**The Grizzly Beat**

**Transcript**

**Dr. Marc Bekoff**

**Episode 16**

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Louisa Willcox: This is Louisa Willcox with the Grizzly Beat. And we’re delighted to be here today with Dr. Marc Bekoff. Marc is a former professor of ecology and evolutionary biology at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and is a fellow of the Animal Behavior Society and a past Guggenheim fellow. His scientific research includes animal behavior, cognitive ethology, which is the study of animal minds, behavioral ecology, and compassionate conservation. He’s published extensively on animal human interactions and animal protection publishing more than 1000 essays and 30 books so far. Marc is also an ambassador of Jane Goodall’s Roots and Shoots Program, in which he works with students of all ages, senior citizens and prisoners. And he and Jane co-founded the organization Ethologists for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. We’re delighted to have you here today Marc.

Marc: My pleasure, Louisa, thank you for your interest in what I have to say.

L: Absolutely. How did you first get interested in animals and animal research?

M: My parents tell me that when I was about three, I began asking them what animals were thinking and what they were feeling. I grew up in Brooklyn, New York on a lot of concrete. But there were dogs and squirrels and birds and insects -- and that actually led to my whole idea about minding animals. I wrote a book called Minding Animals that was published in 2002, and the phrase really refers to "minding animals" in terms of caring for them, being their guardians and "minding" them, attributing minds to them. I mean it never ever dawned on you that anybody could ask whether certain animals are smart or whether they’re sentient. So, I also grew up in a really compassionate home, and I always attribute my passion and empathy to my mother and my drive and positive attitudes to my father. I was lucky. I’m not sure what else I can say other than, I’m lucky.

L: Great. So Marc, much of your work has focused on animal behavior and relationships with each other and also with humans. And you’ve described in many ways that animals are very much like us. They feel love and pain and grief and joy, and their phenomenon such as animal altruism with humpback whales saving seals from predation from orcas. How has your deepening understanding shaped your views on how you think animals should be treated?

M: Honestly, I’ve always been interested in protecting animals and so I came to this with a natural sort of bias. But as the years went on, it just became clearer that we’re dealing predominately with sentient and feeling beings, who care about what happens to them and their friends and their family. And they’re also smart. I put the feelings ahead of their intelligence -- and maybe we'll get into that a little later.

But, we've reached the point -- we reached it years ago -- but we've really reached the point already where we don't need more science to motivate action and activism on behalf of the animals. The science is good -- I’m a scientist I love non-invasive science -- but we don’t need it anymore. We know that wolves and grizzly bears and rats and various birds, I mean just a whole panoply of animals are sentient beings. And so when people say "show me" or people say: "well, we really don’t know that dogs enjoy themselves when they’re playing," I always say: "I’m glad I’m not their dog." I mean there’s tons of observations of animal grief and animal mourning, as well as the positive emotions, so it’s deepened in a sense that we know a lot, but it’s always deepened in a sense that we need to use what we know on behalf of the animals.

L: Where do you think the break-down is between what we know and how we’re operating? We as individuals, or maybe governmental agencies and society at large.

M: Well I think the break-down I mean -- and I say this with all heart. First of all, I think the break-down comes because there are some people who really believe in human domination. We’re living in the Anthropocene and people call it the "age of humanity" and I call it the "rage of inhumanity." So number one: we’re in a human-dominated world, and number two: I know it sounds disingenuous, but I think there are people out there who enjoy killing non-human animals. This is really an egregious act and if they didn’t get something out of it other than: "well, we’re doing it for the good of the world or the good of environment," or whatever, then they wouldn’t do it. And there have been people who have gone from being shooters and trappers to just saying: "I don’t want to do this anymore."

So, like I said, I want to be really clear. I don’t think it’s a very positive attribution, but if you don’t want to kill other animals just don’t kill them. That’s really how I feel about it. So that’s one gap.

The other gap is that there are people who deny whatever -- there’s people who deny climate change in the face of really good science. And in my book Rewilding Our Hearts, I have a section called "Homo Denialist." We’re really good at selectively denying or ignoring things when the data, the facts don’t serve our interests. So you still read about some people who go: "well I don’t really know that wolves feel emotions -- and look at bears, they’re really can be aggressive so, do they really care about other bears?" I just roll my eyes.

But that’s another gap in this book I have coming out with Jessica Pearce called The Animals' Agenda, we talk about the knowledge gap and that’s really the gap where there’s a failure to transmit what we know into action. And that, once again, is what my book Rewilding Our Hearts is all about, is how we get people to feel the sentiment, we get people to really connect with themselves and stop doing these horrific things.

L: You also coined a term “the science of animal well-being" that you’ve been writing about. Can you share your thoughts on what this science is and what it means?

M: Yeah, animal welfare, which we’re arguing against -- let me start off saying, there’s no doubt that animal welfareists, those who favor animal welfare, have helped some animals along. I think it would wrong to say that it’s always failed. But in the end, animal welfare patronizes other animals. Welfare is looked at sort of through the utilitarian calculus -- and "well, if the benefits to humans outweigh the costs to the animals then it’s ok to do something."

So welfarism really favors trumping non-human interests in favor of human interests. And it also doesn’t focus on individual animals. So welfareists who go: "well we’re going to kill a million brown rats because there’s a million more." The science of animal well-being stresses that the life of every single individual counts, and we shouldn’t be playing what I call "the numbers game" -- well there’s a lot of members of one species so it’s ok to kill or harm others. So it really focuses on the fact that each individual has inherent or intrinsic value and that we are obliged to give the very best life we can to each and every individual -- even if it means that we can’t do certain things. So it also argues against the inevitability of human interests trumping non-human interests.

It’s actually a big shift, Louisa. And I’ll say this to some people; it’s not an animal rights position per se. We’re not saying that each individual has this or that right. In a sense, you could look at it that way, but we’re really saying that each individual has an interest in being alive, and we need to honor that interest.

L: So you’re really talking about kind of a quality of life for animals?

M: Yeah, that’s exactly right. It’s our obligation to do the very best we can for each and every individual. Individuals count, and first, "do no harm" -- and that translates back and forth very nicely into the field of compassionate conservation that I’m sure we’ll get into. But some of the basic tenants for compassionate conservation are first, "do no harm," and "the life of every individual matters," right. That’s exactly right.

L: So how do you deal in the context of compassionate conservation with what we have here in the northern Rockies, here with grizzly bears and wolves where you’ve got state agencies who are very domination oriented, very killing oriented. Individuals don’t matter. They’re widgets in a system. And they’re sort of the opposite of what you’re calling for. What do you do with this situation?

M: On the ground, in the practical situation or practical solutions is you talk with them and you hope you can convince them, by showing them data that killing these animals doesn’t work, it’s ecologically unsound and it’s unethical.

The other way is to keep putting the message out there and hoping they’ll get the message and hoping we’ll be able to bridge that knowledge gap. It’s ideological. Just think of the words "wildlife management," right? "Predator control." The words they use: we "euthanize these animals," we "cull them," we "harvest them." What they’re doing is they’re killing them, and it’s premeditated, and I’ve had lots of discussions with people who I call it "murder," trophy hunting is "trophy murder." "Oh no murder, that is only for humans."

But you won’t get a really good answer other than it is ensconced in traditional law.

I really mean that, so I call "Wildlife Services" "Murder Inc." They are Murder Inc. They go out, they kill animals, there’s a lot of collateral damage.

And the sad part about it is they kill themselves. Arial shooting has produced a lot of plane accidents where the humans themselves get killed, so they also try to sanitize it. They’ll sanitize it, "we euthanize the animal," you read about that on the bear Blaze who was killed in Yellowstone. She wasn’t euthanized. That wasn’t a mercy killing. She was killed. It was premeditated.

There might be reasons in some cases, and they can come up and construct reasons, but the fact of the matter is they try to sanitize it by terminology, euphemisms, and they also try to sanitize it in saying: "we had to do it for this reason or another." "We had to do it because, say an animal like Blaze is more likely to attack another human, well -- which of course there’s no data for. Or they sanitize it by saying: "well it ensures an ecological function, it’s an ecological service," but the data belie that, and so do experts.

So, trying to work with these people is really really difficult, but we have to keep doing it because in the end the killing stops. I heard a talk last year by somebody from Wildlife Services who said that the people -- when he goes out or they go out and kill coyotes, the people for whom they’re killing the coyotes -- consider them to be heroes. And I didn’t go anywhere with it. Number one, it was so outlandish, I didn’t know how to respond. And number two, part of activism for me is figuring out which are the best “battles” to fight or to get involved in. And there’s going to be people out there who believe that. And there’s going to be people out there who go: "oh, we don’t really know that grizzly bears feel joy and happiness or grief." Fine, I don’t need to talk to them because it’s a waste of time. I’d rather be talking to people who are open to change, like I’m open to change, or you’re open to change.

So, anyways. I’m rambling on here, but it’s big, and I’m just hoping that there will be more and more people who just say: "ya know what, I don’t want to kill animals anymore. Number one, it doesn’t work, number two, it’s really inhumane. So I don’t want to do it anymore."

It's the same thing in cutting back in laboratory science, for example. Over the years, there’s people who have just basically decided: "I don’t want to do this anymore. We know rats and mice feel joy, and we know they feel grief, and we know they feel pain, and we know they display empathy. They care for other rats and mice. And we don’t want to do this anymore." So it’s motivating a change in protocol. In a sense, the rewilding notion is playing off of peoples' personal commitment to making the world a more humane place. Because in the end, that’s what it comes down to. You’re going to change when you really believe that it’s the right thing to do and it’s going to accomplish certain goals.

L: Along the line of the changes that you described under foot, it does really seem the public opinion is shifting toward giving animals at least some rights. Last year there was a Gallup poll that found 32 percent of people in the U.S. believed that animals should receive the same rights as people and that represents an 8 point increase since 1998. What do you think these rights should look like, and secondly, do you agree that they should be based on the level of an animal’s intelligence?

M: Yeah, well I mean the rights basically look like the right to a life that isn’t filled with pain. There was a project back in the 90s, it’s still active, called the Great Ape project, and I was a member of that and it focused on Great Apes because, from a practical point of view, we have a lot better chance of getting some laws changed by working with say chimpanzees other great apes -- or I always suggest maybe dogs. Animals with whom we’re familiar or animals who are like us. So the rights would be a right to a life that is pleasurable and happy. The right not to be subjected to intentional harm or pain, suffering and death. The right that if something is done to you in a harmful way that you have legal status. That people won’t just write it off, and Steven Wise and the non-human rights project, have been working on this for years focusing on chimpanzees. So that’s what the rights would look like.

No I don’t think intelligence has any role at all. I always say that like a mouse or a rat or a goldfish or a chimpanzee or a human, we’ve evolved adaptations, we’ve evolved behavior patterns to do what we need to do to be card carrying members of our species. And so I think of my friends -- and I don’t mean this in any pejorative way -- but some are brighter than others, but that doesn’t mean to me that the “brighter” ones deserve more protection from harm. The same among rats. You’re going to find differences in the intelligence of one rat versus another rat, maybe based on maze running or solving certain problems. It doesn’t mean that the rat who’s not as smart doesn’t suffer as much as the smarter rat.

We certainly apply that to people. My mom underwent some severe physical and physiological emotional degradation for that last ten years of her life. And nobody turned around and said, "well, she won’t suffer as much, so let her go." It’s feelings. It really to me comes down to sentience and feelings, and that’s why intelligence doesn’t count to me.

I know it’s sometimes is a harder message to get across because people believe, for example, that chimpanzees are smarter than mice. Chimpanzees are not necessarily smarter than mice; they do what they need to do to be chimpanzees. We humans assigned a value. We call chimpanzees "higher" animals and mice maybe "lower" animals, but biologically, there’s no such thing as higher and lower animals. But what happens in a practical sense is that the word "higher" gets translated into more valuable, more worthy or protection and smarter. So as a biologist I think these cross species comparisons, just to me, they’re fraught with difficulties and they’re really useless.

L: Maybe talking about primates a little bit more and the difference, how we see our difference, human difference from animals, primates in particular. So the capacity for speech used to be a bright line separating us from animals. But there’s recent research that you’ve described that one orangutan named Rocky demonstrated essentially linguistics skill by imitating completely the sound and registry of the researcher's voice. What do you make of this and is there anything that really separates us from apes in particular, and animals in general?

M: Yeah, that Rocky example is a good one because people hadn’t really looked for it, and they found that there’s continuity in this vocal fold they call it behavior. One of the things that’s happening in the field of cognitive ethology is people are beginning to actually study certain say behaviors, certain emotional patterns, and we’re learning amazing things about fish that fish can be deceptive. They’re good parents. We learned not too long ago that fish engage in what we call gestural or referential communication, so a fish will use its head to tell another fish where there’s food. It’s almost like I’m pointing to you Louisa, there’s danger there or there’s food there, so we’re learning a ton of stuff on tool use -- New Caledonian crows make and use more sophisticated tools they say than chimpanzees. So once again, that kind of speciesism goes down the tubes when we look at what we know and we look at people actually studying the behaviors.

Prairie dogs have an incredibly large and varied vocal repertoire and people say that it rivals that of the great apes. And when you think about the life history of prairie dogs they must have a need -- the evolution of becoming a prairie dog -- to be able to communicate in a certain messages in a certain way. So as a cognitive ethologist, what’s really exciting to me is people are beginning to actually study things and not say things like: "nah, they’re a bird they can’t use tools," or "it’s a fish, he or she can’t tell another fish where there’s food."

So, that’s why I love the field because it’s burgeoning, and as we said earlier on, we need to use those data to protect the animals.

L: Also what you’re describing is a cry for humility of what we don’t know.

M: I always say that we are definitely "Homo Hubris" or something like that. Right, it is a cry for humility. But you know, the other thing that I think is important is that if you really buy into, which I do, a lot of evolutionary biology, then we’re really appealing to Charles Darwin’s ideas of evolutionary continuity, which is very simply put that the differences among species are differences in degree rather than difference in kind. So they’re shades of grey not black and white.

So, if we do something, other animals do it too -- that’s a little simplistic, but it’s not that simplistic. What separates humans from other animals? We’re amazing beings. We have big brains, other animals don’t program computers, or worry about taxes, or send members of their species to the moon, design machines, I’m not saying that facetiously but that’s who we are. But we shouldn’t use that or those cognitive capacities to say that we’re better than them. We’re just different from them, but different doesn’t mean better.

L: Maybe along those lines, you’ve been involved in UN Harmony for Nature dialogue, and serve as a member of the Holistic Science Group and you shared with them your thoughts and views on what an Earth Jurisprudence should look like. Can you summarize some of those ideas?

M: Earth Jurisprudence basically looks -- I like to think of it freedom and justice for all. And it recognizes that humans are part of a larger community, a larger biotic community made up of other animals and their homes and landscapes. What I find incredibly exciting about this program -- in fact there’s going to be a meeting at the UN and I have to read the email more carefully, but I think I’ve been asked to give a talk at this meeting -- but what I really like about the program is: number one, it’s global and it’s bringing in people from different disciplines from all over the globe. And number two, I love the idea of looking at the earth as a community.

I mean if we really begin to factor in other humans and non-humans and view us all as a community working together, I actually think a lot of the killing will stop. I really, once again, a lot of my friends go: "oh you’re just naïve," but if we really believe that we’re in this all together, if you will, then that would be one road to more harmony, which is the name of the program basically at the U.N.

So, each of us in the program had to answer four questions and of what our views or what our school of thinking would look like from an Earth Jurisprudence point of view, so I focused on compassionate conservation and I focused on the notion of personal rewilding. Compassionate conservation, once again, being motivated by first "no harm" and individuals count, recognizing that every being has value and their life needs to be taken into account. And the first: "do no harm" really meaning that we need to really strive for peaceful coexistence among everyone.

The bottom line -- and conservation psychologists are showing this constantly -- is when other animals lose, we lose. We don’t realize it, but it’s win-win when we care for other animals and their homes, and we lose a lot when we just wantonly harm and kill them.

L: You’re talking a bit about kind of a return to a very, very ancient story of our relationship with the earth and the mother earth and the Gaia, and we’re all part of this community.

M: Yes, in a sense I am. Exactly. I’m looking for people to accept the fact that each individual is part of a global community. We all need to work together. We get rid of borders and boundaries, if you will. There are non-human animals and there are human animals. As a biologist, I mean when I watch programs like Planet Earth or Life or documentaries I'm amazed at diversity, and I’m amazed at what we’re learning. And once again, if we just incorporate that into our actions, and our actions have motivated more by a sense of community than I do think things will change.

It ain’t gonna happen overnight. That’s my bumper sticker. And the other side of this, Louisa, is we gotta get the children. I do a lot of work with Jane Goodall and her Roots and Shoots groups. And I’ve recently in an interview someone who said: "well can you think of one place you’d focus? And it’s really hard to think of one place, but I just said, "ya know, I’d rewild the kids." I call it undoing the unwilding through education, sitting at your computer and playing with friends who you’ve never met, on facebook, staying inside, not going outside. I would just focus on kids and hope that they would incorporate into their heart, and into their physical being, their physical well-being, the importance of getting outside. And hoping that those sorts of exposures will also make them better guardians of animals in the earth.

And conservation psychologists are clearly showing that those sorts of experiences are very positive, and when are feeling positive, they’re more likely to do good things. There’s a really big picture here.

The other big picture is that non-human animals are inherently cooperative. Sure, they fight. It would be wrong to think they don’t, but the data that are coming out shows that more than 90 percent of behavior of animals who have been studied is what we call pro-social or positive. And there’s been recent research showing that in fact the same for humans. That we’re predominantly cooperative good people.

And I know that in the political situations around the world, we tend to forget that, but the political systems are only made up of a very small percentage of people. They have a lot of power, but psychologist named Dacher Keltner at University of California, Berkeley, has a wonderful book called Born to be Good. And it was published about 6-7 years ago. But more research is showing that humans are inherently cooperative. So we need to tap in to our genes, if you will, of this inherent cooperation and things will go better. But it’s going to take a while. It’s just not going to happen over night.

L: Speaking of something that you call a victory for conservation psychology and people working together to achieve that victory, is the cancellation earlier this spring of the Florida black bear hunt following enormous protest and after killing by hunting of over 300 bears last year. And you were heavily involved in this case. Can you talk about what you think this victory means?

M: I think this victory is huge. And slowly but surely, it’s getting a lot of traction. The people running the campaigns down there were doing it 24/7. They were doing it without name-calling. They were doing it based on the science and the ethics. And one of the things is that Gretchen Wyla who used to run the Art Trust, and then the Humane Society of the West out of LA, used to say: "cruelty can’t stand the spotlight." And I would love bumper stickers like that all over the place -- and that’s what happened in Florida.

That’s what’s happening in a lot of different situations that people, you just gotta put it out there. What you do, what I do, what a lot of our colleagues and friends do, not expect a gold star, not expect immediate reinforcement, but expect that the inherent goodness of people will prevail and people will just say: "stop the killing."

L: I love that line "cruelty can’t stand the spotlight."

M: I use it all the time, I do. Because it’s the same thing are happening in slow changes like Sea World making some changes. Are they enough? No. Is it progress? Yes. McDonalds, all the fast food places, and people get very frustrated. Sometimes they get angry with me and now they’re saying: "oh well that’s not enough." No it’s not enough, but McDonalds isn’t going to go vegan tomorrow, and I don’t mean that facetiously. Sea World is not going to stop everything.

So I really believe that we need to be positive and proactive and persistent and passionate, and just keep moving forward. When you get down to delisting, you get down to the way in which a lot of your major interests and how carnivores are protected, you’ve just gotta keep putting it out there. You’ve gotta not get frustrated and you have to realize that there’s a lot of battles to be fought if you will. But in the end, I think we’re going to win by being passionate and positive, and just showing clearly on the large scale that the way we “manage” other animals by killing them doesn’t work.

L: I agree. And speaking since you mentioned delisting, I’d like to follow up with a question about your take on Yellowstone. And here, there’s this heated debate about whether trophy hunting of grizzly bears is appropriate, whether it’s appropriate to remove federal protections, given that those protections were so critical to getting grizzly bears sort of half way out of this very vulnerable state. And we expect the decision to be made by the end of the year by Fish and Wildlife Service. So you’ve watched this issue for a very long time and can you share your perspective on this?

Well you know far more than I do about it, so I come from a very generic -- and first of all a generic position. I am 100 percent against trophy hunting of any being, including humans, because I know that some people engage in that, but I’m just against it. There’s no reason to kill animals as trophies. It objectifies them. It completely removes any value to their life -- and the value might have and that’s why I call it often "trophy murder." It’s premeditated.

We have this situation of Cecil, for example. It created global outrage. It’s really too early to tell whether the outrage is going to make a difference, but I’m thrilled there was outrage. And then, of course, the killing of Blaze in Yellowstone last year generated an incredible amount of rage among people. And once again these animals -- it’s tragic. They become martyrs, they become emblematic of what I think is a sickness in society.

I mean trophy hunting just makes no sense to me and I actually know people who hunt -- I wish they didn’t hunt -- but I know people who hunt, who really really distain trophy hunting. So hunters themselves are just totally outraged by people who travel around the world looking for animals to kill. When you boil it down, that’s what they’re doing right? They’re traveling all over the world to kill other animals. And I’m not going to sanitize it. And the argument that trophy hunting serves conservation purposes -- I mean there’s enough data out there to show that it doesn’t at all. So even if one wanted to get beyond the egregious ethics, it doesn’t service any biological purpose at all.

L: Marc, you mentioned personal rewilding earlier, but you haven’t yet explained what you think that is, and maybe you could share your thoughts.

M: The term "rewilding" originally was introduced to make passages for animals to be able to move absent the presence of humans -- so overpasses and underpasses and corridors And one of the best examples is the Yukon to the Yucatan, the Y2Y corridor, and so I thought about that a lot and corridors in our body. And what came to me really on the long bike ride and the series of hikes, was that we could rewild our bodies in that sense starting from the heart, personally by reconnecting or connecting and becoming reenchanted with nature. And the feelings we get in our heart would then transmit to our brain and muscles. And I really mean that.

And so I thought of pathways and corridors in body -- and it's individual. You might rewild differently from me, but that’s okay as long as you’re becoming reconnected to nature and other animals, and you’re using those connections on their behalf.

Actually it’s been very popular notion. There’s a couple of rewilding groups that have formed around the country. And a woman from New York wrote me and said that she planted a garden on the top of her apartment. She knew nothing about birds and bees, she said, and over the course of a year or so, she became an expert. And now her neighbors come up to her, and instead of killing insects, they want to know what they have, or she describes all the birds who are up there. So that’s what I mean by personal rewilding.

A couple of years ago I was in Central Park in New York City. I was visiting my family and I saw these two kids, and they were walking towards me and I was watching squirrels and one of them said: "what are you doing mister?" So I told them I was watching squirrels. And the woman they were with -- I don’t know if she was a nanny or a mom -- but she was thoroughly disinterested. But the kids said: "what are they doing?" And I said: "do you have a dog?" And they said they did. They lived with a dog in New York City. And I said: "well, squirrels are mammals and they’re like your dog, and they like to play. And one of the boys said: "oh yeah, my dog likes to play." Within five minutes, I had budding ethologists. So the bottom line, once again, is I don’t know whether that experience made a difference. It surely didn’t hurt them.

So that would be an example of personal rewilding. And you can do it by taking walks. You can do it by watching birds and squirrels, by talking to animals. I’ve had people tell me: "well this woman in New York, she rewilded via the plants." So the way I like to cash it out, is that people will connect or reconnect and become reenchanted with nature in their own ways and where they live.

And there’s these big programs called Biophilic Cities, which basically mean they’re cities that are working really hard to factor nature and other animals into the plan, if you will. Some people have to “rewild” by watching documentaries, they live in places where you can’t do it.

It could be 10 or 15 years ago, Jane Goodall and I visited a high school in Denver, and there was a Roots and Shoots group there. And I was really touched because the kids working the Roots and Shoots were becoming rodent experts, because they lived where rats lived. It stilled me, their enthusiasm and saying “we're really learning about these animals” and “wow, they live in families.” I just remember this experience, it essentially rewilded me, because I had never lived in that situation. And that would be an example of personal rewilding that’s also context dependent.

And then I remember years ago there was a Roots and Shoots group in Jordan who was very concerned with water issues, as they should. So that’s what I mean by the personal reconnection and letting our heart motivate your way.

L: So something we can all engage in our day-to-day lives.

M: Easy. I always say to people, it doesn’t take a penny and if you take a walk, I mean -- I really mean this -- or you look out your window, there are the ingredients for rewilding.

L: Well thank you very much Marc. You’re listening to the Grizzly Beat with Louisa Willcox and we’re here with Dr. Marc Beckoff. Thank you very much.