

# Increasing our Compassion Footprint: It's Simple to Make Changes to Accrue Compassion Credits

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Our relationships with nonhuman animals (animals) are complicated, frustrating, ambiguous, paradoxical, and range all over the place. 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.

Surely we can do better in our relationships with animals and other people. Indeed, our relationships with human animals often are of the same ilk. 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," make decisions for them without their consent, and represent them in many varied ways, yet we often dispassionately ignore who they are and what they want and need.

We currently know a lot about animal sentience and animal emotions, more than we often give ourselves credit for. Behavioral and neuroscientific research shows that animals' lives aren't all that private, hidden, or secret. When someone says they're not sure if dogs, for example, have emotions, if they feel joy or grief, I say I'm glad I'm not their dog.

Compassion is the key for bettering animal and human lives. People all over the globe are talking about ways to lighten our carbon footprint and accrue carbon credits. But what about our compassion footprint and compassion credits?

A good way to make the world a more compassionate and peaceful place for all animals, to increase our compassion footprint, is to "mind" them. "Minding" animals means that we must "mind" them by recognizing that they have active minds and feelings. We must also "mind" them as their caretakers in a human dominated world in which their interests are continually trumped in deference to ours.

To mind animals it's essential for people with varied expertise and interests to talk to one another, to share what we know about animals and use this knowledge for bettering their and our lives. There are many ways of knowing, and figuring out how science and the humanities, including those interested in animal protection, conservation, and environmentalism (with concerns ranging from individuals to populations, species, and ecosystems), can learn from one another is essential.

We still have a long way to go. Existing laws and regulations allow animals living on earth, in water, and in air to be treated in regrettable ways that demean us as a species. Indeed, in the eyes of the law, animals are mere property and they can be treated like backpacks, couches, and bicycles with no legal recourse. The animals own eyes tell us that they don't like this at all. They do, of course, have a point of view. Objective views of animals don't work.

We also double-cross animals. I can imagine an utterly exhausted polar bear asking, "Where's the ice?" as she attempts to swim with her offspring from one ice floe to another as she had in years past only to discover that the ice is gone due to climate change. Despite global attempts to protect animals from wanton use and abuse, what we've been doing hasn't been working—"good welfare" just isn't "good enough." Excuses justifying animal exploitation such as "Well, it's okay, I'm doing this in the name of science" or "in the name of this or that" usually mean "in the name of humans." We're a very arrogant and self-centered lot.

It's time for people to begin to think about how to accrue compassion credits as they do carbon credits.<sup>2</sup> Every individual can make positive changes for all living beings by weaving compassion, empathy, respect, dignity, peace, and love into their lives. It's simple to make more compassionate choices about what we eat and wear and how we educate students, conduct research, and entertain ourselves at animal's expenses. Increased compassion for animals can readily lead to less carbon because there's an inverse relationship between these markers especially in our consumption of factory-farmed meat from highly abused animals.<sup>3</sup>

We can also focus on the value of individual lives when we try to restore animal populations and ecosystems. It's fair to ask if the life of an individual should be traded off for the good of their species, for example, when we try to restore wolves to Yellowstone National Park and individual wolves die so that others might live?

It's a win-win situation to make every attempt to coexist peacefully and to do so in the most compassionate ways possible. For compassion for animals will make for more compassion among people and that's what we need as we journey into the future. Cruelty to animals has serious implications

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for humans as well. Studies by Frank Ascione, Phil Arkow, Barbara Boat, and many others show that children who are cruel to animals are significantly more likely to commit violence against humans later in life—the absence of empathy for one indicates lack of empathy for the other. Indeed, studies of prison inmates reveal that as many as 75% of violent offenders had early records of animal cruelty. The Humane Society of the United States has a program, called “First Strike,” devoted to learning more about the connection between cruelty to animals and to humans.<sup>4</sup>

The Society & Animals Forum and the Human/Animal Violence Education Network have also launched similar programs that deserve our support. Albert Schweitzer once wrote: “Until he extends his circle of compassion for all living things, man will not himself find peace.” We can always add more compassion to the world. Ultimately, I believe com-

passion for animals will make for more compassion among people, weaving more empathy, respect, dignity, and love into all our lives. Animals are asking us to treat them better or leave them alone. So, whenever you try to reduce carbon at the same time try to increase compassion. Animals and future generations of humans will thank us for our efforts and I’m sure each of us will feel better about ourselves.

### Endnotes

1. E-mail: marc.bekoff@gmail.com
2. See for example <http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1709186,00.html>.
3. See <http://www.ciwf.org.uk/globalwarning/index.html>.
4. See [http://www.hsus.org/hsus\\_field/first\\_strike\\_the\\_connection\\_between\\_animal\\_cruelty\\_and\\_human\\_violence/](http://www.hsus.org/hsus_field/first_strike_the_connection_between_animal_cruelty_and_human_violence/).