

Interspecies Protocol

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The search for new ecological metaphors lies at the heart of most nature writing, and the case is sometimes made that unborn generations depend on how willing we are, today, to explore these new metaphors of perceiving nature. In that spirit, regard the metaphor of interspecies protocol, an idea comprised of equal parts mythos and politics; a new-old concept that asks us to treat the animals as peers, neighbors, mentors.

Consider an account of the San Bushmen who lived in the Kalahari desert in the 1950's. The Bushman's own oral history focused around the image of human life as it existed around these desert oases for thousands of years. Intriguingly, though the Bushman's stories reveal ongoing instances of tribespeople being mauled, trampled, or impaled by just about every species living there, nowhere in their history is there a single account of a lion killing a Bushman or a Bushman killing a lion.

Western anthropologists visiting Bushman camps during the 1950's often made note of the glowing eyes of the lions clearly discerned just beyond the reach of the cooking fire. One white observer commented that, on those nights when, for whatever reason, the lions started roaring without letup, a Bushman hunter would simply saunter off to the edge of the camp to solicit the lions to please keep the noise down because, "there are children trying to sleep." The lions seemed to heed the request. Somehow, both species had long ago developed a protocol for living at peace with one another.

The traditional Bushman lifestyle ended forever with the introduction of ranching into the Kalahari during the 1950's. The waterhole culture deteriorated to make way for Westernization, including such detritus of progress as the introduction of rifles, four wheel drive vehicles, and an externalized economic system based upon raising cattle for money. Significantly, the Bushman/lion protocol was soon replaced by a mutual attitude of disrespect and fear.

Before the introduction of ranching, Bushmen and lions kept very strict schedules about when and when not to visit the waterhole to drink. Lions drank late at night, Bushmen filled their gourds during the heat of the day. Surprise

encounters were kept to a minimum by a strict adherence to what was a de facto scheduling protocol. Ranchers were, of course, oblivious to the protocol, and so cattle started appearing at the waterholes at all hours of the day and, especially, at night. At first the lions actually seemed to keep their distance from the cattle, as if this new species was to be respected as a living "extension" of the human community. But as traditional schedules became ever more disturbed, lions finally started attacking the easy prey. The ranchers—with help from their Bushmen hired hands—soon reciprocated by shooting lions. Ironically, within a few years time, several Bushmen had been killed by lions. Now, just twenty years later, there are no Bushmen living the traditional lifestyle. And no interspecies protocol.

Clownfish and anemone

Wander out into a cow pasture on a hot summer day to observe cattle grazing in the midst of egrets or starlings. How close did you get before the first animal changed to a defensive posture? How close did you get before the last bird flew away? If interspecies protocol were ever to become a science, then these two distances might provide a potential statistical baseline of data. Simply put, the numbers reveal the distance at which trust breaks down between your own human self and your wild neighbors.

Webster defines protocol as the ceremonial forms and courtesies that are established as proper and correct in official relations between parties. Interspecies protocol may thus be understood to mean the forms and manners (and defense postures) that any species conforms to when relating to another species. Such protocol might be based upon a species-specific instinctual behavior, or in certain other instances upon learned behavior agreed upon by individual animals from two or more different species. The classic symbiotic relationship between clownfish and anemone offers an instance of the former. The historical relationship between lion and Bushman is an example of the latter.

Protocol is different than symbiosis. Symbiosis implies a physical codependency advantageous to two dissimilar species. Protocol is, instead, a social behavior established between individuals. Regard it as the etiquette of an ecosystem. It brings to bear such concepts as demeanor, posture, and even ritualized interaction as a means of communicating (and building) trust between species. Because protocol inevitably implies varying degrees of conscious behavior communicated between species, it may be unfairly construed to be anthropomorphic which is the precise reason we never encounter the concept within the standard lexicon of field biology. But who can honestly say where instinct ends, and a mutual conscious regard between individuals begins. Is the relationship between clownfish and anemone entirely instinctual and therefore generic; or instead, do individual clownfish and individual anemone also need to fine tune their obviously symbiotic relationship to best fit one another's precise size, habitat, level of trust, and even "personality"? If this occurs, (and why not?) then protocol is the term for it. Symbiosis thus refers primarily to relations between species. Protocol refers to relations between individuals.

How is an understanding of such protocol in nature important to us? In fact, when we forget that we are interdependent with any (or all) other species, those other species suffer. We suffer as well. Look around. Who can deny that nature is everywhere in retreat. This cessation of protocol may eventually spell the death of humanity. Significantly, if a modern human being is to accept the concept of protocol he or she must also accept the idea that animals are possessed of individuality and distinct personalities.

Permit another example. Observers of the social behavior of predator and prey on Africa's Serengeti Plain comment that wildebeest often display an astonishing lack of fear for lions not in hunting mode. Although the department of lions at rest is generally recognized to be a subject transmitted by adult wildebeests to their young, turn the idea upside down and you may realize that the lions, themselves, probably play some significant part in the transmitted lesson. If so, then it implies a shared sense of community between lions and wildebeest. A protocol.

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The most fearful survive

The word, protocol originates from two Greek words: protos (first or primary) and kolla (glue). In medieval literature a protocol was the term used for a table of contents—the first page glued into a manuscript cover. In that sense, regard interspecies protocol to be the [consciousness] glue attaching an individual to its social environment. A strong protocol implies well developed bonds of communication between species, while a weak protocol is essentially distrustful or perhaps no relationship.

Protocol may develop into such a formalized behavior that it appears instinctual (symbiotic) although when seen through fresh eyes we may just as easily perceive it as a set of rules passed down through generations. Grizzly bears in Northern Canada have always been routinely shot on sight. Over hundreds of years, the bears who ventured closest to human beings, for whatever reason, were the ones who were shot first. Consequently, those individual bears exhibiting any measure of outgoing curiosity that might have conceivably developed into a strong protocol, were the first to be done in. Only the stealthiest and most fearful of the species survived. Over time the bears became what we made of them; co-evolved into creatures instinctively fearful (or angry) of human beings. We live with that legacy of weak protocol today.

Language reflects perception

We modern human beings can not properly comprehend the ramifications of interspecies protocol until we first learn to perceive of the other animals in an entirely new way: as individuals, and possibly, as peers. We need to know the lions as the Bushman knew them. Interspecies protocol helps us examine our own inability to relate to animals as a kind of bad politics. Social relations void of compassion. Without mutual trust and mutual respect.

To understand protocol we must learn to speak about nature in a way beyond contemporary language. Psychologists tell us that that language reflects perception leading to a certain worldview. For example, the prevailing educational system teaches our children to preclude words of feeling and equality—words like intuition, love, participation, magic and communion—whenever they draw close to observe wild animals. Or another example. Understanding the marriage of perception and language sheds new light on governmental wilderness policies molded by urbane and socially polished men of power debating legislation in a linear fashion inside artificially lit rooms. These are mostly well educated people who, like the rest of us, believe that natural resources is a valid synonym for wildness. Yet whereas wildness was once central to any human being's daily perception of the world, now it is reduced to the margins of our lives. Our language and our policies mirror that distancing. We get the policy we perceive.

By contrast, that most intuitive and nonlinear of books, the Tao Te Ching, offers one of the oldest as well as one of the most succinct treatises about a developed protocol between human beings and nature. As the Tao says: the relationship with nature that can be defined is never the real relationship with nature.

The Colville Indians who once inhabited the shoreline of the Columbia River, tell us the story of the river monster, Nashlah, who has been eating all the people (meaning both human and animal) who travel up and down the river in their canoes. The trickster, Coyote, comes to the rescue by allowing himself to be swallowed into the belly of the monster. He lights a bonfire out of the jetsam left by former victims, while proceeding to cut up the monster's heart to both warm and feed all the half-dead animals inside. As the monster grows increasingly weaker from his wounds, he starts coughing up all the animals who are thus, saved.

Then a plot twist. Unlike most archetypes of resurrection, for instance the story of Pinocchio in which the evil whale is slain, the Colville assert that this is just the start, and not the conclusion of a longterm relationship between a sea monster and Coyote. These two are, after all, not enemies but neighbors bound by a common search for a unifying protocol. The second half of the Colville myth recounts the resurrection of this monster, Nashlah, who is now accorded a strict admonition against killing every person who travels the river. Even the most dangerous predator is accorded status within the status quo and so deserves certain rights to live and enjoy good health. In this instance, a protocol is negotiated between Coyote and Nashlah. Our monster neighbor is permitted to shake and overturn only those canoes that pass directly overhead his pool. With this last image lodged firmly in our minds, we finally understand the beast, Nashlah, to be the mythological keeper of an actual rapids that flows along the Columbia River.

What coyote would never do, the army corps of engineers has accomplished. A recent dam built on the Columbia River destroyed the Nashlah rapids. Today, all that is left of the monster is this myth. Had the engineers taken the myth more seriously in their rush to better control the river, it might have led us to a protocol about how to live with this river. In this case, it would have saved the salmon which are now endangered all over the Pacific Northwest because of too much irresponsible dam-building.

Who are the people?

Once again, the use of words like people and neighborhood to describe ecosystem underscores the fact that language mirrors worldview. And whereas we Westerners learn most of our own right relations between [people] from the texts of our Judao-Christian heritage, in reality, the exclusivity of this heritage also articulates the foundation of the current environmental crisis. Jesus, for example, asked us to love our neighbors (other members of the human species) as ourselves. By contrast, the Colville myth strips Jesus' aphorism of all its specist inference; now including the ecosystem as the very foundation of neighborhood. Or attach a Colville spin to Abraham Lincoln's democratic construct about a government of the people, for the people, and by the people, and you soon find it transformed into a quite disorienting statement binding democracy to ecology and evolution.

So hundreds of traditional myths would just as soon strip Lincoln's aphorism of all its specist inference; and include all species/people as the foundation of citizenship, with relations between peoples governed by interspecies protocol. In this version of government, it is the ecosystem, the watershed, the bioregion, rather than the nation-state that

becomes the wellspring of political consciousness. This expanded metaphor also offers a faraway glimmer of a new kind of democracy. It is a democracy that equates a sense of place with community. It is a democracy based on interspecies protocols that once upon a time defined harmonious relations between species. Gary Snyder puts the idealist tenet this way:

What we must do is incorporate the other people...the creeping people, and the standing people, and the flying people and the swimming people...into the councils of government.

Atavistic? Yes, definitely, when used in the context of governmental structures as they exist during these days of accelerating environmental degradation. But given the ominous reality that faces the planet, human beings everywhere must start to acknowledge uncommon ideas and persuade them onto the table of future possibilities.



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