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Indian street dogs and minding animals conference

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BLOG

Indian street dogs and the Minding Animals conference



HARN

Fiona Probyn-Rapsey recounts her experience at the Minding Animals 3 conference in New Delhi, India where she was inspired to think about animal rights in Australia by seeing the local dogs.



Published 03 February 2015
Posted By Fiona Probyn-Rapsey

I got back from India last week to an unseasonably cold Sydney day, not that different to the wintry cold days of New Delhi, the location for the recent [Minding Animals Conference 3](http://mindinganimals.com/) (<http://mindinganimals.com/>), held at Jawaharlal Nehru University.

The conference was fantastic, the presentations and discussions were great and being in India for the first time was amazing. For me, there was a particular pleasure in getting to and from the Convention Centre by auto-rickshaw, a 20 minute ride through the busy streets of New Delhi, onto a large, forested campus populated with dogs (<http://jaagruti.org/information-to-empower-you/indian-street-dogs-and-their-rights/>) and peacocks (and also macaques and deer, but I never saw them).

Stepping out of the rickshaw and into the driveway of the Convention Centre there were more dogs, friendly, tail wagging, eager for a pat. To me they look a lot like dingoes (though I think I'm starting to see dingoes everywhere), with their curly tails and ginger coats. The dogs lie around on the lawns, under the trees, with a respectful distance between each of them. They'd come up to the lunch area for a pat and by day 3, we seem to have sorted ourselves into favourites.

Such free roaming dogs are rarely seen in Australia. We seem to have only 1 place for dogs in our communities: the pet. Either you're a pet or a stray. And, as a stray your only options are to be sent off to the pound to await adoption or killing. There is no possibility of not being someone's pet. This is probably why the average age of dogs in Australia is so low (around 3.5 years – similar to the street dogs in India) – hardly any dogs in Australia are lucky enough to die of old age.

The dogs that I saw in the streets around where I was staying (a residential area called Saket) looked pretty healthy and the guy who ran the Bed & Breakfast explained that many of the dogs are looked after by the locals: wormed, fed and sometimes de-sexed. They earn their keep by acting as security guards – keeping away other dogs and other visitors. The dogs at JNU certainly knew they were on to a good thing in the form of conference delegates, sneaking the occasional biscuit to them, as well as plenty of pats for those who wanted them.

The contrast between Australia and India in regards to living with animal wildlife/streetlife was significant in other ways too. I came away with the impression that the baseline for human/animal interactions in India is less violent than it is over here, as if reaching for the gun or the poison is an Australian reflex, while over there there is more tolerance for living alongside animals, a stronger expectation of having to share the landscape, the cities, the spaces.

Which is not to say that there isn't violence, because of course there is, but that there is perhaps a greater expectation that humans and animals must adjust to each other's needs because there's nowhere else to go. This was brought home to me by Shankar Raman's presentation about wildlife conservation work he and his team from Wildlife Trust of India had been doing in villages that had experienced human deaths caused by elephants. Wanting to avoid culling 'problem' elephants, the team of conservation biologists worked out that the conflict between human and elephants could be mitigated by adjustments to workplace practices. It was poor human management on tea plantations, for example, that had resulted in people being put in danger of being killed by elephants – culling/killing of the elephants was thus avoided, much to everyone's relief.

Shankar Raman and Sindhu Radhakrishna's presentations also highlighted the importance of Conservation biologists taking up what they described as an Animal Welfare approach; something which they complained had been neglected within their field. Both of their papers pointed out that it was no longer satisfactory to see conservation biology as concerned only with governable metrics of population and species, while Animal Welfare was deemed to concern itself with 'individuals'.

Too often conservation and welfare are posed as opposites. This is something that I complained about in question time too – I get a bit annoyed with the idea that animal studies 'people' are concerned more with 'individual' animal welfare. Don't we also spend a lot of time considering the billions of chickens, cattle, sheep etc raised for slaughter throughout the world? A scale that makes that little 'etc' so nasty. Massification of animal bodies is a problem that can be challenged by individuation, but that does not mean that animal studies is only interested in individuals, but in the ethical work that individuating can help to achieve. Both population and individualized perspectives are needed in order to arrive at stronger ethical frameworks for wildlife management. It was great to hear Raman and Radhakrishna's papers express excitement at the ways in which Animal studies affords them a space in which to bring together both 'welfare' and 'conservation' approaches.

The conference was particularly interesting in relation to the breadth of political options explored. Manekha Gandhi's keynote address at the start of the conference was a stand-out, berating Indian society at large for an expanding live export cattle trade, the cruelties of dairy, and all committed against the supposedly sacred cow. She advocated a stronger role for public policy debate and legislative change, and greater accountability within Indian society for the fate of its animals.

[Will Kymlicka's \(http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/social-justice-for-animals/\)](http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/social-justice-for-animals/) keynote also highlighted the possibilities for extending citizenship rights to animals, particularly by engaging with disability studies and its development of advocacy roles for citizens with limited access to direct participation in democratic processes. Lori Gruen's keynote explained the grounds of her new book – Entangled Empathy – where she shifts the emphasis away from a rights-based framework towards the need to cultivate more empathetic relations with non-human animals. Building on the feminist care tradition, Gruen insists that empathy alone is not enough (just as affect is not enough) to build social change upon – the 'entangled' addition comes in the form of ethical reflection. To do entangled empathy one must not just be empathetic but also one must consider how one's empathy actually impacts upon the lives of others. In other words, empathy is not particularly useful without ethics. I moderated this

session and had a bit of fun being a mean chair, cutting people off with 'is there a question in there?' and insisting that women got to ask as many questions as the men.

At times the conference seemed a bit male heavy, with a number of the panels being stacked out with male presenters, not unlike what happens at Environmental Humanities events also. The problem with gender representation came up for discussion at the 'Women and Animals' study circle, where we discussed the long history of feminist engagement with animal studies and whether or not this was recognized at an institutional level, or whether or not the 'pussy panic' (<http://philpapers.org/rec/FRAPPV>) continues on (See Susan Fraiman on 'pussy panic'). From my perspective, I think a good old-fashioned 'works cited' list at the end of every presentation would help highlight the contribution of feminist scholars to the field – and if yours doesn't have a good swathe of [women writers](http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/news/sue-donaldson-speaks-to-dinesh-wadiwel/) (<http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/news/sue-donaldson-speaks-to-dinesh-wadiwel/>), then it's clear that something's amiss!

The conference covered six full days, each with 6 concurrent sessions, keynotes and invited talks. The papers were mostly social science/humanities oriented and the ones that were from the more science-y side were clearly committed to entering into interdisciplinary dialogue. To me, that represents a real maturing of the field – we're getting more accustomed to having our work heard and discussed by those outside of our disciplinary homes. This is something that I find incredibly exciting about Animal studies – its interdisciplinarity – but this is also what makes it tricky too. Having said that, I get the sense that we've moved on from one of the major stumbling blocks from the early days of the field. I did not find myself mumbling (much) at the conference: animals are not (just) metaphors!

Many people that I spoke to at the conference commented that there seemed to be loads of Australian delegates. It was true – there did seem to be a lot of us. For some this seemed to suggest that we must have a lively and popular animal welfare/conservation commitment in Australia. I put a bit of a downer on this by talking about how Australia leads the world in extinction rates etc, but I did confirm that we do seem to have a very vibrant animal studies community, including a very strong up and coming generation of future scholars (there was a great panel at the conference from the 'young uns').

International conferences like Minding Animals (MAC3, MAC2 and MAC1) are a really important part of this process, as well as enlivening the internal debates within the field of animal studies, they also demonstrate by sheer numbers the growth of this field across many countries. I'm looking forward to the next one in 2018 (which might possibly be in North America).

Finally, a big thanks to the organizing team, particularly Vivek Menon (Executive Director and CEO of the Wildlife Trust of India, and Chair of the MAC3 Organizing Committee), Prajna Panda and Rod Bennison and Kim Stallwood of Minding Animals International.

Dr Fiona Probyn-Rapsey (<https://sydney.academia.edu/FionaProbynRapsey>) is a member of the Human Animal Research Network (HARN) at the Sydney Environment Institute and a senior lecturer at the University of Sydney. Her research interests include Human Animal studies, critical race studies and post-colonialism.

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Kim Stallwood (<http://www.kimstallwood.com>) says:

It was great to meet you Fiona! Many thanks for such an informative report. Delighted to know you found MAC3 so worthwhile.

February 4, 2015

Reply (<http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/indian-street-dogs-and-the-minding-animals-conference/?replytocom=41453#respond>)

Ramchandra says:

Fiona ma'am ! i think you use word Delhi & India interchangeably. I don't know why many Participants of this conference made a generalization about India by just observing JNU ecosystem. Delhi gives completely false image of India.its global & metro City.overcrowd, worlds most polluted. All Animals are in such a poor state, many times i feel helpless.Heart of india lives in Villages.740 million people are living in rural area.diversity in culture,food, down to earth. I believe you just fall in love with India when you roam.

February 5, 2015

[Reply \(http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/indian-street-dogs-and-the-minding-animals-conference/?replytocom=41629#respond\)](http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/indian-street-dogs-and-the-minding-animals-conference/?replytocom=41629#respond)

[Indj-yah! Or, wouldn't you rather be a free roamer? | \(Meat\) lovers' guide to veganism \(https://drsinandmrslomez.wordpress.com/2015/02/10/indj-yah/\)](https://drsinandmrslomez.wordpress.com/2015/02/10/indj-yah/) says:

[...] O'Sullivan's write-up on Knowing Animals Past and Present and Fiona Probyn-Rapsey's on Human Animal Research Network. For tweets tweeted as it happened! look [...]

February 10, 2015

[Reply \(http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/indian-street-dogs-and-the-minding-animals-conference/?replytocom=42371#respond\)](http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/indian-street-dogs-and-the-minding-animals-conference/?replytocom=42371#respond)

[Prasad Np \(http://desiTraveler.com\)](http://desiTraveler.com) says:

Hi Fiona:Your posts brings a new perspective to the strays in India. As we see them around always we never think much about them just accept them as part of our cities. It is interesting to note that in Australia a totally different approach is taken towards stray dogs.

February 12, 2015

[Reply \(http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/indian-street-dogs-and-the-minding-animals-conference/?replytocom=42832#respond\)](http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/indian-street-dogs-and-the-minding-animals-conference/?replytocom=42832#respond)

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