

Developing an Ethic of How Animals Should be Treated

By Craig Cormick

It is important for any writer to declare in their work if they have a conflict – usually a conflict of interest – which is particularly relevant when writing opinion pieces that can influence the attitudes of others.

And up front I want to state that I have a conflict – but it is an inner conflict.

I am a passionate believer in animal rights and have supported organisations like Animals Asia to prevent cruel and unnecessary treatment wild animals. I have close friends and family who have rescue dogs or who have worked with rehabilitated elephants in Thailand – who have been mistreated for profit.

That is one of the reasons I chose to come and visit the First Monkey School in Thailand with some mixed emotions.

I was aware of how some monkeys are treated in shows for tourists and in circuses and even those who are trained to pick coconuts – with rightful condemnation when the animals are mistreated. But I also wanted to form my own opinion, rather than rely on the opinions of others, as well as allow my six-year-old son to have a personal experience of animals that was more meaningful than was possible through a zoo's cages or enclosures. I wanted him to gain some understanding of animals as fellow travellers on this fragile planet of ours that we need to appreciate and live with.

And I spent some time explaining to him that our human relationship with animals is complex and often contradictory, and dates back many tens of thousands of years. It is human's use of horses and oxen that enabled us to develop civilisation and settled communities, farming the soil. And it is our domestication of dogs as helpers that enabled communities to be better hunters, particularly in harsh climates where it was not possible to farm all year round. Ironically it is from the consumption of meat protein over many thousand years that has our brains have evolved to the point where we can actively make a decision not to eat meat.

In the modern world, however, where most of us live far from any farms or animal production, or even animals in the wild, we have often lost connections with the variety of animals and the variety of their lives, and perhaps very easily conjure an idyllic view of what an animal's life should be like - without human interaction.

Social media – and its social memes that link us all together around the globe – has a lot to tell us about animal welfare. But social media is better at passing on outrage and emotion than it is at passing on facts. So I decided this was something my family needed to experience for ourselves, and then decide what we had learned about how the animals were treated at the School.

And the emotions that I want to share after visiting First Monkey School are complex. It is difficult to even capture the feeling of being introduced to one particular macaque monkey named Kung Fu (for her habit of doing backflips and jumps) and the way, after a few days of working with her, she jumped onto my arm for safety when she was startled. I looked down at her and she looked up at me, holding my gaze. And I found staring into a primate's eye more intense than staring into the deep-pool eyes of a dog or horse. Monkey eyes are unsettlingly human-like. Then she wrapped her small fingers around my hand. The feeling – whether I was reading it accurately or not – was one of trust and protection.

And to be honest, it wasn't me that instilled it – it was the monkey's trainers that had. The philosophy at the School, which we witnessed and experienced first-hand, is to treat the animals with kindness, in the way that one teaches an assistant-animal or pet.

Of course the monkey could have otherwise been in the wild, rather than kept in an enclosure on the property. But it could also have been infected with rabies in the wild. Or it could have been attacked by predators. Or could have been dead before now.

The macaque monkeys at First Monkey School are not like the animals that are taught to pick coconuts with cruelty and disrespect. They are treated with kindness and grow to trust their instructors. Yes, they can be tethered, and yes they are being taught a marketable skill – but I found it was a far cry from comparisons of exploitative uses of animals humans have been guilty of over the ages, such as taking canaries down coal mines to test for poison gas, or infecting monkeys with viruses to develop drugs.

Our relationship with animals is – as I said – complex.

Humans have long worked with animals and I think it important to acknowledge this history while developing what is the right ethic for working with animals in the modern era.

After spending several days at First Monkey School, and spending a lot of time talking to the owners about their philosophy and personal ethics - I believe the School is a good thing. Not because it saves human labour and deaths (many coconut pickers are killed by falling coconuts each year). But because it is teaching a new way to treat animals that humans, often by necessity, work with. And that way is based on respect.

I believe we have a duty to treat all animals with respect, whether they have a working role, are a pet or are free in the wild. They are our fellow travellers on this planet and our prosperity and future is clearly entwined with many of theirs.

We each need to develop our own ethic of how animals should be treated, of course, and I am not going to tell you that you need to follow mine. But I would like to recommend that any outrage you find being stirred up via online stories about monkeys being mistreated by the coconut industry is tempered by an evidence-base, and discerns which monkeys might be mistreated and which are treated with respect and kindness.

It may be in years to come that we have developed technologies that allow us to pick coconuts differently, without the use of trained monkeys – and that may be a good thing. But I am also reminded of the stories of people who choose not to give up their seeing-eye dogs to have them replaced with radar-devices, as they have a deep relationship with their dogs that they do not want to lose.

I believe that the monkeys at First Monkey School have a similar deep relationship with their handlers, that I was able to catch just a glimpse of when Kung Fu came to me for safety.

Such relationships can be the start for learning how to respect all animals, and I hope that is a key lesson my six-year-old son took away after spending several days watching and learning about these truly amazing animals.

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