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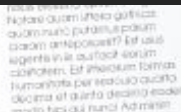
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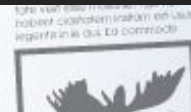
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Accumam et latio talem dignem
 autorem potest. Consect-
 cum actum mium sit munde
 quon stero giffico quon munc



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Main

Endangered Species

Sneezing snub-nosed monkeys, oh my!

11/08/2010

Speaking of cool species new to science (like the [wood-eating Peruvian catfish](#)), here's something else that's new and quirky. Field biologists were conducting a biodiversity survey of Myanmar (formerly Burma) known as the Hoolock Gibbon Status Review, and when they got to northeastern part of the country, locals told field biologists about a monkey they often found readily during rainy weather by listening for sneezes. The field biologist crew, led by the [Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association](#) found the unusual monkey in the eastern Himalayas near the Maw River, and realized that even though the locals knew about it, the species had never been scientifically described. Here's another cute factoid: during rain, the monkeys put their heads between their knees to avoid said sneezes! Other monkeys do this during rain, but some speculate that the newly described monkeys unusual upturned nose may contribute to excessive sneezing. On the other hand, primatologist [Thomas Geissmann](#) of Zurich University in Switzerland, who led the taxonomic classification of the monkey, believes the sneezing may be an alarm call and not related to the weather, after all.

About the Author

Wendee Holtcamp has covered news about conservation, wildlife and adventure travel for nearly 15 years.

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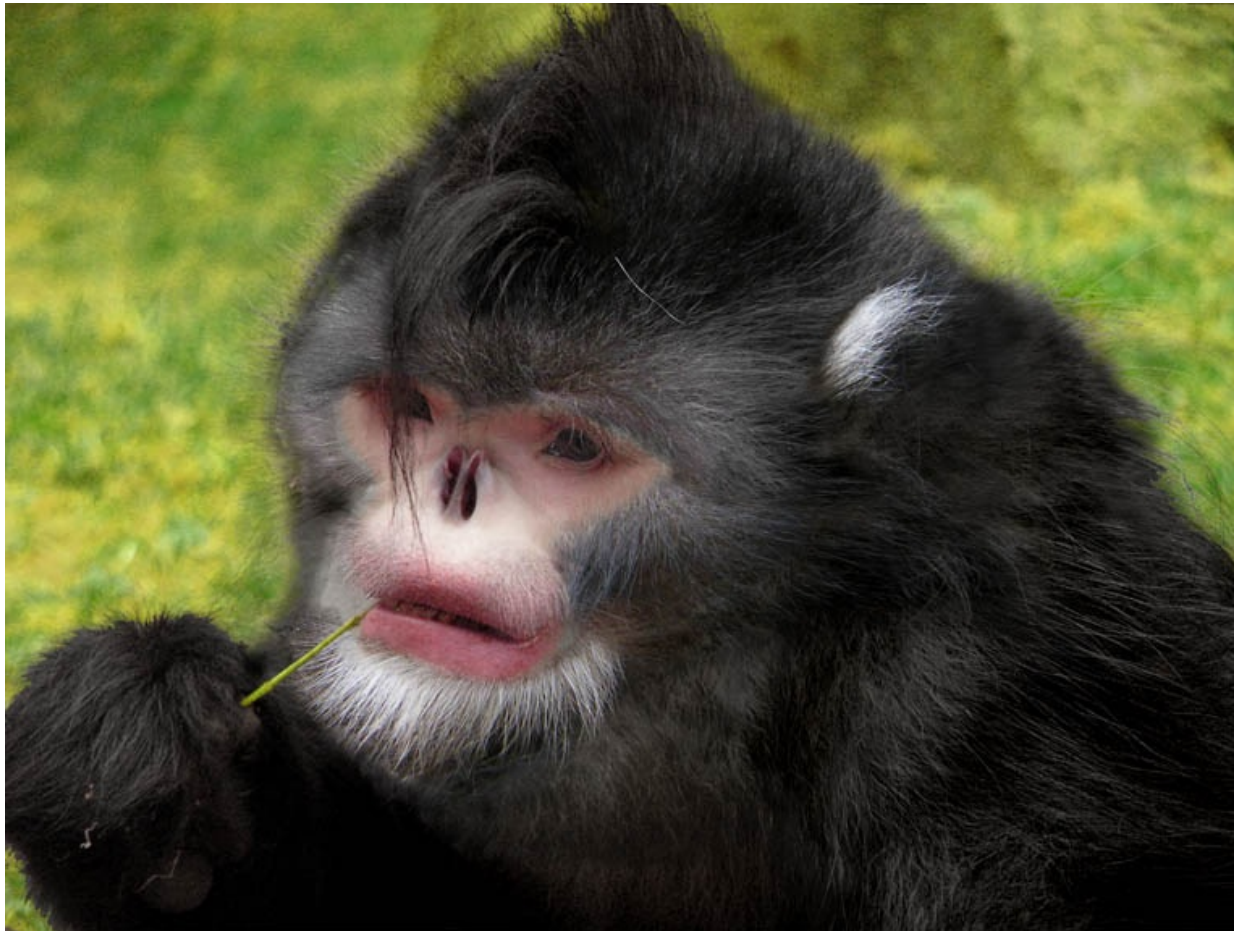
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Because no images of the species in the wild exists, this is a reconstructed image of [Rhinopithecus strykeri](#) based on the Yunnan snub-nosed monkey but with its nose modified. Image Credit Dr. Thomas Geissmann, who leads the taxonomic description of the species.

Once the biologists discovered the monkey population, they did a broader survey to see where else the monkeys might live, but so far have only found them in a relatively limited region, with an estimated population between 260 to 330 individuals. That means that they're likely already a critically endangered species. The pocket population is isolated from other snub-nosed monkeys by major geographical barriers – the Mekong River and the Salween River, as well as high mountain ranges. Snub-nosed monkeys in neighboring countries have different fur color.

Myanmar lies south of China and east of India, and the survey is supported by Fauna & Flora International (FFI) and the People Resources and Biodiversity Foundation. Geissmann led the taxonomic description of the new species, named *Rhinopithecus strykeri*. The research was recently published in the [American Journal of Primatology](#).

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Busted: Is Brazil's 'Jaguar Tony' a Traitor and Poacher?

10/19/2010

Guest blogger [Laurel Neme](#), author of the book [Animal Investigators](#), wildlife conservationist and host of radio show *The WildLife*, offers insight into how a jaguar poaching ring was recently busted.

Twenty years ago Brazil's most notorious jaguar hunter, Teodoro Antonio Melo Neto, also known as "Tonho da onça" or "Jaguar Tony," swore off poaching after logging 600 kills. The foe-turned-jaguar-ally convinced environmental organizations of his turnaround, and began helping agencies track the animals for monitoring and research. His dramatic change of heart even became the subject of a children's book, titled Tonho da onça, which related a conservation message. Not so fast, old friend. "Jaguar Tony," now 71 years old, recently revealed his true spots - a traitor to jaguars. In July, federal agents arrested him and seven others as they prepared for another in a long string of illegal hunts.

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Following reports of missing radio-collared jaguars and jaguar carcasses found on farms in the Pantanal, the Brazilian Federal Police (BFP) and Brazil's Environment Agency (IBAMA) launched a nine-month investigation, code-named Operation Jaguar, that culminated in searches across three Brazilian states.

One of these was an early morning raid on a Pantanal farm, where agents found Jaguar Tony, his son, and the ringleader of the illegal hunts, Elisha Sicoli, gearing up for another illicit trek, this time with five foreign clients. The federal agents had timed their bust to stop yet one more kill.

Jaguar Tony fled, and is believed to be hiding on a farm in the Pantanal, but police succeeded in arresting the others. They also seized a vast array of weapons and ammunition from Sicoli that, according to the BFP Chief in Cascavel, Paraná, was larger than the police's own arsenal, and recovered hundreds of photographs documenting jaguar, elephant and rhino kills that will now provide important evidence against the poaching gang and additional leads.

The scheme was straightforward. Sicoli organized and outfitted the illegal safaris while Jaguar Tony and his son acted as guides. The skilled father-son team used specially trained hunting dogs to track and "tree" the jaguars, making them easy targets. Hunters photographed their conquests and either destroyed the carcasses or made them into trophies using the taxidermy services of another gang member, Fernando Chiavenato. Chiavenato initially fled arrest in Curitiba but turned himself in a few days later.

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The gang targeted jaguars in Brazil's Pantanal, the world's largest wetland - the size of Illinois - and prime jaguar habitat. While nobody knows how many wild jaguars remain, worldwide population estimates range from 8,000 to 50,000, with the Pantanal home to perhaps between 4,000 to 10,000 jaguars. Jaguars are listed as 'near threatened' internationally, according to the IUCN Red List, and are a federally endangered species in the United States, where they occasionally cross over the Mexico-U.S. border into Arizona. All international trade of jaguars or jaguar parts is prevented by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). Under Brazil's environmental crimes law (Lei de Crimes Ambientais - 9.605/98), killing jaguars is a crime. Members of the organized poaching gang face criminal charges under Brazil's Environmental Crimes Law (articles 29 and 32) and, if convicted, could receive penalties of six months to one-year imprisonment.

Ninety-five percent of land in the Pantanal is privately owned, with about 2,500 ranches and up to 8 million cattle residing there. That puts livestock and jaguars in constant contact—and conflict. With their habitat shrinking, jaguars feast on the easy prey, antagonizing local farmers. In response, ranchers kill the predators or hire others, like Jaguar Tony, to do so.

In Brazil, like elsewhere, killing jaguars is a crime. While in theory Brazilian law permits protection of herds from problem predators, IBAMA virtually never—if ever—has authorized it. Typically, it would capture the problem feline and release it elsewhere.

The poaching gang capitalized on the tension and provided a dual service: sport for big game hunters and elimination of a deadly threat facing ranchers. While tourists paid for the privilege (\$1,500 for a five- to seven-day adventure), ranchers did not. Rather, they provided payment “in kind” by allowing hunts on their land and supplying tracking dogs.

The impact of this single gang on jaguar populations is potentially significant. According to BFP's Alexandre Reis, it operated for 20 years and killed up to 50 jaguars annually, or 1,000 animals overall. Consequently, jaguars killed by this one ring may represent as much as one-quarter of the area's wild jaguar population and up to 12 percent of the world's. Whatever the number, Operation Jaguar and stopping this gang will go a long way toward helping the species.

For a full article on Operation Jaguar, see Neme's article at Mongabay.com. Photos courtesy Brazilian Federal Police.

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FDA may approve 'Franken-salmon'

10/11/2010





Atlantic Salmon/Photo Credit William W. Hartley, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Genetically engineered salmon: Could they be the salvation of the third world and a boon to the economy, or an environmental and health disaster of the worst kind? Arguments were heard by the U.S Food & Drug Administration's Veterinary Medicine Advisory Committee in late September over the human health and environmental safety of genetically engineered (GE) salmon (also called Genetically Modified or GM organisms). If the FDA approves the fish, it will be the first genetically modified animal allowed for human consumption.

AquaBounty, the company marketing the fish, has inserted a Chinook salmon growth hormone gene into Atlantic salmon, as well as another gene from an eel-like creature that allows the fish to produce growth hormone constantly. Salmon typically only produce growth hormone part of the year. With the growth hormone, they grow twice the size of their normal counterparts in a much shorter time period.

Some opponents of the GE fish dub them "Frankenfish" or "Frankensalmon" and have two main concerns. First, are the salmon really safe, as the FDA claims? Second, could they harm the environment?

The FDA and AquaBounty have stated that there's no biologically relevant difference between these fish and regular salmon, and hence, people can reasonably assume they are safe to eat. However, many fish contain allergens that people are sensitive to, and others believe that genetically engineered fish could have unknown effects on people eating them. "Shockingly, the FDA allowed AquaBounty, the very company that would benefit from selling the mutant salmon, to perform the tests to determine their safety," says [Food & Water Watch](#) Assistant Director, Patty Lovera, who testified at the hearings. Because the fish are genetically engineered, some information about the fish can be kept from consumers as a proprietary trade secret.


There are also serious concerns over how the fish could impact native salmon, since hatchery-reared

salmon regularly get inadvertently released into the wild. "Experts also called for more independent, well-designed studies on the environmental impact of the fish, particularly since AquaBounty admitted that up to 5 percent could be fertile and could therefore breed with wild populations," says Lovera. No Environmental Impact Study (EIS) has been conducted on how the fish could impact wild populations of salmon.

Another organization, the [Center for Food Safety](#) (CFS), "believes GE salmon threatens human health, the environment and wild salmon populations--and the men and women who's livelihoods depend upon them," says Heather Whitehead, Director of the CFS' True Food Network. "If FDA decides to approve [AquAdvantage](#) salmon despite these risks and overwhelming public opposition, we believe mandatory labeling should be required so that consumers can make informed choices about we're eating and feeding to our families." They recently launched a website focused entirely on [GE Fish](#).

Would you eat them? Do you think GE animals should be labeled in stores? Should they be approved?

Here's what Food & Water Watch have to say:

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Pet Cougars - a Fatal Attraction?

10/04/2010

Animal Planet's show [Fatal Attractions](#) is returning this Friday, October 8th about people keeping exotic animals as pets. And to kick off that series, it's time for another guest post, this one by someone with extensive experience working with exotic animals. Annie Greer and ghostwriter Tim Vandehey, co-authored the new book, [The Chimp Who Loved Me](#). Annie is a veterinary chiropractor, animal behaviorist, radio host and farmer's wife whose life of memorable and bizarre experiences with animals (including a cheeky chimp attempting to mate with her while she was in the shower) inspired the book. Tim insisted that Annie's stories needed to become a book. Both have dedicated the book to raising awareness of how exotic animals are often treated after they stop being cuddly, and will donate 20% of their profits to the ASPCA. To read more of this story, and many others please check out their book! You can join Annie's Facebook page [here](#). So without further adieu...



Caged cougar -Copyright (c) Wendee Holtcamp

Kent and I have a reputation as the “go to” people in our area of Florida when it comes to exotic animals. Case in point: one evening, just as I was looking forward to a glass of my favorite wine, we got a call from a desperate gentleman who had kept a cougar illegally in his backyard garden for the past thirteen years. Now the cat was ill with pneumonia and the man was in a panic.

This is where my “sucker gene” kicks in. I want to be brassy and harsh like Bette Davis in *All About Eve* and say, “Buckle up because you and the cougar are going to have a bumpy night.” But I never can. It’s not that I give a damn about nitwits who think they can keep wild creatures like Pomeranians, but I care deeply about the welfare of the animals involved and can’t resist one more opportunity to get close to them. Kent is the same way. Off we went.

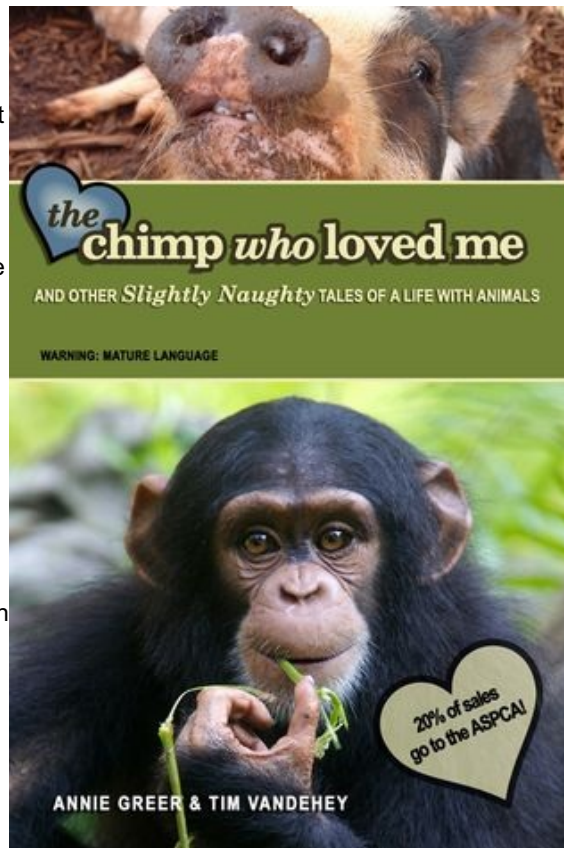
You can never be sure about these residential situations. There's a big difference between a professional enclosure and someone's backyard, and this place was no exception. The man basically had a large cage with a den up a ramp about eight feet off the ground where the mountain lion spent most of its time. So a gorgeous feline had become a shut-in, when in a zoo he would have had the chance to roam and play with other cats. See why I get worked up about this?

We had to sedate the big cat to examine it. He was so sluggish and sick that we were able to get close enough to fire a stream of medication into his mouth. The cat was in critical condition. After checking his heart and lungs, the cat quit breathing altogether; we set about our revival efforts. Now, the drug we use has a revival agent that we're told works quickly. What the manufacturer doesn't tell you is that on some animals, it works immediately. Once we got the cat breathing again, he awoke instantly in his new guise as, "I Feel So Much Better In My Second Life And By The Way Am I Pissed Off."

At times like this, my true nature comes out, and it's not flattering. It was every man for himself as I bolted for the cage door. But I was brought to a halt by my husband, who decided that this would be an opportune time to give the cougar fluids! At least we'd managed to get a noose around the animal's neck while he was out, so he was restrained.

Sedation was too risky, so we had to give him fluids through an IV. My job was to hold the bag of fluids. Now, the average IV line is 72 inches long, but when you are near a snarling predator in a justifiably bad mood, 72 inches is nothing. Kent had the more hazardous job of getting the needle in the cougar's neck. But every time he got close, the cat snarled and I jumped back, pulling the needle out. Kent swore at me, as though I was doing it just to piss him off.

When I am under stress, I have mantras. On a plane, my mantra goes like this: "I don't want to die. I don't want to die." That day, it was, "I hate you! I really hate you!" To make a long story short, we got the IV in and the cougar survived. I'm not so sure about the owner.



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Bald eagles dive-bombing people in Dutch Harbor

09/20/2010

This summer, I spent a month on the Bering Sea on an oceanographic research vessel, [blogging for Nature](#). After we docked, I spent a couple days in the port of [Dutch Harbor](#) on Unalaska Island. If you watch the Discovery Channel show *Deadliest Catch* the name Dutch Harbor will ring a bell – it serves as a home base for fishermen in the show during crabbing season. It's the number one commercial fishing port in the U.S., and though the town is very small, there are always scientists and fishermen from all over the world during summer. And there are hundreds of bald eagles. This is becoming a wee bit of a problem. Read on.

The beautiful volcanic island of Unalaska lies along the Aleutian Island chain, which stretches westward from Alaska. When I returned to the port of Dutch Harbor in mid-July the hills were verdant and covered in wildflowers. It's foggy much of the time, and the airport has a single runway, when planes take off or land, they have to close the one road that goes through the middle of town because the runway goes right up to its edge. The town itself has only two stores – the Alaska Ship Supply and Safeway, and there is one hotel – the Grand Aleutian. It sits right across from the rocky shoreline, which is fun to explore. I spotted a sea lion in the distance, and found some sea anemones and seashells in the tidepools. There's also the Unisea which *Deadliest Catch* has made famous. A sign on the door says "Please give your knives to the bartender. It will be returned when you leave."

But that's got nothing on the talons and beaks of a bald eagle. America's national bird is truly massive, majestic and regal. But you don't want one of them chasing you or dive-bombing your head. Right about the time I visited, the newspapers reported a couple of [bald eagle attacks](#) on people. U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service biologists came into see if anything could be done to prevent the attacks, since the eagles are protected species and people can't shoot or disturb them. They posted warning signs at a few of the spots where people visit regularly which have nearby nests with eagles known to fly at people– including the town post office and the library.



*A bald eagle on Unalaska Island/
Copyright (c) 2010 [Wendee Holtcamp](#)*





Although the eagles were removed from the Endangered Species Act, they remain protected by federal law and technically you cannot harm an eagle - even in self-defense. The federal agents are looking into whether the problem nests can be relocated, since bald eagles nest for life and use the same nest year after year.

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Volunteers can restore coral reefs

07/12/2010

Coral reefs around the world have suffered from coral bleaching, pollution, physical damage, overfishing, and ocean acidification, to name a few. And although people have started to restore some reefs, few scientists have systematically studied the best way to go about returning life and color to the corals.

[Graham Forrester](#), a professor of natural resources at the University of Rhode Island, changed all that. He monitored volunteer efforts to restore a once-thriving coral reef in the British Virgin Islands, while documenting the growth and survival rates of the threatened species of elkhorn coral being restored.

"We picked the elkhorn coral because it has declined severely, and is now listed under the Endangered Species Act," explains Forrester. "This approach has been tried with other coral species. It is most often done with fast-growing branching corals because pieces break off the branches naturally during storms, so there is a naturally available supply of small coral pieces that can be transplanted." The goal was to figure out whether volunteers could ultimately help restore corals simply and inexpensively using these coral fragments. "We focused on the general question, 'when storm-generated coral fragments appear, is it beneficial to use them for restoration?'"

It turns out that the volunteer efforts paid off. Restoring elkhorn coral is as simple as moving broken fragments of coral and reattaching them to barren reefs. Forrester's study, recently published in the journal *Restoration Ecology*, showed that the transplanted coral had higher growth and survival rates compared with reefs that didn't get assistance.

"Our findings were that securing the fragments to the reef dramatically improves their growth and survival, moving them to a new site has no effect, there weren't big differences between the methods used to attach corals to the reef, and that clearing away seaweed improves the growth of transplanted fragments," says Forrester. "So the bottom line, with a little practice and training, volunteers should be able to make coral 'gardens' and this should accelerate the recovery of damaged reefs."



*University of Rhode Island undergraduate student
Lindsay Harmon transplanting elkhorn coral/
Credit Dr. G. Forrester*

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International Moratorium on Whaling Upheld

06/28/2010

After failing to reach an agreement at last week's meeting, the [International Whaling Commission \(IWC\)](#) decided to shelve a proposal that would have lifted the international moratorium on whaling that has been in place worldwide since 1986. The "Save the Whales" movement was considered one of the world's most successful conservation campaigns, ultimately resulting in a complete ban on commercial whaling. However, Iceland and Norway had registered objections to the moratorium. Japan actually agreed to the moratorium by 1988, partly due to pressure from the U.S. related to restricting their access to Alaskan waters to fish, but the nation continued to kill whales for "scientific research" but it is widely thought to be a guise for continued commercial whaling.



Humpback whales/Credit NOAA

The highly anticipated [IWC meeting](#) in Agadir, Morocco brought together delegates from around the world, and everyone's eyes were focused on the 'compromise proposal' in which Japan agreed to reduce their quota of whales caught and bring their whaling under the regulation of the IWC rather than outside of it, as it currently occurs. But it also opened the Southern Ocean around Antarctica to whaling, a region currently considered a sanctuary for all living creatures, including whales. Many nations and conservation groups support bringing whaling back under the control of the IWC, but consider the compromise proposal unacceptable because it allows whaling in the Southern Ocean.

At any rate, last week brought good news for whales: the compromise proposal was shelved. The first day of the meeting, Vice-Chair of the Commission Anthony Liverpool opened the session, and then took the negotiations behind closed doors, rather than have them occur in front of the media and general public. On Wednesday, after two days of negotiations that did not lead to any agreement, they decided to place the compromise proposal on hold, rather than vote on it. That means, for now, the moratorium is upheld. But nothing has changed in terms of what Iceland, Norway, and Japan will likely continue to do in terms of their whaling activities. This will surely come up again in future meetings.

What do you think? After all we eat many animals for food, both domestic and wild. Are there some animals that we just shouldn't eat? Or are all animals fair game, so long as they're sustainably harvested? And that begs the question - have the whales even recovered sufficiently from the low numbers of most baleen whale species found in the 1970s and 1980s?

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Bonobos – our better nature

06/21/2010

Guest Post by [Vanessa Woods](#), author of the just released book, *Bonobo Handshake*. Check it out!

Only one in four people know that bonobos (*Pan paniscus*) are a great ape. Even fewer know that they are our closest living relative, along with chimpanzees. Even people who do know what bonobos are probably think of them as the 'hippie ape', a bizarre primate echo of the 60s, when making love was more important than anything else.

What people don't realize is that bonobos could save the world. For decades, we have focused on chimpanzees as the model for human behavior. Chimpanzees are both the light and dark side of ourselves. They love, mourn their dead, and have sophisticated politics that could baffle a Washington insider. They also beat their females, have a form of warfare, and their murder rates are comparable to human hunter gatherers. What more perfect animal could you have for understanding the biology of human nature?

I've been travelling to the Democratic Republic of Congo since 2005 to try and find the answer. We work in an orphanage called Lola ya Bonobo – the world's only bonobo sanctuary with the largest captive population in the world. What we found there was incredible enough to prompt me to write a book called *Bonobo Handshake*.

Ignoring bonobos means ignoring what humans could be. Bonobos are female dominated. They have never been seen to kill each other. Infants get the kind of idyllic childhood most of us can only dream about.

We tend to think of intelligence as being a linear scale, with humans at the pinnacle. But I've decided that bonobos are the most intelligent of all the great apes. Because for all our technology, all our intelligence, all our things, we have not been able to maintain peace in our societies, or the greater world.

Every 15 seconds a woman is beaten by her partner. One in three women worldwide experience violence.



Author and biologist Vanessa Woods with a bonobo

There have only been 26 days without war since World War II. And right now, there are seven conflicts going on in the world that are killing over 1,000 people a year.

Bonobos live in a peaceful society. They use sex to diffuse tension in the group. As humans, I'm not suggesting for a second that sex will be our mechanism to diffuse tension, but we need to find one. And that means finding out everything we can about bonobos. What is different about their physiology, psychology and behavior that allows them to exist without violence? What can we do, as humans, to emulate that, the way we used bats to develop sonar, and hummingbirds to develop helicopters.

There are as few as 10,000 bonobos left in the wild, and the number is declining. If they go extinct, not only will we have lost our only peaceful cousin, we will have lost our only chance at truly understanding ourselves.

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Celebrate Earth's Marble-ous Oceans this Week!

06/07/2010

Tomorrow, June 8th marks [World Oceans Day](#), recognized by the United Nations, and this Friday, June 11th would have been legendary oceanographer Jacques Yves Cousteau's 100th birthday. Cousteau's documentaries played a role in my love for the oceans and ecology, and I feel honored I got to work alongside his granddaughter [Céline](#) on board the [Undersea Explorer](#) in Australia in 2008. This week celebrate and revere the vast, marble-ous oceans!

Looking back at the earth from space, our planet resembles a blue marble – a tiny blue dot in the vast sea of space. The blue comes from the oceans, which cover over 70% of Planet Earth's surface. About a year ago, marine biologist [Wallace "J." Nichols](#) came up with an idea to raise awareness of the oceans, honor his childhood hero Jacques Cousteau, and at the same time, spread 'random acts of ocean kindness' via [blue marbles](#). Get a marble, and pass it along. But with a caveat – when you give one, tell a story, and when you receive, do something kind for the ocean. Then share your story. You can record audio of your marble or ocean story [here](#), post your photo or story to the Blue Marbles [Facebook page](#), or send them by email for the Blue Marbles blog [here](#). Share the love.



Wallace J. Nichols holds a blue marble in Anambas, Indonesia/

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"Our goal is to share 1,000,000 blue marbles, and ask people to share them forward. Get one, give it away," says Nichols. "I hear so many sweet stories about people giving and getting blue marbles. Sometimes people are surprised. Sometimes they tear up. One woman gave a blue marble to a man, who then told her that he was an astronaut, and has seen our real "blue marble" from space, and that it is beautiful."

Nichols and Sound artist [Halsey Burgund](#) combined some of the recorded ocean and blue marble stories plus music by Burgund into a semi-improvised, semi-composed musical number which they played live for the first time at a celebration of Cousteau's life and accomplishments at the [California Academy of Sciences](#) Planetarium on Thursday, June 3rd. You can [listen](#) to algorithmically generated audio collages of the stories online, too!

As [oil continues to gush](#) into the Gulf of Mexico, I can only hope that my Animal Planet readers the world over will take a moment to appreciate the vast, glorious, beautiful blue ocean, and what we can do to make it better for tomorrow. It sustains us in so many ways.

What can we each do to help the ocean? "We will all be changing our ways with regard to use of plastic and oil," says Nichols. "The stuff just makes too much of a mess and over the past century, while it's been the backbone of our economy the result for our ocean planet is bad. So, get out in front of the curve and begin to remove plastic and fossil fuels from your life."

Nichols has compiled a list of places you can order blue marbles made from recycled glass [here](#). And as for spreading the marbles, Nichols hopes the project will go on and on and on...

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Catching up with Jeff Corwin

05/24/2010



I caught up with Animal Planet host [Jeff Corwin](#) by phone as he visited the Louisiana coast, not long after BP's [Deepwater Horizon](#) rig erupted in flames and started spewing mass quantities of oil into the Gulf of Mexico. Scientists, commercial fishermen and citizens alike have expressed concern over what will happen to the coastal ecosystem when the oil comes ashore – not to mention the impacts on the greater Gulf marine ecosystem. Just Saturday, some of the first oozing brown oil has started washing ashore in [Grande Isle, Louisiana](#). A couple weeks ago, Jeff visited Venice, Louisiana, and took a riverboat out to a brown pelican rookery offshore – one of several rare species that many are concerned about. He told me what he saw.

“Brown pelicans were a critically endangered species and scientists went through incredibly exhaustive efforts to recover them. And then when they delisted it 6 months ago, this happens. It’s the state bird of Louisiana. It’s on every Louisiana license plate. It’s near and dear to the people here. We took a boat out to [Breton National Wildlife Refuge] with Chief Ornithologist of the Audubon Society Greg Butcher, and we were literally within the fishes’ breath of the pelicans. You know you’re close to a pelican when you smell its breath. They were shadowing us. Some sat on their nests, and we were able to experience what makes them so magical. The rookery was illuminated by the setting sun. You feel like you’ve time traveled back to the Devonian.”

The estuaries and hammocks on the coast of Louisiana have untold value for the ecology of the region, important not just for their own sake, but also in anthropogenic terms, for economically important commercial fisheries, coastal birdwatching, and eco-tourism. When Jeff visited the area, recording video not just in Venice but also off of Gulfport and Biloxi, Mississippi, he said that only a few oiled birds had been brought to the rehab center at that time, including a gannet and a couple of brown pelicans. As of last Friday, a total of 27 oiled birds have come in. The [International Bird Rescue Research Center blog](#) keeps a running tally.

“We were there when the third bird, a brown pelican, came into the Oiled Bird Rehab Center outside of Venice. The bird was in distress, and they were trying to stabilize it and examine it. There was no evidence of oil in its plumage but they were trying to see if it ingested something. The birds are not only affected by oil, but they can ingest fish affected by the oil. With pelicans, when they scoop up all that fish, they get everything that is also in the water – from benzenes to sulfur to other very dangerous chemicals .”

Besides the crude oil itself, BP is spraying Corexit 9500 undersea – a chemical dispersant that breaks the oil into smaller bits. It does not chemically change the oil or make it go away. Many scientific studies suggest that it can make the oil itself more available to animals, to be ingested or taken in through their skin, and hence the dispersed oil is far more toxic than either the dispersant or the oil alone. And it’s never been used

in these quantities, nor this deep undersea.

“Dispersants break up the oil, but in untested ways. They’re jetting it at the site, underwater. They’re propelling it at the surface, not just at the bottom of the ocean. This is very toxic stuff, and it’s primarily designed to be used in deep water.”

In fact, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) just [ordered BP](#) to stop using the Corexit 9500 dispersant underwater and come up with an alternative. Over 600,000 gallons of the substance have now been deployed in the Gulf of Mexico. Yet BP apparently decided [they would not take the EPAs advice](#), and said after reviewing alternatives, Corexit remains their best option. Some reporters have [questioned BPs insistence on using Corexit](#), a product manufactured by Nalco, a company owned by Goldman Sachs.

I ask Jeff about why, as of when we spoke, the oil hadn’t really hit the shoreline yet.

“The oil is caught in a loop, like the movie Groundhog Day. It just keeps going around and around. When this hits – we don’t know when, we don’t know where – but many reputable folks from government to NGOs believe that when it does, it could quite possibly be an unprecedented event that could really rattle the national and regional economies, and the nation’s supply of seafood. Twenty-five percent of seafood comes from here. And every day another 210,000 gallons of raw sweet crude get released into the Gulf.”

That number has since been revised upwards. Though BP stands by their value, Purdue University engineering professor Steven Wereley used video footage to [estimate the oil geyser](#) closer to 70,000 barrels or 2.94 million gallons per day, and other scientists’ estimates have concluded similar values. I ask Jeff if he saw the oil himself while off the coast.

“My mission is to try to stay accurate and not be influenced by hearsay. We made a concerted effort to get to the perimeter of the spill zone. We witnessed what we thought was sheen. The spill has grown to the size of Jamaica, as it expands nearly exponentially. But what we saw was possibly a large algal bloom taking place.”

Algal blooms can take place due to lowered oxygen caused by the oil. In fact, such vast quantities of oil may ultimately cause ecological cascades to run through the entire food web, and the effects will be seen for decades to come. Some fisheries have yet to recover from the [1989 Exxon Valdez spill](#) in Prince William Sound, Alaska.

“This region is really a hot zone for several national iconic species: Alligators, sea turtles, pelicans, herons, and it’s one of the nation’s most important shark nurseries, and there are and there are commercially and recreationally important fisheries. It’s part of our national natural heritage and it is in jeopardy. If this is impacted like they think, we’ll all pay.”

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