The Gift of Connecting with Animals [1]

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Theme Essay by Wendy Townsend

Conservationists, Show the Love

On a recent winter morning, I sat at my desk, struggling to write about a girl and a frog. I wanted my intended audience of young readers to see the frog the way I had as a child. Six years old, standing barefoot in the mud, holding my frog, I'd been part of his world and never wanted to leave. There was something between us. What I'd wanted most was for the frog to know I was his friend.

As an adult writer, though, I remained stuck in my head, self-conscious, afraid to seem sentimental—until I looked up and saw a ladybug crawling across the window. On impulse, I dipped my fingers in a glass of water and flicked drops on the pane. The ladybug changed direction, heading straight for a drop, and I watched it drink. I felt giddy; I sat up in my chair. Seeing the ladybug take what I'd offered connected me to it, bringing me back to my original impulse for telling the story—which was love.

When I was a little kid in the ‘70s, I played in the woods and around the ponds on my grandparents’ farm in Indiana. There were frogs, turtles, snakes, and salamanders to talk to and touch. If I felt sad or upset, I could walk at the edge of the woods and find a snake in a patch of sun, as if it were waiting for me. I’d squat close and look at its eyes, watching the tongue flick out, the ribs moving with each breath.

Connecting with an animal opens a door to my humanity. After trying to become a field biologist in college, after writing three children’s books with environmental themes, I’ve learned that scientific venues rarely encourage heartfelt discussions of this kind. Scientific method emphasizes categorization and data collection, but as Jacques Cousteau once said, “People protect what they love.”

Scientists who want readers to care about biodiversity loss can take a lesson from my favorite authors, those whose passion for wildlife gets readers to laugh, cry, and take action. Animals move us to feel, the main thing in life. When I hear the flute voice of the hermit thrush on a summer evening, my longing takes me right back to the intensity of childhood. Like the “harsh and exciting” calls of Mary Oliver’s migrating geese, the call of crows at the compost pile makes me want to join them and caw as loudly as I can. When a praying mantis visits my rose bush, I stop what I’m doing and go outside to see her closely—to see her head turn to see me.

Here's the ending of Stanley Kunitz's poem “The Snakes of September":

At my touch the wild
braid of creation
trembles.

If you haven’t experienced a close relationship with an animal, you may not understand the gift of such a connection. But for Kunitz, touching the snakes in his garden led to unexpected illumination. In *The Wild Braid*, a 2005 book published shortly before the centenarian poet's death, he noted that the “snakes had learned they were in no danger, and allowed me to stroke them,” adding:

> I get a sense of reciprocity that is very comforting, consoling. There are forms of communication beyond language that have to do not only with the body, but with the spirit itself, a permeation of one’s being…. One of the great satisfactions of the human spirit is to feel that one’s family extends across the borders of the species and belongs to everything that lives.

I was eight years old when my mother and I moved from the Indiana farm to New York City. If not for my books and the iguana I rescued from a pet shop, I’m not sure how I would have survived. I read Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* before seeing Disney’s version, and I imagined real wolves, a real panther and bear, a real python, a real boy. I read the story over and over, especially the parts filled with aching and longing. When the boy has to leave the jungle to go live with other humans:

> Then something began to hurt Mowgli inside him, as he had never been hurt in his life before, and he caught his breath and sobbed, and the tears ran down his face.
>
> ‘What is it? What is it?’ he said. ‘I do not wish to leave the jungle, and I do not know what this is. Am I dying, Bagheera?’

Later, he leaves the village and returns to the jungle: “When the moon rose over the plain, making it look all milky, the horrified villagers saw Mowgli, with two wolves at his heels…trotting across at the steady wolf’s trot that eats up the long miles like fire.” I longed to be Mowgli, leaving the city behind, returning to my pond and woods—and every summer, I did go back to my grandparents’ farm. I rode my bike on roads without yellow painted lines, edged with tall weeds. There were wild blackberry bushes and, just beyond, cornfields.

But by the time I was twelve, I also saw bulldozers digging trenches in those fields. Soon, there were houses, and the forest had shrunk to little patches of trees. Cars sped up and down the road, running over painted turtles, snappers, snakes, frogs, and toads.

Birds got hit, as did possums, raccoons, and skunks. I'd see the dead animals and look at the houses, thinking about the washing machines and dishwashers. I'd imagine what it must be like for frogs to have that soap in their water and not be able to get away.

Learning about ecosystems in school, I earnestly believed I needed to demonstrate the importance of animals—that if a species went extinct, it would affect people. So, I headed to college thinking I had to be a scientist, until I barely passed the exams in chemistry and biology. I went to three different colleges before I gave up, the last one in California. Meanwhile, my iguana had grown big. Iguanas had become popular pets, and in the late '80s, I typed up care sheets, handing them out at pet shops in Los Angeles. I even went on to write *Iguanas: A Guide to Their Biology and Captive Care* (Krieger, 1993) with veterinarian Fred Frye.

Still, for a long time, I couldn't say what I needed to in my writing. As photographer and conservationist Robin Moore puts it in his 2014 book *In Search of Lost Frogs, "*I used to believe that the possession of knowledge was enough." Moore's connection with amphibians runs throughout this collection of photos and prose, in writing that evokes, in his words, "a visceral response that data alone could not." He's an advocate for saving species in trouble and describes one frog corpse "as beautiful in death as in life. Her stillness was broken only by the rhythmic wash of water on splayed limbs, and onto her back clung a male—oblivious to her passing—trying to mate." Moore's sadness is tempered with joy in discovery:

> A small delicate frog decorated with flame-orange and black stretches her long slender limbs as she scales a rock by the side of the river. It takes a moment for my brain to register that it is not a figment of my aching desire for this sight to be real.

It wasn't until I began writing my first children's book, *Lizard Love* (Front Street, 2008), that I understood the need to develop the emotional core of my story. One of the reasons I came to write fiction for kids is that my own childhood experiences were raw and immediate, and this kind of energy can make a story powerful. But young readers also need a strong bond with a sympathetic human protagonist, as I'd had with Mowgli. If they care about my child character, when the connection to an animal is fully realized –or broken—they'll feel the joy as well as the sorrow.

That's all very well for children, I can hear scientists sniffle, but feelings can't compete with hard data. But I don't see this as a competition. If anything, all of us who care about the environment—nature writers, biologists, conservationists, citizens—should join forces.

For years, I've subscribed to the International Reptile Conservation Foundation's journal, which mainly covers field research. I look at the photographs, glance at the table of contents, and put most issues aside. But one title in the

December 2008 issue definitely caught my eye: “The Turtles Have Been Watching Me” by Eric Gangloff. His article has Latin names for each and every plant and animal, and plenty of abstract language. But Gangloff also defends the value of including his feelings:

> The reason we founded the Colorado Box Turtle Project is simple; we love these animals, and we want to protect them. Does this passion obfuscate our science? Of course not. Ardor is the impetus for science.

I still think of this striking statement now and then, envisioning the skinny biologist in khakis, patiently squatting in the desert sagebrush, eye-to-eye with a box turtle and filled with love. As Gangloff writes:

> When processing the animals, I can’t help but be enamored of the vibrant and distinctive sunbursts on each carapace scute; the deep, patient gaze of the wizened females; and the showy green-blue-orange of a male’s head and forelegs. Sometimes, I must abashedly admit, I talk to the turtles. No, I must be honest, I always talk to the turtles. I call them ‘sweetie’ and ‘handsome’…. Once, an intern from the local university sarcastically commented, ‘That’s real scientific, Eric.’ Of course it’s not, but it doesn’t hurt the scientific. For science to be pertinent and powerful in the dire circumstances of our world, the days of dispassion must be over.

Ardor is also the impetus for nature and environmental writers whose work moves readers to see the connection all species share. In her marvelous 2011 article “Deep Intellect,” author Sy Montgomery explores the intelligence of octopuses, relating many new scientific findings. But her personal experience with one named Athena at the New England Aquarium is the heart of the piece:

> The moment the [aquarium] lid was off, we reached for each other…. Her eight arms boiled up, twisting, slippery, to meet mine. I plunged both my arms elbow deep into the fifty-seven-degree water. Athena’s melon-sized head bobbed to the surface…. As we gazed into each other’s eyes, Athena encircled my arms with hers…. Athena’s suckers felt like an alien’s kiss—at once a probe and a caress.

After two more powerful encounters, Montgomery says she received an email from senior aquarist Scott Dowd: "'Sorry to write with some sad news. Athena appears to be in her final days, or even hours. She will live on, though, through your conveyance.' Later that same day, Dowd wrote to tell me that she had died. To my surprise, I found myself in tears."

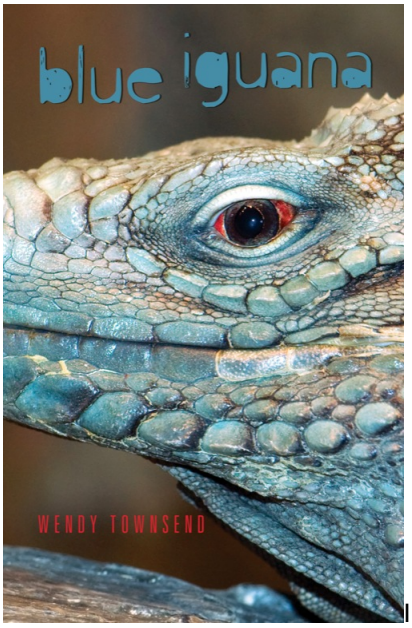
Reading this, I cried, too. Not only did I love Athena—I felt the author’s loss and that of the aquarist.

In her 2008 book *Finding Beauty in a Broken World,* Terry Tempest Williams describes spending two weeks in an

observation tower, recording the activities of prairie dogs in a Utah preserve. “I had no idea of the power of prairie dogs,” Williams writes:

> I can’t get #RR6 out of my mind, how at dusk she sits on her haunches facing the setting sun with her palms pressed together—how can this not be seen as worshipful? …Something about her reminds me of Mimi. How can a prairie dog remind me of my grandmother? Something about the way she stands straight with her head slightly raised and the quality of her mouth. Dignified. Pursed lips when in trouble…. Do we really believe we are the only animals on Earth with deeply emotional lives?

Often, I need to be reminded to slow down and pay attention—to the ground I’m walking on, to the life there, to my beating heart, to the moment and each breath. An encounter with an animal gives me all this and more. As Williams notes, “I write to begin a dialogue.” I also write to enlarge the conversation, because dialogue, anchored in ardor for every creature, can unite people in a movement.



I pick more hibiscus flowers and take them to Billy. He is sprawled on the sand, warming his belly in late-afternoon sun, when he sees me holding a flower. He comes to me quicker than before and takes it. 'Billy,' I say, 'your little cousin Berry is having a rough time.'

As if trying to understand he looks into my eyes in that way that unsettles and moves me. Somehow I get that it’s not my words he’s curious about, it’s me, my intent, my place in the scheme of things. I want to touch him; I want him to know me. Billy’s head is bigger than my fist, and I think of the scars Sandy and Meg have. 'Would you let me pet you?'

—from *Blue Iguana* by Wendy Townsend

Publishing Information

- “People Protect What They Love” [5] by Fabien Cousteau, *Huffington Post*, May 31, 2010.
- “Wild Geese” by Mary Oliver in *Dream Work* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986).
- *The Wild Braid: A Poet Reflects on a Century in the Garden* [6] by Stanley Kunitz with Gentine Lentine,

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- *The Jungle Book* by Rudyard Kipling, originally published in 1894.
- *In Search of Lost Frogs: The Quest to Find the World's Rarest Amphibians* [7] by Robin Moore (Firefly Books, 2014).
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- "Deep Intellect" [9] by Sy Montgomery, *Orion Magazine*, October 2011 (also in *The Best American Science and Nature Writing*, 2012).
- *Finding Beauty in a Broken World* [10] by Terry Tempest Williams (Pantheon, 2008).
- *Blue Iguana* [11]by Wendy Townsend (Namelos, 2014).

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Wendy Townsend is a graduate of the Vermont College MFA Program in Writing for Children and Young Adults. She is a lifelong lover of animals and has shared her home with many large lizards since she was eight years old. In 1993, she coauthored a biology and husbandry book about iguanas, and has written many articles about these lizards.

Townsend is on the faculty at the Writing Institute at Sarah Lawrence College. Her third novel, *Blue Iguana*, has just been short-listed for the 2015 Green Earth Book Award.

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