

RESTORING CONNECTIONS: WE ARE ALL ONE!

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With over ten years experience in Australia, and further experience overseas, her driving vision has been promoting the long term survival of the wildlife and the environment that supports us all, through scientific knowledge, conservation, research and education. She is currently the education officer for Wildlife Victoria.

ABSTRACT:

All elements in nature are interconnected with each other and every action we do on the environment, has an effect in the entire web in one way or another, including the wildlife. This talk explores ideas through which we can understand and be part of some of those connections in order to find more sustainable, responsible and compassionate ways of living.

INTRODUCTION:

Contrary to many ancient cultures around the globe, which understood nature as a big web where everyone and everything was interconnected, interdependent and interrelated, our modern western society has, in general terms, a different point of view.

We tend to divide and categorise what is around us, in order to understand it, process it and handle it. Most of our learning, thinking and analytical processes, are fragmented, which could make things easier for us. But there is the danger of missing the whole picture.

Just to take a few examples, we have divided the planet in many ways, humanity in many ways, knowledge in many ways, medicine in many ways, and even God!

And to prove the point, this talk about restoring connections has been divided into three areas:

1. CONNECTING WILDLIFE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Those of us, who work with wildlife in one way or another, have come a long way. We have learnt a lot about native animals' rehabilitation, husbandry, medical science, behavior, nutrition, reproduction, etc.

We have focused mostly on the animals themselves and I believe the contribution we have all done is fantastic at many levels. However, in many cases we have failed to make the connection

between the native animals we care about so much and the environment in which they live and on which they depend for their survival.

We mostly think about habitats when we struggle to find suitable sites to release our animals after rehabilitation. Our basic knowledge about ecosystems and the interrelations between different species of animals and plants and their surroundings is very limited.

Habitat destruction due to land clearing for farming, other industries and housing development is the biggest threat to all forms of life in the planet, including ours.

We are removing the original native vegetation and on top of that we are replacing it for introduced exotic plant species.

Unfortunately all gardening programs and magazines, the nurseries and even government institutions are constantly promoting the introduction, propagation and planting of exotic plants.

Ironically enough, most gardeners and landscapers are very dangerous for the environment, due to their constant introduction of exotic plants and the large use of pesticides, fertilizers and precious water to keep them alive.

Introduced plant species have the dangerous potential to become environmental weeds. Weeds do not offer the right food source nor shelter for our wildlife; on the contrary, they are associated with introduced animal species, promoting their further population expansion.

But the biggest environmental problem of introduced plants is their capacity to invade natural habitats competing for space, nutrients, sunlight and water with the native vegetation, disrupting the fragile balance of entire ecosystems.

The creation of new varieties of plant species, very popular at the moment, is also a very dangerous practice due to the potential they have to hybridise with native plants and changing the genetic pool.

The lack of appreciation and understanding about the importance and the beauty of the local native plants is one of the biggest threats for the survival of our wildlife in the long term.

The plants we choose for our gardens, regardless of how big or small these gardens are, have a huge impact on the future of our wildlife. Indigenous gardens can be designed in many styles according with each particular condition and they will always make an important contribution to conservation.

If every garden, every park, every school is planted with the indigenous plants of the area, we will be creating wildlife corridors, reducing the problems caused by habitat fragmentation.

Conservation means protecting what we have left, enhancing what has been altered and restoring with the indigenous plants of the area when the habitats have been destroyed.

There is a direct and bidirectional interdependent relationship between wildlife and the environment and we as carers, need to recognise that. The individual animals we look after are little dots that belong to a bigger picture; a bigger picture which we need to understand and look after as well.

Increasing our knowledge about the environment, educating the community about conservation and starting with our own backyard, are the best gifts we can give to the wildlife we love so much.

2. CONNECTING THE BOXES IN WHICH WE CLASSIFY ANIMALS:

As said at the beginning we tend to classify everything around us and the animals are not the exception. We have created boxes with labels in which we include different kind of animals according with our point of view. The way we relate, we treat, we care for and we feel about the animals, depends mostly on the box in which we have included them.

For example, we have:

- Pet animals
- Lab animals
- Wild animals
- Pest animals
- Working animals
- Farm animals
- Amusement animals
- Killing for enjoyment animals
- Black market animals
- Sacred animals

So in most cases, we love pets, we hate pests, we worry about wildlife, we exploit farm animals, we don't feel much for the killing for enjoyment animals, and so on...

However, if we look closely, we will find two things:

First, the animals can change the box easier than we may think.

A rabbit could be a beloved pet, a pest dying poisoned, a tortured being in a lab trial or someone's next meal. Our views and feelings change in a split second.

Dogs are another example, going from friends to food according to the country.

And our kangaroos go from our national emblem, to endless hours of care in our hands, to farm animals for pet-food or pests culled with no remorse.

I think this point is clear enough...

The second thing is that regardless of the box in which we choose to put the animals, their capacity to feel pain, to feel stress and to feel fear is the same. The fact that we classify animals for one purpose or another, doesn't take away their capacity to suffer. Despite our changing feelings from love to disgust, the feelings of the animals don't change with the box.

We usually do not make that connection. To us the boxes are all disconnected from each other and that makes our capacity to question very quiet... it is very convenient. However, we need to realise that those boxes don't really exist. There is only one big box in which we are all included, in which we are all related...Actually, it is not even a box, it is a sphere... and it is called Earth!

3. CONNECTING OUR FOOD WITH THE WILDLIFE:

The biggest threat to wildlife survival and conservation both in local and worldwide conditions is habitat destruction.

All efforts towards helping injured, orphaned, sick or endangered native animals become pointless in the big scale and in the long term if they don't go hand in hand with the protection and restoration of the habitats which sustains them.

In Australia during the past 220 years, 50% of marsupials and 30% of native rodents have become extinct or reduced to less than 1% of their original population. By 2003, 1/3 of all the world's extinct mammals were Australian.

Today in our country 1,324 animal species are threatened with extinction. This is the second highest number in the world after USA and the highest in the world per capita.

Australia is a very old continent where a very diverse and unique wildlife has evolved. However its extremely dry conditions and very poor soils, made its rich ecosystems very fragile.

Animal industry is one of the major causes for environmental problems including:

- Vegetation removal - habitat destruction - land clearing
- Increase in intensity and frequency of fire patterns
- Increasing salinity, compacting and acidifying of soils
- Soil and water pollution with excrements, fertilisers and pesticides
- Greenhouse gas emissions – climate change
- Introduction and spreading of exotic species and weeds
- High use of water
- Competition for food with human population
- Overfishing and inhumane fishing methods are destroying entire populations of many species of marine life and ecosystems

Animal industries...

- Use more than 57% of the country in grazing
- Use 92% of all disturbed land in Australia : 55% beef, 36% sheep & wool, 1% dairy
- Require 55% of the total water used in the country
- Contribute directly and indirectly with 30% of greenhouse emissions including direct production from livestock, fertilisers, land clearing, as well as fuel and energy consumption
- Produce 12% of greenhouse gases, as direct gas emissions, which is the 3rd largest source of emissions, nearly equal to all transport put together.
- Methane is the gas generated by livestock, particularly ruminants, as fermentation by-product of their digestive system. Methane is far more potent than carbon dioxide.

It is far more efficient to feed the increasing human population directly from plants, rather than using plants to feed animals to feed humans.

One acre of land can produce the following pounds of protein:

- 356 from soybeans
- 265 from rice
- 211 from corn
- 192 from legumes
- 82 from milk
- 78 from eggs
- 20 from beef
- 45 average for all meats combined

It takes 3.25 acres to feed a person on an ongoing basis, considering an average diet from a developed country, including animal and plant foods. To feed the same person with a plant based diet, only 1/6 of an acre is needed.

A big impact on habitat conservation for wildlife and human hunger could happen with a change of attitude and food habits.

Trying to feed the growing human population is destroying many wildlife habitats across the world, and yet there the problem of human hunger has not been solved. A change of attitude and food habits could contribute in a great deal to solve both problems.

Realising that we are all connected could open a new perspective as wildlife carers and as human beings; we could enjoy and care for this planet in a way that ensures a better life for all forms and sizes for many generations to come.

Thank you...

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