

CELEBRATING ANIMALS!

Blessed by Animals

The ways that animals bless our lives are far more numerous than the ways that we could ever presume to bless them, but we do offer our blessing to all the animals whose lives touch our own! We also offer them our thanks as we celebrate all the ways that animals wild and domesticated make our lives better! The blessing of animals in the modern church goes back to St. Francis, and so we celebrate this service near to St. Francis' Feast Day.

I expect that we all have heard lots of reasons why animals are important, and most of us have had dogs or cats or birds as companions at one time or another. I would have a hard time imagining living without a couple of dogs or cats. There have been very few periods in my life when I didn't at least have one or two dogs, and there were many years when I had as many as 4 dogs and one or two cats. There are always lots of dogs and cats needing homes, so I don't think we will run short of them any time soon.

I am more concerned about the wild animals, many of whose homes are being lost as more and more people use more and more land, and more of the waters are polluted by industry, farm runoff, and cities not fully treating water before dumping it in rivers, lakes, and oceans. Certain large mammals are also at risk due to poaching or insufficiently regulated hunting. Elephants are still being killed for their tusks, as are rhinoceros. Many large animals are being trophy hunted, with only their heads being taken, with their bodies left to rot even when they could be used for food for the hungry and other products.

Birds and bees have been killed in massive numbers by pesticides, though limits on some pesticides such as DDT have come in time to allow a resurgence of Bald Eagles and other birds. Some of the die-offs of Bees are now being connected with other pesticides and efforts are underway to ban their use. The use of lead shot used in hunting has also been connected with widespread poisoning of the food chain, and efforts are underway to ban the use of lead. But the increase of man-made chemicals in the environment has not impacted the animal world nearly as much as the growth of cities, the destruction of forests, and the increases in farmed lands worldwide.

Our world has become out of balance, with a greater number of species extinctions occurring than at almost any time in geologic history. More people have been eating beef over the last century than ever before, and growing beef cattle takes enormous amounts of water and grain and grazing land. Eating lower on the food chain will help to take some of the pressure off, but as we head toward a population of 8 Billion People on Earth, it will take more and more food to provide for everyone, leaving less and less space and food for the animals.

Conservation of resources is essential to human and animal life on earth. Most of us reuse, recycle and conserve pretty effectively, but there are still too many people around the world and even here in the U.S. that do not understand how important it is to keep the environment healthy and to take care of the animals and plants with whom we share the earth.

Our Celebration of the Animals today, our Earth Day Celebration, and other days we devote to environmental concerns help us to remember the importance of living in harmony with the earth, taking care of the animals, and practicing conservation. These days are also days in which we try to educate ourselves about environmental concerns and encourage others to join us in practicing conservation.

I am pretty sure that there is nobody here over the age of 7 who has never been to the beach, or in a forest, or up in the mountains, but all over the world there are city dwellers who have never seen the ocean or the mountains or a forest. There are people who don't understand how important the wild places are for all living beings. As those who appreciate the wild things and the wild places and who know that the health of all beings is interconnected, we have a responsibility to advocate for wild things and places and to educate those who do not know their importance. That makes our gathering today even more important, for this is one way we remind ourselves of how important those interconnections are for the future of all life.

One of the ways we talk about the interdependent interconnectedness of everything is to talk about the greater Earth ecosystem as well as the more localized eco-systems that surround every waterway and every region and sector of the earth. The health of each ecosystem depends on the complex interrelationship of every living being, plant or animal, which lives in it. You may have heard about the battles over restoring wolves in Yellowstone Park and other places, or about limiting the herds of bison. There is even a suggestion that Grizzly Bears be restored in California. There were consequences in the ecosystems when such predators were killed off and there will be consequences from restoring them to the wilderness ecosystems.

There are also concerns about fish and other creatures in the Delta. Some native species have been killed off by non-native species spreading and by changes in the balance between fresh and salt water. In the case of the Delta, one of the big factors is the quest to draw water from the Delta to insure the water supply for farms and cities in Central and Southern California. This has to be balanced against the health of the Delta, farming in the Delta, and the balance of fish and other wildlife that depend on the fresh waters in the Delta.

Our relationships to other animals and even to the plants can easily be traced in our DNA today, but the significance of the loss of each species is much harder to assess. Because of its place as a food source for bats and some other animals, even the loss of mosquitos could make a huge difference. Hundreds of species of plants and animals die off each year around the globe, never to be seen again. Some that have died might have provided answers about diseases or cancer, some might have provided solutions to global food shortages, some might have provided answers about any number of questions. We don't even know what we might have lost or what we will soon lose. Zoos, wildlife parks, and seed repositories do work to preserve some species, but many are at risk of dying off in the natural world. It is vitally important that we take time to remember how important other living beings are, to remember that we are all connected.

So today, we especially think of the animals. We appreciate the animals who live with us, and we appreciate the animals in the wild. We celebrate the work zoos and wildlife parks around the world do to preserve species and maintain wildlife reserves. We give thanks for the diversity of all the families in the tree of life. We celebrate the lives of animals and all that they do to keep our world going!

Woof, meow, roar, hiss, chirp, caw, and splash!