# WHO SWIMS WITH THE BLOBFISH?: ANTHROPOMORPHIC BIAS IN CONVERSATION

**LUCY JAKUB**

The poster animal of the World Wildlife Fund is the giant panda. A lesser-known fact is that the poster animal of the Ugly Animal Preservation Society is the blobfish.

The Ugly Animal Preservation Society is a little-known project of Simon Watts, a biologist and writer who is also the head of Ready, Steady, Science, a company that supplies educational lectures and performances on science to schools in Britain. The UAPS aims to promote awareness of nature's more "aesthetically challenged" species through comedy. It recently held an online poll to select its mascot; in a pageant that included the proboscis monkey, the 'scrotum' water frog and the dromedary jumping slug, the overwhelming victory went to *Psychrolutes marcidus*, better known as the blobfish (*Ugly Animal Preservation Society*).

The rare blobfish lives in the benthic waters of the Southwest Pacific at depths of six hundred to twelve hundred meters. It is adapted to survive under atmospheric pressure several dozen times the pressure on the surface (Froese and Pauly). Great trawling nets, cast to catch crustaceans on the ocean floor, have been scooping up blobfish as bycatch, threatening their survival. The fleshy fish, decompressed, resembles a droopy, cartoonish face—fat, pink, and slimy, with dark little eyes and tiny fins. It resembles a blob.

The blobfish's comical appearance has made it a source of ridicule in the blogosphere and in the news. Its dead visage, blobby and a little sad looking, has become a meme on the Internet, gazing gloomily from many photoshopped online images. It matters little that, in its natural high-pressure conditions, the blobfish possesses a more elegant form; in three inches of water it looks alien, a freak of nature.

David Quammen, a popular science writer who focuses on evolutionary biodiversity, has an affinity for ugly animals. He makes a point of writing about pests, parasites, and weeds. His most recent book is on zoonotic plagues (though of course he has written about Bengal tigers as well). In his essay "Who Swims with the Tuna," he describes the origins of the dolphin-safe tuna movement, an unusually successful campaign to reduce dolphin bycatch in the nets of tuna fishermen as they deliver canned fish to our supermarkets. Quammen asks a pointed question: why is there such outrage over dolphin death, but such ambivalence toward dead tuna (*Boilerplate Rhino* 65)? One might ask a similar question about blobfish. Unlike tuna, we don't justify killing them because of their edibility—we know very little about blobfish, but we are quite sure that they are inedible. Like dolphins, they are dying as bycatch in human fishing activity.

We justify our dolphin-preference in a lot of ways. They are mammals, social animals, playful, and purported to be highly intelligent. The outrage that fueled the dolphin-safe tuna movement, as Quammen recounts, was inspired by a particular videotape that depicted dolphins dying, tangled in tuna nets. When they suffer, they thrash and scream. They possess the three characteristics that biologist Alvin Chan deems crucial to anthropomorphism: "1) high cognitive ability, 2) ability to suffer or experience pain, and 3) pro-social behavior" (1890).

Anthropomorphism, the human tendency to ascribe human characteristics to non-human entities, is a powerful factor in our relationship to the natural world. As Chan reminds us, it is a particularly important factor in our efforts to preserve our planet's rapidly dwindling biodiversity. Conservation efforts rely on the public support garnered by our concern for endangered animals. Anthropomorphizing animals allows us to moralize the issue of species loss and habitat destruction.

Steven Pinker's essay "The Moral Instinct" explores moralization in depth, and it's a complex concept. Our moral compass, it seems, is highly subjective, and some suspect it to be inherently self-serving (35, 55). The duplicity of morality is particularly relevant when examining our motives for helping other species. The moralization of conservation depends on our ability to empathize with the species with whom we share our environment. And this empathy is driven, in turn, by our ability to anthropomorphize creatures that are very different from us.

Studies on the effects of anthropomorphism in campaigns for social causes have determined that people are more likely to support a cause if it is given a human face. PSAs encouraging electrical conservation, for example, elicit a greater response when their picture of a light bulb has "humanlike features" and can be anthropomorphized (Ahn, Kim, and Aggarwal 2-3). Additionally, people connect more emotionally to an individual than to a group, or even two individuals. When audiences are shown suffering on a large scale, they become numbed and are less likely to feel that their contribution will make a difference (Kogut and Ritov 159). Confronted with the plight of entire species or ecosystems, one balks. Given a picture of a single baby tiger, one reaches into one's pocket. The active force here is called *anticipatory guilt*: that is, the feeling that if you don't help that baby tiger now, the tigers will go extinct in the future, and you will feel guilty that you did nothing to prevent it (Ahn, Kim, and Aggarwal 2). You anticipate your guilt. Rather than assuage it later, you do something proactive. You donate $20 to World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and are absolved.

Both dolphins and tuna, as it turns out, are on the WWF's protected species list. WWF chooses its projects—mostly animals at the top of their food chain and mostly mammals—based on their roles in their environments ("Species"). Big animals have a big impact on their ecosystems; generally, the higher its trophic level (i.e., position on the food chain), the more impact a species has, the smaller the population is, and the faster that population goes extinct when pressures are put on its habitat. Still, our focus on mammals and vertebrates is creating an imbalance in the research and funding

allocated to different members of the animal kingdom, a menagerie that includes 1,367,555 known species, only 62,305 of which are vertebrates, and only 5,490 of which are mammals ("Table 1"). The existing research and literature available on species reintroduction is overwhelmingly focused on mammals and birds; research published in the *International Journal of Conservation* states that only three percent of reintroduction literature is concerned with invertebrates, though they constitute at least ninety-seven percent of all species (Bajomi, Pullin, and Stewart 360).

Despite the value of its role in facilitating public awareness and the support of species protection, anthropomorphism remains, as ecologist Meredith Root-Bernstein et al. put it, "a double-edged sword." To assign value to a species based on its sociability, intelligence, and suffering is to suggest that species without these qualities "are not worthy of conservation because they are not like humans in the 'right' ways" (Root-Bernstein et al. 1578).

Ecologists Irene Martín-Forés, Berta Martín-López, and Carlos Montes note that conservation programs in Spain did not meet their 2010 biodiversity goal because, on close inspection, it was found that preference was being given to the conservation of vertebrates phylogenetically linked or physically similar to humans. An important factor in the conservation bias was the vertebrates' "Kindchenschema," manifested in the possession of large eyes, large foreheads, and short noses (Martín-Forés, Martín-López and Montes 2)—a factor more commonly known as "cuteness." Spain's amphibian species were left begging.

Some biologists take issue with anthropomorphism because it fundamentally inhibits our research and understanding of nonhuman animals. Zoologist James D. Rose argues that "[h]uman-centered thinking is a prejudice, a bias, a distorting lens between the affected individual and an objective perspective that is essential to accurately understanding other organisms, especially fishes" (140). The only creatures that think and feel like humans do are humans, and to extend the same qualities to other species is extremely misguided. Fish do not experience pain in the way mammals do, nor do they have "feelings" that arise from their emotional states.

The anthropomorphism of fish has led to other negative repercussions. Following the release of the animated film *Finding Nemo*, in which fish are highly anthropomorphized and also very cute, the demand for clownfish in aquariums and pet shops soared. This led directly to the export of hundreds of thousands of fish from coral reefs, specifically in the Vanuatu archipelago in the South Pacific, threatening the species and its ecosystem (Fickling).

Anthropomorphism can prompt us to attribute negative human characteristics to animals just as often as positive ones. Often the qualities attached are merely assumptions of intent, such as bloodthirstiness, malice, and the capacity for evil. Killer whales are a classic example of animals cast as murderous predators. Do they *enjoy* ripping apart cute baby sea lions? Quammen reflects on the octopus's image in popular culture as a tentacled sea monster that grabs beachgoers, an image that serves to justify

a tradition of good-natured underwater octopus-wrestling that leaves many poor animals shaken (*Natural Acts* 37). The blobfish, for obvious reasons, has been negatively anthropomorphized as well—it looks so pathetically humanlike that our first impulse upon seeing it is to laugh, and then to feel horrified pity.

Our so-called "moral instinct" is the force that compels us to donate to wildlife protection organizations; we help because we care. Our concern arises from our love for specific animals, the ones who danced through our picture-books and snuggled with us, velveteen, in our beds. It is too horrible to imagine Babar slain for his ivory tusks. It is heart-wrenching to watch Flipper struggle in the net. And the tigers, those majestic cats, with their gaudy orange stripes—who could condemn the Tiggers of the world to extinction? Our personal and somewhat superficial connection with these animals creates a desire for their conservation that could be construed as selfish. Quammen asks, "Are we concerned with humanity's relationship with nature, or are we merely concerned about Man's Special Friend at Sea, the dolphin? These are two different things" (*Boilerplate Rhino* 67).

Pinker refers to a biologist named Robert Trivers who proposed that altruism is an evolutionarily selected trait (37). We are biologically conditioned, he suggests, to be altruistic not only toward our kin, beings that are like us genetically, but also to members of other species (Trivers 35). In harmonious ecosystems, organisms don't take more than they need, and every species serves as a cog in an infinitely complex machine. There can be no blue whale without plankton, no swallows without gnats, no wolves without field mice. Organisms are engaged in many symbiotic relationships that support not just themselves but their neighbors; thus, an ecosystem thrives and is self-sustaining. Most humans don't buy into this idea—at least, our altruistic camaraderie with dogs doesn't extend naturally to all other members of our habitats. We tend to think of humans as existing independent of a larger system. But it is important to recognize the degree to which healthy biodiversity and the existence of weird species are in humankind's best interest. Simon Watts, with the UK's National Science and Engineering Competition, points out the practical value of keeping the ugly animals alive. The genetic resources of the world's varied species, he explains, including the millions we have not yet identified, could be crucial to the development of new medicines and cures for diseases. Secretions from the skins of frogs have antimicrobial capabilities. Biologists are researching snail venom as a painkiller. Axolotls' ability to regenerate limbs could change the course of medicine. For all we know, the cure for cancer could be derived from the disgusting skin of the blobfish (NSEC UK). We don't know very much about the blobfish, and it could disappear before we get the chance to learn.

But viewing the blobfish in terms of its potential genetic resources seems cold, just as cold as valuing the prolonged existence of bluefin tuna for its meat. We do not wish to save the dolphins because they perform crucial roles in their ecosystems (though they do) or because their DNA might contain lifesaving cures (it's possible) or because

they are tasty (also possible, though few dare confirm it). We want to save the dolphins because we are charmed by them, and because they remind us of ourselves. And because, as Quammen says, "they consent to let us swim with them" (*Boilerplate Rhino* 71). It turns out that we do not need to look for a reason to protect a species beyond simple, misguided, instinctual love. Love, guilt, admiration, compassion—these are the human impulses that drive conservation. Yet they are poor motivators if we reserve them for only a select few of the myriad species endangered by humanity's impact on the environment. How do we generate a genuine, holistic concern for all life on Earth? Can we moralize conservation without inevitably playing favorites?

Pinker cautions, in the heavy conclusion to his survey of morality, that we must be careful relying on our moral instinct when faced with such high-stakes concerns as the fate of the planet. "Nowhere is moralization more of a hazard that in our greatest global challenge. The threat of human-induced climate change has become the occasion for a moralistic revival meeting," he writes (58). Philosopher and vegetarian Peter Singer's moral stance on the treatment of animals, for instance, is only slightly helpful when extended to the environment as a whole. He believes that we should expand our circle of altruism to include "all beings with the capacity to feel pleasure or pain," but as James D. Rose might point out, the line gets blurry when we're defining the sensory experiences of other organisms (120). Plus, the circle excludes most invertebrates. But as much as environmental conservation has been driven by necessity and a fear of impending doom, the degree to which our efforts have been fueled by emotion and a sense of righteousness cannot be denied.

The environmental movement as we know it began in the 1970s and was triggered in part, oddly enough, by a photo taken from space. It was 1968, and Apollo 8 took its first manned flight to the moon. Astronaut William Anders looked out the window and snapped a photo—not of the moon, but of what was behind him, the Earth. In the midst of the cold void, peering over the lifeless surface of the moon, a bright blue marble hovered in the dark ("Apollo Astronaut"). The image struck us with its beauty—and its smallness. It's a planet with finite limits, and it's the only living thing as far as the eye can see. It was so little and blue and lonely-looking, and we suddenly felt responsible for it, like it was our job to protect it. We felt that moral instinct—perhaps along with a little *Kindchenschema*—tug at our heartstrings, and with it came a moment of clarity. Two years later, the Environmental Protection Agency was founded, and April 22 was christened Earth Day. All it took was a little perspective.

Quammen has predictions about the world after mass extinction, perhaps two hundred to four hundred years from now (*Natural Acts* 172). According to him, we won't wipe out life on Earth—even the Permian extinction 245 million years ago only devastated ninety-five percent of species—but we will certainly wipe out the big cats, and the blue whales, and the giant pandas (Quammen, "Planet of Weeds" 58, 67). Gone with them will be the blobfish, the tuna, and the spotted dolphin. The life that will be left will be composed of the roughest, toughest, most opportunistic of

organisms, which Quammen un-pejoratively calls "the weeds" ("Planet of Weeds" 66-7). Your roaches, your rats, your gray pigeons, and your dandelions. Humans, perhaps the weediest species of all, will probably be glad enough for the company.

We are currently undergoing the sixth mass extinction in the history of life on Earth, with species dying out at a rate of up to one thousand times the background rate (Chivian and Bernstein 5). It is true that big mammals—our beloved tigers, whales, and elephants—will be the first to go, due to their precarious perch at the top of unraveling food chains. But conservation must be a comprehensive effort to save as wide a variety of critters as possible. Ecosystems are not expendable—not even the ones that exist out of sight, in the aphotic murk. To assign value to the lives of species based on our own shallow preferences is to discolor our efforts to save the environment with pettiness. It is only through a broader appreciation for life, fostered by people like David Quammen and Simon Watts, that we can generate genuine concern for the well-being of *all* species, not just the pretty, the witty, and the bright. If we can expand our moral circle to include the biting, the barnacled, and the blobby, there may just be hope for biodiversity.

## WORKS CITED


Ahn, Hee-Kyung, Hae Joo Kim, and Panjak Aggarwal. "Helping Fellow Beings: Anthropomorphized Social Causes and the Role of Anticipatory Guilt." *Psychological Science* (2013): 1-6. Web. 5 Nov. 2014.

"Apollo Astronaut Shares Story of NASA's Earthrise Photo." *NASA*. NASA. 29 March 2012. Web. 27 Dec 2014.

Bajomi, Bálint, Andrew S. Pullin, Gavin B. Stewart, and András Takács-Sánta. "Bias and Dispersal in the Animal Reintroduction Literature." *Oryx* 44 (2010): 358-365. Web. 5 Nov. 2014.

Chan, Alvin. "Anthropomorphism as a Conservation Tool." *Biodiversity Conservation* 21 (2012): 1889-1892. Web. 5 Nov. 2014.

Chivian, Eric and Aaron Bernstein. "How Our Health Depends on Biodiversity." Boston, MA: Center of Health and the Global Environment, Harvard Medical School, 2010. Web. 15 Dec. 2014.

Fickling, David. "Reefs at Risk after Disney Film." *The Guardian* 20 Nov. 2003. Web. 19 Nov. 2013.

Froese, Rainer and Daniel Pauly, eds. "Psychrolutes marchidus." FishBase. Nov 2014. Web. 23 Dec 2014.

Kogut, Tehila and Iliana Ritov. "The 'Identified Victim' Effect: An Identified Group, or Just a Single Individual?" *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*. 18: 157-167 (2005) Web. 3 Jan 2015.

Martín-Forés, Irene, Berta Martín-López, and Carlos Montes. "Anthropomorphic Factors Influence Spanish Conservation Policies of Vertebrates." *International Journal of Biodiversity* (2013): 1-9. Web. 15 Dec. 2014.

National Science and Engineering Competition UK. "Ugly Cures." Online video clip. YouTube. YouTube, 26 Aug. 2013. Web. 18 Nov. 2013.

Pinker, Steven. "The Moral Instinct." *The New York Times Magazine*. 13 Jan 2008: 32-58. Print.

Quammen, David. *The Boilerplate Rhino: Nature in the Eye of the Beholder*. New York: Scribner, 2000. Print.

---. *Natural Acts: A Sidelong View of Nature*. New York: Scribner, 2008. Print.

---. "Planet of Weeds." *Harper's Magazine* Oct. 1998: 54-69. Print.

Root-Berstein, M. L. Douglas, A. Smith and D. Veríssimo. "Anthropomorphized Species as Tools for Conservation: Utility Beyond Prosocial, Intelligent, and Suffering Species." *Biodiversity Conservation* 22 (2013):1577-1589. Web. 15 Dec. 2014.

Rose, James D. "Anthropomorphism and 'mental welfare' of fishes." Diseases of Aquatic Organisms 75 (2007): 139-154. Web. 5 Nov. 2014.

Singer, Peter. *The Expanding Circle: Ethics and Sociobiology*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981. Print.

"Species." The World Wildlife Fund. n.d. Web. 23 Dec 2014.

"Table 1: Numbers of Threatened Species by Major Group of Organisms (1996-2010)." *IUCN Red List*. International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. 11 Mar. 2010. Web. 15 Dec. 2014.

Trivers, Robert L. "The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism." *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 46.1 (1971): 35-37. Web. 26 Aug. 2008.

Ugly Animal Preservation Society. n.p. n.d. Web. 17 Nov. 2013.

---

**LUCY JAKUB '17CC** is a Creative Nonfiction major. She may concentrate in history. Sometimes she illustrates for *Columbia Daily Spectator* and the *Columbia Political Review*. Lucy is a feminist, a cinephile, and writes songs for ukulele in her spare time. She's from Blue Hill, Maine and misses the woods.