

JOINT OPEN LETTER TO THE ASSOCIATED PRESS CALLING FOR A CHANGE IN ANIMAL PRONOUNS — ANIMALS ARE A WHO, NOT A WHAT

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To:

Paula Froke

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In the 1960s, world-renowned ethologist and conservationist Dr. Jane Goodall submitted her first scientific paper on chimpanzees that was promptly returned to her to be edited. Every place she had written *he* or *she* to describe a chimpanzee had been replaced with *it*, and every *who* had been replaced with *which*.

Goodall refused to budge and won a small battle for nonhuman animals back then, but decades later we're still waiting for respected style guides like The Associated Press Stylebook to catch up on the relative pronouns used to describe them.

In an age struggling with industrialized animal cruelty, the sixth mass extinction of species, a climate crisis, and the exploitation of the natural world, the way we use language influences the way we see our relationship with our environment and the nonhuman animals we share it with.

This isn't a niche topic or a trend in language, and it affects a broad range of stakeholders. Our lives intersect with nonhuman animals in myriad ways. They live in our homes as our companions and visit our yards as wild guests. They're hunted, farmed and eaten. They're raised and killed for their skins and fur. They're used in research and entertainment and held captive in zoos and aquariums.

Wild and domesticated nonhuman animals are everywhere around us, and the scientific consensus is that they too are conscious beings.

Conscious beings cannot be described similarly to cars, or couches, as *it* and *that* and *which*. It is inaccurate and unjust to describe nonhuman animals as if they were inanimate objects, yet it's done every single day — and writers are instructed to do so at the behest of widely-used and respected style guides, such as The Associated Press Stylebook.

Mass media, which defaults to this guide in particular, has a great influence on our perception and therefore has an enormous responsibility to portray nonhuman animals as precisely as

possible. This is especially true considering the overlap of nonhuman animals and social justice issues that are being increasingly covered by journalists.

Yet the current references to them as *it*, *that* and *which* reduces individual nonhuman animals deserving of our understanding, respect and protection to mere objects to be owned and exploited for utilitarian purposes.

The Associated Press Stylebook instructs writers not to apply a personal pronoun to an animal unless their sex has been established, or they have a name. This is too limiting to writers as well as fellow nonhuman animals, most of whom are discussed abstractly and thus their sex is not established. We pay respect to humans whose sex is indeterminate or gender fluid by using *he/she* or the non-binary term *they*. That same courtesy should be extended to all animals, as they are gendered beings.

When gender is known, the standard guidance should be, *she/her/hers* and *he/him/his*, regardless of species. When it is unknown, the gender-neutral *they*, *he/she*, or *his/hers* should be used. It is also preferable to use *who* rather than *that* or *which* when describing any individual nonhuman animal. [See full recommendation at *Animals and Media*.](#)

“When I began my research and shared it at Cambridge, I was told that my findings and approaches, including giving the chimpanzees names, were wrong. I was also told that surely the realizations that chimpanzees have individuality and emotions were wrong - at the time it was believed that other animals were essentially automatons devoid of complexity and very different from humans. How wrong they all were. Thankfully, we have come very far in our understanding of the other animals with whom we share this planet. We know that they feel joy, pain, grieve, and demonstrate compassion and altruism. We are not separate in kind from other species, but rather by mere degree. I've spent my life working to grow respect for nonhuman animals, and to ensure a future for the complex tapestry of life on Earth, but as we face devastating losses and cruelty to individuals and species, we must do everything we can to help people recognize the sentience and innate value of other animals. I've often said that to make change you must reach the heart, and to reach the heart you must tell stories. The way we write about other animals shapes the way we see them - we must recognize that every individual nonhuman animal is a 'who,' not a 'what.' I hope that we can advance our standards in this regard globally to refer to animals as individuals, and no longer refer to them as objects, so that the stories we tell spark compassion and action for these fellow beings," said Dr. Goodall.

For language to achieve accurate communication of the world around us that allows us to educate ourselves, make informed decisions, and navigate a way forward, it must continuously

evolve. This change would be a simple, yet monumental, step towards promoting accuracy in communication and ending the objectification of nonhuman animals we live amongst.

The undersigned individuals and organizations have long held that this update should be made, and agree that it should be made as soon as possible. We would appreciate hearing what efforts The Associated Press is planning to make in this regard. Thank you.

Sincerely,



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