

“The Biology and Philosophy of Human-Animal Relationships”

Zoology/Wildlife Ecology 335

Patricia B. McConnell

This course is an inquiry into the complex and often contradictory relationships between humans and other animals. It begins by examining the paradox of humanity—asking when and how humans, clearly still members of Class Mammalia, became an animal like no other. We will do a comparative study of several aspects of behavior often labeled as unique in humans, including culture, tool use and language. The semester continues with a discussion of a major change in the relationship between humans and other animals, the process of domestication. We'll look at how the process could have begun, and the profound affect that agriculture and domestication had on all the species involved.

A substantial section of the course is devoted to the study of ethology and behavioral ecology, first in a general sense, and then related specifically to common domestic animals. Domestic animal ethology will be studied through a series of lectures, slides, videos and live demonstrations. The Ethology section ends with a comparative study of cognition in human and non-human animals, and an objective process by which to determine suffering in other species. This section provides a foundation on which to form opinions about welfare and rights issues later in the semester.

The next section of the semester is an inquiry into philosophical perspectives of our duties toward other animals. Beginning with Aristotle, the course provides a brief history of the changing nature of our perceptions of other animals, and beliefs about our obligations toward them. Several different perspectives are examined in depth, distinguishing between concerns about animal welfare vs. concerns about animal rights, the viewpoint of ecological holists, and the balancing act of two factor egalitarianism.

The semester concludes with a substantial section on current social controversies involving our relationships with animals. It begins with considerations of our relationship with wild animals and the ecosystems in which they live, and continues with the biology and philosophy of using animals in bio-medical research, in agriculture, and as companions. This section of the course includes guest lecturers from a variety of fields, from wildlife conservation to agriculture.

The goal of the course is to provide students the foundation needed to make thoughtful, educated decisions about their relationships with other animals. It does not prescribe what those decisions should be, but rather encourages all citizens to examine each issue—from wildlife conservation to eating meat to keeping pets—from many different perspectives. None of these issues are simple or black and white, and each of us needs to thoughtfully examine many different perspectives before making informed and personally ethical decisions about our own behavior.

This is not an easy course. It involves a relatively heavy reading load throughout in the semester, and research for—and careful writing of—three short papers (1-2 pages) throughout in the semester. Do not take this course if you need some easy credits, but do consider it if you are interested in gaining knowledge and perspectives that will inform and enrich the rest of your life.