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The importance of creating positive bonds between children and animals through picturebooks and other literature for young audiences

It is not a secret that human presence has affected the fate of many species of animals and plants on planet Earth. However, the impact of humanity's actions is much larger than a lot of us care to admit. Christine Dell'Amore, a National Geographic Reporter, states in her story for the publication that "current extinction rates are up to a thousand times higher than they would be if people weren't in the picture" (Dell'Amore).

Predatory fishing, trophy hunting and unethical farming practices have put a stress in the ecosystem that needs immediate action in order to be contained or reversed. However, more important than the eradication of plastic bags and straws or the occasional ocean cleanup is the relationship people have with the animals they are meant to protect. By viewing them not as a source of energy or food, but as part of a larger and necessary ecosystem, it creates an emotional bond of respect that leads us to question these practices and enable a more balanced method of cohabitation.

We often hear the phrase "the world we will leave to our children" yet somehow neglect to include the children in the making of that world. It is they who will, in a couple of decades, be making laws to decide how animals are treated, what programs will be funded or what new technology can be put towards these efforts in conservation.

In this paper I propose to look at the relationship between materials for children and the forming of this mindset geared toward preservation. Can stories and picturebooks help kids see animals in a different light even if that is not the reality they see reflected in the news or in conversations at home?

Children, much like adults, enjoy good stories. Especially today, they are exposed to such a large amount of content it can be a challenge to teach them about something that could be considered "scholarly" like ecosystem balance, population levels or chemical imbalance. However, children are also naturally curious and drawn to animals, from a very young age in many cases. It is not uncommon to see a child interact with an animal that would be considered "repulsive" by adults, like insects, frogs or snakes. The world is brand new to them and their minds are often blank spaces.

Their relationships with these animals and plants will be formed from their experiences with them and the information they hear about them. What better way to engage children than by making them care about the characters in the stories they are reading, be they scientists, biologists or the animals

themselves? And what better way to create that engagement than with bright pictures, interesting facts and interactive elements that make them consider the nature of the world outside the book?

But before diving into the creations themselves, let us consider a question: can books or other forms of entertainment like television shows and movies really change people's perspective on real world matters? Let us look historically at some examples. Peter Benchley's 1974 bestseller *Jaws* and Steven Spielberg's blockbuster movie adaptation - about a great white shark that terrorizes a small town - created an image of sharks that was so villainous it "stoked unjustified fears of sharks and popularized shark hunting tournaments." (New England Historical Society).

In an interview for a film blog, Columbia Professor Marc Lapadula stated: "[Jaws] was also responsible for beach attendance being way down in 1975 because people stayed away from the beaches in droves. But the big thing was it demonized sharks. This is the one adverse, really negative thing that came out of *Jaws*: ever since this movie came out, shark-killing contests are run all over the world. On average, between 20 and 100 million sharks are murdered every year. Some species have been driven close to extinction, others are in danger, and there are only three species of shark — the Bull, the Tiger and the Great White — that ever really go after humans." (Lapadula, Marc).

The impact of both the film and book was so intense, author Peter Benchley became a lifelong activist for sharks, stating that they should have been portrayed as the victims for they "are much more the oppressed than the oppressors". The damage done to the image of these animals is still having to be recuperated, including by some of the authors analyzed on this paper like Lily Williams, Jess Keating and Owen Davey.

The recent documentary *Blackfish* about the abuse of orcas - also known as killer whales - in captivity in parks like "Sea World" prompted worldwide rage, dipped attendance in their parks and caused the company "[...] and its former C.E.O. [...] to pay \$5 million in fines to 'settle fraud charges for misleading investors about the impact the documentary film Blackfish had on the company's reputation and business'." according to a 2019 New York Times story by Mihir Zaveri.

What these examples show us is that people listen to entertainment. Kids all over the world insisted on owls as pets when *Harry Potter* premiered in theatres and then demanded clown fish for their aquariums after the animated film *Finding Nemo* made its debut. They were aware that they loved these animals, but the pieces which they so dearly loved failed to explain that they are not meant for captivity or that they require very specific care and supervision. The passion was ignited, but not the responsibility that should come with it.

What would happen if the majority of children who read these books or watched these movies already came into it with a knowledge and respect for their relationship with the animals in them? Would that have prevented the illegal sale of birds of prey or tropical fish? It is my belief that, just as one can teach a child why it is important to be kind to classmates, they can also be taught to view wildlife as something they share their space with.

Author Richard Louv introduced the term and concept “Nature Deficit Disorder”, which explores the consequences of an increasingly digital world and the reduction of independent and outdoor play for children. The research conducted on the topic also “suggests that the nature-deficit weakens ecological literacy and stewardship of the natural world” (Children & Nature Network). Just like being immersed in another culture creates greater sympathy for the people in that culture, so does being immersed in nature. In fact “recent studies focus not so much on what is lost when nature experience fades, but on what is gained through more exposure to natural settings, including nearby nature in urban places.” (Children and Nature Network).

While real world experience is important, when it is not possible picture books, non fiction books and even magazines can be a great substitute. Ideally, the knowledge gained from reading this material would be applied to nature outings, visits to the zoo or aquarium or even to a spotting of an animal in a local park. The material can be the spark of interest that will be applied for many years to come.

And can children truly learn from picture books? In a study on Child Development conducted by Patricia A. Ganea, Lili Ma and Judy S. DeLoache, after children were tested with real animals the results showed “[...] that by 4 years of age, children can learn new biological facts from a picture book. Of particular importance, transfer from books to real animals was found. These findings point to the importance that early book exposure can play in framing and increasing children's knowledge about the world.” (Ganea, Ma and DeLoache 1421).

The study also decided to focus on books that portrayed animals either as photographs or more realistic portrayals as the anthropomorphic ones tended to confuse children and give them individual motivations as opposed to portraying an entire species of animals. As the books in this paper are all non fiction and do not create animal “characters” but rather look at real ones, their study applies.

According to the authors “the research has shown that by the age of 4 children can learn new biological facts from a picture book that they can then apply to depictions of new animals and even to live animals. For example, when asked to indicate which of two live animals would be more likely to fall prey to a predatory bird, the 4-year-olds correctly indicated the animal whose color did not match the background, and justified their choice by explicitly referring to

information encountered in the book about color camouflage.” (Ganea, Ma and DeLoache 1428).

So, picture books *can* be educational tools. Let us look at how each of the books analyzed for this paper fulfills this function and how their different strategies can help engage kids with fruitful, educated and positive relationships with animals and other wildlife.

How do these books tackle conservation and what tools do they use to create relationships with the reader? Are they effective?

10 Reasons to Love a Whale by Catherine Barr gives kids reasons to feel close to these animals by explaining how they are similar to the reader and even little ways on how to show that they love them through little purple circles in some of the pages. The suggestions include visiting skeletons at museums or even helping in conservation programs. By showing them as mothers and travelers it approaches them to what kids understand as humans and it makes it easier to sympathize with these animals.

Owen Davey’s *Smart About Sharks* focuses more on painting sharks as interesting, fascinating creatures. By giving the reader constant facts about these animals, it creates a bond and a fascination through knowledge. Someone once told me that “it is impossible to hate someone when you know their story” and Davey seems to rely on the truth of that statement. The book dedicates a page to reminding people that sharks are not mindless killing machines but animals with behaviours, hunger and a will to protect their young, reproduce and have their space.

The Polar Bear by Jenni Desmond does something really interesting by opening the book with a note about the endangered state of this massive animal. It puts the reader in a place of concern before they even turn to the second page. What really sets it apart though is that the book is told in sort of a meta way, where it’s a book about a child reading a book called “The Polar Bear” and learning about them. The imagery is beautiful because it places the child in the environment with the bear, culminating in when she cuddles with the mother and the pups and the very next page shows her cuddling in her own home. This imagery is very effective in putting the child in the skin of the bears, feeling close to them and making them feel like bears are just as important to protect as the child’s own family.

In *The Amazing Animal Adventure*, Brendan Kearney does a good job of reminding children that animals are not this isolated, separated thing that you have to go to the zoo or aquarium to see. As a lot of children do not get the opportunity to visit many of the habitats in the world, the author opens the book by reminding us that animals are wherever we are, whether it be in your garden,

local park or inside your home. By turning the book into an interactive experience that makes kids find the animals, it helps them learn about them too.

Jason Chin's *Island: A Story of the Galapagos* takes readers on a different journey, exploring concepts like evolution, adaptation and how land is formed and slowly taken over by wildlife. It's a more mature, detailed description of how nature takes its course but a fascinating one that perfectly illustrates the balance and harmony that is constant in the natural world and describes the slow process of what is necessary for scientific observation.

Jess Keating's *Pink is for Blobfish* tackles a subject that is often overlooked by many of the other wildlife books: weird animals. While it is easy to learn to love and protect a fuzzy critter like a beaver or a cute wolf pup or tiger cub, Keating illustrates how fascinating some of Earth's most unusual looking animals can be. This approach actually pairs really well with the proposal of this paper, the one of fascination through education. Maybe a blobfish or a pink tarantula are not every person's first choice of pet, but by giving us facts about their methods and survival, the reader can't help but feel a connection to them, a respect that could turn into an effort for their survival. Keating, a zoologist turned author, also makes a point to explain things to the child reader in a glossary and adds a space for "threats" on each page, which are often caused by humans.

Keating's other book, *Shark Lady*, focuses more on giving kids and adult readers someone to look up to, maybe even imitate. I grew up watching Jane Goodall's documentaries and reading her stories and her passion and connection to the animals she studied made me want to be just like her as an adult. *Shark Lady* engages the child audience by starting Eugene Clark's story as a child herself, one with questions and curiosities most likely very close to the ones of the child currently reading the book. She paints a journey of success and effort where, from education and curiosity this woman managed to change the face of shark study and marine biology forever. Eugenie's story is one that children everywhere can mirror: proving that animals deserve to be understood and protected and the message comes across very clearly.

Nancy Castaldo's *Beastly Brains* is the most detailed and dense book of the bunch. At 152 pages, it is packed with information about several types of animals, but unlike the curious facts or simple truths present in the other works, Castaldo focuses on the behaviours of these animals that make them very similar to humans. Do they feel like we feel? Can they understand empathy? Complex emotions? Can they communicate? Do they express gratitude or have temper tantrums? Relating children's thoughts and feelings to the animals is likely to make them feel more compassion for them and a proximity that could lead to a closer relationship.

Castaldo also finishes up the book with several invitations for kids to conduct their own researches, teaching them the scientific method, encouraging them to become animal advocates and even giving them institutions they can look for and questions to answer. It is an invitation to participate actively in the study and preservation of animals, one that follows a detailed look of extremely interesting behaviours that keep the reader's interest peaked.

Lily Williams' *If Sharks Disappeared* and *If Polar Bears Disappeared* both tackle the subject of conservation head on. She spends a little time educating the reader on the nature of these animals, but jumps quickly to what the current situation is in our oceans and poles, explaining in illustrated detail why the disappearance of a species can affect the entire ecosystem, including humans! This direct connection to how nature can change our world if we do not take care of it is easy to understand and can pull in even the most reluctant reader to the issue at hand.

Williams is a vocal advocate of cruelty free animal products and conservation funds and does not shy away from the truth even when addressing her young audience. By talking to her readers with respect, I believe she manages to gain their attention better than by talking down to them. They are made to feel like a part of the solution, like real life heroes who can make a difference.

Conclusion:

Analyzing the long term effect of children's relationship with animals and the psychological ties these might have with the literature they consumed while young is a much bigger endeavor that requires deeper research and a larger sample size, but this paper set out to observe some of the material that is available out there, specifically picture books. Considering how these books keep getting produced, involving prominent authors and talented illustrators, not to mention the production value of all of them, there seems to be an indication that the market does have a demand for this type of literature.

While most do not have a story *per se* to engage the reader with following one specific character, they attempt (and in my opinion succeed) to approximate the reader with the subject matter and create an emotional bond with an entire species or several species of animals. Even now, as I was reading these books I found myself encouraged to look for more information, to engage more in a lot of the institutions that are mentioned and learn more with the animals being portrayed.

The beautiful illustrations, photographs and the easy to digest, well researched text in all of the chosen body of work really help keep a child interested and, more than that, create a great opportunity for parents, educators and librarians to bring a young audience into a discussion about the world they will inherit. If children grow up reading these kinds of books, I believe that it will

be very difficult for them to not think about the impact every day actions will have on the animal life on the planet.

It is not just about learning about animals and understanding how they work, it's about sparking a sense of curiosity and, in turn, responsibility, which doesn't just encourage more study, but evokes an emotional response and a bond that can be carried through to adulthood. Feeding the passions of artists, doctors, engineers, musicians, among others is what allows them to continue to explore and learn and this is also true of the future leaders and ecologists that could be responsible from bringing Earth back to balance.

It may sound grandiose and like wishful thinking, but it is my belief that there is no better place to begin this all important loving relationship than with lighting that fire of curiosity and inviting children to explore for themselves and fall in love with the wildlife they can help save.

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