

## Kim Stallwood Interviews Mark Hawthorne

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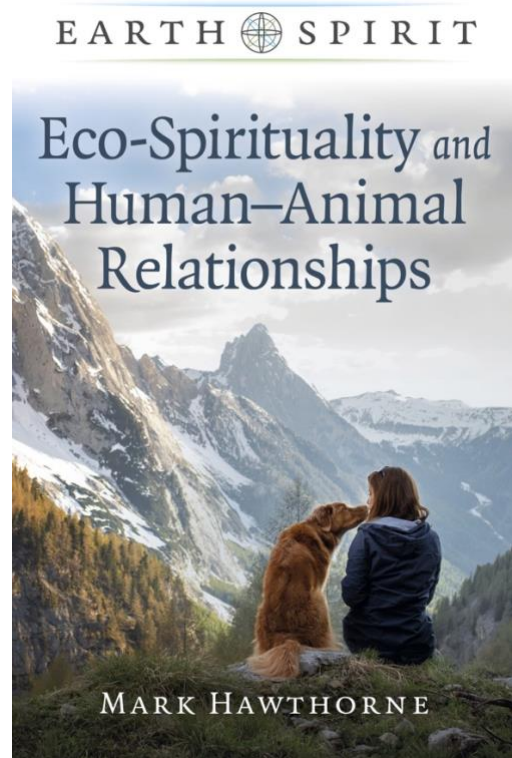
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Mark Hawthorne is the author of five books on animals, animal rights, and social justice: *The Way of the Rabbit*; *A Vegan Ethic: Embracing A Life Of Compassion Toward All*; *Bleating Hearts: The Hidden World of Animal Suffering*; and *Striking at the Roots: A Practical Guide to Animal Activism*, which empowers people around the world to get active for animals. He stopped eating meat after an encounter with one of India's many cows in 1992 and became an ethical vegan a decade later.

*What prompted you to write Eco-Spirituality and Human-Animal Relationships?*

My publisher, John Hunt Publishing, has several imprints, including Changemakers, which has published most of my books. Another of their imprints, Moon Books, asked me to write this book as part of their “Earth Spirit” series. This series includes a number of titles, with each one dedicated to our planet's future. Since my writing has mainly focused on animals—and they know me to be a spiritual person—I suppose they thought I would be a good fit for *Eco-Spirituality and Human-Animal Relationships*.



I'm glad they asked me to write this, because, as you know, writing a book makes you scrutinize your feelings about the subject you're examining. There are things that I believed about Nature in general and

animals in particular that I have never put into words, and writing this book was an excellent way for me to articulate those feelings. I have written about our relationships with animals before, but this is the first book I've written that includes a special emphasis on spiritual aspects of those relationships—both the good, such as how many people bond with their companion animals, and the bad, such as the tradition of “honoring” animals used for food for their “sacrifice” before eating them.

### **What do you understand eco-spirituality to mean?**

Eco-spirituality has many definitions. Some people view it as a manifestation of the spiritual connection between human beings and the environment. Others see it as the connection between environmental activism and spirituality.

For me, eco-spirituality is feeling emotionally and spiritually connected to Nature. It is an abiding respect for our planet and all the species who call it home. For so long, humans have considered themselves separate from the natural world—or even above it, as if Nature is something to be conquered. Instead, from the viewpoint of the eco-spiritualist, humanity is responsible for the preservation of Nature.

It also means finding beauty not just in the obvious, such as picturesque mountain peaks and charismatic megafauna, but in something unexpected yet still natural, like a tenacious weed or the veins of a dead leaf or the colors in a handful of dirt.

Incidentally, eco-spirituality is an umbrella term that also includes eco-feminism. Although they both involve humans and the natural world, as I understand it, eco-feminism explores how men oppress and exploit both women and Nature.

### **How do you describe the human-animal relationship from the perspective of an eco-spirituality relationship?**

I would describe the human-animal relationship as complicated and inconsistent. There are those animals whom we bond with and lavish our affection on; we call them pets, companion animals, or even refer to them as our “kids.” There are animals in Nature whom we admire from a distance, in awe of their beauty. And there are those animals we use for a wide variety of purposes, such as food, clothing, entertainment, and research. Every major religion says that there is a spiritual dimension to our relationship with the natural world—and protection of animals is supposedly a fundamental principle—yet religions exploit animals as well, which is at best counterintuitive and at worst hypocritical.

As we consider our relationship with animals and the rest of Nature, I believe we must ask ourselves what we can do to help repair the damage humanity has done to them. What responsibility do we have to not only reverse the climate crisis, clean the ocean and rivers, stop deforestation, and halt species extinction, but to ensure that the habits, practices, and choices that brought us to this point are not repeated by future generations—and how can eco-spirituality help?

We can learn a great deal from Indigenous communities in North America, who have long regarded humans as part of the natural world, not controllers of it; Nature is not to be conquered but celebrated as divine. The Iroquois, for example, see other living creatures as possessing qualities of humanness, complete with souls and temperaments that are not always benevolent. For them, animals are not “lesser beings” to be exploited but individuals with great power and wisdom with whom humanity shares a transcendental link.

Indeed, Native American traditions played an important role in the development of American Transcendentalism, which began in the mid-19th century. The Transcendentalists revered Nature and

believed that studying it would help them understand the divine. Henry David Thoreau was one of the movement's leading members. "My profession is to be always on the alert to find God in nature," he wrote in his journal in 1851, "to know his lurking-places, to attend all the oratorios, the operas, in nature." For Thoreau and his fellow Transcendentalists, the divine was present in everything and everyone. In his book *The Maine Woods*, Thoreau wrote:

*Every creature is better alive than dead, men and moose and pine trees, and he who understands it aright will rather preserve its life than destroy it.*

### **How do you put into practice eco-spirituality in your life?**

My partner, Lauren, and I feel very fortunate to live in California, where we have year-round access to the outdoors and get to enjoy an abundance of wildlife as well as the ocean and forests. We love to explore the coast and to hike in the hills. We appreciate the sea otters, sea lions, gulls, monarch butterflies, pelicans, rabbits, lizards, squirrels, and all the other animals we encounter. And we get to see evidence of them, such as deer tracks.



We also participate in docent-led nature walks in our community, and these are great opportunities to experience Nature and learn new ways to connect with her. On a recent tour at Pismo Beach, the docent taught us how to rescue clams who have surfaced on the beach, and Lauren and I found a honeybee, who was struggling in the sand. We picked her up, fed her some bee food that we always carry, and watched her gradually clean the sand grains from her wings, head, and body. Holding this little creature in our hands was a surprisingly moving experience, and even after she was well enough to fly again, she stayed with us, sitting on my hat or on Lauren's bag before finally moving on. (*Please see the above photo of Mark with the bee on his hat.*) The other participants on the tour and even our guide seemed a bit amazed by all this, so we were able to talk about how everything in Nature is connected.

Even though I feel closest to Nature when I am out in it, I also feel a connection when I am reading how others appreciate it, especially writers such as Thoreau, who very clearly saw the divine in Nature, and the

poet Robert Burns, who referred to animals as our “fellow mortals”; here is a man who was so distressed by having accidentally destroyed the nest of a little field mouse that he wrote an entire poem about it!

One of the things that appeals to me most about eco-spirituality is that it’s informed by what is already around us. In other words, it is not a spirituality that is about *seeking* something—such as a higher power, for example—but celebrates a reality we are already present in. That’s not to say I don’t admire the act of pilgrimage or seeking the divine; I have been privileged to spend many hours in temples, churches, monasteries, and sacred sites around the world, and I have much respect for the comfort this type of spirituality can bring to people. I just find it more spiritually fulfilling to engage with companion animals or walk among trees or rescue a bee who needs a little help.

### **Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of life on Earth?**

I would describe my feelings as conflicted. Maybe my attitude is influenced by current events, but I feel rather pessimistic right now. Or maybe it’s because as I sit here today, I am recovering from COVID, which the latest data suggests originated from animals. In fact, one thing that COVID has in common with tuberculosis, influenza, hepatitis, Ebola, measles, syphilis, and HIV/AIDS—aside from being generally dreadful and infectious diseases—is that they all originated in animals before being transmitted to humans, a process known as zoonosis. Indeed, an estimated 60 percent of all human diseases and 75 percent of emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic.



Humans have a very active role in this phenomenon in that most of the animals from whom we acquire diseases are raised and killed for human consumption, though some are wild animals. In either case, what the transmission of disease makes clear is that our relationships with animals can have lasting and devastating consequences. Although there have been many cases of wild animals infecting people—notably chimpanzees who were likely the source of HIV when they were eaten by humans—much of the cross-species transmission has been related to animal agriculture. And it is here that we find what is arguably humanity’s greatest opportunity to rethink and redress 10,000 years of animal exploitation and abuse.

One thing that does make me feel somewhat optimistic is the Land Back movement in much of North America, where colonization has stolen land from Indigenous peoples. This movement seeks to restore ancestral territories to them, the lands’ traditional stewards, including water and natural resources.

Lands managed by Indigenous communities are as healthy as some protected areas. One reason for this is that there is a big difference between the Eurocentric attitude toward Nature, which emphasizes “mastery” over the land and animals, and that of the Indigenous peoples, who view themselves as an intrinsic part of Nature, not above it.

For example, we have a native tribe in California called the Winnemem Wintu, and for millennia they protected the Chinook salmon, whom they consider sacred. The Winnemem Wintu ensured their safety as the fishes swam upstream to reproduce, even carrying them in baskets over obstacles. Then in 1945, the Shasta Dam was completed. The hydroelectric dam not only displaced tribal members and submerged hundreds of their villages, burial grounds, and sacred sites under water, but it cut the salmon off from their spawning grounds. Salmon don’t just swim, feed, and reproduce in rivers—they clean them. So when the salmon population declined, other animals, including deer and bears, became scarce. The good news is that on October 9, 2023 (Indigenous Peoples’ Day) the tribe was able to reacquire more than a thousand acres of their ancestral land, and they are working on a 300-mile-long waterway that will bypass the dam and restore salmon populations above the Shasta Reservoir.

I believe that the more land we restore to Indigenous peoples, the more we are securing the future of life on Earth.