

Animals Are Not Inanimate Objects

by Ingrid Newkirk

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In 1980, a small group of friends started People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

Back then, no one had heard of “animal rights.” Today, people remain confused as to what the term means, but they do know that how we treat animals is important. Acknowledging animals’ rights can be as simple as respecting their needs. Of course, animals don’t need complex rights, like the right to drive or the right to vote—although considering the mess we sometimes make of our elections, perhaps that’s not such a bad idea.

Animals enjoy the natural world without ruining it. All they need is to be able to take a drink of clean water, to be nourished, to have shelter from extreme weather, and to be left in peace. It isn’t much to ask. Yet today, few animals have those vital things. The reason they don’t have them is because human beings dominate the world and, to put it bluntly, enslave animals.

That may sound harsh, but think about it. If allowed to be themselves, animals are self-sufficient, whole, and vital. Animals don’t pollute

the waterways or woods, as humans do with our pop-top bottles and our plastic bags and, far worse, the hog and chicken waste from our intensive farming systems. The Alaskan wilderness, which is often described as “uninhabited” and “unspoiled,” has, in fact, always been inhabited by billions of animals who have kept it pristine.

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Although animals have their own wants and needs and behavior, they are often treated by human beings as nothing more than hamburgers, handbags, living test tubes, amusements, or cheap burglar alarms. They are not allowed to live their lives in peace but are instead forced to serve us, giving us carriage rides and performing silly tricks, and are even killed so that we can have their skin to use for clothing. We use their flesh as food, despite knowing

that vegan food is far healthier, and we test our poisons on them.

I was inspired to form People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals after reading a book called *Animal Liberation*, written by the philosopher Peter Singer. Dr. Singer suggests that instead of just being kind to animals, which everyone knows they should be, we might try viewing animals as individuals like ourselves, as members of other cultures or, indeed, of other nations.

After all, animals aren't inanimate objects; they are feeling beings who experience love, joy, loneliness, and fear, in much, if not exactly, the same way we do. Although we have set ourselves up as gods who can do anything we please, biologically we are but one animal among many. Many anthropologists believe that we have miscategorized ourselves as a separate class of animal (hominids) out of pure conceit, for now that we have unraveled the human genome, we see that we share 98% of our DNA with other primates.

When we think about it, perhaps all that keeps us from treating the other animals with respect—the ultimate respect being to leave them in peace—is simple prejudice. Human beings have a sorry history of prejudice. Through the ages, our feelings of superiority have caused us to denigrate and abuse others we have felt were somehow less important or less intelligent than ourselves instead of exercising magnanimity and protecting them.

The questions facing our generation and future generations are: “Who are animals?” “What are we doing to them?” and “Should we change our behavior, no matter how much we like our old ways?”

Some members of our own species may have been to the moon, and some can split the atom, but there are many ways in which human talents pale in comparison to animals'. Our military is still learning from dolphins, who use sonar not only to navigate but also to stun their prey, and from bats, who can find their way in total darkness. We have trouble deciphering animals' languages, but it is indisputable that they have them.

Monkeys have separate warnings to alert the troop to a threat from the sky, such as a hawk, or a threat from the ground, such as a poisonous snake. Prairie dogs use different calls to signal the approach of a single human being, a friend, or a foe. Whales sing their histories through the great oceans, adding new bits of information every year. Tree frogs drum their messages to others far away, while other frogs can “hear” with their skin.

Turtles navigate by the Earth's magnetic field, and starlings read the heavens for directions. It was an albatross, not a human being, who first circumnavigated the globe and knew the Earth was round. As for family values, geese mate for life, and a male goose will defy hunters' guns to stick by his injured mate when she is shot.

When people say, “But all that is just instinct,” I wonder how they think we human beings select our own mates, the people we love. Is it by cold logic?

Most people, when shown how their actions contribute to cruelty and given other options, will make compassionate choices. While the demand for cheap flesh results in the killing of more than 10 billion animals each year in the U.S. alone—that's 1 million animals eaten every hour—the number of vegetarians is nevertheless growing rapidly.

PETA's message is that each of us is a vital player in life's great orchestra. Every day, our choices perpetuate or stop needless violence. I ask that you please join us in making the world a less violent place for all living beings.

Thank you.