

## The Language That We Use *Matters*

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We rarely think about it, but the language that we use to talk about the world has a profound impact on how we see things, our attitudes, and our choices. This is most definitely true in regard to our relationships with other species with whom we share this earth.

How many times have you heard the word “livestock” used to refer to cows, pigs, and chickens? The primary meaning of “stock” is “inventory” or “merchandise,” so the use of the word livestock helps create and maintain the view that it is appropriate to see other species as mere objects to be bought, sold, and used.

The English language is full of common expressions that promote the view that other species are here for humans to exploit. We very often speak of other (nonhuman) species as “animals” and refer to our own species as “humans” or “mankind.” This implies that humans are not animals, that we are somehow separate from and better than all other species—a “higher life form.” And yet, this ignores the fact that humans, seen biologically, are animals. We are one animal species among many species. When we see things in this way, we begin to let go of the idea that we are the rulers of all living beings and begin to see that we are part of a family of beings that live together in a shared world. Each species has its own excellences and is worthy of having its well being and suffering taken into account. We can reflect this new awareness by using terminology such as “human animals” and “nonhuman animals,” or better yet, we can simply drop the word “animal” altogether and just use the species name: human, pig, salmon, eagle. We can also begin to see that our talk about “higher” mammals and “higher” primates simply perpetuates the idea that humans are somehow superior and, therefore, have the right to treat other species as commodities.

The use of this sort of language is so prevalent, it turns up in places where you would least expect it. In the publication of an organization dedicated to moving people toward a vegan diet, there was a list of the death toll for various species that result from humans choosing to eat them. Over the course of a lifetime, the average U.S. citizen (according to the USDA) will have consumed: 21 cows, 14 sheep, 12 hogs, 900 chickens, plus 1,000 pounds of other animals (fish, birds, rabbits, shellfish, deer, etc.). The last entry is telling. Would we ever measure human deaths in *pounds*? It would be unthinkable to say, for example, that 2,000 pounds of humans were killed by a terrorist. And yet we easily refer to the deaths of other species in pounds rather than lives lost.

In regard to the actual killing of animals for their flesh and skins, our common language hides the reality of what is occurring. We refer to slaughterhouses as “meat packing plants,” and even talk about “harvesting” both wild animals (deer for example) and captive animals (cows, pigs, chickens, fish) rather than acknowledge the fact that a decision has been made to deliberately kill these beings to fulfill a taste or fashion preference. Also important in obscuring our exploitive behavior is our habit of referring to the animals that we choose to eat as seafood, beef, bacon, pork, veal, and (in general) as

meat rather than fish, cow, pig, or calf flesh. It is interesting to note that a human with a superficial nonthreatening wound is often said to have a flesh wound; think how peculiar it would be if we talked about ourselves the way we do other species and called it a “meat wound!” Similarly, our use of the word “leather” obscures the fact a cow, pig or snake was killed so that we could wear its skin on our feet or around our waist.

The litany of terms that cast living animals as mere objects is long: game animal, game fish, dog owner, food animal, broiler or layer (for a chicken), bi-catch (name for killed marine life that are thrown away because they were swept up in the same net as “food fish”), “pork bellies” appearing in the commodities pricing section in the newspaper financial pages... and then there is our habit of referring to a nonhuman animal as “it,” something that clearly reduces a being to an object and would never be applied to a member of our own species.

Hunting and fishing magazines virtually never use the word “kill.” They write repeatedly about “taking” a large buck, deer, elk, salmon, etc. A particularly large or healthy animal is a “trophy” animal. Animals that humans are in the habit of killing for food are referred to as “game animals,” as though that is their basic nature rather than the result of a choice we have made to treat them that way. Likewise, animals that we choose to use for forced labor are “draft animals.”

The very words “hunting” and “fishing” obscure the true nature of the activity. “Hunting” makes it sound like all that is being done is trying to *find* something. We casually refer to these activities as “recreation” or a “sport,” which trivializes the true nature of what we are doing—it’s certainly not a sport or recreation for the animal that is being relentlessly stalked and then killed.

Even our computer software contributes to shaping our attitudes. The second sentence in this article states that “This is most definitely true in regard to our relationships with other species with whom we share this earth.” When I typed this sentence, the software on my computer immediately flagged the word “whom” as mistaken, informing me that the correct word to use there should be the word “which.” “Whom” refers to living entities, while “which” refers to mere objects.

All of the uses of language above tend to create and promote the idea that other species are simply objects/things whose needs, interests, and suffering do not need to be given any consideration or taken into account. Once we begin to notice the implications of our choice of words in referring to other species, we can begin to see how our own attitudes have been conditioned by our culture, and we can make wiser choices that help to create better, more accurate perceptions of the other beings with whom we share this planet that we call home. Using different language in regard to other species will often be noticed by other people and give them something to think about. When someone notices our choice of words, this moment can be used as an entry point for a useful conversation about our culturally conditioned perceptions and treatment of other living beings.

