and grace. A thought exercise I do with my students is to ask them about what humans and domesticated species give to the natural environment and to list both positive and negative things. You can give it a try.

Can you please explain the importance of the One Health approach to education, intervention, and how a person should interact in the world especially when they are able to help others.

The One Health approach is a way of looking at the world that helps humans to see and acknowledge that humans, other species, and the natural environment are completely interlinked. If we harm one of these three pillars, all three are harmed. On the positive and hopeful side, when we work to protect one pillar, all have a better chance of positive outcomes and surviving. An example that often helps my students centers on the use of pesticides. Everyone knows that pesticides kill insects and other pests that we would prefer not to share our food with (harm to animals). However, we also know that pesticides are also very harmful to human health and that pesticides leach into soils and water, creating an environmental impact that harms even more species that depend on those environments. On the flip and more hopeful side, humans survived for most of their time on Earth without pesticides and learned how to grow food utilizing biological control or sometimes called integrated pest management. We still have this knowledge and can work toward a greatly limited use of harmful chemicals, to someday, not using them at all. In concert with these efforts, we will need to work humanely and lovingly toward stabilizing and decreasing our population.

Are you hopeful that the future will be brighter for nonhuman and human animals?



The One Health Triad Source: Wikipedia fair use doctrine



Charlie and a swan Source: Sarah Bexell

fascinating planet we call home.

give me hope. We are in some ways a very brilliant species, but also a very greedy, short-sighted, and cruel species. I hope someday soon humans can remember how good it feels to share and to enjoy the company (not through a device!) of other people, other species, and the natural world. Humans like to feel good, so if we can practice this sharing which results in feeling good, maybe people will have less appetite for rampant consumerism that is *one* of the main drivers of environmental destruction and species loss.

What are some your current and future projects?

Most of my time is dedicated to teaching and I absolutely love my job. At the University of Denver, I teach in a graduate-level concentration we call Sustainable Development and Global Practice and at the Institute for Humane Education, I teach animal protection. At the Institute For Human-Animal Connection, I direct and teach a graduate certificate called Raising Compassionate Kids: Humane Education & Interventions for Early Learners. My students are amazing and working hard to create a more humane human presence on Earth and they give me hope. Another current project is a research program of the Institute for Human-Animal Connection into the State of Humane Education in the United States in partnership with the Humane Education Coalition. I also have a couple of book projects in the works, including some for children!

Is there anything else you'd like to tell readers?

Allow yourself to love everyone, and I mean individuals of all species, including our own, and this amazing and

"Caring for nonhumans, for their own sake, does not preclude caring for humans. Humans are more than capable of caring for many more than one kind of thing. Reasoning to the contrary might also be used to support the belief that honoring one's ethnicity is fundamentally incompatible with racial equality. These considerations indicate that nothing is inherently misanthropic about being non-anthropocentric." ([John Vucetich et al. 2015](#), cited in [Treves et al. 2019](#))

Thank you, Sarah, for an enlightening interview. It's difficult for me to imagine that there is a more viable and hopeful way to move into the future in an increasingly human-dominated world than one that helps humans to appreciate and acknowledge that humans, other species, and the natural environment are inextricably linked. I'm reminded of the World Wildlife Fund's Living Planet Report 2014 called Species and spaces, people and places that shows that the Earth's ecological domain supports human survival and all that we hold dear. I also agree that working with youngsters is a gift and that we need to pay careful attention to their curiosity about our fascinating planet for they will inherit the world we leave them when we're no longer here. I hope that as time moves on more and more people globally will adopt this collaborative and multidisciplinary approach that works locally, nationally, and globally and accept that we humans are just one of the gang, all of whom must work together for a better future for all beings and their homes.

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