

**WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE:
JUGGLING OPPOSITIONS IN A SCOTTISH WILDLIFE PARK**

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‘Human beings are the only animals of which I am thoroughly and cravenly afraid.’

—*George Bernard Shaw*

Many multispecies projects are interested in sociality – disputing ‘what counts as a social relation and who can participate?’ (Candea 2010: 243). In this article, instead of attempting to define these relationships as social or otherwise, I focus on how they are constructed and understood by the humans in these relationships at the Scottish Deer Centre, Fife.¹ As the name suggests, the centre hosts fourteen species of deer, as well as a host of carnivore and bird species, which the keepers - my interlocutors - interacted with on a daily basis.²

The centre was an environment of juggled oppositions that I show are not as contradictory and exclusive as they seem: engagement and detachment, care and responsibility, public and private, wild and captive, these binaries do not exist in the lived world. They rather produce the paradoxes in which we live, wherein the captive must somehow be wild and good keepers must be engaged enough with their animals that they care for them but detached enough that they can make responsible decisions about these same animals' welfare. While there is not space to describe relations between keepers and each individual species in the collection, the following exploration uses what I believe are the best illustrations of multiple oppositions and meanings.

¹ Due to the heavily loaded connotations of the term ‘zoo’ in current discourse, I use the terms ‘park’, ‘wildlife park’ and ‘centre’ in reference to my field site.

² The full range of carnivores are: short-clawed otters, grey wolves, Scottish wildcats, Eurasian lynx, and European brown bears. All of the bird species at the centre were raptors, including a wide range of owls, falcons, and eagles.

THE ETHNOGRAPHER'S PLACE

Over the course of three separate days, I shadowed keepers, asking them questions and occasionally participating in daily animal husbandry tasks. While I mainly followed three members of staff, I also talked with other staff, students, and volunteers, and the following account is the product of these collective conversations. I have chosen not to identify individual informants.

Most students who come to the park have an ecological or biological interest, making my project quite outside the ordinary for the park staff. From the beginning, I talked very openly about my interests, and keepers were full of stories, anecdotes, and various tidbits they thought would interest me. I believe that consciousness of my personal project and interests, however, changed the information I was presented in contrast to other students. Keepers knew that I wanted to hear about human-animal interactions, and so they went out of their way to tell me about the roles they viewed themselves as playing in the lives of the park's animals. I also acknowledge my own investment in the issues I discuss; as an avid conservationist, I have no doubt that my opinions shaped not only my interactions with keepers but my presentation of this ethnographic encounter.

FOLLOWING CANDEA'S FOOTSTEPS

Engagement and detachment, when viewed as relational rather than oppositional, provide a useful starting point for analysis; but at the park, distinctions between the two were not so clearly defined. Approaches to engaging and detaching were highly situational and scaled. As one keeper said, 'we try to maintain a distance and it just doesn't work'. Keepers' interactions with and discussions of park animals are constantly mediated by a tension between engaging and detaching. Specific circumstances generally call for one form to dominate, and as I will consider later, dilemmas of animal health and welfare require negotiating a position somewhere between emotion and objectivity. I was constantly reminded that one must 'think with your head and not your heart'.

Scale is also significant in understanding the fluid dynamics of engagement and detachment. While keepers might discuss individual animals with great affection, their dedication to a species or a wider conservation cause emerges from a detached, naturalistic perspective. One keeper, heavily involved with population control of ungulates in Scotland, told me that ‘some species just need to be managed’ but ‘if you tell me that’s an endangered species, I will protect it with my life’. Engagement and detachment do not function in isolation from each other, but in a coexisting dialectic that allows mediation and negotiation between the two.

CREATING A PUBLIC OTHER?

In an ideal world, keepers see engagement and detachment are part of a wider scientific ideology that all people should attend to, but unfortunately most guests at the park did not meet this expectation. Tension and exasperation with the behaviour of the visiting public was rife during my visits. I heard horror stories of visitors poking animals with sticks, throwing stones at them, attempting to feed them crisps, even holding deer by their antlers in order to take photos.

On one occasion, during the afternoon carnivore feed, a group of school children attempted to touch one of the Scottish Wildcats through the wire of their overhead walkway. When their teacher was asked to restrain them, her response was to huff and become angry with the keeper, rather than with her misbehaving students. Incidents like this greatly frustrated keepers, who had strong words for guests who blatantly disregarded everyday park decorum.³ Later, one keeper told me:

‘People are clueless; they don’t understand their impact. They assume that these animals are around people, so they’ll put up with anything. That’s just not the case.’

This statement was accompanied by a number of anecdotes of individual animals that had been permanently scarred by a callous public, such as a falcon who had his foot grabbed by a child during a flying display and was now terrified of children. Another keeper added, ‘our

³This particular incident was handled with great decorum and professionalism, but brought tensions to the surface. Rather than include some of the pejoratives alluded to in the text, I suffice to say that these reactions were angry and deeply emotional. There is an expectation that visitors will behave with ‘common sense’ when observing animals in the park.

attitudes toward wild animals just don't tally'. These interactions emphasized a separation between The Public – a nebulous, faceless entity that could not care less about animals or conservation – and Keepers, a loosely identified group of people who worked with animals and cared deeply not just for individuals but for entire species. For keepers, engagement and respect from the public were a trade-off – either guests were *too* interested in the animals, attempting to touch and harass them, or they were not interested enough, willing even to toss litter within enclosures. An underlying interest for many keepers was to turn the Public into *responsible* visitors, visitors who understood the importance of engaging and detaching with the animals in the park - or more specifically, understood that their role as visitors was to be detached and *observe* rather than to be engaged and *interact*.

WHEN DOES CARING END?

Naturally there are consequences when visitors become too engaged with the park's animals. The mess the public leaves isn't always easy to clear. Keepers told me about a young female muntjac was found with a ring-pull embedded in her hoof, the result of a guest leaving an aluminium can near the enclosure.⁴ The severity of the injury demanded a speedy judgement call. The decision regarding the animal's welfare was actively portrayed as separate from any emotion regarding either the individual animal or the cause of her condition. As the keeper who put the deer down explained to me:

'You have to make a decision and stick by it and not get stuck in it. If you get stuck in it, you're no good anymore.'

That is, if you get too bogged down emotionally by these decisions, you cease to be detached and objective, and the decisions you make no longer have the ability to be the *right* decisions. This is a reversal of the 'gloved love' described by Hoon Song in *Pigeon Trouble* (2010), where volunteers are chronically ineffective because of their emotional investment in the pigeons they are trying to save. Their fear of hurting the birds is driven by their emotional attachment to them, and it is exactly this ineptitude that keepers believe they avoid through an active dismissal of emotion.

⁴ The muntjac is a dainty and nervous deer about the size of the average dog, native across much of southern Asia.

Yet animal welfare is not solely about detachment; assessing situations where euthanasia is a real possibility requires the capacity to remove oneself emotionally. However, personal connections and relationships are never entirely out of the picture. While discussing an elderly wolf who was euthanized several months before my arrival at the park, narratives of concern, especially for the animal's discomfort, emerged:

'I was worried about his legs . . . as soon as I saw the x-ray I said, right. [. . .] He'd worn the cartilage right off [where his hind leg attached to his pelvis]. You can imagine how painful that was.'

While euthanasia was a choice made in a detached and objective frame of mind, it was also an engaged and personal decision. The keeper's objectivity was born from the very opposite – an individual relationship with the animal in question. Thus, as Candea (2010) suggests, discussing engagement and detachment as oppositional is not helpful – these concepts are intimately connected and borne from each other, so that scientific detachment cannot exist without personal engagement and personal engagement gives rise to a desire for scientific detachment.

RE-CONSTRUCTING WILDNESS

Part and parcel of this desire for scientific detachment, the park designed enclosures to replicate a 'wild' environment as closely as possible. A scientific approach provides barometers for what animals *should* be like, based on studies of the same or similar species in their natural habitats. One result, for example, is the role of diet in the creation of a truly 'wild' subject: the wolves in the collection are regularly and randomly allocated starve days and the lynxes' meal sizes vary regularly to imitate the large range of prey they might catch in their natural habitat.

Agency is a crucial aspect of wildness. Enclosures are designed for animals rather than humans, meaning animals always have the choice to be seen by the public. This is especially important for the park's rescued red fox, Ginger. Hand-reared, Ginger was not treated as a wild animal in her early years, which lead to the development of 'unfortunate behaviours' such as pacing and an inability to interact with other foxes. Eventually she was relocated to

an animal park where her enclosure was entirely concrete and did not allow any escape from the visiting public. By the time she arrived at the centre, allowing her to recreate natural behaviours and determine who she wanted to interact with became paramount:

‘If she doesn’t want to come out, she won’t come out. People often complain that they can’t find her, but it’s what she needs. It’s got to be about her.’

The largest step forward in Ginger’s rehabilitation was when she began to construct her own dens within the enclosure, a necessary habit for a wild fox. Yet during feeding times, keepers enter her enclosure and speak to her as they scatter her feed, and she will occasionally take food from a keeper’s hand; she still prefers their company to that of other foxes. Although the care that Ginger receives revolves around redeveloping her agency and in turn her wildness, it is this abstract wildness, driven by scientific ideas of what a fox *should* be like, that determine the very personal mediated relationships that keepers have with Ginger.

CAN’T TOUCH THIS

Discourses of wildness also appear in a comparison of the park’s two most dangerous species – the European elk (moose) and the European brown bear. Both are classified as non-contact species, meaning that there must be a barrier between the keeper and the animal at all times. Their reception of and by humans, however, is decidedly different.

During feedings for the Elk, a complex process involving the manipulation of several fences mainly around Mickey (the grumpy dominant male), the threat he posed was no secret to me. ‘Oh, they *hate* people,’ I was told as their feed spilled into a newly added trough and Mickey’s mate, Toffee, grumbled and whined in an attempt to get around him and to her meal. Moving them between paddocks required a great deal of frenetic running and intense gate-holding.

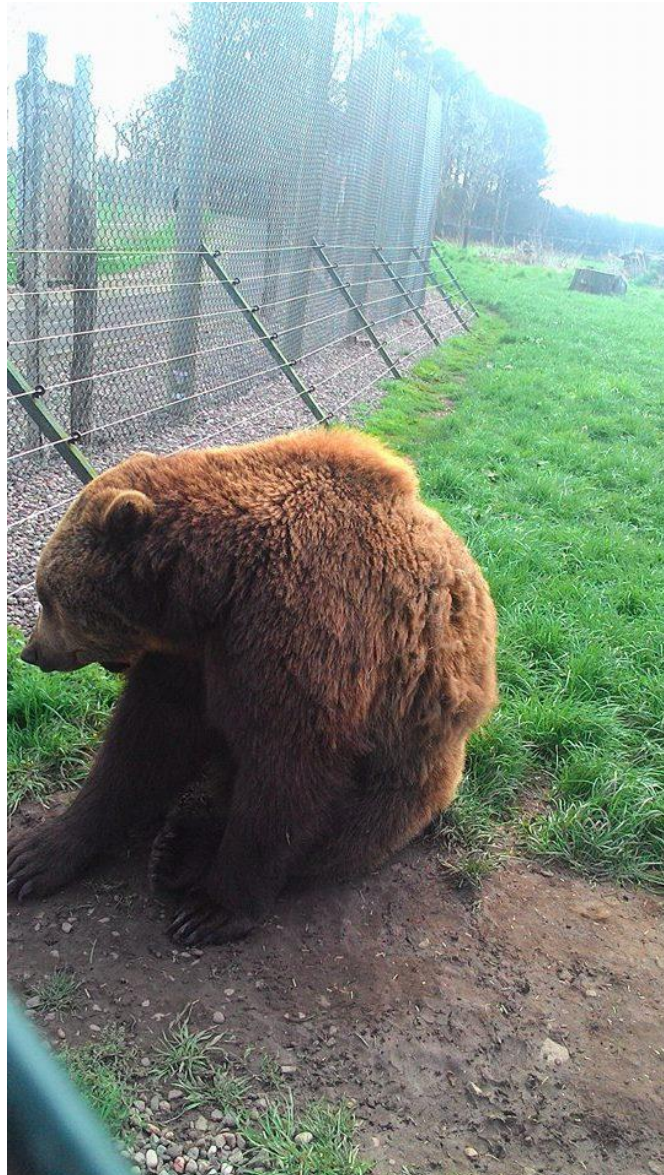


Figure 1: Loki waits patiently for his lunch. The brown bear recognized keepers and often sat in sight of the gate to greet them during feeding times.

Feeding Nelly and Loki, the mother-and-son bear duo, was a far more relaxed and intimate affair. If she came indoors during feedings, Nelly would occasionally get a scratch through the fencing from one of the keepers. Even without a large degree of physical contact, keepers maintained great affection for the bears, often using kinship terminology in the ‘conversations’ they had. The bears very evidently recognized the voices of specific keepers, and ideas of kinship often entered the narratives that I was told about the bears. Describing an instance when Loki was sitting in the highest branches of the lone surviving tree in the enclosure, one keeper recalled:

'I stood and I talked to him for hours and he wouldn't get out, and I said, right Loki, I'm telling your mum. Get out of that tree! And he came straight down.'

On the one hand, keepers were working with an extremely dangerous no-contact species, and on the other, they experienced very personal and individualized relationships with these particular animals. The abstract Science behind the park's work denies the anthropomorphized relationships that are the foundations of everyday routine.

Much as I do not deny the existence of a social relation between keeper and animal, I do not deny that animals have personalities, despite the continued debate on this topic in many academic circles (see Burns 2014, Candea 2012, Pluhar 1995). I ask when attributions of personality cease to be factual description and begin to be projections of humanness, but I ask this knowing that I have no definitive answers. I speculate that keepers' own distinctions of anthropomorphism lie in what Milton (2005) describes as the *mistaken* attribution of human characteristics to animals, so that acceptable and unacceptable attributions exist on a personally determined scale. Attributions of personhood, however, are separate from impositions of humanness, as I will continue to explore.

NOT QUITE HUMAN

While Nelly was often described as an 'engaging' bear to work with, affection for the bears was not due to their capacity to interact and develop relationships alone. Nelly, like Ginger, has had a hard life. Originally part of the European breeding program, she was moved from park to park ten times in just a dozen years; after a number of unfortunate accidents, she was eventually removed from the program. She and her son were neutered so that they could stay together, and while she appears much happier now, she had developed the habit of pacing during more difficult times in her past. Pacing was explained to me as a 'coping mechanism', implying that psychological damage is not a human phenomenon alone: 'We try and break her out of it, but she'll always have it'.

Loki, her son, has his own quirks: he does not like being in the indoor house. This makes him difficult to manage in a no-contact setting; keepers cannot enter the enclosure to conduct basic tasks without first enticing him indoors. The keepers believe this is due to negative associations with indoor enclosures, where he was first anaesthetised for relocation. They explained that bears can take three to four years to overcome a bad memory.⁵

These are very detailed, emotional narratives to attribute to non-humans, and fall into the rhetorical trap described by Carrithers *et al.* (2011), where the charismatic nature of the animals in question leads to the forgoing of a detailed discussion of attributed personhood. Because of her willingness to interact with keepers and volunteers, Nelly makes herself accessible to social relations and in turn anthropomorphizing. Nelly's personhood, however, is bound within the personal scale of engagement. Despite this personhood being largely undefined, her position as *non-human* is more valuable to keepers who say explicitly time and again that they 'want to work with animals, not people'. For this reason, it is important that Nelly engages as a human without becoming human; this exceptionalism is what the keepers then use to define themselves. They relate to other humans based on their ability to relate to non-human persons. Because she actively interacts and responds to her human counterparts, Nelly makes this possible.

CONCLUSION

In the course of this brief ethnography, I have demonstrated that binaries help keepers understand the world only once they are recognized as not being mutually exclusive. Keepers' interactions with animals are a constant negotiation of science and emotion, demonstrated especially well by Ginger and her 'wildness'.

⁵ While these accounts come as no surprise to me personally, I believe there is scope in the future to explore the presentation and reception of trauma narratives for the human and non-human. In contrast to human trauma narratives, where victims must 'remember to forget' (Mookherjee 2006), trauma narratives of the non-human – at least in the zoo context – engender far more sympathetic and emotional (perhaps one might even say engaged) reactions.

The personhood of individual animals is also constantly negotiated and renegotiated. Humanness and personhood exist on a spectrum on which, importantly, there is a barrier – the non-human person can never become fully human because this defeats the fundamental identity of the wildlife professional. If animals are human, they can no longer be separated from The Public, and a preference for the company of animals ceases to have a logical conclusion.

I am, however, hesitant to place these conclusions within a wider context of wildlife parks, conservation, and human-animal interaction; understanding the fundamental ideas and experiences that inform the actions of keepers and other wildlife professionals paves the way for understanding how they then interact with the global environmental network, of which this is just a very miniscule part. Thinking back to the muntjac who lost her life to the ring-pull, it is not as hard to fathom one keeper's exhortation: 'There's a reason I want to work with animals and not people'. Bears may be dangerous, but keepers have every reason to believe that humans are who we should truly be afraid of.

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