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Seals as humans

- ideas of anthropomorphism and disneyfication

by

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INTRODUCTION

Much of the animal ethics and welfare debate today is accused of anthropomorphism, which is when human mental states and characteristics are used to describe animals. It is generally considered that these attitudes do not assist animals. According to many natural scientists these qualities given to the animals, usually fail to mark what animals really are, that animal needs and responses are actually very different from human needs and responses.

Non the less, anthropomorphism is a complex cultural and emotional phenomenon, as it is closely related to the human capacity of feeling empathy for another individual. This can sometimes be misguided, but proves at other times to be a powerful and useful tool in the interaction with non-human animals. Historically it was instrumental in raising the awareness of the plight of animals in society, which led to ethical benefits such as demands for the humane treatment of animals and even for animal rights. Anthropomorphism should therefore not offhand be regarded as a defect in society but as a potentially valuable cultural, ethical, and scientific force (Huges, 2001).

OBJECTIVE

The aim was to find out if anthropomorphism and disneyfication have any impact on how the tourists see animals. If it has any impact it would help to know how much and where the tourists could possible get the ideas of these phenomenons.



THEORY

More and more the tourist industry is seeking to work with nature instead of controlling nature for its own benefits. The position of welfare and rights of animals within tourism development are rather forgotten areas. Many of the social sciences and humanities have lately been creating the space for research which animals play the main role. Even though it is acknowledged that 'wildlife tourism' should deal with both wild and captive situations, much of the data has only focused on the issues from people who seek contact with the animals in their natural surroundings. Animals are a part of tourism in many ways. They are either caught and displayed in some form of captivity, used as a way of transport or they can be sought out in the wild. They can also become a signifier of a specific place, for example on postcards, posters or in booklets. Animals are more often considered objects than subjects in tourism. They tend to get manipulated in their own surroundings and habitat and seen as passive rather than looked upon as agents or actors in their own right. Although some attempts have been made in order to format the tourist industry to their own needs. An example of that can be found where wildlife tourism has taken place, where human/animal interaction goes on in the animal's natural environment (Huges, 2001).

Giving animals human characteristics has not become a focus point for social research for long but for centuries scientist have researched the tendency to give characteristics or even characters to different societies, nations or races. This tendency is very old and quite widespread and called imagology.



METHOD

Data collections

During this summer the tourist who visited The Icelandic Seal Center at Hvammstangi had the option of answering a short visitor survey. All adult tourists were asked if they would be interested in taking the short survey but not all of them participated. The sample turned out to be very random like intended and expected. Total of 162 tourists answered the visitor survey. One of the questions was why they chose to see seals.

RESULTS

When the tourists answered our visitor survey this summer it became clear that anthropomorphism is very well widespread. Many of them answered because the seals were cute, funny or have nice eyes. In other words, they gave the seals some characteristics of humans. Thanks to Walt Disney's creations this tendency of making animals like humans or giving them human assets is called disneyfication. Anthropomorphism and disneyfication are very much alike concepts. The tourists used many adjectives to describe the seals which are generally used to describe humans or perhaps rather to describe babies. Total of 26 answered when asked why they were interested in seals that the seals had cute/nice/beautiful eyes and 3 others make similar comments about the seals eyes. 13 said the seals were cute, 2 said they were funny, 3 said they were curious, 4 said they like their behavior (seals being generally considered playful and curious) and one tourist described them as human. The seals obviously have some resembles to humans according to our summer tourists. Beside from this comments many tourist mentioned that they had general interest in seals, they want to see them in their natural habitat/environment or they would like to see them because they never have before or cause there are no seals in their countries. See figure 1.

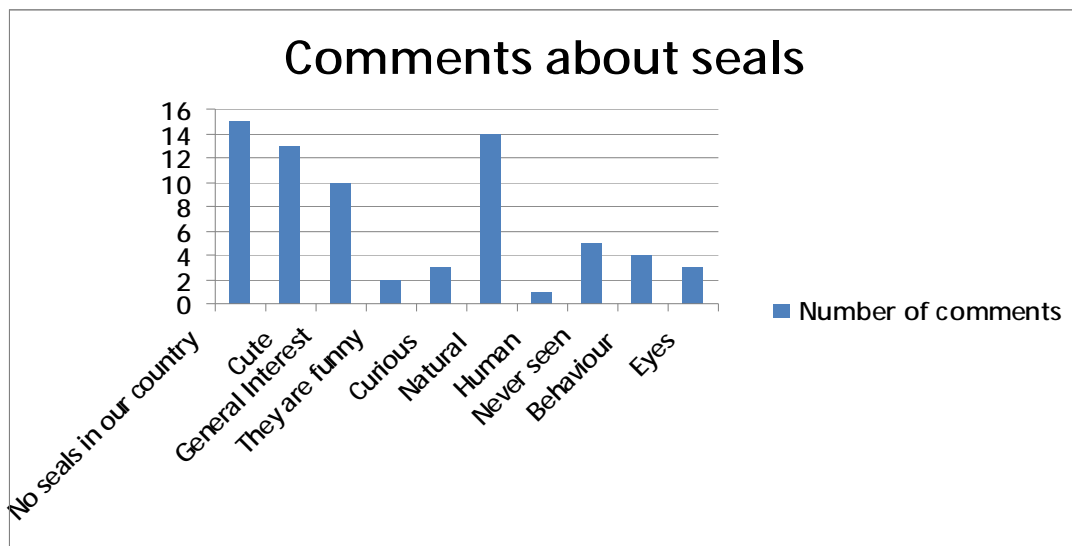


Figure 1. Some of the comments about seals made by the tourists.

DISCUSSION

It is clear that the tourists are fond of seals and their appearance resembles some human assets or characteristics. It seems to be that the seals eyes are specially lovable and many tourists made a comment that the eyes are humanlike. Perhaps shouldn't the statement about the seals eyes come as any surprise since there are many folklore all around the world connected to seals. Humans find this animal very beautiful, specially it's skin and eyes. The seal is considered to have many human assets, for example their inquisitiveness, the shape of their head and last but not least their eyes. This particular motive often occurs in the Icelandic folklore tales that the seal has human eyes. Because of that there are many folklore tales which consist of people being trapped in seals bodies or seals being the deceased (tekið þann 10.8 af <http://visindavefur.hi.is/svar.php?id=6378>).



The tourists gave the seals other traits that are usually used to describe humans or perhaps babies, such as cute, funny and curious. This behavior, to give animals human assets or characteristics, has been called anthropomorphism or disneyfication. These concepts are used when animals are in one way or another made human or given some qualities that are belong to humans. urthermore, it is possible to give even societies human assets and characteristics and that is called imagology.

In the tourist industry today it is becoming more and more increased that tourist can see animals in their natural habitat without disturbing them or at least trying to disturb them as little as possible. Animals are earning more right as individuals and therefore gaining more personal space and respect. Whether the animals are getting these rights due to anthropomorphism or disneyfication is not certain. Hopefully that is a development which will only continue to strengthen the tourist industry and will benefit the animals as well.

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References

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