

Wild Kingdom

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Date: Mon, 13 May 1996

From: [John Gary Daynes](#)

Subject: Wild Kingdom

I'm interested in the way nature documentaries anthropomorphize wild animals; especially the oft-repeated assertion that predators kill only the "old, weak, or diseased" members of the species they hunt. Does this assertion have a history?

Thanks.

Date: Wed, 15 May 1996

From: [Wil Wagers](#)

On Mon, 13 May 1996 John Gary Daynes wrote:

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> animals; especially the oft-repeated assertion that predators kill
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How is this an anthropomorphization ?

Will Wagers

Date: Wed, 15 May 1996

From: [Yash Holbrook](#)

From: John Gary Daynes

> I'm interested in the way nature documentaries anthropomorphize wild
> animals; especially the oft-repeated assertion that predators kill
> only the "old, weak, or diseased" members of the species they hunt.

John, I'm curious as to why you call what you describe above "anthropomorphizing" animals. Do animals not age, get weak or get sick? Do predators?

Could you explain this to me (off list if you like)?

Thanks

Yash Holbrook

Date: Thu, 16 May 1996

From: [A.Silver](#)

On May 15, Yash Holbrook asked what John Daynes meant by anthromorphizing animals in his earlier message.

Isn't there a suggestion that these predators knowingly go about selecting prey with a view to improving the species or the state of health of the population -- or to weed out from competition for food resources those individuals not able to contribute to the propagation of the species? That seems like an anthropomorphising idea, doesn't it?

A.Silver, Toronto

Date: Thu, 16 May 1996

From: [J. Cartier](#)

On Mon, 13 May 1996 John Gary Daynes wrote:

> I'm interested in the way nature documentaries anthropomorphize wild
> animals; especially the oft-repeated assertion that predators kill
> only the "old, weak, or diseased" members of the species they hunt.

> Does this assertion have a history?

> Thanks.

John, the assertion is a factual report, and usually added to it is the statement that many young animals are also killed by predators. The biological reason is the same for all: The identified populations have less strength, energy and speed, and are therefore easiest to catch, thus requiring the least expenditure of energy for a predator.

J. Cartier

Date: Wed, 15 May 1996

From: [ROBERT T DEMALLAC-SAUZIER](#)

I would hypothesize that this is a modern extension of Social Darwinism. Both Herbert Spencer and Charles Darwin have written of the profound influence that reading Thomas Malthus had upon them, prior to their independantly arrived at theories of evolution. Malthus held that while populations increased geometrically, the resources to support them increased only arithmetically, hence some sort of conflict is unavoidable. This pretty directly led to the doctrine of "survival of the fittest."

I have heard it said that Spencer was in favor of moving hospitals onto swamps so that the sick and elderly would die more quickly, thus being less of a strain on the resources of the healthy and strong. (Corroboration, anyone?)

I think you are quite correct in your assessment of the anthropomorphizing that nature programs all too often fall into, unconsciously or not. I've found that schools of thought that emphasize the genetically-determined aspects of human behavior and downplay cultural learning, such as E.O.Wilson's sociobiology, tend also to put the accent on "Nature red in tooth and claw."

I don't want to come off sounding too socialist, which I am not, but I feel modern capitalism has definitely emphasized the competitive aspects of human nature. To what extent these economic theories have influenced biological theory is anybody's guess (I'd like to hear that question related to the thread on the NRA and the temperament of Texas teachers).

Tentatively,
Robert deMallac

Date: Thu, 16 May 1996

From: [John Gary Daynes](#)

Sorry, I simply was not clear in my original posting, especially in referring to "anthropomorphosizing" animals. My question is much more prosaic. It seems that predators will eat anything they can catch. The catch might be old or sick, but it is just as likely to be a healthy animal that took a wrong turn. My question is this--is the description of animal predators as benevolent forces that put other animals out of their misery tied to changing American perceptions of wildness? Did documentaries once describe killing in more visceral terms, only to change those descriptions as the wilderness came to be seen as a refuge from the "dog eat dog" nature of urban life?

Hope this is clearer.

JGD

Date: Fri, 17 May 1996

From: [Loren Crow](#)

At 3:33 PM 5/17/96, H-Ideas Co-Editor (David Bailey) wrote:

>On May 15, Yash Holbrook asked what John Daynes meant by anthromorphizing
>animals in his earlier message.

>

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>about selecting prey with a view to improving the species or the state
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>resources those individuals not able to contribute to the propagation
>of the species? That seems like an anthropomorphising idea, doesn't it?

The way this is often put is that it results from a sort of ethical impulse on the part of the predators. Definitely anthropomorphizing, although honestly it hadn't ever crossed my mind before. Thanks to John for raising my consciousness on the matter!

Loren

Loren D. Crow, Ph.D. ++ Office Phone: (903) 927-3219
Department of Religion ++ Fax: (903) 938-8100
Wiley College ++
711 Wiley Avenue ++ Email: crowld@rapidramp.com

Marshall, TX 75670

++ WWW: <http://www.rapidramp.com/Users/crowld>

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