



**SERRC**

Social Epistemology  
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>  
ISSN: 2471-9560

Bears as Neighbors

Robert Frodeman, Independent Scholar, [robert.frodeman@gmail.com](mailto:robert.frodeman@gmail.com)

---

Frodeman, Robert. 2021. "Bears as Neighbors." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 10 (5): 25-27. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-5QC>.

Spring has arrived in the Rockies. This is where I live now—in Wyoming, the least populated state in the union, near the town of Jackson, at the junction of the Hoback and Snake Rivers. While still connected to the group mind via the internet, and harboring no illusions of nature being pristine, the dominant presence here is wild nature.

The snow has mostly gone from the flats, and the kayaks are out on the Hoback. The ospreys returned in late March, and now fish the Hoback each day, carrying their catch to the [top of a crooked tree](#) to dissect the wriggling fish. The bears have come out of hibernation, which has brought the tourists out who hunt bears with cameras in hand.

The emergence of the bears and the reaction that they draw raises questions that were tabled locally last fall—about how we interact with bears, and wildlife generally, and what the likely consequences of these interactions will be. This issue will take on extra urgency in the coming weeks: the West will see a banner tourist season this summer. We can expect more human-animal interactions, confrontations, and one suspects, tragedies.

The most famous of our bears is 399, who has her own [Wikipedia page](#). I've heard it said on more than one occasion that Bear 399 and her cubs, the most famous bears in the West, are already dead—not actually, of course, but that behavior patterns have been established, and we are simply waiting for the final parts of the story to play out. 399 and her litter have become habituated to human structures and human food sources. It's inevitable that they will wander through suburban neighborhoods, turn over garbage bins, and roust chicken coops. This will happen a couple of times and the decision will be made to follow established policy and to put them down. Or without the euphemism, to kill them.

The people making these comments are conservationists. The comments are made in remorse and anger. They view the situation as a tragedy—a tragedy that we humans have set in motion. The animals are seen as victims. This account assumes a lack of any agency on their part. And the conclusion, that these animals will have to be killed—after all, we've been taught that a fed bear is a dead bear—isn't questioned.

### **Policies and Categories**

The current policy is based on the crude ontology we've used to divide animals. We place them into one of two categories: animals are either domestic or wild. Domestic animals are dependent on us. They are to be cared for, and we are allowed to celebrate our interactions with them. On the other side are wild animals. They properly live their lives free from human interference, and any influence we have on them or interaction we have with them diminishes them and is liable to lead to their destruction.

The distinction between domesticated and wild is held onto despite abundant evidence that the natural world does not so easily break into two. It leaves aside a whole range of categories: animals who are pests, or food, or contained by zoos or in labs, or who are

entertainers in circuses, and those animals who partner with us in aesthetic activities like dressage.

Here in the West many of our actions quietly acknowledge the inadequacy of our bivalence. I don't see anyone protesting bird feeders, or the creation of fish ladders, or the existence of the nesting platforms for ospreys that you see around the West. And that's not even to bring up our 100 yearlong feeding of 10,000 elk in the winter at the National Elk Refuge just north of Jackson.

If there are human interactions with 399, or with the fox M-15, who was put down last fall in Teton National Park because it had become too bold with humans (jumping on picnic tables and the like), the blame is placed on us. We enticed them by leaving food out or by not properly dealing with our garbage. But this doesn't fully account for the situation. Sure, there are cases where we've overtly attracted them. There was a recent account in the newspaper here of a woman who had been feeding moose and bear on her suburban property for years. But animals are not simply passive. They are intelligent agents as well, searching out and seizing opportunities. Even if we are on our best behavior, animals will still be on the lookout for new food sources, domiciles, and entertainment.

### **Rethinking Human-Animal Interactions**

We need new concepts and categories for human-animal interactions. Donaldson and Kymlicka (2013) offer help here.<sup>1</sup> They argue that animals should be viewed as citizens—a view that sounds absurd at first but which steadily gains credence. They note that we already treat different types of humans as moral subjects, even though they are unable to fully function as moral agents: children, the elderly, and the mentally disabled. We recognize that each of these groups have interests even if they are unable to articulate them. The case is the same for animals: it's relatively unproblematic to recognize that animals would prefer not to live in cages or be eaten.

What's more, animal also function as moral agents. When 399 surveys her surroundings and discovers new food sources she is not simply a victim. Clearly she and other animals sometimes fall into a category between the domestic and the wild. Some animals are better viewed as neighbors. As active agents, animals choose how close to get to us.

We are confronted by a spectrum of behavior. Some animals, like mountain lions, want little or nothing to do with us. Others, like raccoons or bears, are constantly on the lookout for opportunities tied to our existence—living beneath our porch or raiding our garbage. And then there are the horses and sheep and cats and dogs who share a domestic life with us.

Of course, we should do better at not creating attractive nuisances. But it's also important to recognize that in raiding a trash can, animals are not merely victims of human intervention. They are also expressing their own desires, as do squirrels who nest in our homes and deer

---

<sup>1</sup> Donaldson, Sue and Will Kymlicka. 2013. *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights*. Oxford University Press.

who enjoy the protection of being near populated areas. And if we really want to take responsibility for our actions, we should find ways to stop punishing animals (i.e., killing them) for their intelligent responses to a human-inhabited environment.