

Human Lives Are Not More Important Than Animal Lives

By **Paul Watson** - Jun 8, 2016

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Captain Paul Watson, environmental activist and founder of Sea Shepherd Conservation Society explains interdependence of species and why a biocentric approach is what the world needs.

A commentary by Captain Paul Watson

Is a human life worth more than a gorilla, a whale or any other species?

I'm going to tread on some very sensitive toes with this commentary but I think it needs to be said.

My perspective is biocentric, whereas most of humanity looks on reality from an anthropocentric point of view. I do not expect the anthropocentric mind to understand my position. My position is that a human life is not more important than the life of a gorilla or a whale.

This is is going to make some people angry as hell, but that does not concern me. What concerns me is the reality of our relationship with the natural world.

Columnist Dave Bry recently wrote in The Guardian:

As much as I love animals – and I love them very much – the idea that the life of a cat or a dog or a lion or a gorilla is as important as the life of a human is a terrible one, a wrong one, an insulting one. [There] are powerful, important things about being a human being ... Yes, I would save the life of Ted Kaczynski, Idi Amin or Donald Trump over any animal you could name. (Yes, even my beloved childhood pets: the cats Love and Honey, the dog, Yvette. Sorry, guys, RIP.)

Personally I think this statement by Bry is asinine, insensitive and absurd. Idi Amin was a mass murderer. His life was not worth the life of a mosquito and if someone had shot the bastard, thousands of people's lives would have been spared not to mention the slaughter of African wildlife under his authority. Would Bry say the same about Hitler, and if not, why not, how is he any different than a mass murdering dictator like Idi Amin? So I think Brys' position has not been thought out, and if it has, it is he who holds a terrible idea with a wrong position and insulting to every person who was slaughtered in WWII or in Africa under Amin. Bry is saying his cats and his dog are expendable but a vicious dictator is not, simply on the basis of being a member of the human species.

The reality is that some human lives are simply not worth more than other humans and also not more important than many animals.

A few years ago when I was teaching at UCLA I asked my students this question:

If you had to choose between a human life and the survival of an unknown species, what choice would you make? And to make the question a little easier for them, I said the human life is a cute little baby and the species is a type of bacteria.

"So," I said, "Does the baby live in exchange for the eradication of the species or do we save the species and allow the baby to die?"

They answered without hesitation and chose the life of the baby.

"What if I ask you to save 200 species of unknown bacteria in exchange for the baby?"

Again they chose the baby.

"Can anyone tell me why you made that choice?" I inquired.

"Because human lives are more important." One student answered. Another said, "The life of a baby is more important than some germs, how could you even ask such a thing?" she said with a look of disgust.

"Congratulations everyone," I said. "Your choice just caused the extinction of the human race."

This is because there are anywhere from 700 to 1,000 different species of bacteria residing in the human gut and without them we could not digest our food or manufacture vitamins for our bodies.

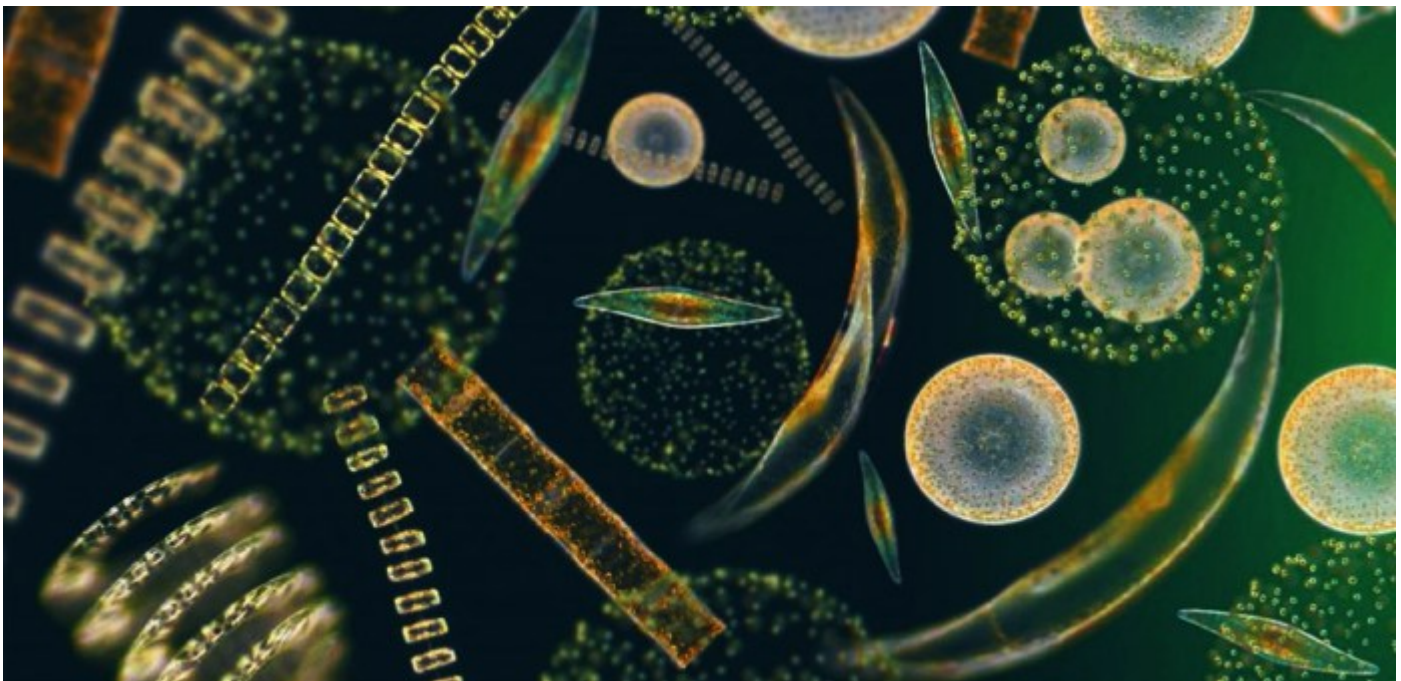
This was part of a lesson I was trying to teach on the law of interdependence, that all species need each other and without some species we cannot survive.

Are phytoplankton and zooplankton less important than human lives? If it was a choice between diminishing human numbers and diminishing worldwide populations of phytoplankton what choice would we make?

Again I put the question forth, this time to some die-hard anti-abortionists. If the choice is between forcefully preventing abortions and allowing the births of millions of unwanted babies or watching the disappearance of phytoplankton, what choice would you make?

They said that the lives of the babies were more important even if it meant the babies would not be properly cared for, nurtured, educated and loved.

One person asked me what a phytoplankton was?



Phytoplankton. Photo courtesy of Sailors for the Sea

"It's a tiny marine plant," I answered.

"You mean like seaweed?"

"Yes but much smaller."

"So you're saying that seaweed is more important than babies?" The man asked with a look of disgust on his face.

"Yes, that's what I am saying." I answered.

"You're a sick man," he literally shouted at me.

And of course he was not interested in my explanation.

And the truth is that we have already made that choice to eradicate phytoplankton in exchange for increasing human populations.

Since 1950, the Ocean has suffered a 40% decline in phytoplankton populations and phytoplankton produces over 50% of the oxygen for the planet.

This is a serious problem but one which most people remain blissfully ignorant of.

Phytoplankton has been diminished because of pollution, climate change, acidification and the slaughter of the whales.

Why the whales?

Because whales provide the nutrients essential for the growth of phytoplankton, especially iron and nitrogen. These nutrients are spread to the phytoplankton in the form of whale feces similar to a farmer spreading manure on his crops. A single Blue whale defecates three tons a day of nutrient rich fecal material which makes the whales the farmers of the sea and a key species for the survival of phytoplankton.

Diminishment of whales means diminishment of phytoplankton means diminishment of oxygen.

There are many species much more important than we are. Bees and worms, trees and plankton, fish, ants and spiders, bacteria, whales and elephants amongst many others.

They are more important for a very simple reason. Most of them can live quite happily without humans but humans cannot live without them. A world without bees and worms would be a world where we could not feed ourselves. A world without phytoplankton and trees would be a world where we could not breathe. A world without yeast (an animal) would be a world without beer and wine which I mention only because this is a loss that may get some people's attention. Nature has three very basic ecological laws. 1. Diversity, meaning that the strength of an ecosystem is determined by the diversity within it. 2. Interdependence, meaning that the species within an ecosystem are dependent upon each other and 3. Finite resources, meaning that there is a limit to growth, a limit to carrying capacity.

As human populations grow larger they literally steal carrying capacity from other species, leading to diminishment of other species which leads to diminishment of diversity and diminishment of interdependence.

In other words, no species is an island entire unto itself and that includes our own human species.

Humans have created a fantasy world called anthropocentrism, the idea that all of reality, all of nature exists only for humanity, that we are the only species that matters and human rights take priority over the rights of all other species.

In other words we look upon ourselves as divinely created superior beings when in reality we are simply overly conceited arrogant, ecologically ignorant, naked apes who have become divine legends in our own limited minds.

This anthropocentric view of the world has made us selfish, self-centred and extremely destructive to all other forms of life on the planet including our own. Our fantasies have allowed us to destroy the very life support systems that sustain us, to poison the waters we drink and the food we eat, to amuse ourselves with blood sports and to eradicate anything and everything we do not like, be it animal, plant or other human beings. We demonize each other and we demonize the entire living world.

This fantasy world we have invented has witnessed our creation of Gods out of whose mouths we can give voice to our fantasies with the moral authority to justify our destructive behaviour.

Over the years I have risked my life and my crews have risked their lives to protect whales and seals, sharks and fish. I am often asked how can I ask people to risk their lives for a whale?

Very easy, is my answer because fighting for the survival of whales or fish means fighting for our own future.

The mystery however to me is how people can question risking our lives for a whale yet accept that young people are routinely asked to risk their lives for real estate, oil wells, religion and for a coloured piece a cloth they call a flag.

Apparently risking their lives to protect property is acceptable whereas taking risks to defend non-human lives is not.

This was very neatly summed up once by a ranger in Zimbabwe who was attacked by human rights groups after killing a poacher who was about to kill an endangered Black rhino.

The accusation was, how could you take the life of a human being to protect an animal?

His answer revealed the hypocrisy of human values. He said, "If I was a policeman in Harare and a man ran out of a bank with a bag of money and I shot him dead on the street, I would be called a hero and given a medal. My job is to protect the future heritage of Zimbabwe and how is it that an endangered species has less value than a bag of paper?"

Humanity slaughters some 65 billion animals every year for meat and takes even greater numbers of lives from the sea, much of which is discarded callously as by-catch. We kill animals for fun or because we consider them to be pests. There has never been a species as mercilessly destructive as the human primate. We kill wilfully, viciously and relentlessly and we do so because we feel entitled to do so.

Anthropocentrism is an incredibly delusional conceit by a single species to lift ourselves above in value and importance over all other living things.

Humanity is so entrenched in this view of the world that we have stifled all empathy to the feelings and interests of all other species. We view them as expendable, as property, as nuisances, as sources of amusement, as slaves.

In an anthropocentric world only humans matter and this has absurdly led to beliefs that this entire planet was created just for us, that we are the pinnacle of evolution and the masters of the universe.

Every single anthropocentric religion places human beings at the centre of everything and above all other species. We have fashioned God in our image in order to justify our superiority and woe be it to any one of that questions this fantasy.

Anthropocentrism is a form of ecological insanity and is leading us towards self destruction, because only so many species can be removed before the laws of diversity, interdependence and finite growth lead to our own extinction.

Are humans the most intelligent species on the planet? Yes. because we define what intelligence is and therefore declare ourselves to be the most intelligent species. We define ourselves as moral, ethical, benevolent and wise despite the fact that our actions reveal that we are anything but moral, ethical, benevolent and wise.

I would define intelligence as the ability to live in harmony with nature and within the boundaries of ecological laws. We wilfully ignore that dolphins and whales have larger more complex brains and we dismiss any speculation that animals think, make choices, dream and have emotions. We also dismiss the reality that trees communicate through chemicals and fungal networks. We pride ourselves on our art, our science, our religions, our politics, our cultures and totally reject that other species have their own cultures, their own realities completely independent of our hominid vanities.

Recently a 17-year old gorilla named Harambe was shot dead because zoo-keepers determined that he was a threat to the life of a four year old child despite the indications that the gorilla was actually attempting to protect the child.

The primary justification was that the life of a gorilla is of less value than the life of a human child and thus expendable without hesitation.

Never mind that in two previous incidents, one in Chicago and another on the island of Jersey a child's life was saved by a captive gorilla.



Levan Merritt after he tumbled 12 feet into the gorilla enclosure at Jersey Zoo, falling unconscious before being saved by Jambo the silverback gorilla. Photo courtesy of Big Wave Productions

The Cincinnati zoo was most likely motivated by the threat of a lawsuit unless they shot Harambe and ended the drama with a bullet to the head of a sentient being that although confused and disoriented was displaying real concern for the child that fell into his prison cell.

Very few thought of the trauma this would cause to the other gorillas or the fact that the killing was a horrific betrayal to the good intentions of Harambe. After all he was just an animal and no animal is worth the life of a single human.

Instead of acknowledging that her child was not hurt by Harambe, the mother of the child thanked God for the child not being hurt with the assumption being that her God could not have cared less about a gorilla. Harambe and the child were together for ten minutes before Harambe was murdered.

There are 7.5 billion of us and every year there are fewer and fewer of everything else except for the slaves we breed for food and amusement.

Gorillas do not contribute to climate change, to pollution of the ocean to deforestation, to war and habitat destruction. They are gentle, vegetarian, shy, and intelligent self-aware sentient beings whose existence benefits the planet and gives hope for the future.

What human being can equal a gorilla for the virtues of harmlessness, sustainable living, peacefulness and ecological intelligence?

Not one of us. So in my opinion the life of a gorilla is not only of more value than the life of a human being, it is a hundred times more valuable, as are whales, and snails, bees and trees.

Why? **Because we cannot live on this planet without them.**

This article was originally published as a Facebook [post](#) on Captain Paul Watson's page

Feature Image © Meesha Holley (Amphiprion Perideraion also known as the Pink Skunk Clownfish, spotted at a diving spot off the coast of Koh Tao, Thailand. The sea anemone and clownfish share a mutualistic symbiotic relationship. Sea anemones provide a safe and ideal home for clownfish, and in return, clownfish keep sea anemones clean, provide nutrients from its waste and help catch prey).

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