Expanding environmental education: Integrating animal welfare and overcoming human-centered thinking

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"Only those who have lived among the birds could truly appreciate the magic of their singing. At daybreak, the bushes and the alley corners would all be drenched in a vibrant chorus of birdsongs. The whole scene is exhilarating, exuding the mysterious vibes of a major orchestra".

—In "Conductor"; *Wild Wise Weird* (2024)

[**SCIENCE NEWS**]

In recent years, environmental education has increasingly focused on the role of nonhuman animals in our ecosystems [1]. However, even with growing research, animals are still not a central part of environmental education. Instead, the focus remains on human-centered issues. This reflects a larger societal problem, where influential groups—such as businesses and political or religious institutions—resist changes that might challenge human dominance [2].

A recent study [2] points out that environmental education, shaped by the idea of "sustainable development," often overlooks the ethical treatment of animals. This happens

partly because the concept of sustainability is vague, allowing economic growth and management goals to take priority over animal welfare. Moreover, many educational systems consider biocentrism—the belief that all living beings deserve respect—as optional rather than fundamental.

To foster meaningful change, education needs to address the deeply ingrained anthropocentrism (human-centered thinking) that dominates our society. Education can encourage a shift from anthropocentric to ecocentric or biocentric views, emphasizing interconnectedness with nature [3]. The granular interaction thinking of mindsponge theory suggests that by regularly exposing learners to new ideas, like the ethical treatment of all species and a more inclusive understanding of sustainability, people's attitudes can slowly shift [4].

Illustration. Generated by Imagine AI (https://www.imagine.art/)

Furthermore, research in this field has mostly focused on Western middle-class experiences, leaving out diverse cultural, socio-economic, and geographic perspectives. By widening the scope of environmental education to include these diverse voices, we can better understand how various communities relate to animals and the environment.

Lastly, teaching ethical relationships with animals is not just about presenting facts [5]; it involves understanding that learning is connected to broader social change. By encouraging mindfulness, compassion, and community-based learning, environmental education can help move towards a world that values and respects all living beings [4].

References

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