

WellBeing International

WBI Studies Repository

Winter 2009

Fostering Humane Attitudes Toward Animals : An Educational Camp Experience in China

Sarah M. Bexell

Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding, sarah.bexell@gmail.com

Olga S. Jarrett

Georgia State University

Xu Ping

Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding

Feng Rui Xi

Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.wellbeingintludiesrepository.org/humeccur>



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Humane Education Commons](#), and the [Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bexell, S. M., Jarrett, O. S., Ping, X., & Xi, F. R. (2009). Fostering humane attitudes toward animals: an educational camp experience in China. *Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice*, 25(4), 25-27.

This material is brought to you for free and open access by WellBeing International. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of the WBI Studies Repository. For more information, please contact wbisr-info@wellbeingintl.org.



Fostering Humane Attitudes Toward Animals

An Educational Camp Experience in China

Sarah M. Bexell, Olga S. Jarrett, Xu Ping, and Feng Rui Xi

**A program for children
overcomes detachment from
other living beings.**

Note. This article summarizes parts of the first author's doctoral dissertation, "Effect of a Wildlife Conservation Camp Experience in China on Student Knowledge of Animals, Care, Propensity for Environmental Stewardship, and Compassionate Behavior toward Animals." (Georgia State University, 2006).

SARAH M. BEXELL is the Director of Conservation Education and Communications at the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding, Sichuan Province, China.

OLGA S. JARRETT is an associate professor of early childhood education at Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia.

XU PING is the Manager of Conservation Education at the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding, Sichuan Province, China.

FENG RUI XI is the Conservation Education Program Manager at the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding, Sichuan Province, China.

On an evening out with friends, a girl decides it would be neat to have one of the lovely bunnies being sold on the street in a tiny pink cage as a pet. She hands the salesman the purchase price, and as she and her friends stroll away they swing the tiny bunny in its cage and admire the bunny's beautiful fur. That night she places the bunny next to her bed with a small leaf of lettuce and no water. She talks and coos to the bunny as she falls asleep, and in her own way she loves the bunny. After two weeks of no water, random amounts of lettuce with minimal nutritional value, and declining amounts of attention, the young rabbit's body finally gives out and the bunny is finally at peace.

Walking home from school a group of boys observe a man tossing a puppy into the air repeatedly, laughing and showing off to all around him. Sometimes he does not catch the puppy and the dog falls to the ground and yelps. No one yells at the man to stop or tries to help the puppy.

At a zoo a mother throws stones at the already tormented tiger to get him to move for her four-year-old child.

The above observations are from China, where such behavior is commonplace and socially accepted (see Song 2004). Animal abuse is hardly unique to China, of course. Think only of the animals that suffer in United States in rodeos, circuses, and experimental researcher labs, to say nothing of the billions who don't even have space to move in factory farms. But China also presents unique conservation problems. Especially critical is the staggering loss of native wildlife (Elvin 2004). In addition, efforts by local animal protectors to change cultural attitudes are

hindered by the progressive one-child-per-family law. Youngsters are growing up without siblings from whom they can learn skills such as teamwork, helpfulness, and kindness, so educational programs will have to be more intensive and widespread to have an effect.

I became aware of the need for educational programs while working with Zoo Atlanta on long-term giant panda projects in Chengdu, China. I began by assisting in research on the behavior of giant pandas, a species threatened with extinction. Within five months of working with my Chinese colleagues, I was invited to assist in the development of education departments and programs. All of our programs were designed to help young people develop humane attitudes and behavior toward all animals and nature; however, one program stood out as truly effective.

A Promising Educational Program

This program consisted of five-day camp experiences developed for children ages 6-12. The program was designed to take children along what we called a "continuum of care." Students first met small animals (rabbits, guinea pigs, hamsters, parakeets, and tortoises) as *individuals* (and not merely members of a species) and were allowed to recognize them as individuals with personalities and feelings similar to ours. They also met exotic captive animals (including giant pandas, red pandas, zebras, golden monkeys, giraffes, and lemurs) as individuals.

Children were soon given responsibilities for the care of animals. During this process, students were also actively encouraged to "put themselves in the shoes" (paws, claws, and hooves) of individual animals and think about how each was feeling. We hoped that the experiences would help the children begin to care about the environment that their new animal friends depend on.

Finally, we hoped students would care enough about animals and their living space (for example, home environments, captive situations, and natural habitats) to change their own personal behavior and care for and protect animals after the camp. We also empowered the students to talk with their friends and family about the proper treatment of animals and the environment. We knew this would be hard for them in a culture in which positive attitudes to-

ward animals are often thought to be soft or silly. Animal emotions and feelings are not generally perceived or accepted.

Educational experiences during the camp included, in addition to information on caring for animals, conversations with conservation experts, information on animal feelings and animal minds, and the provision of knowledge and skills to enable effective communication to others about animals, their welfare, and conservation.

We felt a camp experience and setting was impor-



tant for our goals to be achieved. A camp, in which youngsters stayed five days and four nights, would provide extended contact time between the students and the animals, and extended time with positive role models, as well as peers. It also would provide time for students to acquire a depth of knowledge and skills. Lastly, we believed that time spent in the natural world (camping in tents and exploring nature were curricular components) was also important for developing a humane conservation ethic (e.g., Louv 2005). A total of 60 children, who stayed at two zoological locations in Chengdu, participated in the program .

Evaluation of the Camp Experience

We believed it was essential to evaluate the effectiveness of the camp experience as fully and rigorously as possible. Too often, this component is omitted from children's nature programs. Without program evaluation, we cannot truthfully state that we are achieving our conservation and humane education goals.

We developed a mix of structured, unstructured, and observational methods to evaluate the camp experience. These methods included pre- and post-camp questionnaires, children's journal entries to guided prompts such as "What was the most interesting thing you learned today?," responses to vignettes, and instructors' observations of the children's actual behavior. Overall, we found statistically significant increases in knowledge about and positive attitudes toward animals and the environment. Instructors' observations of children's actual behavior revealed a reduction in negative behaviors, such as littering or shouting at animals or calling the animals bad names ("This monkey is stupid."). Positive actions, such as asking someone else not to bother an animal, did not increase, but the reduction of negative actions did indicate progress.

Children also revealed a desire to take better care of animals in the future. Statements such as the following in children's journal entries also reflected an increase in compassionate understanding: "Friendship ... is most important to all animals, including human beings." "My attitude toward animals was terrible, but now I discover animals have emotion also." Anecdotally, from observation of the children as well as parental responses, we also learned that some students became kinder toward their peers, especially younger campers.

Conclusion

This program and its evaluation allowed us to document one way that young people can be helped to develop positive and humane attitudes toward animals and nature. In our increasingly degraded world, it is essential that we discover these critical intervention strategies to help avoid further massive levels of extinction and biodiversity loss.

Conservation education is beginning to be recognized as one of the critical components of preserving life on Earth (Orr 2004). A recent textbook by Susan Clayton and Gene Myers, *Conservation Psychology: Understanding and Promoting Human Care for Nature*, is evidence of a growing interest in new ways of understanding psychology and behavior in terms of

conservation. This comprehensive text explores the emerging field of conservation psychology, namely, the study of human behavior and the achievement of positive and enduring humane conservation goals.



The foundation of the camp curriculum was based in large part on the human universals of compassion, morality, and solid scientific knowledge about animals and natural systems. Humane and conservation education programs need to be designed to help children overcome socially and culturally imposed distancing from animals and each other. This needs to occur not just in China but globally. Perhaps, in combination with other forms of humane education, conservation education can contribute to a more peaceful and kinder human presence in the world.

References

- Clayton, S., and Myers, Jr. O. E. 2009. *Conservation psychology: Understanding and promoting human care for nature*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Elvin, M. 2004. *The retreat of the elephants: An environmental history of China*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Louv, R. 2005. *Last child in the woods: Saving our children from nature-deficit disorder*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin.
- Orr, D. W. 2004. *Earth in mind: On education, environment, and the human prospect*. Washington, D. C.: Island Press.
- Song, W. 2004. Traditional Chinese culture and animals. Animal Legal and Historical Center. Available online at <www.animallaw.info/nonus/articles/arcnweiculturalatt2005.htm>.