JOINT OPEN LETTER TO THE ASSOCIATED PRESS CALLING FOR A CHANGE IN ANIMAL PRONOUNS — ANIMALS ARE A WHO, NOT A WHAT

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To:
Paula Froke
Editor of The Associated Press Stylebook and executive director of The Associated Press Media Editors

In the 1960s, world-renowned ethologist and conservationist Dr. Jane Goodall submitted her first scientific paper on chimpanzees that was promptly returned to her to be edited. Every place she had written he or she to describe a chimpanzee had been replaced with it, and every who had been replaced with which.

Goodall refused to budge and won a small battle for nonhuman animals back then, but decades later we’re still waiting for respected style guides like The Associated Press Stylebook to catch up on the relative pronouns used to describe them.

In an age struggling with industrialized animal cruelty, the sixth mass extinction of species, a climate crisis, and the exploitation of the natural world, the way we use language influences the way we see our relationship with our environment and the nonhuman animals we share it with.

This isn’t a niche topic or a trend in language, and it affects a broad range of stakeholders. Our lives intersect with nonhuman animals in myriad ways. They live in our homes as our companions and visit our yards as wild guests. They’re hunted, farmed and eaten. They’re raised and killed for their skins and fur. They’re used in research and entertainment and held captive in zoos and aquariums.

Wild and domesticated nonhuman animals are everywhere around us, and the scientific consensus is that they too are conscious beings.

Conscious beings cannot be described similarly to cars, or couches, as it and that and which. It is inaccurate and unjust to describe nonhuman animals as if they were inanimate objects, yet it’s done every single day — and writers are instructed to do so at the behest of widely-used and respected style guides, such as The Associated Press Stylebook.

Mass media, which defaults to this guide in particular, has a great influence on our perception and therefore has an enormous responsibility to portray nonhuman animals as precisely as
possible. This is especially true considering the overlap of nonhuman animals and social justice issues that are being increasingly covered by journalists.

Yet the current references to them as *it, that* and *which* reduces individual nonhuman animals deserving of our understanding, respect and protection to mere objects to be owned and exploited for utilitarian purposes.

The Associated Press Stylebook instructs writers not to apply a personal pronoun to an animal unless their sex has been established, or they have a name. This is too limiting to writers as well as fellow nonhuman animals, most of whom are discussed abstractly and thus their sex is not established. We pay respect to humans whose sex is indeterminate or gender fluid by using *he/she* or the non-binary term *they*. That same courtesy should be extended to all animals, as they are gendered beings.

When gender is known, the standard guidance should be, *she/her/hers* and *he/him/his*, regardless of species. When it is unknown, the gender-neutral *they*, *he/she*, or *his/hers* should be used. It is also preferable to use *who* rather than *that* or *which* when describing any individual nonhuman animal. See full recommendation at Animals and Media.

“When I began my research and shared it at Cambridge, I was told that my findings and approaches, including giving the chimpanzees names, were wrong. I was also told that surely the realizations that chimpanzees have individuality and emotions were wrong - at the time it was believed that other animals were essentially automatons devoid of complexity and very different from humans. How wrong they all were. Thankfully, we have come very far in our understanding of the other animals with whom we share this planet. We know that they feel joy, pain, grieve, and demonstrate compassion and altruism. We are not separate in kind from other species, but rather by mere degree. I've spent my life working to grow respect for nonhuman animals, and to ensure a future for the complex tapestry of life on Earth, but as we face devastating losses and cruelty to individuals and species, we must do everything we can to help people recognize the sentience and innate value of other animals. I've often said that to make change you must reach the heart, and to reach the heart you must tell stories. The way we write about other animals shapes the way we see them - we must recognize that every individual nonhuman animal is a 'who,' not a 'what.' I hope that we can advance our standards in this regard globally to refer to animals as individuals, and no longer refer to them as objects, so that the stories we tell spark compassion and action for these fellow beings," said Dr. Goodall.

For language to achieve accurate communication of the world around us that allows us to educate ourselves, make informed decisions, and navigate a way forward, it must continuously
evolve. This change would be a simple, yet monumental, step towards promoting accuracy in communication and ending the objectification of nonhuman animals we live amongst.

The undersigned individuals and organizations have long held that this update should be made, and agree that it should be made as soon as possible. We would appreciate hearing what efforts The Associated Press is planning to make in this regard. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Dr. Jane Goodall, DBE  
Founder, The Jane Goodall Institute & UN Messenger of Peace

Marilyn Kroplick, M.D.  
President, In Defense of Animals

Debra Merskin, PhD  
Professor of Communication, University of Oregon; Co-founder, Animals & Media

Carrie P. Freeman, PhD  
Associate Professor of Communication, Georgia State University; Co-founder, Animals & Media

Marc Bekoff, PhD  
Professor emeritus of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, University of Colorado, Boulder

Stephen Wells  
Executive Director, Animal Legal Defense Fund

Steven M. Wise  
President, Nonhuman Rights Project

Karen Dawn  
Founder of DawnWatch, the Daily Animal World News Watch
Jonathan Balcombe, PhD
Biologist, Author

Randy Malamud, PhD
Regents’ Professor of English, Georgia State University

Leslie Irvine, PhD
Professor of Sociology, University of Colorado, Boulder

Dr. L.A. Kemmerer
Professor of Philosophy and Religions, Montana State University Billings

Bernard E. Rollin, PhD
University Distinguished Professor; Professor of Philosophy, Animal Sciences and Biomedical Sciences; University Bioethicist, Colorado State University

David Nibert, PhD
Professor of Sociology, Wittenberg University

Sarah M. Bexell, PhD
Clinical Associate Professor & Director of Humane Education, University of Denver

Tema Milstein, PhD
Associate Professor of Environment & Society; Convenor, Master of Environmental Management Program, University of New South Wales

Lawrence A Hansen, M.D.
University of California San Diego School of Medicine Department of Pathology Division of Neuropathology

Barbara J. King, PhD
Emerita Professor Anthropology, William & Mary; Author of “How Animals Grieve”

Tess Hupe, MSW
Research Fellow, University of Denver, Graduate School of Social Work's Institute for Human-Animal Connection

Brian M. Lowe, PhD
Professor of Sociology, State University of New York College at Oneonta
Nina Ekholm Fry, MSSc., CCTP  
Director of Equine Programs & Adjunct Professor, Graduate School of Social Work and Graduate School of Professional Psychology, University of Denver

Julia Senecal  
Humane Education Programs Manager, Institute for Human-Animal Connection

Elizabeth Cherry, PhD  
Associate Professor of Sociology, Manhattanville College

Hope Ferdowsian, MD, MPH, FACP, FACPM  
President & CEO, Phoenix Zones Initiative

Alexis Miller  
Education and Outreach Manager, Luvin Arms Animal Sanctuary

Dr. Jessica Pierce  
Faculty Affiliate, Center for Bioethics and Humanities, University of Colorado Anschutz School of Medicine

Abby Power  
Founder & Creative Director, The Solutionary School

Melanie Joy, PhD  
Founding President, Beyond Carnism

Zoe Weil  
President and Co-founder, Institute for Humane Education

Molly A. Jenkins, MSW  
Adjunct Faculty and Professor, Institute for Human-Animal Connection, Graduate School of Social Work, University of Denver

Lori Marino, Ph.D.  
Executive Director, The Kimmela Center for Animal Advocacy

Dr. Matthew Cole  
Lecturer in Criminology, The Open University
Stevan Harnard, PhD
Editor, Animal Sentience; Professor of Psychology, Université du Québec à Montréal; Adjunct Professor of Cognitive Science, McGill University; Emeritus Professor of Cognitive Science, University of Southampton

Dr. Shelley M. Alexander
Canid Conservation Science Lab, University of Calgary

Ana Bradley
Executive Director, Sentient Media

Núria Almiron, PhD
UPF-Centre for Animal Ethics, co-director, Universitat Pompeu Fabra

Paula Casal
ICREA Research Professor, Catalan Institute for Research and Advanced Studies, Law Department, Pompeu Fabra University; UPF - Centre for Animal Ethics co-director; President, Great Ape Project - Spain

Eze Paez
Postdoctoral Fellow, Centre for Ethics, Politics and Society, University of Minho

Pamela Hart
Executive Director, Center for Animal Law Studies at Lewis & Clark Law School

Dr. Richard Twine
Co-director, Centre for Human-Animal Studies, Edge Hill University

Dr. Catia Faria
Postdoctoral Researcher at the Centre for Ethics, Politics and Society; Coordinator of the Research Group in Applied Ethics of the Centre for Ethics, Politics and Society, University of Minho (PT)

John Beske
Co-founder, Vegan Street and Vegan Street Media

Marla Rose
Co-founder, Vegan Street and Vegan Street Media
Rory Forrest
Author of “Dave the Space Pet”

Dr. Richard J. White
Reader in Human Geography, Sheffield Hallam University

Reynard Loki
Earth | Food | Life, Independent Media Institute

Nina Jackel
Founder, Lady Freethinker

Preeta Sinha
Founder, One Green Planet

Jasmin Singer
Executive Director, Our Hen House

Robbie Lockie
Co-founder & Director, Plant Based News

Mariann Sullivan
Host, Animal Law Podcast, Our Hen House

Jacy Reese Anthis
Co-founder, Sentience Institute; Postdoctoral Research Fellow, University of Chicago

Jo-Anne McArthur
Founder and Photojournalist, We Animals Media

Priscilla Feral
President, Friends of Animals

Aryenish Birdie
Founder and Executive Director, Encompass

Karen Davis, PhD
President, United Poultry Concerns
Aph Ko
Founder and Author, Black Vegans Rock

Nathan Herschler
Executive Director, Rise for Animals

Laura Leigh
Founder and President, Wild Horse Education

Regina Asmutis-Silvia
Executive Director, Whale and Dolphin Conservation, North America
Pronouns: she, her, hers

Brooks Fahy
Executive Director, Predator Defense

Suzanne Roy
Executive Director, American Wild Horse Campaign

Elizabeth Novogratz
Founder, Species Unite

Eric C Lindstrom
Executive Director, Farm Animal Rights Movement (FARM)

Camilla Fox
Founder and Executive Director, Project Coyote

Amber George, PhD
Editor and faculty at Galen College, Journal of Critical Animal Studies

Nathan Poirier
Asst. Editor, Journal of Critical Animal Studies

Jennifer Conrad, DVM
Founder and Director, Paw Project

Leah Garcés
President, Mercy For Animals
John Horning
Executive Director, WildEarth Guardians

Robert Grillo
Director, Free from Harm

Patricio Jones
Co-founder & Coordinator, VINE Sanctuary

Ivy Collier
Executive Director, Animals & Society Institute

Con Slobodchikoff, PhD.
CEO, Zoolingua

G.A. Bradshaw Ph.D, Ph.D
Founder and Director, The Kerulos Center for Nonviolence

Mary Finelli
President, Fish Feel

Carl Safina, PhD
Endowed Professor for Nature and Humanity, Stony Brook University

Jack Norris
Executive Director, Vegan Outreach

Jim Jensvold
President, Los Angeles County Democrats for the Protection of Animals

David Ebert
Co-founder, Animal Defense Partnership

Joel Litvin
Co-founder, Animal Defense Partnership

Kierán Suckling
Executive Director, Center for Biological Diversity
Jim Mason  
Author of “An Unnatural Order”

Erica Meier  
President, Animal Outlook

Brooke Hecht  
President, Center for Humans and Nature

Jane Velez-Mitchell  
Founder, JaneUnchained News Network

Ingrid Newkirk  
President, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals

Alexandra Horowitz, PhD  
Senior Research Fellow, Dog Cognition Lab, Barnard College; Author of "Inside of a Dog" and "Our Dogs, Ourselves"

Barbara Hodges, DVM, MBA  
Director of Advocacy & Outreach, Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association (HSVMA)

Paula Kislak, DVM  
Partner, KM Veterinary Services; Board member, Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association

Heather Schrader, RVT, MCJ  
Program Manager, Student Outreach, Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association