

# ANIMAL SENTIENCE

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL ON ANIMAL FEELING

Marcum, James A (2020) [Can we handle the truth of what COVID-19 is telling us?](#). *Animal Sentience* 30(17)

DOI: 10.51291/2377-7478.1641



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).

## Can we handle the truth of what COVID-19 is telling us?

Commentary on [Wiebers & Feigin](#) on Covid Crisis

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**Abstract:** Wiebers & Feigin (W&F) are right that what COVID-19 is telling us is that to prevent future zoonotic pandemics we need to put an end to our exploitation of wild and farmed animals. To implement W&F's recommendations we need to overcome at least three obstacles: (1) the way we have responded historically to zoonoses, (2) our insatiable appetite for meat (wild or farmed) and (3) our speciesist attitude toward nonhuman animals.

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Wiebers & Feigin (2020) (W&F) raise very powerful and profound questions about what the COVID-19 pandemic is telling us: What is our role, not just in the present zoonotic pandemic but also in past pandemics? And what must we do to avoid future zoonotic pandemics? W&F's answer is that we are responsible for the rise in zoonotic pandemics, including COVID-19, because of our exploitation of wild and farmed animals:

*"The trade and consumption of wild animals in live-animal markets should be banned in all countries. Intensive confinement of animals in factory farm operations should be discontinued worldwide for the sake of animals, humans, and the environment, and we should rapidly evolve to eating other forms of protein that are safer for humans."*

I certainly agree with W&F about what needs to be done to avoid future zoonotic pandemics. I have concerns not so much about implementability (although that will certainly be a challenge, given animal agriculture's ability to conceal its mistreatment of animals; Pitts 2012) but about whether, once we have heard what COVID-19 is telling us, and the pandemic ends, we will act -- or simply forget what we have heard and persist in our pre-COVID-19 behavior of exploiting animals. Can we handle the truth of what COVID-19 is telling us? There are at least three obstacles to surmount:

**1. History.** The first obstacle to surmount is suggested by the history of pandemics to date, especially since the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Within that timeframe, the number of zoonotic outbreaks and epidemics has increased to such an extent that we now live in an "era of pandemics" (Morens et al. 2020). The Ebola virus initially emerged from a bat reservoir in 1976 and then erupted into an epidemic in 2014 (Bremam et al. 2016). Since the appearance of HIV in 1981 through hunting and eating chimpanzees, millions of people have died from AIDS (Sharp and Hahn 2011). Other significant zoonotic outbreaks and epidemics include the 2002 SARS coronavirus epidemic, the 2009 H1N1 virus

swine flu, the 2012 MERS coronavirus epidemic, the 2014 H5 virus bird flu, and the 2015 Zika virus epidemic, to name a few. Although these are all zoonotic outbreaks and epidemics, we didn't take them seriously enough to make the changes required for preventing future outbreaks and epidemics. Indeed, we now have a pandemic on our hands. The pandemic nature of COVID-19, however, seems to have galvanized us into action to respond effectively so as to predict and prevent future zoonotic pandemics (Carlson 2020).

**2. Eating Habits.** The second obstacle to surmount is our seemingly insatiable appetite for meat, with an almost 60% increase in meat consumption globally over the past two decades (Whitnall & Pitts 2019). This increased consumption has driven both greater wildlife hunting and more intense animal farming. Although reasons for the increased consumption of meat are many, one important reason is that meat, whether from wild or farmed animals, is seen as a status symbol of wealth and prosperity. Exotic meat, such as baby pangolins, is highly prized and considered a gastronomical delicacy (Volpato et al. 2020). However, plant-based meat sales, too, have increased significantly since the pandemic's onset. This seems to signal that we are beginning to hear what COVID-19 is telling us, and responding (Lyons 2020).

**3. Speciesism.** The third obstacle is our anthropocentric attitude toward nonhuman animals, which Richard Ryder (2011, p. 43) has dubbed "speciesism": "human discrimination or exploitation against members of other species." This attitude is blamed for motivating capitalistic ecoterrorism (Sorenson 2016), but most consumers of meat products are unaware of the cruelty associated with the animal agriculture industry. The industry, through its advertising and lobbying conceals and denies its violence (Schally 2018; Fiber-Ostrow & Lovell 2016). The result is that most people consider "their intake of meat and other livestock-based products as a right derived from their status as the superior species" (Bogueva & Marinova 2020; Chapman & Huffman 2018). The animal rights community, however, is working hard to expose the causal link between speciesism and pandemics like COVID-19 (Plotczyk 2020).

In sum, there may be hope that we can heed the message of COVID-19 so clearly articulated by W&F and surmount the obstacles to making the imperative changes in our relationship to wild and farmed animals, both for their sake and our own.

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