

Mobilizing heads and hearts for wildlife conservation

Commentary on [Chapman & Huffman](#) on *Human Difference*

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Abstract: Highlighting the shared evolutionary relationships between humans and animals — and recognizing that all species, including humans, are unique in their own way — may facilitate caring for and conserving animals by tapping into a human emotion: empathy.

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Chapman & Huffman (2018) (C & H) suggest that the long history of elevating humans above other living organisms has given us *carte blanche* to (mis)use animals for our own purposes. As they point out, we tend to cherry-pick the traits we use for comparison with other animals, traits that matter for *our* species to justify claims of superiority, and thus our actions. Despite numerous studies demonstrating that humans are better than non-human animals at some tasks and worse at others, our perceived superiority has facilitated our exploitation of wildlife and the resources and habitats on which they depend. As a result, we now find ourselves in the sixth great extinction, which could very well lead to our own, through the loss of ecosystem services we humans rely on. C & H suggest that we should shift the way we think about our species by considering human “uniqueness” through the prism of evolutionary theory. Such a change would highlight the similarities among living organisms resulting from shared ancestry, as well as celebrate the uniqueness of all living organisms and their ability to thrive in their environment of evolutionary adaptedness; as C & H put it, the differences that do exist among species should be “value-free”.

C & H urge that we use our heads, and our strong reasoning abilities, to treat other species more kindly because we share many similarities and because our survival depends on their contributions to our shared ecosystem. We certainly agree, but add that moving away from the perception of human superiority may also activate our emotional intelligence by tapping into

something else: empathy. Colombo (2018) notes in his commentary that some religions encourage the preservation of wildlife, arguing that the perception of human superiority doesn't justify mistreating other animals. As Shackelford (2018) points out in his commentary, we should care about animals because they can suffer. For many people, this may be a hard pill to swallow. Sure, most would agree that those animals we interact with frequently, whether they be dogs, cats, horses, or cattle, can feel pain; many may also acknowledge their cognitive abilities. But less familiar animals suffering the effects of anthropogenic habitat modification may come to be viewed as pests. It may be a stretch for people to empathise with such animals because it is more convenient to ignore that animals can suffer and have emotions. Even human populations that consider some animals as incarnations of a god may have ambivalent feelings towards these species (Saraswat et al. 2015). When these species start raiding human property, stealing food and provisions, causing financial losses, attitudes towards these species can worsen. As humans encroach on the habitats of other animals, many species are forced to enter into closer contact with humans, which can lead to human-wildlife conflicts (Fuentes 2006; IUCN SSC Human-Wildlife Task Force). This can reduce the empathy we feel toward such species, which might affect the treatment they receive. Appealing to our hearts – by highlighting similarities between humans and other animals – could lead to better treatment of animals and their environments.

Viewing humans as somehow unique or “superior” emphasizes the perception that humans are not part of, nor affected by, nature. This perception creates a false dichotomy between the needs of humans and non-humans. This is not to suggest the absence of conflicts between humans and animals, but must human and animal needs always be diametrically opposed? By emphasizing our similarities rather than human “uniqueness”, and appealing to people's heads *and* hearts, we can refocus attention on our shared needs and shared benefits from biodiversity conservation.

References

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