

The Biophilia Factor

Reprinted from *KIND Teacher*, 2000-01

by Lesia Winiarskyj



Pig, dog, shark, tiger, dove, rat, worm, crab, fox, snake. In *KIND Teacher*, we're reminded of animals with whom we share this small planet—its seas, woods, fields, even our homes and gardens. Some are our close companions. Some are members of a larger, wilder ecosystem, key players in the delicate balance of nature.

Now consider how animal names become metaphors to describe people: *Pig. Dog. Shark. Tiger. Dove. Worm. Rat. Crab. Fox. Snake.* Here are words loaded with positive or negative connotations: smart, indiscriminating, peaceful, dirty, bad-tempered, gracious, shifty, lazy, ugly, cruel.

According to internationally acclaimed biologist and Pulitzer-Prize-winning author E. O. Wilson, language is rich with metaphor in part because humans process information through symbols. Creating a “symbolic universe” helps us define our place in it, and we inevitably turn to the animal kingdom for a frame of reference, to help us articulate our actions, emotions, and values. But why animals, including some we may never encounter?

Wilson believes humans have a natural affinity for other living beings that is deeply rooted in genetics and evolution. By that he means that we've evolved around animals, with them, because of and in spite of them. They have played a significant role in determining what we strive for, cherish, fear, and reject, and so our search for a meaningful existence is tightly tied to our association with animals even today, as

our natural environment and interactions with it are greatly diminished. These ideas are the basis for Wilson's *biophilia* concept, which has sparked lively discussion among scientists and scholars and generated ideas on everything from the way we paint a sunset to the reasons we help. *The Biophilia Hypothesis* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1993) is a collection of thoughts on this concept and its implications for people, animals, and the environment. Included is a particularly relevant essay by Dr. Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence, professor of environmental studies at Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine, who examines how language on the one hand reflects our view of animals and on the other predicts it.

Our impression of a species is shaped not only by the way an animal looks and behaves, says Lawrence, but also by a mix of other factors, such as politics, society, environment, culture, and religion. For starters, she offers the example of the capybara, a furry South American rodent the size of a pig. Capybaras are skillful swimmers and so were classified in the sixteenth century as fish. Today, though people have long known capybaras are mammals, they retain their religious status as “fish” so that they may be eaten during Lent.

The strange case of the capybara is but one example of how we form a collective view of an animal by exaggerating certain traits, real or imagined, and ignoring others. How many people, for instance, regard bats as bad luck even while their ecological value as pollinators is well known? How many perceive birds' songs as expressions of joy rather than what they really are—usually claims to territory?

We know better. But the stereotypes persist. Perhaps the most poignant example Lawrence describes is that of the pig. Epithets such as *filthy pig* and *lazy pig*, terms like *male chauvinist pig*, and expressions like *living in a pigsty* and *pigging out*, she says, “reveal much about our symbolic perception of this

species.” Pigs represent gluttony, greed, sloppiness, and evil—no matter that they've proven exceedingly loyal, social, intelligent, and clean by nature. Authorities in fields as diverse as anthropology, philosophy, and linguistics speculate on several reasons for the contradiction, including this: Raising animals solely for the purpose of slaughter would be more difficult if we acknowledged them as affectionate or smart.

Dirty pig. Sacred cow. Wise owl. The biophilia concept points to an inherent tendency to symbolize animals, endowing them with our own human frailties and aspirations. Though they are characterized differently in every part of the world, the need to attach metaphors to animals is universal and profound. In fact, Lawrence points out, to a great extent people's preconceived ideas about animals have replaced real interactions with them. So it is often a commonly held belief, rather than personal experience, that determines how we see and treat animals and, consequently, whether we preserve or destroy a species.

The problem isn't so much that we “symbolize” animals, says Lawrence, but that we've fit them into categories we think they should occupy. She suggests placing greater importance on natural history and observable facts, which can help us appreciate animals for their true nature and intrinsic worth—as well as their value in our lives and our world. That's where humane education comes into play.

Humane education gives us a better, more honest understanding of animals' behaviors, biology, and needs and teaches how and why animals should be treated kindly. By its very nature, it complements another major educational initiative, character development, in that the values humane education promote in children's dealings with animals—respect, responsibility, empathy, fairness, and compassion—apply as aptly to their relationships with people.