

# The Meaning of Animal Portraiture in a Museum Setting: Implications for Conservation

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Summary of original paper published in  
*Organization & Environment*, June 2011, 24(2) 150-174

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*"Removed from the intensity imposed by the ... artificial exaggeration of similarity and difference, only the poets are likely to find the sight of an animal penetrating, and to appreciate the opportunity that animals provide us to realize what life is" (Pekarik 2004, 259).*

## Summary

- We examined the changes in visitors' perceptions of animals after viewing an animal portraiture exhibit at the National Museum of Natural History in Paris, France.
- Our hypothesis was that using an approach that presented the animal in a context that is, culturally, usually associated with human representation, viewers' sense of kinship with and respect for animals can be enhanced.
- Pre-exhibit, visitors saw endangered animals as wild, free and violent creatures that are part of a "nature" that is separate from humans. After viewing the exhibit, people felt a stronger sense of kinship with animals, seeing them as individuals with personality and in need of protection.
- Our findings indicate that certain types of visual representations of animals can change visitors' cultural perceptions of animals thus having a potential influence on human-animal relations.
- We raise questions about today's prevalent approaches to transmitting conservation messages:
  - Traditional nature and wildlife images and documentaries may create a culture of increased separation between people and nature/animals thereby making it more difficult to gain support for conservation action
  - Science- and fact-based educational efforts may not be the only, or maybe even the best, ways of communicating conservation messages. "Free-learning" approaches that launch people on their own intellectual and emotional journeys may have an important impact in motivating people to act.

## Study and Results

We evaluated visitor experiences of *Monde Sauvage: Regards et Emotions*, an exhibit of animal portraits by photographic artist Joe Zammit-Lucia ([www.jzlimages.com](http://www.jzlimages.com)) on display during Fall 2008 and Winter 2009 at the National Museum of Natural History in Paris, France. The exhibit consisted of 29 photographic prints, the participants were 50 visitors, and the instrument used was the Personal Meaning Map.

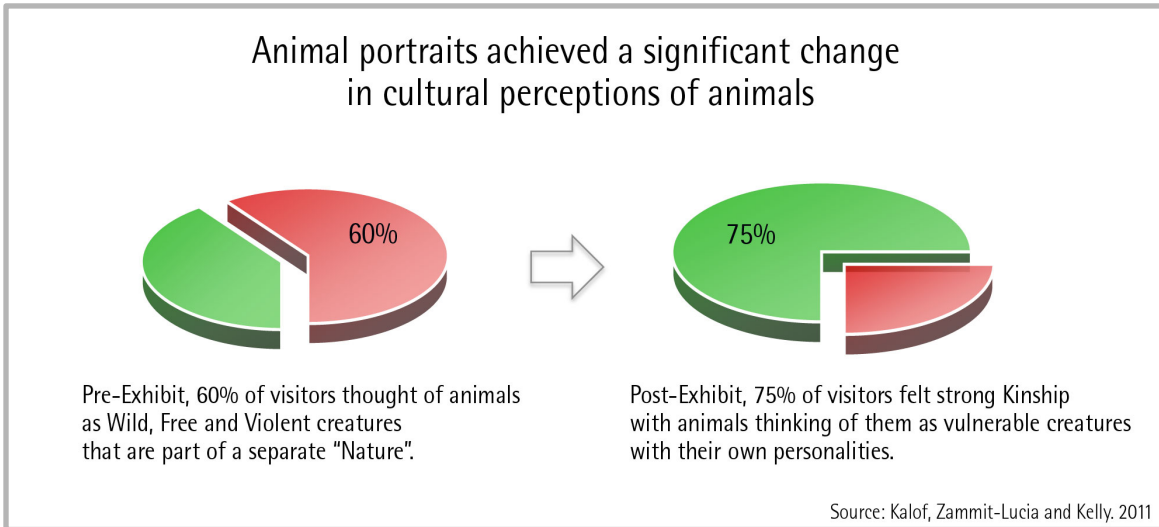
### *"Personality" Emerges as a Dominant Theme*

As a result of visiting the exhibit, museum visitors gave a different meaning to the word "Animal" compared to the meanings they expressed before entering the exhibit. The biggest single change was seen in the significant increase in the attribution of "Personality" to animals. This finding alone confirms that exposure to this particular artwork seems to have the effect desired by the artist – encouraging viewers to see animals as individuals with character and personality rather than as generic specimens of species. The emergence of "Personality" as a dominant theme in the evaluation of the animal portraits ties in with previous conclusions (Kalof 2003) that the recognition of both our similarities with and our differences from other animals is an essential first step in the development of coalitions to resolve some of our most serious social and environmental problems.

### *A Significant Cultural Shift in Perceptions*

However, the impact of this artwork was seemingly much broader than the increased attribution of Personality to the concept of "Animal." We see a wholesale shift from the Animal being perceived as something wild, natural and hostile – and therefore separate from the Human – to a perception of closeness and kinship between animal and human. Pre-exhibit, the thematic cluster of "Nature," "Wild/Free" and "Violence" accounted for 60% of respondents' aggregate intensity scores. Post-exhibit, the relevance to visitors of this cluster fell to 25%, with the combination of "Personality," "Kinship"

and "Vulnerable" now accounting for a full 75% of the aggregate intensity scores.



These changes suggest that the effect of the exhibit went beyond isolated changes to perceptions around individual themes to changes in the overall cultural perception of the Animal and the nature of the relationship between the Human and the Animal. This lends credence to the hypothesis that certain approaches to animal representation can impact visitors' fundamental perceptions of animals and potentially impact human-animal relations.

### *How Should Animals be Represented?*

It has long been the assumption of many in the environmental movement that a romanticized representation of nature – representations of animals in their natural habitat doing whatever it is that animals do – and the presentation of scientific information as part of a didactic learning process are the most important elements on which to build coalitions focused on environmental conservation. As Baker (1993) has argued, some go even further, making demands "for a morally or politically correct image of animals, an image of animals as they should be seen, of animals running free in our imaginary and mythical wild" (194).

Our findings combined with previous research serve to raise questions about these assumptions. The first question that arises is: which approaches to the cultural positioning of animals are more or less likely to encourage the development of the sort of human-animal relationships that could resolve some of our most devastating exploitations of other animals? The philosophy literature (Callicott 1992; Fox 2006) suggests that cultural constructs that emphasize concepts of personality, kinship and vulnerability are more likely to move us in the desired direction than the more distancing concepts of wild, free and violent creatures who belong in a distant, non-human Nature.

### *Which is the Best Form of Learning?*

In thinking about how to influence fundamentally the underlying structure of an individual's understanding and attitude, a second question arises: what are the relative roles and degrees of effectiveness of the didactic, fact-based learning approach compared to the free-choice learning experience stimulated by an ambiguous work of art? For instance, some have suggested that philosophical reflection acts as a deflection that actually distracts us from the immediacy of our encounter with animals with the effect of distancing people from animals (Diamond 2008). Scientific or documentary explorations are, like philosophical reflection, intellectual exercises that can lead to emotional disengagement and potentially increase distance in human-animal relations. There may be fundamental flaws in the assumption that "education" through didactic scientific communication is either universally effective or the best way of persuading lay people of the merits of conservation efforts. For instance among visitors exiting a recent, highly sophisticated exhibit about climate change at the Science Museum in London, England, a majority of 2:1 stated that, having visited the exhibit, they did not believe that human-driven climate change was a significant issue to be dealt with (Jones 2009).

How deeply embedded is the belief in the primacy of didactic communication is reflected, for example, in the comprehensive and detailed evaluation undertaken by the Wildlife Conservation Society of its highly successful "Congo Gorilla Forest" Conservation Exhibition (Hayward and

Rothenberg 2004). The authors open with this statement: "Most zoo visitors are primarily motivated by the joys of watching animals, which may preclude attention to major ecological issues that are the focus of research in biodiversity, habitats, and other matters pertaining to the survival of wild animals" (261). Here, rather than visitors' own natural motivations being seen as opportunities to enhance the human-animal relationship, they are seen as obstacles potentially getting in the way of "introducing basic concepts of environmental science and conservation biology" (Hayward and Rothenberg 2004, 266) – in other words the scientists' own desire to produce scientifically educated people.

Because of their expressive qualities, works of art affect viewer perceptions in a different way compared to knowledge-based or documentary communication. Especially when ambiguous or counter-cultural, a work of art operates to engage viewers at the immediate, emotional and subconscious level. There is no attempt to force on the viewer a specific viewpoint. Rather, the viewer is launched on his or her own individual thought processes, part intellectual, part emotional, and reaches personal conclusions in a "free-learning" environment. The exhibit that we evaluated was totally "fact-free." It consisted of a series of images with no advocacy or other factual information promoting the animals or their conservation. Yet the impact on visitors' expressed views was substantial.

### *Getting People Motivated to Act*

Currently, the use of fact-based, scientific information remains the dominant form of communication within the conservation community. Indeed, among some, there is deep suspicion about any alternative approach. Yet, "(t)he poetic as distinct from the prosaic, esthetic art as distinct from scientific, expression as distinct from statement, does something different from leading to an experience ... It constitutes one." (Dewey 2005, 88). This statement points to a complementarity of art and science that, combined, may provide a more effective route to influencing the cultural environment in which decisions on human-animal relationships and their conservation implications are made. This approach requires a recognition that, apart from

attempting to produce scientifically informed citizens, effective communication efforts "must also address motivation to act, which is closely related to feeling and emotion" (Myers 2009, 39).

### *What is the Value of Viewing Captive Animals in Zoos?*

Finally, we would like to discuss the widespread perception that providing people with the opportunity to view live, captive animals (i.e., in zoos or nature parks) is an important element in the overall "education" efforts designed to influence conservation endeavors. The impact of most zoos' effectiveness in creating a positive conservation culture continues to be a matter of debate. Some consider zoos "embassies in which ambassadors of other species reside" (Rabb 2004, 243). They see zoos progressively evolving into conservation centers and places where the opportunity for aesthetic appreciation of individual animals helps conservation efforts by leading to a wider appreciation of the entire species (Kagan and Veasey 2010). Others see talk of conservation as a mere fig leaf and argue that zoo visits are more about family entertainment than environmental education (Hyson 2004). Here our interest lies not in zoos' potential in traditional, didactic educational efforts but rather in their potential impact on the human-animal relationship. In addition, we are interested in the potential impact of the zoo exhibit itself rather than the many research and field conservation projects that zoos and zoological societies now support but that have little or nothing to do with the animal as public exhibit.

In this regard, our study may provide an alternative framework for thinking about ways to connect people to animals in need of protection. It serves to raise two important questions for discussion. First, our study has shown that the device of placing animal representations in a visual context that is usually associated with human representation had the effect of enhancing feelings of kinship. What, therefore, are the effects of continually exposing people to animals in a captive setting? As suggested by Berger, Kellert, Acampora and Malamud, does viewing animals in zoos only reinforce and enhance feelings of human dominance over other living beings? Rather than enhance feelings of kinship, is captive subjugation merely "... a

demonstration of the dualism at the very origin of the relation between man and animal" (Berger 1980, 28), one that increases the perceived distance between the human and the animal and continues to legitimize the exploitation of the animal for the purposes of mere entertainment?

Second, if appropriate visual representation has the potential of effectively enhancing feelings of kinship and attitudes towards conservation, what opportunities might this present to decrease the number of animals in captive settings and replace – at least in part – viewers' experiences with appropriate visual imagery? Pekarik (2004) argues that an important and often neglected element of the zoo experience is the ability to reflect on what it means to be alive and to be human and to realize that "(a)nimals are simultaneously 'like us' and 'not like us' " (257). He stresses that this questioning takes place through metaphor. If this is so, could combinations of live animal experiences and more metaphorical art-based experiences serve to enhance such questioning?

### *Images Are Important And The Visual Culture of Conservation Bears Examining*

Our study clearly shows that, in the right form, animal representation can have a substantial influence on viewers' cultural attitudes and feelings about animals. In modern urban culture, animal representation and live animal attraction settings are the only significant forms of contact that exists between the majority of humans and other animals, with the exception of companion animals. Animal representations are therefore central to the future development of human-animal relationships. The form of these representations will determine the direction in which the human-animal relationship will develop – for better or for worse. Yet, in the absence of empirical information about the impact of different forms of representations, we are left with Baker's (2001) contention that any discourse about the animal "as it should be seen" becomes nothing more than a matter of personal preference.

Rather than focusing on a preferred form of animal representation, it may be more productive first of all to understand how different forms of representation may affect meaning. In this, we should consider the important



point that viewers first of all process images in terms of their global, meaning-laden qualities rather than their content details (Myers, 2006). This distinction between meaning and content is analogous to what some art philosophers have described as matter versus form, arguing for a unity of matter and form in works of art. In providing a very specific combination of matter and form, the images we have studied here seem to have generated a meaning that goes far beyond the literal, and to have done so without the need for additional narrative support.

Alternative approaches to animal representation – such as traditional wildlife and nature photography or wildlife documentaries – may have effects on viewers opposite of those we have found here. For instance, traditional wildlife photography that places animals in a naturalistic setting, may enhance themes of nature, wild and free potentially to the detriment of feelings of kinship and vulnerability. Kill scenes, which have seemingly become an obligatory component of traditional wildlife documentaries, may enhance a concept of the animal as a violent, ferocious and brutal predator, further undermining concepts of kinship and vulnerability. These approaches may be more in tune with a view of conservation that sees Culture and the Human as somewhat separate from, and a destructive intruder upon, a Nature that must be protected, rather than a belief in the primary importance of positive human-nature relationships as the vital underpinnings of successful conservation efforts.

Any form of animal representation is a cultural artifact. One group or another may prefer one form of representation over another. But every preferred form "of seeing and understanding is itself cultural and in a sense no more a true picture of the animal than any other" (Mullan and Marvin 1987, 6-8). For these reasons, our study is not concerned with trying to establish a preferred form of representation. Rather, our interest is in providing evidence of whether one specific form of representation changes viewers' understanding of the concept of "Animal" and whether the changes achieved are likely to help or hinder conservation efforts. It is possible, indeed likely, that untested but established assumptions about the desirability and acceptability of different forms of animal representation may have unwittingly created a visual culture that might serve to distance us further from non-

domesticated, threatened and endangered animals. More empirical information about the ways different forms of animal representation impact cultural meaning and human behaviors may give us the better understanding needed for the future development of effective approaches towards improved human-animal relations.

The particular animal portraits we have examined intensely emphasize the animality and individuality of the represented subjects and artificially place those subjects in a setting culturally associated with human representation. This seems to create among viewers a type of engagement and change in perceptions – a meaning – that may not happen when animals are presented in other, more prosaic, naturalistic or scientific settings.

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