

The importance of Earth jurisprudence, compassionate conservation and personal rewilding

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Becoming ecocentric

“That the universe is a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects is the central commitment of the Ecozoic. Existence itself is derived from and sustained by this intimacy of each being with every other being of the universe.”

(Swimme and Berry, 1994: 243)

I came to ecocentrism as a youngster. My focus was on other animals, but, as time went on, I also incorporated humans and all of our homes into a broad ecocentric perspective. I always attribute my compassion for non-human animals to my mother’s warm and compassionate soul, and my positive thinking, as well as my keeping dreams alive, to my incredibly optimistic father. In retrospect, I know I was very lucky to be born into a home where playfulness and laughter were highly valued, as was hard work. I didn’t live with any animals except a goldfish. I used to talk to him as I ate breakfast. It felt very natural to do this. I told my folks that it wasn’t nice to keep him cooped up alone. My parents told me that when I was around three years old I started asking them what animals – especially the dogs, squirrels, birds and ants with whom I had contact outside of our apartment in Brooklyn – were thinking and feeling. They said I was constantly paying attention to animals; not only was I attributing minds to them, but I also was very concerned with how they were treated. I always said that we also needed to mind and care for them, because they couldn’t do it for themselves. My concern for individual animals has continued on for decades as I work in the rapidly developing field called compassionate conservation.

Ecocentrism recognizes that an Earth-centred, rather than a human-centred,

view of nature, calls for a change in people’s values if they favour humans over nature as a whole, including non-human animals and their homes. Earth jurisprudence can be viewed as “a philosophy of law and human governance that is based on the idea that humans are only one part of a wider community of beings and that the welfare of each member of that community is dependent on the welfare of the Earth as a whole” (Wikipedia, 2017). Thus, societies of humans are part of a wider community that incorporates societies of other animals and where they choose to live or are forced to live. All community members are dependent on one another. No individual is an island and we all depend on one another to thrive and to survive.

Embracing Earth jurisprudence is essential in the ‘Anthropocene’ – often called the ‘age of humanity’. Given how human animals are plundering our magnificent planet and surrounds, I call the epoch, instead, the ‘rage of inhumanity’, in which the interests of humans regularly trump the interests of non-human animals. The idea that all of Earth’s residents are part of an interconnected community forms the basis of my ideas about personal ‘rewilding’ that are outlined in my book *Rewilding Our Hearts* (Bekoff, 2014). The ideas are novel and call for personal (and some might say individual) spiritual transformations that serve to reconnect people to nature and to embrace the magnificence of our planet. All individuals are seen as stakeholders who must work together.

The growing international field of compassionate conservation also mandates that all individuals are stakeholders, and it is based on the following principles:

- 1 First, do no harm.
- 2 All individuals matter.

3 We must strive for peaceful coexistence among all of Earth's residents.

Currently, while many people talk about how all individuals matter, and how all individuals must work together, in the end human interests regularly trump those of non-humans. This has produced a world of daily chaos – a world that is falling apart. Personal rewilding and compassionate conservation can change how we go about 'business as usual' and can come to the rescue and reverse these destructive trends. As such, I've called for a 'rewilding manifesto' based on compassion and biophilia – our innate drive to connect with Mother Nature – that will help to foster hope for the future.

Along these lines, what I call the 'ethology of rewilding' entails focusing on what we know about who other animals truly are, and using this information to come to a deeper appreciation of the similarities and differences among non-human animals and between non-human and human animals. I lean towards the side of offering practical solutions.

We don't need 'more science' to know that we must change our ways, and we already have enough information to mandate making positive changes. We must redefine our relationship with other nature and we must rapidly do it and act on the feelings that emerge. We also need to reconsider our relationships with other humans and do away with resolving conflicts using violent means. A rewilding manifesto would clearly state that we will indeed need – and with deeply passionate and motivated intention – to reconnect with other humans, other non-humans, and their homes, and to do it with as much positive energy as possible.

One trait we share with many other animals is a strong tendency to be compassionate and empathic, rather than inherently violent, and we need to tap into these predispositions as we move forward. The Earth jurisprudence perspective mandates that we need to harness our powerful and positive biophilic impulse and exploit it for all it's worth, and then some, as we move into the future. And let's be sure that youngsters know just what we are doing,

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Marc and Bessie, a rescued dairy cow.

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and then they, too, can continue to do the good work that is necessary for our magnificent planet, and for all beings to thrive and to look forward to, and joyously welcome in, many new days. Along these lines, we need to rewild education and allow kids to be kids, to get down and dirty, and to enjoy the outdoors and engage in spontaneous wild play. They seem to give up when they're not allowed to be the kids they are and that they deserve and need to be.

Rewilding also calls for 'undoing the unwilding' that comes not only from sitting in classrooms, but also from media that misrepresents other animals, and from getting lost in busyness. It also means that youngsters must get out into nature and experience first-hand the community in which they live. It is essential to redefine our relationship with other nature, and we must rapidly do it and act on the feelings that emerge. In our forthcoming book *The Animals' Agenda* (Bekoff and Pierce, 2017), Jessica Pierce and I argue for a revolutionary paradigm shift to what we call 'the science of animal well-being', in which the interests and lives of all individuals matter. When these ideas are employed, our decisions will not routinely or conveniently favour humans over non-humans.

I feel that most people do care about the planet, but because their daily lives are so out of control (and over-filled with having to do this and that) that they lose their innate connections with nature. This persistent alienation makes them forget how good it feels to interact with animals and other environs. Many people also 'give up' and don't realize that our one and only planet is tired and surely not as resilient as some people claim it to be. I'm a total dreamer and optimist, but there simply is no way that the methods by which we choose to live today can be sustainable, even in the short-run. Giving up means that our children (and theirs) will live in a world in which I'd rather not live, so I wonder why so many people are so self-centred and selfish, acting as if

they don't care what their kids' lives will be like in the future?

What we're doing now will result in a disastrous situation for future generations. Ecocide really is a suicide that crosses time and space. I see rewilding as a process that will result in much closer and deeper reciprocal connections with other humans and other animals and their homes, and I believe that if enough people rewild themselves, rewilding will become a heartfelt and heartfelt meme, a behaviour that will spread from person to person and to future generations as a form of cultural evolution. There are the '10 Ps of rewilding' – being proactive, positive, persistent, patient, peaceful, practical, powerful, passionate, playful and present. We must clearly speak out about our deep and wild connection with nature. *We must rewild our sense of wonder.*

It's inarguable that if we're going to make the world a better place now and for future generations, personal rewilding is central to the process, and this will entail a major paradigm shift in how we view and live in the world and how we behave. It's not that difficult to expand our compassion footprint (Bekoff, 2010), and if each of us does something the movement will grow rapidly. All in all, ecocentrism surely has to be the wave of the future, yet time is not on our side. All individuals can do something to realize the essential goals of ecocentrism, and everyone who can do something must do what they can right now. ■

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