

WLRN transcript, COMMENTARY for Edition 56: Women & Animals

:ethereal, atmospheric wind instruments fade in:

:hand drum and marimba eventually join:

Sekhmet SHEOWL: Women have had a special relationship with animals for thousands of years. We have cared for them, saved them, lived with them, studied them, and enjoyed their protection in just about every civilization in history. We have arguably shown animals more respect and appreciation than men have, even cultivating caring relationships with the livestock we've raised and kept for food and other goods. So many of the modern world's most passionate environmental activists and wildlife advocates have been women precisely because our empathy and love for animals motivate us to do what we can for them in reaction to men's destruction of nature. Some of the most noble work women are doing and have done is the work of protecting animals and preserving their habitats, simply out of love for these creatures we share the earth with.

Pets provide women and girls with comfort, purpose, and joy that can never really be measured. Sometimes, when our lives feel painful or hopeless or just too hard, the animals we live with are the only reliable bright spot for us. They are a source of simple happiness and unconditional love. Animals don't care what we look like or what other people think about us or even what we think of ourselves. They reciprocate our love and care and good will without negotiation; they make us laugh and play with us; they sense when we need consoling and console us. Our animals can help us navigate the world despite our medical disabilities and they can help us heal mentally and emotionally from loss and trauma. Even other people's animals can make us smile when we desperately need a reason, whether we see them on the street or on the internet. Without animals, both wild and domestic, life as a woman or a girl would be so much darker and tougher to get through.

My black cat, a female, is one of my favorite creatures, and I love her as much as I can love other human beings. She is a living thing no different than a human being: intelligent, funny, affectionate, with a unique personality. She has been my companion for many years, and I want her around for as long as possible. I dislike calling myself her "owner" almost as much as I hate the terms "cat mom" and "dog mom." She is not my possession or my child. She is my friend. I think friendship of such an unconditional nature is far more meaningful than a pseudo-parent/child relationship. I have no wish

to exert power or authority over my cat beyond the basic need to protect her or interrupt her scratching up the furniture. I don't want her to be anything or anyone other than herself. And I know she feels the same way about me. It's the kind of relationship that we women dream about finding with other human beings, and with my cat, with any animal, it comes easy.

There are a lot of lonely women out here, and while animals can never quite substitute for human companionship, they can alleviate our loneliness to a significant degree. For women who live alone or who don't get enough touch in their lives or who have been single for an extended period or who don't have a best friend or any close friends, a positive relationship with an animal can be the reason they keep their heads above water and avoid feeling crushed under the weight of loneliness, isolation, or touch starvation. Animals have contributed to female sanity and mental well-being to an extent that we'll probably never fully understand.

I think it's important for us as feminist women to recognize that we share so much of the female experience with other female animals. We are not as different or disconnected from the rest of nature as men want us to believe. We are not the only female animals who face male violence and rape. We are not the only female animals who raise our young and live with the risks and burdens of that responsibility. We are not the only female animals who love and care for each other. Some people would say that it's dehumanizing to even call women "female" and compare us to other animals, but I don't see it that way at all. Seeing the things we have in common with other female animals, especially other female mammals, and understanding that males are not only violent, cruel, and sexually predatory toward females in our species but in many others too actually makes me feel more connected to the natural world, not less human. Men hurt female animals in many of the same ways they hurt us, but male animals also hurt the females of their own species. While it's deeply distressing to think about female animals being killed, raped, or maimed by their male counterparts or even by human men, the way this knowledge increases our potential sense of connection to those female animals can be comforting. Female animals, without intending to do it, show us we have the right to defend ourselves by any means necessary and just like women, they do their best to survive and enjoy themselves despite how brutal life is for them. They are fierce and free. So maybe we can be too.

To the animals of the world, to the dogs who make women feel secure enough to run outside and who have protected women from violent men, to the cats who cuddle their crying women and girls and vibrate their tails in excitement just to be around them, to the horses and birds and rabbits and hamsters and guinea pigs and cows and sheep and chickens who have shown women their affection or helped through medical

emergencies or led them out of house fires, to the female lions in Africa who protected a little girl from male sex traffickers and the deer who chased off a woman's male attacker in Ohio, to every animal who's ever saved a woman or girl in any way: thank you. We love you!