

Animals Are People, Too: Ethical Lessons about Animals from Native American Sacred Stories

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Introduction

Americans have been searching for better ways to relate to our North American environment since at least the 1960s, and arguably since the mid-1800s. This search is partly a matter of redefining who we are as a people, but it is also partly a matter of survival: if we do not find more sustainable ways of living on the land, if we do not find a way of resolving our ongoing environmental crisis, our future as a species, let alone the future of America, looks grim indeed.

In this self-critical climate, it seemed only natural to turn for answers toward peoples who have typically been seen as being far closer to the earth than Euro-Americans have ever been: to the Native Americans.¹ For instance, in his book *North American Indian Ecology*, J. Donald Hughes argued that if we want to avoid eco-catastrophe, "we can gain much by studying our American Indian heritage and seeking modern applications of the wisdom we find there."² On the one hand, as Shepard Krech and others have argued, it is at best an oversimplification—and a potentially demeaning and dehumanizing one—to regard all Native Americans as pure, ecological Indians living in perfect balance with nature.³ But on the other hand, as Thomas Davis, John Loftin, Richard Nelson, and other scholars have shown through their extensive ethnographic work with tribes across North America, it is also true that many Native American tribes do have conservation ethics that guide their actions toward the natural world.⁴ These ethics have been developed here on Turtle Island (North America) for hundreds to thousands of years. Surely, then, there must be some lessons that other Americans can learn from these indigenous environmental ethical traditions to help guide our own behavior. And if we accept this premise, what might these ethical lessons be?

In this essay, I will approach these questions in two ways. First, drawing on Native American sacred stories, especially creation and origin stories, from a number of tribes, I will discuss what these stories have to say about the proper ways that animals ought to be treated. Second, I will consider what other Americans can and cannot learn from these stories. Although I conclude that other American can learn few *direct* lessons about environmental concern from Native American stories, due primarily to cultural differences, I do identify a number of important *indirect* lessons that can be learned, including the importance of storytelling in teaching, which I discuss at length. And finally, I will suggest ways in which other Americans can use these lessons to develop our own sacred and personal stories that can help guide our actions toward animals onto a more sustainable path.

For the purposes of this article, the main "other Americans" I am referring to are Euro-Americans. Obviously America does not just consist of Native Americans and Euro-Americans, and it is not my intention to exclude any Americans, since we all need to find ways to resolve our environmental crisis together. However, a focus on contrasting Euro-American and Native American environmental values is justified for a number of reasons. First, it is primarily Euro-Americans who have been calling for us to draw from Native American environmental wisdom. Second, Euro-American attitudes and actions toward nature have been the primary cause of our current environmental crisis in the U.S., in part because they have been enacted into policy through the dominant Euro-American legal and political systems. And third, I myself am an American of European descent, and therefore feel most comfortable speaking for and about their—including my ancestors'—environmental values.

Why Stories?

Before we begin, though, we must first answer the question, Why stories? Why focus on Native American stories if we want to understand their ethical beliefs regarding animals? The answer is simple: for traditional Native American peoples, orally told stories have always been the primary means to pass along knowledge from the elders to younger generations.⁵ These stories have long been used by Native Americans both to share practical knowledge learned from generations of firsthand observation of the natural world and, crucially, to transmit the cultural values and worldviews regarding animals, plants, and other aspects of nature that have been developed based on these observations and experiences.⁶ Creation stories play an especially important role in this regard, among Native Americans and all peoples, since they lay the foundations for how each people sees the world and its proper place in it, as well as its duties toward the world and the other beings with whom it shares the world. Because they are set in the mythic era at the dawn of time, such accounts of origins are, as Old Testament scholar Theodore Hiebert writes,

"both explained and validated as part of a design built into the world from its very beginnings."⁷

For example, in his historical survey of attitudes toward animals among the hunting tribes of the northern Plains, Howard Harrod describes how explanations of the way the natural world worked were recorded in the oral traditions of these hunting peoples, much as today we have them explained in narratives of creationism, evolution, etc.⁸ And Ojibwe scholar Basil Johnston writes that among the Ojibwe of the Great Lakes region,

It was through stories drawn from the dramas taking place on the earth among other living creatures that tribal teachers passed along the tribe's values, beliefs, teachings, traditions, understandings. . . everything.⁹

These traditions of passing along knowledge and ethical traditions regarding animals through stories continue today among Native American peoples. As the contemporary Abenaki storyteller Joseph Bruchac puts it, "Our stories open our eyes and hearts to a world of animals and plants, of earth and water and sky. They take us under the skin and into the heartbeat of creation."¹⁰

Teachings about Animals in Native American Environmental Ethics

While Native American stories have many, many things to say about animals, I will focus on just four main kinds of teachings from these stories in this article. These teachings include the concept that animals are people too, with agency and the ability to act consciously in this and other worlds; that we humans have a kinship or familial relationship to other animals; that we depend upon other animals for both sustenance and spiritual assistance, and hence ought to act humbly towards them; and because of these concepts and others, we ought to adopt principles of restraint and reciprocity in our dealings with animals.

Let us begin with the idea of animals having agency. Irving Hallowell was one of the first to discuss this idea in detail, based on his ethnographic work with Ojibwe peoples of the Upper Great Lakes. Hallowell learned that the Ojibwe do not class just humans as people, but also consider spiritually powerful beings from the world of nature to be people, including certain kinds of animal beings; Hallowell refers to these kinds of animals as "other than human persons."¹¹ These other than human persons think and act in the world just as humans can. They also have souls, just like us.¹² Most Native American tribes share a similar conception of animals.

In Native American sacred stories, animals talk, play games, make plans, and generally do anything that humans do. For instance, in the Creek and Yuchi Earth Diver creation stories from the Southeastern U.S., the animals gather together in council to talk about how to find mud with which to make the lands to cover the flooded world.¹³ In the Ojibwe story of "A Moose and

His Offspring" from the Great Lakes region, a moose family is described as making camp for the winter, and the young male moose in the family learns the folly of ignoring his father's advice, in much the same way that human teenagers do.¹⁴ And in a story told by several Southeastern tribes, including the Creek and the Cherokee, the birds and the mammals face off in a ball game, with the bat winning the game for his side.¹⁵ The take-home ethical lesson from stories like these is that if animals have consciousness and agency, and even souls, we humans cannot just treat them as objects to do with as we please, but rather with the sort of respect we owe to other humans.

But the stories teach us more than this. Animals are not just people, they are also our kin, our direct relations. For instance, the sacred Distant Time stories of the Koyukon of Alaska say that animals once had human form and society and spoke human languages; because they were once human, animals can understand human speech and behavior.¹⁶ The Netsilik Eskimo and the Skagit and Thompson Indians of the Northwest Coast share similar beliefs.¹⁷

Plains Arikara origin stories not only say that animals were once people, and are thus our relatives, but also explain how animals became different from humans. In these stories, after the people emerged into this world from underground, Mother-Corn led them in a migration to find where they should live; during the course of the journey, the people encountered many obstacles. At each obstacle, one of the people changed into an animal to surmount the challenge. For instance, when the people came to a vast forest, with thorns all over the trees, Owl stepped forward and volunteered to clear a path through the forest for the people; after the people passed through, some chose to stay behind and take the form of owls to live in the timber.¹⁸

Traditions of clan origins often express a similar concept. For instance, among the Oto of the central Plains, each clan's origin legend describes the first clan members living as animals below or above the Earth, but later becoming human and serving as the ancestors of that clan. The Bear clan, for instance, were animals when they lived under the earth, but became human once they emerged onto the surface.¹⁹

Stories of animal-human intermarriage provide another way in which humans can become related to animals in the present day, rather than just at the time of creation. Building on the idea that animals are people, too, and thus can enter into social relationships,²⁰ these stories describe animals choosing to marry humans. For example, stories told by many Northern Plains tribes such as the Arikara, Lakota, and Pawnee describe a human man marrying a buffalo wife, who had been sent by her people to the humans.²¹ Through these marriages, a direct kinship relationship is established between humans and buffalo (or another species), just as one human tribe may choose to seal an alliance with another tribe through intermarriage.²² This relationship explains why animals of that species willingly give themselves to humans to be hunted, or gift us with spiritual power—they are coming to the aid of their relatives, just as any good family member would.

But animals are not just people like us—they are also more powerful than humans in spirit because they existed before we did, and therefore know more and can do more than we can. In the Creek and Yuchi Earth Diver creation story discussed above, the animals existed in the world before humans were created,²³ and hence know more about the world and are more spiritually powerful than us. And in the creation stories of many tribes, humans are seen as the weakest of all the created beings. For instance, Ojibwe scholar Basil Johnston has written that "creation was conducted in a certain order: plants, insects, birds, animals, and human beings. In the order of necessity, humans were the last and the least; they would not last long without the other forms of beings."²⁴ Similarly, the Koyukon hunters of interior Alaska have traditionally depended on nature, and especially the animals they hunt, for everything they possess; therefore, the Koyukon say that "nature is to be petitioned and pacified, not forcibly conquered, because nature holds the ultimate power."²⁵ This sense of dependence and lowly position in the overall scheme of life, shared by most if not all Native American tribes, is taken to mean that humans ought to behave in a respectful and humble manner toward other animals.²⁶

Because other animals are our kin, and because we depend upon them for physical sustenance and spiritual power that we need to survive in the world, Native American peoples believe that we ought to use animals with restraint, treat them with respect, and establish reciprocal relationships with them. The Koyukon conservation ethic, for instance, specifies that the Koyukon should not overhunt, but take only what they need.²⁷ One should also not waste anything from nature; the Koyukon say that "If someone kills an animal and then leaves it unused or neglects to return for its meat, bad luck or illness will come as a punishment."²⁸

Animals also ought to be respected, especially before, during, and after a hunt. Koyukon hunters, for instance, will wear new boots when they start hunting bears in the fall,²⁹ and Cree hunters will decorate their clothing and equipment with colors and designs thought pleasing to the animals they seek.³⁰ Hunters should not boast of their kill, but rather humbly thank the animal for the precious gift of its life.³¹ Koyukon hunters will often hold a "bear party" after they have killed a bear, a sort of funeral potlatch given in the animal's honor.³² Care is taken in the butchering of animals, and any leftover remains are disposed of in such a way as to protect them from being stepped on or otherwise disturbed by dogs or humans; beaver bones, for instance, are put back into the water, and bear bones placed on trees, poles, or platforms in the forest, far from settlements, or burned in a clean fire.³³

Many Native American stories also teach that humans ought to have a reciprocal relationship with nature, giving something back in return for what they take for their subsistence and other needs. While animals and other aspects of the natural world are powerful, there are things they cannot do, but humans can. For instance, nature needs humans to renew the world in a spiritual sense, to help ensure the changing cycles of the seasons, the fertility of plants and animals; to promote harmony among all beings through our rituals

and ceremonies.³⁴ Among hunting peoples of the Plains, the great annual ceremonies like the Okipa of the Mandans, the Thunder ritual of the Pawnee, or the Sun Dance that have been performed by dozens of tribes are classic examples of ways in which humans could ritually ensure not just the continued fertility and availability of the animals they hunted, but also the welfare and continuity of the entire world.³⁵ It is through such ceremonies, large and small, that humans establish a reciprocal relationship with creation, animals and plants giving themselves so that humans might live, and humans sacrificing in a personal and spiritual sense so that harmony and balance can be maintained in the world.³⁶ If we humans do our part through ritual observances, animals will willingly give themselves to be hunted, the world will be renewed, and the circle of life will continue unbroken for generations to come.

Lessons for Other Americans?

These, then, are some of the main ethical lessons regarding the proper treatment of animals that Native Americans have passed on through their sacred stories for generations. What can other Americans learn from these stories' wisdom?

In terms of specific stories to tell or practices to adopt, probably not much wisdom is to be gained. There are a number of reasons why this is so. First, Native Americans did not create our current environmental crisis; Euro-Americans did. Therefore, many Native Americans, including Hopi scholar Emory Sekaquaptewa, think that Euro-Americans will not find answers to their ecological problems in Native American traditions, but instead must search within their own cultural and religious traditions for answers.³⁷

Other Americans also do not live as the Native Americans have; they do not share the same sociocultural contexts in which Native American ethics are based. The Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday has described the Native American relationship to nature as "proceed[ing] from a racial or cultural experience. . . formulated over a long period of time,"³⁸ and I think that is a very apt description. A crucial element of Native American environmental ethics is the sense of dependence upon and reciprocal relationship with nature that many tribes feel. This sense of dependence, in turn, is based on these groups' traditional ways of living from the land—hunting, fishing, and farming—combined with their belief in the dire consequences of violating these ethics.³⁹

For example, the Koyukon recognize all too well the practical consequences of overhunting, or wasting meat from animals that they kill: because game may be scarce and difficult to find in the future, killing too many today may result in hunger or even starvation for the tribe later on.⁴⁰ And the Koyukon also believe in the ability of animals' spirits to exact a spiritual revenge as well, taking away a hunter's "luck," that indefinable spiritual quality that alone allows success in hunting. Without luck, even the most skilled hunter will pass right by a game animal without seeing it.⁴¹ Many other Native

American peoples hold similar beliefs.⁴² However, most other Americans do not share those subsistence lifeways or the resulting sense of dependency. Therefore, the teeth that enforce Native American ethical proscriptions, such as the threat of loss of hunting success among the Koyukon, would not work at encouraging other Americans to follow these ethical proscriptions.

Along similar lines, most other Americans do not share Native American worldviews, religions, or philosophies. It is the grounding of Native American traditions of moral concern for nature deep in Native American religions and worldviews that makes their environmental ethics so powerful. Trying to abstract Native American ethics from the philosophical and religious contexts in which they have been nurtured for generations would be like trying to rip a plant out of a fertile wetland and transplant it into the middle of a desert. To take just one example, the Koyukon, Ojibwe, and many other tribes see animals as equal or superior to humans, as having once *been* humans; as having spirits, and as having spiritual and practical knowledge that humans need to survive. Most other Americans do not share this metaphysical understanding of animals; they do not see nature as sacred, and many do not recognize animals as having spirits, either.⁴³ Indeed, quite the opposite; it was only in recent years that Euro-American scientists have granted the possibility that animals might have emotions and therefore the capacity to suffer,⁴⁴ let alone possess souls.

We should also carefully consider whether it is ethically appropriate for other Americans to appropriate environmental ethics from Native Americans, after we have already taken so much from them—their lands, their resources, and in all too many cases, their very lives.⁴⁵ Because I am not Native American, I will not presume to speak for them. But I can say that a number of Native Americans are very willing to allow other Americans to learn from their ethical traditions, provided these teachings are approached in a respectful manner, and with the intention of giving back something positive to the Earth—and ideally also to native peoples—in return. For example, when Terry Tempest Williams asked Navajo medicine man Herb Blatchford if he thought it was appropriate for a non-Native American to use Native American stories to teach an ethic of concern for the land, he responded, "That is why [the stories] were created."⁴⁶ Abenaki storyteller and writer Joseph Bruchac agrees, noting that many native authors have begun writing down their stories about animals (and other beings in nature) in recent years, not so much to preserve them as to make them more readily accessible to other Americans. Why? Because the ethical lessons contained in these stories, according to Bruchac, "have never been more needed by human beings than they are now"; "The stories. . . were for all human beings. Their purpose was to help people learn how to live in balance with each other and with the earth."⁴⁷

Oglala Lakota medicine man John Lame Deer offers an important caveat, however. He said that he doesn't mind if a Euro-American comes to learn about Lakota religion, even to pray with Lakotas, but Lame Deer said that:

"I would mind if he tried to change our beliefs, adapt them to his kind of culture, progress, civilization, and all that kind of stuff. I would mind that very much. You can't take our beliefs out of our Badlands and prairies and put them into one of your factories or office buildings."⁴⁸

A Way Forward: The Power of Stories and Storytelling

So where does that leave us? Can other Americans learn nothing from Native American animal ethics? I would argue that other Americans can, in fact, learn much of value from Native American traditions of moral concern for animals. But these lessons must necessarily be somewhat indirect, for the reasons we have just discussed.⁴⁹

Perhaps the most important lesson we can learn from Native American ethical traditions regarding other animals is the manner in which they have traditionally been taught: through stories. This is no accident. Native peoples have known for thousands of years what cognitive psychologists and others have also been documenting more recently: humans are hard-wired to learn through stories.⁵⁰ Nor do we have to take the cognitive scientists' word for this. In story-based courses on nursing, introductory biology, and advanced meteorology, students wrote on their end of term evaluations that by using storytelling techniques, their teachers helped them learn the course material better.⁵¹ As Will Rogers put it, "Stories can accomplish what no other form of communication can: they can get through to our hearts with a message."⁵²

Why do stories help people learn better? For one thing, they can capture our interest, attention, and imagination in ways that facts alone cannot.⁵³ They can help us remember the stories' messages better, because they put facts into a meaningful contextual order, charged with emotional content and associated with striking visual images.⁵⁴ This is why the story of Little Red Riding Hood is easier to remember than a 20-digit number, even though the story is actually much more complex, and why native peoples have traditionally shared foraging information in the form of stories rather than lists of species and the geographic locations in which they may be found.⁵⁵ Storytelling also works because it productively disrupts our normal thought and attention patterns, resulting in a state that has been variously described as a "hypnotic trance" or "storylistening trance," and which can make us more receptive to the story's messages.⁵⁶ Finally, storytelling is a gentler way to teach about morality and norms than off-putting "shoulds" and "should nots"; by engaging with our emotional, intuitive ways of knowing (rather than just intellectual or "rational" ways of knowing), stories can help us connect with other beings, and thereby come to care about them.⁵⁷

For all these reasons, educators at all levels, both inside and outside of classroom settings, have been using storytelling for conflict resolution,⁵⁸ building cultural awareness and understanding,⁵⁹ training ethical decision-makers,⁶⁰ developing reading and writing skills,⁶¹ and teaching specific subjects

from nursing to introductory biology to meteorology.⁶² And perhaps most relevant to the purposes of this article, storytelling has also been increasingly used in recent years to teach about the environment and natural history. In South Africa and Zimbabwe, Shona folktales are being used to teach Shona students about environmental impact assessments, ecosystem monitoring, and other topics.⁶³ Educators in botanic gardens are using stories to help dramatize natural processes, making them easier and more fun for children to understand.⁶⁴ Moroccan children are learning to care about endangered reptiles and amphibians through storybooks.⁶⁵ And conservationists in Cameroon are using stories as a better way to develop back and forth dialogues with local peoples about conservation issues.⁶⁶

Of course, stories are not a magic bullet; they are not a perfect way to communicate messages of concern for the environment generally or animals in particular. For one thing, as Susan Strauss aptly puts it in her book *The Passionate Fact: Storytelling in Natural History and Cultural Interpretation*, "story has a will of its own," and you cannot control the messages that any given listener will receive from any given story.⁶⁷ Storytellers in all cultures often liken their work to planting a seed, which will take root and bear fruit in its own time—not on our schedules.

Thus far, we have only discussed orally told stories. Among Native Americans, teaching through stories has traditionally been done orally. This process of oral transmission has allowed the stories to change and adapt as people encounter new situations and new kinds of environmental problems. Even among contemporary Euro-Americans, who often tell stories in writing instead,⁶⁸ orally told stories still have an important place, and a special kind of power to touch people's hearts and build community among them in a way that the written word cannot. For example, in terms of conservation, a story about animals in danger told by someone based on their personal experience has much greater resonance and meaning for most audiences than the same information conveyed in the form of a scientific paper or government report.⁶⁹ And by telling and listening to personal stories from the students' point of view in a classroom, students and their teachers can learn to understand one another better, develop respect for each others' cultural and personal diversity, and begin to build a shared classroom community together.⁷⁰

But because stories today are shared in many media, there is no reason we should restrict storytelling about animals for ethical purposes to orally told stories. Such stories can now also be shared through pictures and artworks, blogs and listservs, books and movies. Although written, painted, or filmed stories may not be able to adapt to new situations as quickly as orally told stories, nor to build community at the local level, they do have the ability to reach out more widely than just to one's immediate community. Consider the immense popularity of James Cameron's recent film *Avatar*, for example, which allowed the film's message of environmental concern to reach a very large audience.⁷¹

Finding the Stories: Sacred and Personal

How, then, can all Americans develop stories that could pass on an ethic of sustainable relations with other animals, either orally or in written form? Although one could take a variety of approaches to achieve this goal, I will focus on just three: modifying or recovering existing sacred stories that contain such teachings, developing new sacred stories within existing religious traditions, and/or creating new personal stories of animals.

While contemporary Americans practice many different religious and ethical traditions, nearly all such traditions have something to say about proper relations to nature. This is another reason we should not tell just or even mainly Native American stories about animals: to avoid giving the impression that only Native American peoples have stories that inspire care for animals, when in fact all cultures have such stories.⁷²

For instance, as critics starting with historian Lynn White have pointed out since the 1960s,⁷³ many Christians have interpreted the sacred creation stories in Genesis 1 to mean that humans should "fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over" (Gen 1.28) every being with whom we share the Earth. But many Christians today are reinterpreting this story to mean instead that we are to act as God's stewards on Earth, with a responsibility to care for all of creation, not just to use and abuse it as we see fit.⁷⁴

Moreover, other scholars are recovering forgotten sacred stories from existing faith traditions that portray animals as agents with whom we can and should have relationships of reciprocity, just as Native American traditions teach. For instance, Laura Hobgood-Oster has recovered numerous stories of saints in the Catholic tradition that foreground the roles of other animals as exemplars of piety, sources of revelation, saintly martyrs, and thinking, feeling subjects with whom humans can enter into two-way relationships.⁷⁵ One of my favorites of these stories involves Guinefort, a greyhound who was viewed as a local saint in southern France in the 1200s, a martyr who was a special protector of children:

Guinefort, a trusted [family] dog, was left alone with an infant. When the father returned [home] he saw blood covering the room and surrounding the infant's crib. Guinefort sat next to the crib, blood around his mouth. Immediately the man took an arrow and shot Guinefort in the heart. Approaching the crib, he saw that his child was [actually] unharmed. Below the crib was the body of a dead snake who had been trying to get to the infant. Guinefort had saved the child's life.⁷⁶

This story suggests that other animals are fully capable of moral and caring behavior, even if we may not always recognize this at first, and that we ought to treat them accordingly.

Similarly instructive ethical stories about animals can also be recovered from other faith traditions practiced by contemporary Americans. For example, a story told about Rabbi Zusya clearly demonstrates the Jewish principle of *tsa'ar ba'alei chayim* (kindness to animals). One day Zusya was out collecting funds to ransom prisoners. In his travels, he came to an inn, where he found a large cage filled with many types of birds in one room. Seeing that they were trying to fly out of the cage, and feeling pity for them, Zusya thought to himself, "what greater ransoming of prisoners can there be than to free these birds?" He then opened the cage and set them free. . . . The innkeeper beat Zusya and threw him out of the inn, but Zusya went away content."⁷⁷ This story teaches both compassion to animals, based on biblical teachings (in the story, Zusya quotes a verse from the Psalms: "His tender mercies are all over his work"), and the importance of placing other animals' welfare above our own, when the circumstances warrant it.

Recovering and publicizing sacred stories about animals like these can significantly improve people's attitudes and actions toward other animals, if such stories are both true to the religion in question, as well as culturally relevant to the people with whom they are being told. For example, fishermen on Misali Island, off the coast of Zanzibar in Africa, were using dynamiting and other illegal and destructive fishing techniques. Since over 95% of Zanzibar is Muslim, international conservationists, the UK-based Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences, and the local Zanzibar Commission for Natural Resources teamed up to develop an environmental education program for the fishermen based on Islamic principles and stories. Before participating in the program only a little more than a third of the local fishermen thought Islam related to their trade. Afterward, two thirds of the fishermen saw the connections between their faith and their fishing, and the use of illegal and destructive fishing techniques almost ceased entirely. Clearly the use of culturally relevant sacred stories about proper treatment of animals had a significant positive impact in the Misali Island case.⁷⁸

In another example, from Tangier Island off the coast of Maryland, local watermen and environmentalists in the Chesapeake Bay Foundation had been fighting over pollution in the Chesapeake and declining catches and regulations concerning the oyster and blue crab fisheries. Most of the watermen were conservative Christians whose worldview was profoundly shaped by their personal understandings of the Hebrew Bible. To help resolve this conflict, Susan Drake Emmerich developed a stewardship initiative based on biblical texts and stories, which resulted in both a Watermen's Stewardship Covenant and a Women's Stewardship Commitment. Through the use of sacred stories that had meaning for the watermen, Emmerich's approach enabled the watermen to see the fisheries as precious resources over which they had a stewardship responsibility. This change in attitude, in turn, resulted in

improved compliance with fisheries laws and a partnership between the watermen and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation to work together on fishery legislation and oyster restoration.⁷⁹

We can also develop new sacred stories of proper relationship with the natural world. For instance, drawing on contemporary cosmological, evolutionary, and ecological understandings of our place in the universe and in relation to other animals, Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry have developed a new sacred story called the Universe Story or the New Story that reveals the world to be, in their words, "a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects."⁸⁰ Drawing on scientific understandings of cosmology, the Universe Story describes the Big Bang as a "primordial flaring forth" from which the galaxies formed, which in turn gave rise to countless stars. Some of these stars, in turn, became supernovas; from their fiery death, more chemically complex stars were born, including our own Sun. And from the supernova-spawned matter swirling around our Sun, our planet Earth was formed, and eventually all the countless forms of animal life that inhabit it.⁸¹

This new story of creation opens a new way for us to understand our relationships to other than human animals. If everything on the Earth is formed from the same matter, the same star-stuff, then we all really are kin at the deepest molecular level. In other words, the Universe Story offers us another kind of story, one more attuned to contemporary scientific worldviews, that teaches the same lesson of our kinship with animals as the Native American creation stories described above.

Finally, to re-establish a caring relationship with other animals, we need to tell new personal stories about animals. As I have described in detail in another essay, the first step in creating such stories is developing techniques for more closely observing nature.⁸² And these techniques must be not just intellectual, but also experiential and intuitive, so that our knowing of animals will not just come from our minds, but also take root in our hearts and spirits.

Then we can draw on these personal experiences with animals in nature to tell stories about animals that help ourselves and others develop closer connections with them. Susan Strauss provides detailed suggestions for turning personal natural history observations into compelling stories.⁸³ For example, she recommends taking observations or daily events in nature and telling them as adventure stories, or as one story told from multiple points of view, such as those of a park ranger, a camper, and the black bear who is hungrily eyeing the camper's picnic basket. By telling personal stories about animals using these or other techniques, we can begin to develop connections with other animals that approximate the kinship (familial) relationships with animals that Native American sacred stories teach.

Of course, experiential understandings of nature can be very helpful not just in personal storytelling, but also in education. For example, instead of asking our elementary school teachers to spend all their time preparing our children to take test after standardized test, we might instead encourage them to take students outdoors to learn from hands-on observations in nature.

Through such observations, students will not just learn facts about animals, but also develop a sense of closer connection to them; this will help animals become part of their personal stories. For me, at least, frogs became a source of wonder not when we dissected them in high school biology, but while I spent hours as a kid collecting tadpoles from swales near our house and watching them transform into frogs. A pioneering method for encouraging such teaching in elementary education was developed at Cornell University in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, known as the Nature Study Movement.⁸⁴ More recently, a nonprofit organization in Fort Worth, Texas, R.E.A.L. School Gardens, has been assisting elementary school teachers with using school gardens ("outdoor learning environments") as part of hands-on curricula teaching environmental science, writing, and other subjects.⁸⁵

Such experiential educational techniques are, of course, similar to those that Native American peoples have used to teach their children (and adults) about animals and the rest of the natural world for countless generations.⁸⁶ But the techniques described in this section also have a firm grounding in Western scientific understandings, which will make them more accessible and meaningful to Americans who do not share Native Americans' cultural and religious understandings of animals.

Conclusion

I have argued in this article that non-natives should not try to appropriate Native American sacred stories of animals directly and expect them to have meaning for other contemporary Americans. Instead, all Americans should recover, revise, or create sacred and secular stories of animals drawn from our own traditions. Only through this process of recovering, revising, and creating our own culturally, spiritually, and scientifically meaningful stories of animals will we be able to shift our view of animals from resources to be exploited to thinking, feeling subjects with whom we can relate and care for on a personal level.

As we work to recover or create such stories about animals, there are a number of "best practices" based on Native American and other storytelling traditions that we should keep in mind. First, we need to resist the urge to spell out the "moral of the story" for our listeners, as Aesop's fables do. Lawrence Gross explains that traditional Ojibwe storytellers do not include a moral in their stories because they want their listeners to develop their own understandings of the stories; this is a traditional technique that all storytellers can emulate, because it is not restricted to any one culture.⁸⁷ By following the Ojibwe storytellers' lead, and not spelling out the story's message, we can not only show respect for our listeners (whether they are children or adults), but also allow them to go through the process of discovering those messages for themselves, a process which will make the messages much more personally meaningful to them.

Second, we would do well to avoid telling doom and gloom "crisis" stories of impending environmental apocalypse, massive species extinctions, etc. Such stories, although they are intended to awaken people to urgent action, can end up being terribly demoralizing and off-putting unless there is some concrete action the listener can take in response (which most often there is not).⁸⁸ They can also give a false impression of how conservation works, painting it as a heroic struggle to save species and lands from imminent destruction, when actually the bulk of conservation happens over a much longer term, demanding a lifelong commitment, acted upon every day, to care for the other species with whom we share the world.⁸⁹

A better approach would be to teach through humorous or surprising stories, which introductory biology students, at least, have said are the best kinds of stories to help them remember key concepts.⁹⁰ Part of the reason trickster tales are so popular among peoples around the world is that they are *funny*; we can laugh at the trickster's antics, while also learning important information about what to do (or not do) from them.⁹¹ Peter Forbes, the director of the Trust for Public Land's Center for Land and People, also advises that we tell stories that focus on positive emotions such as love and hope.⁹²

And finally, our stories about animals should ideally focus on particular, concrete examples rather than generalizations or abstractions.⁹³ It's easy to demonize a group that we think of in general terms, but it is much more difficult to do so about an individual with whom we have developed a personal relationship. This is why shepherds in northwestern Iran who normally view wolves in general as dangerous predators will nevertheless rescue individual wolves in danger, such as a wolf who was saved by villagers near the town of Shahindej in December 2009 when she fell into a fourteen-foot deep irrigation canal.⁹⁴ If we want to tell stories to inspire connection and compassion for wolves, then, we need to find stories that speak of individual wolves with authoritative particularity. This focus on particularity is part of the reason why the following personal story about a wolf whom he had shot, told by Aldo Leopold in his book *A Sand County Almanac*, has inspired concern for wolves (and nature in general) among thousands of his readers:

We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.⁹⁵

Notes

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71. Of course *Avatar's* simplistic portrayal of the alien "natives" (the Na'vi) is problematic on a number of levels, but the fact remains that the film succeeds marvelously *as a story*, which is key to its success at spreading its environmental message. See www.avatarmovie.com for more information about the film, and a tree-planting initiative inspired by it.

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