

SIX REASONS TO EXPAND YOUR COMPASSION FOOTPRINT

By Marc Bekoff



Our relationships with nonhuman animals are complicated, frustrating, ambiguous, and paradoxical. When people tell me that they love animals and then harm or kill them, I tell them I'm glad they don't love me. We observe animals, gawk at them in wonder, experiment on them, eat them, wear them, write about them, draw and paint them, move them from here to there as we “redecorate nature.”

People are starting to pay attention to their carbon footprint—how their lifestyle choices tread on the earth. We need to also pay attention to our compassion footprint. Animals are constantly asking us in their own ways to treat them better or leave them alone, and they're fully justified in making this request. If they could put that request into words, what might their manifesto look like?

1) All animals share the earth and we must coexist. “Redecorating nature” refers to the global tendency, almost a human obsession, to move into the living rooms of other animals with little or no regard for what we're doing to them, their friends, and their families. We unrelentingly intrude because there are too many of us and because it's so easy for us to do. We also shamelessly over-consume.

2) Animals think and feel. Like any good manifesto, there is a gentle call for action that mixes facts with values. We all need to raise our consciousness about the lives of our fellow animals and change the current paradigm, in which those who work on behalf of animals and the environment are seen as “radicals” or “extremists.” No one should be an apologist for passion and no one should be ashamed, or shamed, for feeling.

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3) Animals have and deserve compassion. The late theologian Thomas Berry stressed that our relationship with Nature should be one of awe, not one of use. All animals, including humans, have a right to lives of dignity and respect, without forced intrusions. We need to accept all beings as, and for who, they are. All animals, all beings, deserve respectful consideration simply for the fact that they exist, and this alone mandates that we coexist with them.

4) Connection breeds caring, alienation breeds disrespect. Our alienation from animals and nature kills our hearts, and we don't even realize how numb we've become until we witness the beauty of nature and the wonder of life: a squirrel performing acrobatics as she runs across a telephone wire, a bird alighting on a tree limb and singing a beautiful melody, a bee circling a flower, or a child reveling at a line of ants crossing a hiking trail. In these small moments, we feel our inherent connection to all creatures and all of nature.

5) Our world is not compassionate to animals. We must stop ignoring their gaze and closing our hearts to their pleas. We can easily do what they ask—to stop causing them unnecessary pain, suffering, loneliness, sadness, and death, even extinction. It's a matter of making different choices—about how we conduct research, about how we entertain ourselves, about what we buy, where we live, who we eat, who we wear, and even family planning.

6) Acting compassionately helps all beings and our world. More and more people around the world are truly concerned about how we affect the lives of animals. More than ever we understand that coexistence with other animals is essential, that our fate is tightly bound with them. To a very large extent, we control the lives of other animals. We're their lifeguards. It's essential that we move rapidly to make kindness and compassion the basis of our interactions with animals. We shouldn't be afraid to make changes that improve animals' lives. Indeed, we should embrace them. Such changes will only help heal our world and ourselves.

It's really pretty simple. This animal manifesto is a plea to regard animals as fellow sentient, emotional beings, to recognize the cruelty that too often defines our relationship with them, and to change that by acting compassionately on their behalf.

Unlike our carbon footprint, our compassion footprint is something we need to make bigger. If we try to bring forth our innate compassion with every being we meet, we will always be making progress and expanding our compassion footprint. I'm an optimist and a dreamer and I do think that the future can be a much better one for animals, nonhuman and human.

LET'S MAKE THIS THE CENTURY OF COMPASSION

As I've been traveling around the world talking about these topics, and meeting wonderful people working tirelessly and selflessly for animals and for humans, I'm always so pleased. So, the challenge I would like to put forth is that we commit to rewilding our hearts, to putting compassion and empathy first and foremost.

To achieve this, we need to be positive and keep working hard to make the lives of animals better, we need to be proactive and focus on what works.

Surround yourself with positive people who are sensitive to the dire situation we're in and committed to doing something about it. This helps prevent burnout. Make the resolution to try to do better for animals—both non-human

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and human—and for the earth; to work for more peace and justice for all. We can and must keep our hopes and dreams alive, and putting compassion and empathy on the front-burner is a must, and we must do it now. And we can learn much about how to do this from our animal friends. We can make the future much brighter for our children, who so dearly need better models for positive thinking and hope.

There is no room for hypocrisy or negativity. So let's put it all aside and move ahead together as a tight-knit community, knowing how much work there is to do, but also knowing and feeling that, with a global commitment to compassion and empathy, we can succeed. Never say never, ever.

Let's all work together to make this The Century of Compassion, The Era of Empathy.



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Marc Bekoff along with Jane Goodall in 2002 also wrote a ground-breaking book, *The Ten Trusts, What We Must Do To Care For the Animals We Love*, which lets us know of a pathway that humans and animals can live together on this earth in peace and harmony.

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Marc Bekoff has published numerous essays and books, and has received several awards for his work with animals.