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(E)valuations of More-Than-Human Care

FROM THE SERIES: Multispecies Care in the Sixth Extinction

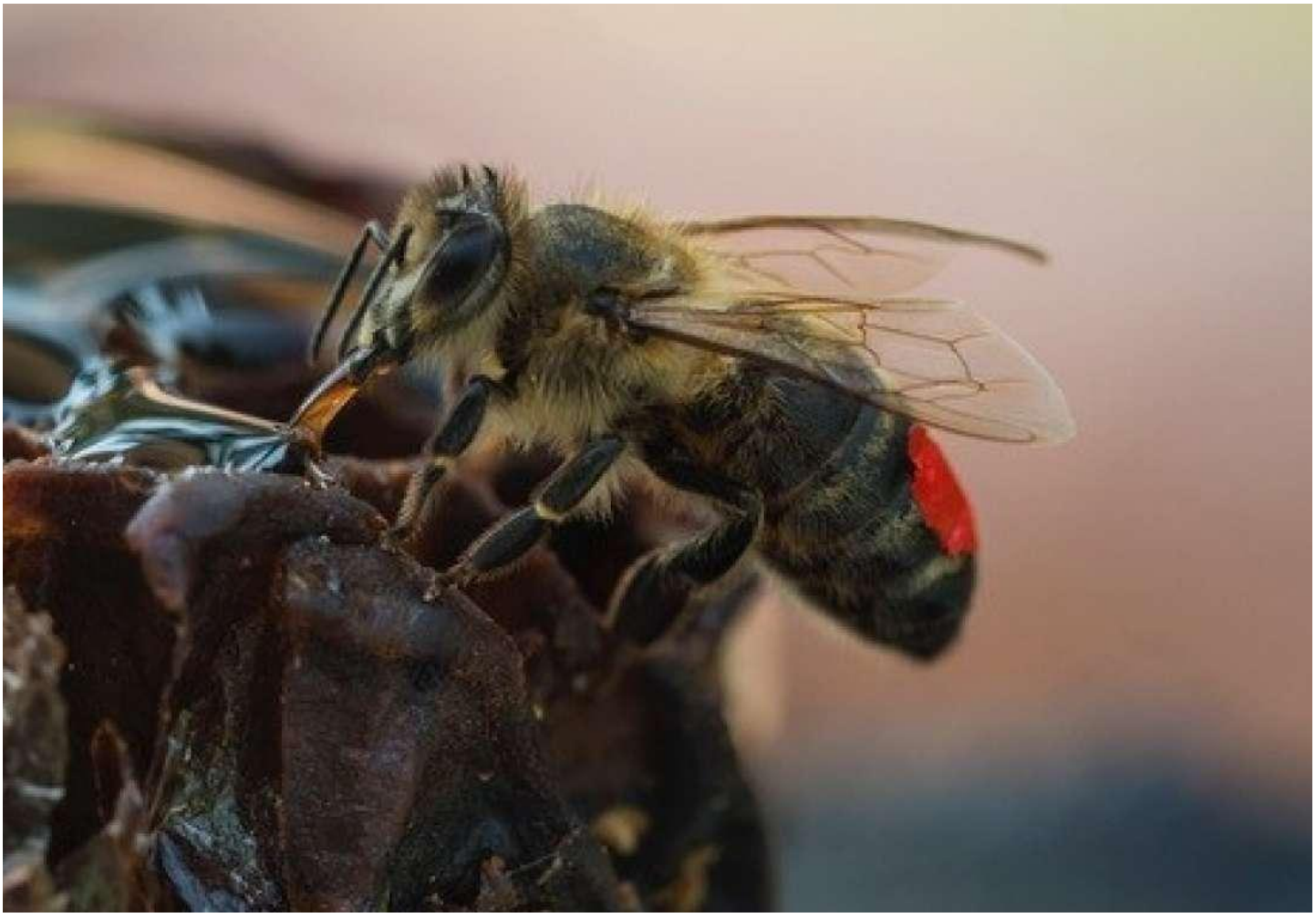

Photo by Felix Remter.

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Smiling bashfully at the off-screen television reporter, the lady starts speaking calmly. He's now three years old, she says brightly, cuddling A, a toddler-sized orangutan in a blue hoodie. As she describes what he's like and strokes his frizzy head, however, her eyes well up. "I treated him just like my own child," she declares shakily. "Even though he's an orangutan, he's just like my own child." A nuzzles her. She recounts sleeping in the same bed, buying him condensed milk, and putting him in Pampers. "He's just like my own child."

The camera follows her through the neighborhood as she carries A to a waiting car, pausing to give him a chocolate bar. At the airport, a tearful embrace. Then A is passed over—not without a struggle—to the authorities. He is put in a cage and flown to an orangutan rehabilitation center elsewhere in Indonesian Borneo, where he will learn to live as a wild animal. Hunting, poaching, and human–wildlife conflict are key drivers of orangutan population decline in Borneo and Sumatra (Voigt et al. 2018). A common casualty of such encounters are baby orangutans (e.g., Freund, Rahman, and Knott 2017), which are often taken from their dead mothers and trafficked or sold as pets to villagers or townspeople. If discovered, such orangutans are confiscated by the authorities and moved to rehabilitation centers—largely run by NGOs with funding from the global North—where they are checked, treated, and prepared for their "return to the wild."

Confiscations are justified on the grounds that orangutans are wild animals that belong in the forest, not with humans. Baby orangutans are cute, warn officials and conservationists, but prolonged human contact can stunt their development, cause malnourishment, illness, or death, and result in their confinement as they grow bigger, stronger, less controllable. By this logic, pet ownership—however loving—involves the *wrong* sort of care, ensnaring orangutans in potentially lethal cross-species intimacies.

Conversely, orangutan rehabilitation is cast as the *right* sort of care. Although their approaches vary (Palmer 2020), rehabilitation programs work along similar lines: here, vets, "babysitters," and other humans care for orangutans in a bid to equip them with skills for survival in the forest. In these curious coteries of humans and apes, cross-species care and intimacy are avowedly temporary, means to a worthwhile end that benefits individuals and the species.

In rehabilitation teleology, the kindest outcome for orangutans is thus separation: an unravelling of their ties with humans and a restoration of the species divide. But separation

is not always achievable (Parreñas 2018): some orangutans will never be released, and release does not guarantee survival in forests filled with human and nonhuman dangers. These possibilities thus raise a sticky question: are such outcomes that much kinder for orangutans (see also Palmer 2020, 134–66)?

Former pet owners and other villagers may well ask this question—just as they sometimes ask why moneyed foreigners care more about orangutans than humans (Meijaard and Sheil 2008; Howson 2015, 143). Their concerns are thrown into relief by pet confiscations, when seemingly similar nurturing practices—feeding, cuddling, communicating, playing—are differentiated and ordered in a hierarchy of acceptability. Underpinned by the same Western naturalist dichotomy that frames global biodiversity conservation (Adams 2004), this evaluative process valorizes one regime of care (rehabilitation) while delegitimizing the other (pet-keeping)—defining it as *not*-care, unwitting cruelty.

This is not an abstract ordering exercise but one with material consequences. In the uneven playing field of global conservation, (e)valuations of kindness-as-care turn orangutans and pet owners into legitimate targets of intervention. At stake here is not just what gets cared for, but who has the right to care, whose care is recognized as such—and who or what even defines "care."

Orangutan pet-keeping is an *ethnographic* instance that muddies various *ethico-political* impulses in anthropology. First, there's anthropologists' traditional, usually morally relativist, duty of care to ordinary people like A's "mother." Why, we might ask, shouldn't they be allowed to form whatever cross-species bonds they like? Second, there's recent disciplinary interest in more-than-human coexistence and nonhuman subjecthood. Shouldn't orangutans' agency, autonomy, and affective ties to humans be accounted for? Yet, all this is tempered by a third concern: the fact that ultimately, pet-keeping can have detrimental, even fatal, consequences for orangutans. Given this danger, is it not kinder to remove these pets before such care morphs into confinement, illness, or death? And shouldn't saving a critically endangered species outweigh the "violent-care" (van Dooren 2015) necessitated by individual confiscations?

Often implicit, these different ethico-political impulses become jarringly visible in conflict, parsing our loyalties, priorities, and ethical boundaries. Their awkward conjuncture reminds us that care is not an unqualified good. Rather, it entails a variable set of practices, ideas,

relations, and ontologies that are enacted and evaluated in different (sometimes contradictory) ways (e.g., van Dooren 2015)—not only in conservation but also in anthropology.

By training our reflexive lenses onto anthropology's own ideals, values, and (e)valuations of care, we can provincialize and unsettle them, asking what conceptual and ethico-political orderings they sustain (Chua and Mathur 2018). But doing so means acknowledging the risks and potential downsides of anthropological practices of care, and their un/intended effects. Who/what do we prioritize—and elide—in our efforts to care? Do we inadvertently harm through our care, or unwittingly delegitimize the care of others? What even gives anthropologists the obligation or right to care? And how do we hold (analytical, conceptual, ethnographic) space for ethically problematic forms of care? Rather than resolving such discomfiting tensions, perhaps there is something to be gained by foregrounding them in our work, and thinking carefully—and care-fully—about how our ethics, praxis, and ethnography inflect each other.

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Back to Series Description