

What is anthrozoology?

Abstract

Anthrozoology is a relatively modern, inter-disciplinary sub-field of anthropology concentrating on the research and ethnography of the co-existence of “human and non-human animals” (Siddiq & Habib, 2016, p.49). Within this research are found the sub-disciplines of history, art, zoology, philosophy, religion, and medicine. Throughout this essay, I intend to use the term ‘non-human’ to encourage the acceptance of equality amongst diverse species and to demonstrate examples where humans interact with other animals (Hurn, 2012). I have drawn on personal experience, and the literature to describe such human and non-human animal partnerships. These include the use of animals for entertainment, equine therapy, animal communication and natural horsemanship, but also their representation in totems and indigenous practices. These examples demonstrate one aspect of human and non-human interaction within our uncertain, changing world.

Podberscek, Paul & Serpell (2000, p.1) state, “It is through the medium of social relationships that we find our true connection with others, irrespective of whether those others are human or non-human.” Podberscek et al’s sentiments express the dilemma we, as humans, are in currently and why attempts are being made to re-establish harmony with nature; this includes our ability to empathise with other species. Historical records show that as far back as the Stone Age period, humans were known to share their lives with companion non-human animals (Tobias & Morrison, 2017). This suggests that our interest in other species was not always in respect of obtaining food for survival. Throughout history it is apparent that there are factions in society who regard non-human animals as non-sentient beings and have no empathy or attachment towards them (Bradshaw, 2017).

Erickson (2013) argues that this is determined by perceptions of their non-human levels of consciousness, cognitive abilities, absence of self-recognition and empathy. Her studies also demonstrate bonding and a few positive findings (mostly for humans) such as the benefits of having household pets, canine scent detection and the effects of animals on psychological and physiological health (Erickson, 2013). In this paper I interrogate academic literature as well as some personal experiences with non-human animals, which reflect on the study of which demonstrates that Anthrozoology is worthy of study and encourages us to reconnect and learn to understand how our fellow animal species exist in nature. Challenging us to study and learn how we can best support other species and their 'societies' as we co-exist in the world we share.

References

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