

## **Interaction with Wild Animals – Good or Bad**

Louis Dorfman, Animal Behaviorist

Among the most controversial of questions in the animal care world is the question of whether it is progressive and helpful to have a human/animal interaction with wild animals, or just a bad idea. This article will give the author's viewpoint on this question with the caveat that I do not feel I have a monopoly on "truth," and I am very suspicious of anyone that seems to feel he/she does.

I believe it must first be understood that this question falls into the same category as questions such as "is it good or bad to have a gun for protection," or "is religion a good or bad thing for society." These questions share a common thread: it depends on how they are used. Certainly we humans have a profound ability to corrupt good ideas and goals and turn them into a negative result, if the motivation and intentions of the particular person or group is self-centered and/or driven by desires not beneficial to society or, in this case, the animals affected.

The first question to be asked is "Why?" What is the purpose of any proposed interaction or desire to develop a relationship with a wild animal? Here are a number of constructive reasons for interaction, which I will address individually: for the emotional wellbeing of the particular animal, for health and medication purposes, for safety of both the animals and caretakers, and for public education and conservation.

### **EMOTIONAL BENEFITS**

We humans know that our health and general well-being is dependent on a number of factors including proper nutrition, proper medication, exercise, and a positive emotional attitude and outlook. Why, then, do we generally only address an animal's nutrition, medication and habitat? Do we not feel that they would benefit tremendously from a positive mental and emotional outlook? It can be argued that many wild animals have a more highly developed emotional range than humans do and therefore need more attention addressed to this element. I personally have found that there is more difference in personality and characteristics between individuals within a species of big cat than there is between differences among species. We have 68 big cats at the International Exotic Animal Sanctuary, including 21 tigers, 14 lions, and seven leopards. I therefore have had a chance to work with many individuals within a species. They have the same ranges in personality and temperament, as do humans. For example, we have two female Amur Leopards that were raised together, live together, and had almost exactly the same environment while growing up, yet they are as different as any two human sisters might be. I spend a great deal of time with them, and their personality differences are more noticeable than are their similarities.

I find that all wild animals with which I've worked benefit from having a human whom they can look for security, trust, and comfort. They are placed in an unnatural setting in captivity, and since they of necessity have to have humans around them, they are much more comfortable and relaxed if they view humans positively. As we all know, all the large big cats are solitary in nature, with the exception of lions. Yet my experience is that all species of big cats generally crave and desire positive human attention as much as any other being. In fact, for some reason I find that cougars and leopards—probably the most solitary of cats in nature—are perhaps the most affectionate of cats with humans they trust. We find that our cats benefit in reduced stress level, comfort around volunteers and employees, and even comfort around tour groups, once they develop a positive one-on-one relationship with a human.

Now, the phrase "positive one-on-one relationship" is critically important. I work with all wild animals using no discipline and no reward. Only affection, trust and respect. If the purpose in having interaction is to benefit the animal, it must be a completely positive experience for the animal; otherwise there is no purpose under this category or reasons for interaction. That means one must start with the proper experience, knowledge, and motivation. Without all of these qualities, it is a recipe for failure, or worse—injury. One must know which individual would probably benefit. Since wild animals do all have unique emotional characteristics just like us, some individual wild animals can't be trusted by even the most experienced human and perhaps don't want human contact. Next, the human must know what activities and interaction will produce positive emotional benefits, and the human must be motivated only for the benefit of the animal involved. If one has any other purpose for the interaction such as ego gratification, desire to dominate, or to show off to others, the animal will probably not respect or trust the human and it will not be a positive activity for either party. In fact, someone with improper motivation will most likely end up seriously injured, and the animal will also suffer as a result. It must also be emphasized that positive interaction does not have to take place in unprotected contact with a wild animal; many of the benefits of emotional bonding and trust can be achieved from protected contact through a fence.

## **HEALTH AND MEDICATION**

If a wild animal looks to an individual or individuals for security, trust, and comfort, quite often minor medical procedures can be accomplished without stress and/or sedation. I have given tigers and other large cats shots for days, taken urine samples, removed objects jammed in their teeth, removed obstructions around the animals, and checked paws, etc. for potential problems. I have heard of others doing artificial insemination without sedation. We don't do any breeding, so that has not been relevant for our sanctuary. We have made a number of moves from habitat to habitat without stress,

sedation or obvious discomfort. I have even led cats from one habitat to another, although I don't advise this method unless the behaviorist is extremely knowledgeable, knows the cat to be moved very well, and the environment in the entire area can be completely controlled.

## **SAFETY ISSUES**

There is a great benefit to having someone present at any facility that has a positive relationship with each individual animal, from a safety standpoint. My observation is that most escape plans with which I'm familiar, even at large institutions such as zoos, do not take sufficient notice of the benefit of calming an animal down and getting it more comfortable with his or her surroundings before attempting to either sedate the animal or confine it in some manner. Failure to do so frequently has resulted in injury to animals, humans or both. With few exceptions, the presence of someone with whom the animal feels comfortable and trusts can minimize potential for harm to either animals or humans. A caregiver that animals look to as a source of security and support can often lead escaped animals back to their enclosures, since they are frightened once they escape and seek a source of comfort. Escape plans that don't take into account the fact that stress and agitation will cause aggressive/defensive reactions that are potentially harmful to all present are fundamentally flawed. Conditioning a dangerous animal to accept humans as caregivers rather than a source of irritation, stress or agitation can be the difference between life and death. I know of at least two separate instances regarding big cats where the prior conditioning of different tigers resulted in no injury to keepers that came in contact with the cat through the keepers' mistakes. I was responsible for the conditioning of one of the tigers. A very experienced friend of mine conditioned the other tiger.

## **PUBLIC EDUCATION AND CONSERVATION**

This section will undoubtedly be controversial, for my experience is that not one person working with wild animals will agree with everything I say here. Also, I very much doubt that anyone working with wild animals would agree with everything anyone else said on this subject. There is a bit more unanimity among animal rights advocates that don't work with wild animals, as they tend to group wild animals as a cohesive unit and decide what they think is right for all wild animals generally. On the other hand, I and many others that have close relationships with wild animals realize that they are as individual as are humans. For instance, the statement often heard that all wild animals would be better off in the wild than in the best conditions of captivity is too confining. Just as all humans don't want to live in the wilds of Montana—or live in the confinement of an apartment in New York City—so too do wild animals differ in what makes them happy, based on their individual personalities.

It has been illustrated time and again that we humans only care about preserving those animal species with which we identify in a positive and caring manner. Examples such as dolphins, killer whales, panda bears, koalas, and wolves illustrate the value of human caring. And, even some of those species are having difficulty surviving because of habitat destruction, poaching, commercial activities, and conflict with agricultural and developing interests.

While I consider myself an animal activist, I also have a pragmatic understanding that appropriate venues are necessary to enable the public to identify with individuals of species—particularly carnivores and large wild animals such as bears—in order for the public to take an interest in their treatment and survival. If we didn't become attached to "Flipper" many years ago, where would dolphins be today? And, if we didn't become attached to "Shamu" and his many incarnations, what would the fate of killer whales be?

Many wrongs have been committed in the attempt to use animals for entertainment, including past inappropriate activities such as: dressing primates in foolish human clothing and having them do undignified and demeaning activities, having exotic cat shows where the cats and the trainer have an adversarial relationship and the cat is expected to do "tricks" such as leaping through a hoop of fire or balance on a platform while the trainer brandishes a whip or other device, or elephant shows wherein the elephant is trained and controlled with a "bull hook" and required to do inappropriate and unnatural tricks such as sitting on a pedestal or standing on one leg.

Add to those obvious infractions the following inappropriate, and stressful activities such as: photo shoots with the public in close proximity or holding wild animals, taking wild animals on television shows where they are ridiculed or used only as props for jokes, walking large carnivores on a leash in proximity to the public, and allowing the public to fondle and pet wild animals that are confined—and there is plenty of ammunition for those animal rights activists that want to ban all venues using wild animals. They characterize all these activities as exploitation and inappropriate use of a wild animal. Many of them are. These activities send a wrong message to the public and perpetuate the treatment of animals as objects to be utilized in any manner we choose for entertainment. The appropriate venues that do treat wild animals with respect and utilize natural behavior are cast in the same light, because the majority of uses are the inappropriate ones. Therefore, the opportunity to educate the public about treating wild animals with the respect and dignity to which they are entitled, while getting the public to identify with them, is being questioned, and we have "opportunities lost."

The zoological community in the past has been among the perpetrators of the above stated inappropriate activities, and some zoological community members are still perpetrating some of the abuses. The solution by a large number of the zoological

community members that realize the mistake has been to decree that they will no longer utilize wild animals in any venue involving human interaction, and therefore the animals will then be treated more as exhibits, not sentient beings. This choice would result in further distancing the public from identification with wild animals and vastly inhibit the ability to marshal sentiment for conservation and protection methods that will be crucial to the survival for most of the larger species of wild animals.

I would submit that there are appropriate and proper venues that involve wild animals in a manner that is educational to the public, helps the public identify with a particular species of wild animal and is enjoyable or at least not stressful for the animals involved.

First, the organization developing the interaction must carefully select individuals within a species that are temperamentally suited to activities involving masses of people. Each animal is an individual, and some wild animals like solitude, while others can enjoy interaction in front of a crowd if they are treated with respect and concern for their welfare and comfort.

Next, any interaction should be designed to display the particular species of animal in a venue that allows it to use its natural behavior in a manner that the public enjoys but is also pleasurable for the animal. As far as exotic cats, this would involve a natural setting wherein the cat would chase lures or other objects, perhaps climb trees, and leap from object to object. Properly done with the right cats, this activity can be fun for the cats, if they are treated with the proper respect and concern for their comfort and welfare. In addition, it would educate the public about their playful and sometime affectionate nature, while at the same time showing that any use of a wild animal should involve activities that the animal finds enjoyable as much as the public. For primates, an appropriate activity could be having a grouping of ropes and swings in an area and having the trainers swinging and engaging in natural primate activities with the primates that would be fun for the primates as well as the public.

In my opinion, if wild animals are to be used in television shows, there should be conditions present that minimize the stress to the animal while ensuring its safety and security. Only animals that have proven to be comfortable around groups of people should be used, and the particular television show should show appropriate respect and consideration for the animals and not ridicule their behavior or nature. Also, there should always be a message about the need to respect and to preserve our natural world.

Otherwise there is no educational value, rather the message given is that it is okay to exploit and utilize animals in any manner we choose for our entertainment. Rather, all public uses of wild animals should emphasize that it is wrong and improper to enjoy seeing an animal in stress or discomfort in any manner. Nor should an enlightened public get pleasure out of seeing an animal made to engage in unnatural behavior.

In summation, well-planned and well-executed interaction between human and animal can be a constructive and positive activity for a variety of reasons. Not the least of which is that hopefully future generations will grow to accept that all higher beings on this planet are entitled to some rights and concerns for their emotional needs and rights. Half a century ago humans were guilty of classing other humans in a subordinate classification and treating them as something to be separated and treated differently. Our state of enlightenment in the 21st Century can hardly realize how that activity came to be and was accepted for so long. Perhaps better understanding and knowledge of wild animals—particularly wild predators—will allow humans to recognize that the animals' emotional makeup is more similar than different from ours, and the gap we now think exists between us is more a result of lack of verbal communications than it is substantial differences. Only dedicated individuals embarking on a lifelong journey to learn about the animals on their terms and with respect of their instincts and needs can bring that recognition about. Necessarily, it will take interaction and understanding to achieve those results. Mistakes will be made. People will be injured. Has any achievement—including the struggle to establish equal treatment of all humans—taken place without those very same sacrifices?