

# ANIMAL SENTIENCE

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL ON ANIMAL FEELING

Kopnina, Helen (2020) *Of elephants and men*. *Animal Sentience* 28(2)

DOI: 10.51291/2377-7478.1553

Date of submission: 2020-02-05

Date of acceptance: 2020-02-09



---

This article has appeared in the journal *Animal Sentience*, a peer-reviewed journal on animal cognition and feeling. It has been made open access, free for all, by WellBeing International and deposited in the WBI Studies Repository. For more information, please contact [wbisr-info@wellbeingintl.org](mailto:wbisr-info@wellbeingintl.org).



## Of elephants and men

Commentary on [Baker & Winkler](#) on *Elephant Rewilding*

**Helen Kopnina**

The Hague University of Applied Sciences

**Abstract:** Baker & Winkler’s target article is well-researched and thought-provoking, but I do have four points of contention: (1) The proposal to entrust elephants to traditional mahout culture has restricted elephants’ freedom of movement and reproduction and (ab)used them. (2) The concept of “indigenous” simultaneously reifies and denigrates the “noble savages”, privileging only human indigenous groups, ignoring nonhuman indigenes. (3) Most lifestyles have been globalized under consumer-economic and anthropocentric worldviews. (4) The fact that people (including mahouts) are part of nature does not mean they are benevolent, any more than cities, monocultures, or roads are.

**Keywords:** animal rights, animal welfare, deep ecology, ecocentrism

[Helen Kopnina](#), coordinator, Sustainable Business program, Hague University of Applied Science (HHS), Netherlands, conducts research on environmental sustainability, environmental education, and biological conservation. [Website](#)



**1. The traditional expertise of a mahout culture.** Baker & Winkler (2020) (B&W) write of the “traditional expertise of a mahout culture that has been elephant-keeping for centuries”. Yet, elephants have a multi-millennial culture of being free to live their lives (Kopnina 2017). Mahouts have historically been complacent in depriving elephants of their freedom to use them for heavy work, and more recently in their (ab)use in the [elephant tourism industry](#).

B&W write: “To avoid potential misconstrual of this target article’s thesis as a cultural defense of exploitative practices, we wish to make it clear that we are in no way suggesting that practices that permit and perpetuate violence and exploitation of nonhuman and human individuals should be defended on the grounds of tradition.” They then suggest that a way forward is to “understand the diversity of ways human communities relate to elephants.” Yet nowhere in their article do they suggest that this understanding counters the root cause of elephant oppression – anthropocentrism. Nor does their examination suggest that the mahouts believe elephants should just be free to live their lives free of oppression. Instead, they speak of “traditional mahout knowledge of elephant husbandry, developed over many generations of working alongside elephants”. Nobody asks elephants what they think of such “husbandry” or about working alongside humans for human profit. Coulter (2016) likened domestic/unpaid labor, “women’s work”, and slave exploitation to animal labor.

There have been many “traditions” — head-hunting, a ritual sacrifice of babies, children or adults (virgins, widows), mutilation — that are now prohibited because of enlightened humanitarianism. Unless it can be shown that indigenous mahouts are perfect “guardians” of the

elephants without depriving them of freedom of movement and reproduction or exploiting them for farm or building work or entertainment, historically or today, their elephant-keeping traditions might not be as benign as B&W present them.

**2. The problem with the concept of “indigenous.”** B&W cite “[t]he notion of land belonging to no one — *terra nullius* — which has been invoked for centuries as legal justification for occupying the land of others, marginalizing indigenous communities”. The very term “indigenous” seems problematic. Historically, human groups have moved a lot — so what makes one group “indigenous” or another “just” local (and these days, immigrant or cosmopolitan?). Can we still refer to people who moved to cities, voluntarily or not, or intermarried with the “non-indigenous” as indigenous? Can “the Dutch” not be seen as indigenous too, because they come from some ancient local origins? The very term “indigenous” has colonial connotations as it implies that these people are pre-modern “noble savages”.

Today’s forest-dependent people have been seen as keepers of traditional ecologically wise knowledge of their ancestors. Yet, there is archeological evidence that even in pre-industrial times, humans already played an important role in shaping ecosystems and causing extinctions (Barnosky et al. 2004). Currently, [indigenous populations are growing while indigenous populations of nonhumans are declining](#).

The perspectives of animal rights, or ecocentrism, or deep ecology, however, which are derived from some of these indigenous traditions (Piccolo et al. 2018; Washington et al. 2018), do deserve more attention.

**3. Globalized lifestyle.** The expansion of the human population and our extractive activities (Holt et al. 2004) and modern hunting weapons (Nunez-Iturri et al. 2008) have radically altered our relationship with the environment (Washington et al. 2018). One can’t assume human groups who were formerly discriminated against will somehow treat nonhumans in a more humane way. Strang (2016) discusses some of the more complicated ethical issues in the treatment of nonhumans by aboriginals:

*“Colin Lawrence referred to the history of settlement in the area. In the early 1900s, a European grazier had shot a number of Aboriginal people until being speared by one of their leaders, now regarded as a local hero. The grazier had shot Aboriginal people ‘like dogs’, said Lawrence pointedly, ‘and now you want to tell us we can’t even shoot a wallaby!’ (Strang, field notes, 1991). Yet the number of wallabies has fallen dramatically, not just because the possession of cars and rifles has enabled new forms of hunting, but also because of ... intensifying cattle farming. At some point, the population may drop to unviable levels...”*

Considering this, in today’s monetized, industrialized world, human (indigenous) rights discourse often masks Western economy-centered bias, scapegoating nonhumans. To quote Crist (2015): “wild nature, once again, is targeted to take the fall for the purported betterment of people, while domination and exploitation of nature remain unchallenged” (p. 93).

**4. Rewilding and dichotomies.** Rewilding is a widely contested area. While some people have indeed recognized “humans as part of nature” (e.g., Torres et al. 2018, cited by B&W), this does not mean that everything humans do – pave roads, hunt to extinction, transform wild landscapes into cityscapes or agricultural monocultures – can be “excused” by simply erasing the dichotomy (Kopnina 2016a, 2016b). In the same way, one can reason that deadly viruses are part of nature – so, what does it mean in moral terms when applied to rewilding? There are some examples of how captive elephants have been bought from mahouts and released into the protected areas elsewhere in Cambodia, with indigenous mahouts and local people serving as eco-tourist guides and protecting the territory against poachers – without ever having to deprive an elephant of freedom or to force them into any kind of labor (Kopnina & Baker, forthcoming). As this type of activity protects the habitats, attracts enough tourists to provide local livelihoods, and secures basic elephant freedom, this might be a better example of rewilding and erasing the dichotomy between the importance of human versus nonhuman animal welfare.

**5. Summary.** Given that elephant-human “interaction” is still based on interspecies colonialism, I must disagree with B&W’s conclusion that “mahouts should hence be offered leadership roles in local conservation projects” unless it can be shown that they treat elephants without depriving them of freedom to be wild and to be themselves, without causing them pain, without forcing them to work. Without such evidence, the only one who would deserve such a leadership role would be someone who is in the position to allocate large pieces of land that will allow elephants to live and flourish in the wild.

## References

- Baker, L. & Winkler, R. 2020. [Asian elephant rescue, rehabilitation, and rewilding](#). *Animal Sentience* 28(1).
- Barnosky, A.D., Koch, P., Feranec, R. & Wing, S. 2004. Assessing the causes of late Pleistocene extinctions on the continents. *Science*, 306:70-75.
- Coulter, K. 2016. The work done by animals: Identifying and understanding animals’ work. In *Animals, work, and the promise of interspecies solidarity* (pp. 55-95). Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- Crist, E. 2015. I walk in the world to love it. In G. Wuerthner, E. Crist & T. Butler (Eds.), *Protecting the wild: Parks and wilderness, the foundation for conservation* (pp. 82-95). Washington: The Island Press.
- Holt, F.L., Bilsborrow, R.E. & Oña, A.I. 2004. Demography, household economics, and land and resource use of five indigenous populations in the Northern Ecuadorian Amazon: A summary of ethnographic research. *Occasional paper, Carolina Population Center*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina.
- Kopnina, H. 2016a. Wild animals and justice: The case of the dead elephant in the room. *Journal of International Wildlife Law & Policy*, 19(3):219-235.
- Kopnina, H. 2016b. ‘Nobody likes dichotomies (but sometimes you need them)’. Special forum: Environmental and Social Justice? The Ethics of the Anthropological Gaze. *Anthropological Forum*, 26(4):415-429.

- Kopnina, H. 2017. Beyond multispecies ethnography: Engaging with violence and animal rights in anthropology. *Critique of Anthropology*, 37(3):333–357.
- Kopnina, H. & Baker, L. 2020. Conservation, animal well-being and indigenous participation at the elephant sanctuary, Mondulkiri Project, Cambodia. Forthcoming.
- Nunez-Iturri, G., Olsson, O. & Howe, H.F. 2008. Hunting reduces the recruitment of primate-dispersed trees in Amazonian Peru. *Biological Conservation*, 141(6):1536-1546.
- Piccolo, J., Washington, H., Kopnina, H. & Taylor, B. 2018. Back to the future: Why conservation biologists should re-embrace their ecocentric roots. *Conservation Biology*, 32(4):959-961.
- Strang, V. 2016. Inconvenient truths and reconciliation in human–non-human relations. In H. Kopnina & E. Shoreman-Ouimet (Eds.), *Handbook of environmental anthropology* (p. 259). Routledge, New York.
- Washington, H., Piccolo, J., Chapron, G., Gray, J., Kopnina, H. & Curry, P. 2018. Foregrounding ecojustice in conservation. *Biological Conservation*, 228:367-374.

# Call for Papers

Special Issue of the ***Journal of Consciousness Studies***

*Plant Sentience: Theoretical and Empirical Issues*

Guest Editors: Vicente Raja (Rotman Institute of Philosophy, Western University)  
Miguel Segundo-Ortin (School of Liberal Arts, University of Wollongong)

In this special issue, we address the issue of plant sentience/consciousness from different disciplines that combine both **theoretical** and **empirical** perspectives. Some of the questions to be addressed in the special issue include the following:

- Plants exhibit interesting behaviors; does this entail that they are conscious to some extent?
- What are the requirements for a living organism to be conscious? Do plants meet these requirements?
- What does the possibility of plant sentience/consciousness entail for the study of the evolution of consciousness?
- Is it just a categorical mistake to attribute consciousness to plants?
- Can we talk about different levels or degrees of consciousness?

## How to submit?

Deadline: **June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020**

Please submit your papers (max. 9000 words including footnotes, references, abstract, etc.) to [vgalian@uwo.ca](mailto:vgalian@uwo.ca) with subject "Paper Special Issue JCS".

For more information, including bibliography and more detailed descriptions of the topics and questions to be addressed in the papers submitted to the special issue, please contact the guest editors at [vgalian@uwo.ca](mailto:vgalian@uwo.ca) (Vicente) or [mso693@uowmail.edu.au](mailto:mso693@uowmail.edu.au) (Miguel).