



THE CASE FOR EMPATHY: FOSTERING EMPATHY AS ONE AVENUE TOWARDS ENCOURAGING CONSERVATION BEHAVIOR

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When it comes to encouraging people to engage in action on behalf of animals and nature, a number of different motivations – both internal and external - come into play. An individual may be motivated to buy a hybrid car, for instance, by the idea of paying less for gas, which can be a powerful external motivator. On the other hand, they might buy a hybrid because of their concerns about climate change and its impact on the earth; in this case, they're internally motivated to act in ways that support the planet's sustainability. Our decisions are shaped by a combination of internal and external motivations, and while there is no single variable that predicts whether a person will engage in environmentally responsible behaviors, a number of factors increase the likelihood that someone will engage in behavior beneficial to animals and nature. Empathy, an internal motivator, is one of these factors.

While there is a great deal of research into the construct of empathy towards other humans and its role in encouraging caring behavior, research on the role of empathy in fostering caring action for animals and nature is much scarcer. There are a few studies, however, that point to the potential role empathy may play in relation to conservation behavior.

- Empathy with other forms of life is one component of **environmental sensitivity**, the positive emotional response that some individuals feel in relation to nature. Research suggests that environmental sensitivity plays a valuable role in motivating peoples' engagement in learning and action (Hungerford and Volk, 1990).
- Taking the perspective of a distress animal increased environmental concerns in a few different studies (Schultz, 2000; Sevillano, 2007). In another demonstration of the role of **perspective taking**, people who were given "empathy nudges," where they were asked to put themselves in the place of people affected by a conservation issue, were more likely to support conservation action than those who receive a financial incentive alone (Czap et al, 2015).
- People who **feel compassion for the suffering environment** are more likely to promote conservation of nature. Furthermore, some research suggests that those who feel compassion for other humans are also more likely to hold proenvironmental values and intentions, and more likely to donate to nature or environmental organizations (Pfattheicher et al, 2016).

- Evoking **empathy for a natural object** (like a bird or a tree) increases peoples' willingness to act in a way that protects the environment (Berenguer, 2007).
- Moral reasoning about the environment (that is, the extent to which someone has **moral reasons for protecting nature**) can be enhanced by evoking empathy, according to one study (Berenguer 2010). The same study found different results depending upon whether the focus of empathy was a vulture or a human. When the object of empathy was a vulture the number of moral arguments of an ecocentric nature increased (i.e., seeing intrinsic value in living things, regardless of their perceived value to humans); when it was a person, the number of moral arguments of an anthropocentric nature increased (i.e., interpreting the world in terms of human values and existence).
- Adult zoo visitors' **emotions of caring, love, sense of connection and respect** were strongly correlated with a desire to save the observed animals, in one study (Myers, 2004).



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