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Freeing Nemo

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Freeing Nemo

Abstract

Floating on the surface of the water, I observe the life teeming below me. The waves were carrying my body further and further into the beautiful reef; but all I was conscious of was the cleaner wrasse below bouncing from fish to fish, the parrotfish scraping algae from the coral, and the anemone protecting the ornate clownfish living within. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, animal rights, animal cruelty

Disciplines

Animal Sciences | Marine Biology | Other Animal Sciences | Zoology

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](#) Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

FREEING NEMO

November 5, 2014



Floating on the surface of the water, I observe the life teeming below me. The waves were carrying my body further and further into the beautiful reef; but all I was conscious of was the cleaner wrasse below bouncing from fish to fish, the parrotfish scraping algae from the coral, and the anemone protecting the ornate clownfish living within.

As I snap back to reality I realize that the other snorkelers have spotted a green turtle. People begin to gravitate towards it, intrigued. More and more of the snorkelers crowd around the turtle, aiming to get the best picture to upload to Facebook or Twitter and

share their latest discovery with friends. A swarm of people in their black wetsuits are swimming around the animal, swirling into a black mass obscuring the sea turtle from my view completely.

A few reach out to touch the turtle. "Stop!" I think to myself. "He needs to get up for air!" I want to scream. But no one seems to be concerned for the turtle's safety, only for their own experience: a story they can tell, a picture they can show.

This is not an isolated incident. Throughout my life I've witnessed people take advantage of the nature around them for their own satisfaction. It seems as though the millions of different species of animals have become mere objects to touch, mock and abuse for their own gratification. When did animals become toys?

Although zoos today are occasionally used for the conservation of endangered and threatened species, their origins can be traced to Ancient Egypt when Pharaohs would call upon exotic animals to be on display for their amusement. Reintroduction programs and funding for research are just some of the ways zoos today are attempting to aid some of the animal populations which we have destroyed. However, there is still an educational component which I feel is missing.

Ogling animals from behind the safety of a glass screen, although allowing us to feel somewhat connected to the animals, does not result in a deeper understanding for animals. Rather, it sprouts a sense of superiority to the animals. The human gaze on the animals only breeds a pretentious distinction between “nature” and “civilization”.

Evidence of this can be seen in cases ranging from something that seems as insignificant as a young child squishing a bug for fun, to much more extreme and rare cases as a baby shark being [killed for onlookers to get a photo](#). By placing ourselves above nature, we create a disconnect which hurts us all.

What we often don't seem to understand about our relationship with animals is that our actions have a great impact. Many animals form communities and ecosystems which can be irreparably harmed by human activity. Commercial overfishing and bycatch, for instance, can deplete population levels by removing more organisms than can sustain the population. Provisioning, or feeding, wild animals leads to operant conditioning of the animal to be near humans. As the urban-wildlife interface becomes smaller, animals are more likely to be hit by cars or boats. Approaching wild animals, and even tame animals, has been shown to increase their stress levels.

Not only are human-wildlife interactions harmful for the animal, but they can harm us as well. When feeding wild animals, the reward-based system can result in aggression of animals towards humans. We can also be harmed from the increased number of accidents that occur, not to mention zoological diseases that can be spread from contact with mammals.

As a result of this mentality, animal cruelty also becomes a quotidian factor in our society. How many times have you seen heartbreaking advertisements from the SPCA on your Facebook newsfeed, read horrible accounts of sharks being de-finned for shark fin soup, or heard of the sordid conditions in which many livestock animals live? All of these animals have suffered for the sake of our amusement.

We are not necessarily superior to or separate from nature, the two are concomitant. We must better understand the harmful results that can occur from treating animals like toys and how this could potentially be a detriment to an entire population. Human interaction with animals can lead to behavioral changes in animals, dependence on humans for food, and, even worse, death for either us or the animal. Animals are in this world for their own sake, just as we are. Let's peacefully coexist.

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