

Sociocultural Aspects of Attitudes Toward Marine Animals: A Focus Group Analysis

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Abstract: In geographic research of the past decade, the understanding of nature-society relations has broadened to include ideas about our relationship with and attitudes toward animals. In this study, we explore the relationship between attitudes toward marine animals and sociocultural diversity, and the role of cultural difference and marginalization in the attitude formation process. We conducted five focus groups with low-income, inner-city Los Angeles women of different race/ethnicity (African American, Latina, Chicana, Chinese, and Filipina). From these group discussions we learned that participants had experienced both a distancing from and a rapprochement with animals in their everyday lives, leading them to alter their attitudes toward animals. Also, their experience of social exclusion and marginalization led many to understand that ideas about animals are socially constructed. Building on this understanding, certain participants argued that some animal-related practices have an over-riding cultural purpose, even if such practices are not sanctioned by mainstream norms for human-animal relations prevalent in the U.S. This research contributes to our understanding of nature-society relations in geography, and can help wildlife managers better communicate to the public and garner support for species preservation and habitat conservation.

Introduction

EXCITING CHANGES ARE HAPPENING in geography in the study of human-environment relationships. Geography's flagship journal, the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, today devotes a section to nature-society relations in every issue. Among the six Nystrom finalist papers presented in the May 2002 issue

of *The Professional Geographer*, topics related to nature-society relations were well represented. Not surprisingly, the subfield of animal geography is attracting increasing attention, with the recent publication of *Animal Geographies* (Wolch and Emel 1998), *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places* (Philo and Wilbert 2000), and a growing number of textbooks that include perspectives on human-animal relations. This development has not occurred in a vacuum: from history to anthropology, the social sciences have launched a reconsideration of human-environment relations, partly in response to the real and urgent need to better understand attitudes toward nature in order to shape more effective practices and policies. Wildlife managers, for instance, are beginning to incorporate some of the latest research findings in their efforts to increase participation rates in recreational fishing (Murdock et al. 1996; Hunt and Ditton 2001); to engage divergent stakeholders, from state wildlife agency personnel to wildlife rehabilitators, in resolving common problems (Bright, Lipscomb, and Sikorowski 1997); and to reframe conservation on cultural grounds in places such as East Africa, where local economic incentives are not necessarily forthcoming (Infield 2001).

In the short time it has existed, attitudinal research related to nature and animals has changed significantly. Until recently, this research was based on survey questionnaires, from “new environmental paradigm” questionnaires (Dunlap and Van Liere 1978) to Kellert’s surveys of attitudes toward wildlife (1979; 1987; 1993; 1999; with Berry 1980; with Gibbs and Wohlegenant 1995), on which much subsequent work has been modeled. While researchers have used surveys to characterize a range of attitudes and broadly link them to demographic variables, their efforts to clarify why differences occur, how attitudes change, and how people negotiate attitudes with behaviors have been largely frustrated. Also, academic and commercial research on animal-related topics has tended to focus on animal testing, hunting, vegetarianism, membership in animal rights organizations, the fur industry, organ transplants, companion animals, and zoos (Herzog and Dorr 2000).

But this research has done little to extend the understanding of a particular group’s attitudes toward animals. Today, as attitudinal researchers better appreciate the dynamic nature and social contexts of attitudes, they are turning to other qualitative methods such as focus groups. The objective is not so much to

record attitudes and identify the groups that hold them but to create new conceptual frameworks from which to better understand the dynamic and complex nature of attitudes. It is within this research context that we undertook our investigation of the sociocultural processes of attitudinal change, and in particular the role of cultural “difference” in the attitude formation process. We wanted to examine how the process of marginalization might impact these attitudes: would disenfranchisement make people more or less sympathetic to animals and how would a change in attitude be explained?

To address this question, we investigated relationships between sociocultural factors (e.g., ethnicity/race, immigrant status, degree of assimilation) and attitudes toward marine animals among women of color living in Los Angeles. Greater Los Angeles, a major metropolitan coastal region, is an area where extraordinarily heterogeneous human populations live among unique ecosystems that contain threatened or endangered species. Our premise was that population subgroups in this city would have varying cultural traditions with respect to nature-society relationships and could therefore be expected to hold a wide variety of attitudes toward the environment and animals, marine animals in particular. We chose to focus on marine animals because people of all cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds are likely to have encountered them, whether at the beach, in aquaria, on fishing excursions, or at various events such as whale festivals and grunion runs. While marine animals were our primary focus, participants readily volunteered information about other animals such as pets.

We anticipated that the cultural diversity of life in Southern California would give residents the opportunity to reconsider their attitudes toward animals—perhaps leading to a repositioning of their views in relation to their sociocultural status—and that their insights into these changes could better help us understand the process of attitude formation and change. Our findings should also be of use to Southern California wildlife managers, who face the daunting challenge of dealing with an increasingly complex range of cultural practices and attitudes (Ewart, Chavez, and Magill 1993).

This paper presents findings from five focus group discussions conducted with low-income, inner-city women of color—one group each of African American, Latina,¹ Chicana, Chinese, and

Filipina women. Our analysis concentrates first on the various attitudes elicited in the groups, followed by a discussion of the contexts in which these attitudes formed and the reasons for them as given by participants. We then examine the resonance of various attitudes within each group and the connection between these attitudes and sociocultural variables, particularly cultural difference and marginalization. The criteria we used for our analysis were based on those outlined by Krueger (1994, 149–51), including internal consistency, frequency, extensiveness and intensity of comments, and recurring ideas that emerge to become the backbone of attitudes.

Focus Group Methodology

Conceptual Background

Focus groups (also known as “group depth interviews”) involve bringing together groups of eight to twelve people to discuss an issue in the presence of a moderator who elicits a range of opinions and keeps the discussion from straying off course. While focus groups have been used increasingly in market research, social scientists are enlarging the purview of this methodology and using the technique to explore the processes of attitude formation across groups of people. Aside from the fact that they are faster and less onerous than individual interviews, focus groups appealed to us because the discussions allow participants more time to reflect, give them a chance to recall past thoughts and amend statements (Basch 1987, 434–35), and include the possibility for the moderator to probe for more details (Krueger 1994, 34–36).

Focus groups help ensure that topics are examined “from the perspective of representative participants of the study population and not just strictly through the lens of researchers” (Minnis et al. 1997, 47). Furthermore, exchanges between participants give researchers the opportunity to understand which arguments are of influence in attitude formation, or as Krueger (1994, 11) puts it: “Evidence from focus group interviews suggests that people do influence each other with their comments, and in the course of a discussion the opinions of an individual might shift. The focus group analyst can thereby discover more about how that shift occurred and the nature of the influencing factors.”

In geography, the use of focus groups to characterize attitudes toward the environment started in the mid-1980s. For example, Burgess, Limb, and Harrison (1988a; 1988b) used focus group techniques to better understand people's fears in urban parks and the extent to which concerns about the environment affect people's purchasing choices (Bedford and Burgess 2001). Their work was premised on the belief that "empirically, group analytic practice explicitly recognizes the significance of *context* in any interpretation of discourse; it argues that the *content* of conversations within a group is inseparable from the *social structures* and the *processes of communication* within which it is spoken" (italics in original) (Burgess, Limb, and Harrison 1988b, 457–58).

More and more, geographers have advocated the use of focus groups in order to explore "the discourses which shape practices of everyday life, the ways in which meanings are reworked and subverted, and the creation of new knowledges out of seemingly familiar understandings" (Cameron 2000, 87). The focus group methodology continues to gain greater popularity in the discipline.

Study Methodology

Following an initial assessment of current literature on cultural attitudes toward nature, along with interviews with local coastal zone wildlife managers about how they thought cultural attitudes might be related to threats to the coastal environment,² we conducted five focus groups of up to eleven participants each. Each group was ethnically homogeneous and all participants lived in central Los Angeles. Our focus groups were composed of low-income women because, although gender and class differences in attitudes toward animals have long been noted, the attitudes of low-income people are still rarely considered and women's attitudes have not been extensively investigated (for important exceptions, see Kellert and Berry [1980] and Herzog, Betchart, and Pittman [1991]). Also, since our moderators were female, we could avoid the complicating issue of gender difference between moderator and participants. By conducting different focus groups with Chicanas and Latinas, we were able to gather separate, albeit related, perspectives on marine animals and also show how these perspectives are based on degree of assimilation as well as cultural traditions and family life.

The focus groups met on community agency premises and a stipend of twenty-five dollars was paid to each woman to cover costs of transport and childcare. Participants first responded in writing to a basic demographic questionnaire in their native language. The moderators in the Latina and Chinese groups were native speakers whom we hired and trained. In the discussions, participants were asked semi-structured questions about their interactions with, knowledge of, and attitudes toward animals, especially marine animals. Focus group sessions lasted up to two hours and were taped, transcribed, and analyzed using NU*DIST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing), a qualitative data software package.

Participants

Forty-eight women were recruited through community groups and agencies that provide housing and social services to local low-income residents. From responses to a basic written questionnaire, we learned each woman's age, education, birthplace, length of residence in Los Angeles, membership in any animal-related organizations, and whether she had ever worked with animals or had had pets (Table 1). Although we were not concerned to ensure representation *per se*, a comparison to 1990 U.S. census data showed the women shared many demographic characteristics (especially education and nativity) with other central Los Angeles-area residents. Our participants ranged in age from 18 to 78, with a median age of 36. Almost a third of the women in each group had no high school degree, with the exception being the Filipina group, in which all had completed at least some college. Over half of all participants were born in other countries and three-fourths had lived in Los Angeles for more than eight years.³ Within each group, participants differed significantly in terms of age and education (except for the Filipino group); in some groups they differed as to whether or not they were native to the U.S. or to Los Angeles. In terms of their relationship to animals, a third of the participants—especially the African Americans, Latinas, and Chicanas—had worked with animals on a farm at some point in the past. Over 90 percent of participants had had at least one pet and in fact reported a large number and variety of pets, from crickets to pigs. Only one woman (in the more educated Filipina group) was a member of an environmental/animal organization. In each group we found

a mix of experience that provided for contrast and fruitful exchanges.

Table 1.—Information on Focus Group Participants

	Afr. Am. (n=1)		Chicana (n=8)		Latina (n=10)		Chinese (n=10)		Filipina (n=9)		Total (n=48)	
Age												
Range	22–75		18–35		23–62		36–78		22–59		18–78	
Median	28		19		37		53		37		36	
Education	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
No degree	3	27	0	0	7	70	5	50	0	0	15	31
High school deg.	4	36	1	12	2	20	1	10	0	0	8	17
Some college	2	18	5	62	1	10	2	20	3	33	13	27
College degree	2	18	2	25	0	0	2	20	6	67	12	12
Birthplace												
Los Angeles	4	36	5	62	0	0	0	0	2	22	11	23
Rest of Calif.	1	9	0	0	1	10	0	0	0	0	2	4
Other states	5	45	1	12	0	0	0	0	1	11	7	15
Other countries	1	9	2	25	9	90	10	100	6	67	28	58
LA residency												
< 2 yrs	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	11	1	2
2 to 8 yrs	2	18	1	12	1	10	5	50	2	22	11	23
> 8 yrs	9	82	7	87	9	90	5	50	6	67	36	75
Member of org.												
Yes	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	11	1	2
No	11	100	8	100	10	100	10	100	8	89	47	98
Work w/animals												
Farm	5	45	4	50	6	60	1	10	0	0	16	33
Vet, pet store, lab	0	0	1	12	1	10	0	0	1	11	3	6
Pets												
Yes	10	90	8	100	10	100	8	80	8	89	44	92
No	1	10	0	0	0	0	2	20	1	11	4	8

Analysis

Typology of Attitudes

Our interpretation of the focus group discussions was based on both mainstream and critical focus group approaches (Lunt and Livingstone 1996). Mainstream procedure was applied in obtaining direct information about participants' practices related to animals, identifying their knowledge claims, and classifying their attitudes. But in clarifying sociocultural factors that emerged through group reflexivity and dynamics between participants, we followed procedures typically emphasized in critical focus group research. In the African American, Chicana, and Filipina

groups, leaders emerged (a frequent feature of single-gender groups) and we observed how this leadership dynamic arose, whether and how leaders challenged others in the group or consolidated agreement, and how contradictory views were handled.⁴ In particular, we took note of how competing knowledge claims were strategically used by participants to convince others of the appropriateness of particular attitudes.

In order to establish the main attitudinal trends of the group discussions, we categorized statements according to Kellert's (1979) and Kellert and Berry's (1980) typologies of attitudes, with some modifications.⁵ Kellert's typologies have been used to identify attitudes and pose questions to people of other cultures (see, for example, Bjerke, Ødegårdstuen, and Kaltenborn 1998). More recently, researchers have used Kellert's work to create new typologies that can help identify conflicting values between the public and wildlife managers (Miller and McGee 2001). In this vein, we adapted Kellert's typology based on the attitudes expressed in the group discussions and the justifications behind these attitudes.

Attitudes toward animals were expressed throughout the discussions and were linked to normative questions of how humans should or should not use animals. They also surfaced in the justifications participants used to explain certain animal practices, such as eating sea turtle eggs or dogs. Given the recurrence of certain attitudes that emerged from the discussions, we found it useful to group them into two overarching attitudinal perspectives—"anthropocentric" and "biocentric" (Table 2). This binary division allowed us to better portray the dialectical nature of the discussions.

Table 2.—Typology of Attitudes toward Marine Animals

Anthropocentric Perspective	Biocentric Perspective
Utilitarian-dominionistic	Environmental-naturalistic
Utilitarian-stewardship	Environmental-stewardship
Negativistic	Animal rights
Animal welfare	Coexistence
Aesthetic	
Other (e.g., spiritual)	

Source: Adapted from Kellert 1993.

The “anthropocentric perspective” comprises six types of attitudes exhibited by focus group participants. Utilitarian attitudes (“humans must use animals to survive”) were divided into two types: one suggests humans use animals because they are inferior (utilitarianism-dominionistic), and the other that people should act as stewards of nature in order to protect resources for future generations (utilitarianism-stewardship). Negativistic attitudes incorporated expressions of dislike, disgust, and fear of animals. Animal welfare attitudes were characterized by statements reflecting human effects of interacting with animals, such as “We need to be kind to animals because of our emotional attachment to them,” and concerns about the cruel treatment of animals. The aesthetic attitude also portrayed strong human-centeredness, giving weight to the visual pleasures provided by animals. We recorded statements relating to the spiritual value of animals to humans as “other” anthropocentric attitudes.

The “biocentric perspective” reflects nature-centered attitudes and exhibits less variation. The environmental-naturalistic perspective stresses animals as part of nature (“animals should not be harmed for their natural behavior”), while the environmental-stewardship perspective emphasizes a more managerial approach (“animals need a helping hand in order to live naturally”). The biocentric perspective also includes an animal rights attitude (“animals have as much of a right to satisfying lives as humans do”) and a coexistence attitude, the view that people should learn to coexist with animals on the basis of fairness to animals and equal claims to territory (“the world is big enough for everybody to share”). This categorization helped us to identify attitudes and to code statements. We then counted the statements (overt attitudinal statements only; not, for example, nods of approval) and unpacked the justifications participants used to explain or argue their positions.

Classifying Focus Group Attitudes

In quantitative terms, most statements of attitudes (188 out of 242, or 78 percent) fit into the anthropocentric category (Table 3). The animal welfare attitude was especially well represented across all groups, with 84 such statements total. A Chicana, for instance, described her support of her mother’s decision to have the family cats surreptitiously neutered despite the father’s disapproval; she felt it was not only better for the animal but would

result in fewer nighttime disturbances for the family. In the Latina group, one woman explained her change of attitude since coming to the U.S. as follows: "There are street dogs in Central America who beg for food, and they bug you, and it's normal for people to kick them. I definitely don't agree with that anymore...I never realized how fun it is to have a pet and how easy it is to love [pets] once you know them."

Table 3.—Classification of Attitudinal Statements

# of Statements (N=242)	Attitude	Perspective
84	Animal welfare	Anthropocentric
45	Utilitarian-dominionistic	Anthropocentric
32	Negativistic	Anthropocentric
32	Animal rights	Biocentric
12	Other (e.g., spiritual)	Anthropocentric
11	Environmental-naturalistic	Biocentric
10	Utilitarian-stewardship	Anthropocentric
8	Environmental-stewardship	Biocentric
5	Aesthetic	Anthropocentric
3	Coexistence	Biocentric

The Chinese women reported being at odds with American sportfishing practices where fish are caught with "big cruel hooks" and not necessarily for food. One statement gathered widespread support: "Yes, Americans like animals, but on TV you see programs on sportfishing, catching fish with big hooks and releasing fish [just for] fun. But why if you love animals, why act so cruelly and inflict pain? The fishermen use big hooks that inflict pain." Although the Latina and Chinese groups were composed of some of the most recent immigrants, the prevalence of animal welfare statements in all the groups supports research that shows animal welfare attitudes are more common among women than men (Kellert and Berry 1980; Driscoll 1987; 1992; Herzog, Betchart, and Pittman 1991; Pifer, Shimizu, and Pifer 1994), and among those who keep pets (Driscoll 1987).

The next most common attitude—utilitarian-dominionistic—is also anthropocentric and was expressed in 45 statements (especially common in the Latina and Filipina groups), about half as many as animal welfare statements. This was followed by the negativistic attitude (especially present in the African American and Filipina groups), expressed as many times (32) as animal

rights attitudes (biocentric perspective). In the Latina group, one participant related that a friend had introduced her to animal rights and that it had played an important role in sensitizing her to animal suffering, especially because she came from a culture where such a view was nonexistent. Comments made in the Filipina group reflected moves in the opposite direction. An American-born participant explained how she had gone from an animal rights standpoint to a more utilitarian-dominionistic attitude, based on visits she had made to the Philippines and the cultural and economic conditions she encountered there. Several Filipinas argued that seemingly cruel cultural practices could be normalized in the Philippines by the fact that (to their knowledge) no animal rights organizations existed there. This point was underscored by one participant, who remarked that with a dictator (President Marcos) in power they had had more to worry about “than dogs.”

Statements reflecting the environmental attitudes—both naturalistic and stewardship—were few and far between, and were unevenly developed. This probably reflected the fact that our questions probed into the women’s everyday, family, and cultural practices rather than their knowledge of animals and natural processes or their views on environmental policy. Likewise, there were few comments reflecting utilitarian-stewardship and spiritual attitudes (anthropocentric perspective). Aesthetic and coexistence attitudes were present in various contexts but even more limited.

At the risk of downplaying some of these results (and their possible relation to demographic data, for instance), our objective was not to record a precise distribution of attitudes; focus groups are not meant to be used in this fashion. Our objective was to explore and gain an understanding of the relationship between attitudes toward marine animals and cultural diversity, and the role of sociocultural difference in the attitude formation process. By identifying recurring attitudinal statements and the anthropocentric and biocentric perspectives they represented, we gained insights into the general orientation of the groups. Our next step was to characterize the arguments participants used to defend their views; this was achieved by asking the women about their prior and current experiences with animals, the social contexts in which these took place, and changes in activities and perceptions.

Explanations for Attitudes, Practices, and Changes over Time

The focus group discussions provided a number of compelling explanations for how attitudes had formed or changed, elicited by questions about past and present interactions with marine animals. Like most Americans, many of the women recalled going to the beach as children and described their experiences with oceans and the many animals they had seen. In fact, family outings had strongly influenced the appreciation for all things marine for the Latinas and Chicanas (for similar findings see Duda, Bissell, and Young 1998, 657). Ocean-related activities were also tied to a strong social and traditional background in food provision through fishing and tidepool collecting, and were deemed important because they brought food to the table. Speculations about good fish to eat and ways to prepare seafood were important discussion foci in some groups, especially among African American and Latina women. They mentioned many varieties of fish in the course of their discussion, which largely centered on eating “marginal” or so called “trash” meats such as squirrels or possums as a strategy against poverty⁶ (see also Wolch, Brownlow, and Lassiter 2000). This strategy was reported in all but the Chicana group, most of whom were young (median age 19) and had not faced the challenge of providing for families with extremely limited resources. Eating fish has remained an important practice for most of these women—one that connects childhood and/or traditional experiences with contemporary life in Los Angeles.

Contemporary participation in marine-animal-related activities centered on going to local beaches and visiting aquaria. Reasons given for going to the beach included fishing, enjoying cooler coastal temperatures, and giving children an inexpensive and fun place to play. However, the beach did not necessarily elicit a positive response and several women expressed mixed feelings about beach outings, including the fear that kelp (a seaweed common in Southern California) might cause one to drown. Aquarium visits dispelled the fears of some of the women by providing them with a memorable occasion to explore and learn about sea creatures. As one Latina explained: “I had never seen an octopus...I really thought they were very mad animals who ate people, and that the tentacles were enormous. It made me

laugh when I saw [at the aquarium] how big they really are. They are not really that big." Aquaria and zoo visits played a significant part in child rearing in the U.S., for the Latina group especially. Indeed, they considered visits to these places a vital part of their duty to educate children about animals.

Many sea-related practices had changed with time and relocation for both immigrants and non-immigrants. One practice that had declined among all focus groups was fishing. In the past, fishing had been carried out in the context of collecting animals for food and survival. With the decline of this need, some expressed regrets about losing an important opportunity for socializing, especially between children and parents. On the other hand, a Filipina was one of several who explained that because life is lonelier in the U.S., people have to rely more on animals for companionship. This had been the lived experience of many women in the Latina, Chicana, Chinese, and Filipina groups, most of whom reported having numerous pets (see Table 1).

Some of the changes in the frequency and types of marine activities seemed to be related to knowledge participants had about marine animals. For immigrants especially, knowledge was mostly characterized by "back home" experiences, including the longing for particular foods and activities. Rarely did their knowledge extend to the unique characteristics of the Southern California marine environment, because interactions with the current local environment were less common and less intense (no women reported depending on local fishing for their income or diet, for instance). An exception to this was two Filipinas (the most educated group), who made accurate and perceptive assessments of lowered fish counts based on their past activities: "I used to go snorkeling in Laguna Beach," said one, "and we would see all kinds of schools of fish, but I'm sad because some of the areas are really barren now." Said the other, "We used to go clamming...but there is a size limit, and you're not supposed to bring in the little ones."

Collectively, the women described many changes in their practices toward marine and other animals over time. There had been for most a distancing from animals both in the wild and as direct sources of food (although the sounds of chicken necks twisting and cries of squealing pigs had been seared into memory). Some consequences of these changes included regrets at the loss

of the social bonds that had been forged and maintained through participation in fishing and other practices related to marine animals. The local context of marine-related experiences now included other factors, namely cultural assimilation efforts (especially pronounced in the discussion of responsible child rearing) and contact with science-based institutions such as aquaria. Here we heard how fear had been mitigated by the controlled display of animals in aquaria, yet we wondered about the loss of knowledge based on direct experience.

Discussions about the women's experiential contexts were invaluable in that they clarified the nature of particular human-animal relationships, from the necessity to hunt and fish to the adoption of new relationships with animals in order to adjust to contemporary life in Los Angeles (and ensure the development of culturally adjusted children). Relations with animals in general had become closer, principally through the presence of companion animals in the home which had led to greater empathy toward other species.

Americanization, Cultural Difference, and Marginalization

By noting which arguments were used in the discussions to strategically uphold and defend particular views, we were able to examine their significance in shaping attitudes. These arguments emerged mostly in the context of various anthropocentric views and, to a lesser extent, in the discussion of biocentric views (such as animal rights attitudes). Importantly, attitudes were often defended on the basis of sociocultural position, for example as a response to marginalization and its imprint on the culture of an oppressed people.

Our questions probed into some of the more perplexing problems of human-animal relations: Should some animals deserve more respect? When should humans intervene in nature? And when should cultural practices that are deemed cruel to animals be overlooked? When asked what should be done about sea lion pups that had been starving on local beaches due to El Niño, the participant responses in several groups helped clarify the dynamic process of attitude formation. For instance, many initially felt that since El Niño is an act of God (African American group) or is a natural occurrence (Filipina group), nothing should be done. But this attitude changed over the course of the discussion. In

the African American group, one woman offered that because we know how to save animals it is a human responsibility to do so. Another claimed that the sea lion pups were “crying out” for help and should be assisted. Thus, the early fatalistic view was amended by a participant on the moral basis that, since animals suffer like humans, and since humans could provide care, we were obliged to assist. This argument justified an animal welfare and even an animal rights attitude for several African American participants. In the Filipina group, several women stated that since El Niño may have had anthropogenic causes, humans were responsible for remedies (cleanups or government initiatives were suggested).

The Chicanas were less fatalistic about El Niño, insisting that we should help marine animals not only because we can but because we are the *only ones* who can. The Latinas expressed a similar animal welfare attitude, focusing specifically on human failure to anticipate such a condition as El Niño. The women in the Chinese group agreed that if the sea lion pups could be helped by humans then help should be forthcoming. One woman justified this, however, by adding that if marine animals were left to die, then the waters would become polluted and unhealthy for humans—clearly a utilitarian-dominionistic statement.⁷

When probed about whether the particular species of animal should make a difference in the decision to perform a rescue, nearly everyone said it should not matter. African American women agreed that animals are not only “just like humans,” but likened differences between animal species to differences between humans, and on this basis advocated for the rights of all sorts of animals to be treated equally:

Norma: An animal is an animal and if they need our help, well...we should help them.

Georgia: Right. Just like humans, they're all different; we're all different in some ways.

Norma: In some ways; but, you know, we stay people.

Georgia: In some ways; but I would rush to help you. I would...you know.

Norma: Black, white, purple.

Georgia: Yeah. So why wouldn't I rush to help like a goose, [or] a lion?

Carla: Animals are just like humans.

(Note: Participants' names have been changed.)

In the Filipina group, a discussant raised the issue of indigenous rights to hunt a whale. This topic was debated among several participants who supported Native American rights in general and saw the hunt as an act of cultural empowerment. Others added that Native Americans kill animals “more spiritually,” and one woman likened this to the way Filipinos kill dogs for food. Another participant maintained that the death of animals for cultural reasons was more noble and meaningful than “being killed because they don’t have a home...or [are running loose] on the freeway.” Women in both the African American and Filipina groups justified particular animal-related practices on the basis of acceptance of cultural difference and in defense of the marginalized cultural practices of their own group. For African American women, poaching was considered an appropriate response to a dire need, especially because the need was created by white racism. This is a clear example of how the relationship between cultural background and attitudes toward animals can be complicated by processes of marginalization and resistance. Marginalization and struggles over identity may in fact be instrumental in preserving or invigorating some attitudes through resistance against the dominant culture.

In the Chinese group, one participant remarked that in the U.S. there seemed to be a stronger feeling of coexistence between humans and animals. She elaborated: “In the U.S., people accept the inconvenience of animals, and at Sea World, they don’t mind if the whales splash them....The idea here seems to be coexistence. People bring [animals] inconvenience too, so there is mutual inconvenience.” This participant interpreted American practices as being based on a desire for greater coexistence between humans and animals, where tolerance is mutual. Although she was baffled by this attitude, she was open to interpreting it as being based on a truly democratic ideal. This sentiment emerged, albeit unevenly, in all groups. Certainly this attitude is influenced by the Americanization process, in which tolerance is exalted as a critical character of Americans.

It is little wonder that the exchanges of these inner city women should rest so much on arguments related to their own position outside mainstream society. After all, they experience sociocultural and economic marginalization on an everyday basis—through poverty and their successful or unsuccessful attempts

to assimilate. Their arguments were carefully framed and the women often demonstrated an understanding that attitudes toward animals are socially constructed. Clearly they had learned this by comparing practices and values in different cultural contexts, and by being “put on the spot” and even criticized (justly or unjustly) for particular practices, such as dog eating, ascribed to their culture group as a whole. They knew their attitudes toward animals could play a role in their claims for being accepted into U.S. society or, alternatively, could shape their resistance to a mainstream America that so often rejects them.

How might these important motivations be included in a model of attitudinal formation? First, we must extend the idea that culture is a dynamic process to better understand the role it plays in shaping attitudes. Second, attitudinal models must take into account not just demographic factors but also the sociocultural and political contexts in which people of particular groups find themselves, in order to anticipate attitudes more accurately and develop more meaningful ways of communicating critical information about animals and nature. Third, considering the fact that all the wildlife managers we spoke to in the course of our study were white, science-oriented professionals, we suspect that many of their efforts to teach science-based ideas about animals might be misconstrued, not so much because they lack knowledge about particular cultures but because they are unaware of the role played by marginalization in making some attitudes more meaningful to certain groups (Lassiter 2000). If the social construction of attitudes is not clearly acknowledged, wildlife managers—and the science they represent—run the risk of losing credibility with populations whose thinking and behavior they wish to influence.

Summary and Conclusions

This exploration into the motives behind attitudes toward marine animals was based on focus groups, a qualitative methodology gaining prominence in geography. We hoped the participants could give us insights into the attitudinal changes they had experienced and that this would allow us to better understand sociocultural factors that enter into the shaping of attitudes toward animals. We identified a number of attitudes and their frequency and resonance in the discussions and noted the

contexts in which these attitudes arose and the arguments that were used to justify them. In this way, we benefited from what Goss (1996, 118) writes is a special appeal of focus groups, namely, that they “provide...the researcher with insight into the manner in which knowledge is produced, or reified into social truth, and in which social decisions are made in the local context.”

Whether immigrants or not, women in all five focus groups related changes over time in their experiences and interpretations of the marine environment and marine animals. On the one hand, many described a distancing due to life course and/or geographical changes. Indeed (and not unlike other Americans), many of their marine-related activities had taken place when they were children and living elsewhere. On the other hand, several described having formed new and meaningful connections with animals (as pets for instance) now that they lived in the U.S. Influenced by norms operating within mainstream American society, even immigrants had some contact with mainstream American ideas about the “proper” treatment of animals, companion animals especially. This had apparent impacts on their awareness and attitudes. The most commonly expressed attitude among the women was one of “animal welfare,” stressing the effects (positive and negative) on humans of interactions with animals. We expected this, since participants were women and since, in Kellert and Berry’s (1980) survey of attitudes toward wildlife, women (as well as younger and more educated persons) demonstrated stronger animal welfare attitudes. However, the strength of this attitude was surprising given the low economic status of participants, which is often linked to more utilitarian views of animals. And in fact, statements reflecting the utilitarian-dominionistic attitude were the second most frequent in the discussions.

Most of these women were marginalized from mainstream society by race/ethnicity as well as by different geographical, historical, linguistic, sociocultural, and political conditions, and the adoption of new ideas about nature and animals often conflicted with traditional practices and beliefs. But it seems their utilitarian attitudes (expected to be strong since most had been raised in environments where animals played a direct role as food) may have been mitigated over time by the women’s

struggles to “fit in” to American culture, especially through child-rearing practices. New practices and behaviors had played into their sympathies for animals, even animals that were not their pets.

Because these women experienced the contrasts between traditional and modern practices and attitudes with heightened acuity, they were more aware of the social construction of nature and animals. It was no surprise, then, that they defended some of their cultural practices (and those of other marginalized groups) on the basis of cultural survival or autonomy. In many instances they did this despite the close bonds they had formed with pets and the respect they had for nature and animals in general. Nevertheless, in every discussion the possibility for change—in practices, perceptions, and attitudes—was present, as expressed in the women’s viewpoints on animal welfare, animal rights, and to a lesser extent, coexistence.

As exemplified in this study, attitudes toward animals are intimately related to one’s experiences over the life course and as a member of an ethnic or sociocultural group. Moreover, a change in one’s geographical context can trigger a reassessment of long-held values and attitudes, and adoption of new ones. On the other hand, marginalization and disenfranchisement can play a large part in strengthening an individual’s attachment to particular traditional practices, even when these practices contradict new experiences or are socially unacceptable. By better understanding the sociocultural context of practices seen negatively in the U.S., we can develop more sensitive approaches to such behaviors. The role of sociocultural context—including processes of acculturation and assimilation—should be given greater attention by geographers and other social scientists seeking to understand attitude formation. Culture should not be understood as a fixed set of practices and attitudes, but as dynamic and fluid. Wildlife managers who grasp this conceptual understanding can seize the opportunity to more meaningfully engage a culturally diverse public in their science-based efforts. Further research on how attitudes are shaped through processes such as acculturation, disenfranchisement, and marginalization will by reflection also lead to better understanding of the role that mainstream society and attitudes play in the process.

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Notes

1. The terms “Latina” and “Chicana” are used here to distinguish between first-generation immigrants from Mexico (Latina) and their children (Chicana). One participant in the Latina group was from Guatemala.
2. The interviews were repeated after conducting the focus groups to identify more clearly what wildlife managers might be “missing” about cultural attitudes (see Lassiter 2000).
3. Although we noted each participant’s nativity and years in the U.S., we did not directly link these variables to attitudes because such relationships were unevenly drawn in prior research (Caro and Ewert 1995) and because we assumed that many of the women had gone back and forth to their country of origin. This was later confirmed in the discussions.
4. The persons who took this leading position were distinctive in terms of their age or national origin (for instance, an African American woman from Belize) or higher educational level. While leaders emerged in the Latina and Chinese groups for similar reasons, their role was limited (they dominated by speaking more, for instance) and they did not consolidate agreement on particular points.
5. Kellert’s initial surveys of attitudes toward wildlife (1979) identified nine attitudes—the naturalistic, ecologicistic, humanistic, moralistic, scientific, aesthetic, utilitarian-dominionistic, negativistic, and neutralistic. Of these, the humanistic, moralistic, utilitarian, and neutralistic attitudes were found to be most common in a diverse population of Americans (Kellert and Berry, 1980). These findings demonstrated people’s conflicting perceptions of animals as well as gender differences in attitudes, with women more likely to

exhibit humanistic, moralistic, and aesthetic attitudes toward animals. Since then, societal values toward animals have changed (with the ascendance of the animal rights movement, for instance), and Kellert (1993, 59–60) has modified his typology accordingly, by combining the ecologicistic and scientific attitudes, by recognizing a symbolic attitude, and by differentiating the utilitarian from the dominionistic attitude. He also added a “biophilia” attitude, which is based on the belief that “[t]he conservation of nature is rationalized, not just in terms of its material and commodity benefits but, far more significantly, for the increased likelihood of fulfilling a variety of emotional, cognitive, and spiritual needs in the human animal.”

6. The historical antecedents of this practice—namely, slavery and deprivation—were duly noted by the African American women.
7. A third of all participants (larger among the Filipinas, Chinese, and Chicanas) had raised fish in a home aquarium, and the Chinese women in particular discussed fish-keeping issues extensively, mainly in terms of the space fish need to thrive. However, their knowledge was limited to home fish-keeping practices and did not extend to larger-scale marine environments. For instance, when asked what to do about marine animals that were weakened or dying on account of El Niño, one Chinese participant declared: “Humans should take responsibility. One reason is that some of [the injured animals] can be helped. And the other reason [is] if we leave them [to die], they could cause health problems.” Clearly the experience of fish-keeping—and of having dead fish “fouling” the aquarium—had informed this woman’s view.

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