'A SEAGULL JUST STOLE MY DOUGHNUT': HUMANS *VERSUS* HERRING GULLS IN THE FIGHT FOR FOOD

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Herring gulls *(Larus argentatus)* are ubiquitous at our coasts and seaside resorts, a fact acknowledged by the catch-all name 'seagull' that is used interchangeably for these and other gull species. However, despite this long-standing association with coastal habitats, gull behaviour regularly incites anger amongst seaside residents and visitors. Whilst gulls can cause harm to humans through their daily activities, humans also cause harm right back. This short article, drawing on data from interviews with participants in an animal welfare education project and media coverage of gull stories, explores some of the tensions between gulls and people that can lead to acts of cruelty towards these birds. It considers both how conflict is created and fostered, and the ways in which some of the apparent vitriol humans feel towards gulls might be dissipated.

HUMANS *VERSUS* HERRING GULLS

The natural history of the gull indicates that these birds lead long and complex lives (Pierotti and Good, 1994). However, interview data and newspaper analysis reveals that their food choices and eating habits are amongst the factors impacting most significantly on our opinions and attitudes towards them. Many gull species exhibit plastic feeding behaviours, learning and adapting to the resources available, and some count interspecific kleptoparasitism amongst their skills. This can be a successful foraging strategy and demonstrates the gull's mastery of their habitat and their application of brain-power to problem-solving (Morand-Ferron *et al.*, 2007). However, these survival-enhancing behaviours can cause gulls to come into conflict with humans. Diners take umbrage at having their chips, doughnuts and ice creams 'stolen' from them, as evidenced by the story of the unsuspecting Mrs Dack, relieved of her doughnut by a passing gull on Brighton seafront (Linning, 2014). Her husband commented 'If there's one thing Mrs Dack doesn't like its having her doughnuts pinched.'

Gulls also appear to have developed a taste for more than just doughnuts. Newspapers eagerly report them swooping to snatch small dogs (Mullin, 2015), false teeth (Bexhill-on-Sea Observer, 2013), crisps (Barnes, 2016), and most popular of all, any food from Greggs (Edwards, 2016). Despite the sometimes humorous portrayals in such articles, the underlying pattern is that of the media systematically depicting gulls in a negative light. Content analysis of newspapers featuring gull stories showed that descriptions of gulls and gull behaviour is predominantly negative, with 'victims' of gull attacks being variously described as having been mugged, intimidated, terrorised, stalked relentlessly, and more. Gulls are pigeon-holed as masters of intimidation, winged raiders, and greedy, swaggering, cunning beasts.

Newspaper headlines such as 'Call for action over Kirkcaldy Seagull Menace' (Fife Today, 2012) or 'Seagull Terror: Lock up your babies' (Perry, 2015) further promote the viewpoint that gulls are a problem and thus require a solution. And it is not just the media that frames gulls as menaces to society; their reputation is consolidated in our popular culture from an early age. Stories such as The Lighthouse Keeper's Lunch (Armatige, 2007) depict gulls as thieving varmints that have to be outwitted at all costs. And the upshot of all this negativity – seemingly derived from just one of their natural behaviours, and the human inability to share – is the casting of the gull as a 'problem' animal, which in turn can lead to an uprising of humans against gulls. It is within this landscape of people *versus* 'problem animals' that we find individuals taking matters into their own hands.

Across England and Wales there are hundreds of wildlife rehabilitation centres, caring for thousands of sick and injured wild animals each year. Data from the four RSPCA wildlife centres alone shows that nationally they admit an average of 30 shot gulls each year, alongside gulls that have been deliberately poisoned, stoned, kicked or fished. Such acts of purposeful cruelty appear to indicate that some people are happy to respond to the 'call for action' newspapers espouse. And even those that do not commit acts of cruelty may try to tackle the perceived problem in a range of creative ways. One interviewee commented 'If a gull ate my chips I wouldn't finish them. I would feed them the rest. I'm playing the long game and giving gulls diabetes.'

In short, gulls seem to be unpopular, unwanted, and perceived as out-of-place in our modern landscapes. And yet herring gulls are listed as species with a red status in conservation terms, whilst lesser black-backed gulls (*Larus fuscus*) and great black-backed gulls (*Larus marinus*) have amber status (RSPB, 2017). Gull populations in the UK have suffered declines, so it appears that from a conservation perspective alone we should be caring for these species, even before we consider their individual welfare as sentient creatures. But if we then argue that it is necessary to try

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and improve the relationship between people and gulls for either or both of these reasons, how do we actually go about making a difference?

ADVERSITY MAKES THE HEART GROW FONDER

One source of inspiration for change can be found in Peace's work on the ponies of Coffin Bay (Peace, 2009). Here public opinion about these animals was dramatically turned around when the ponies were cast as vermin by the Department of Environment and Heritage and faced a cull within the conservation plan for the unique habitat of Coffin Bay National Park. Local people, previously indifferent to the ponies, rallied around when central government announced this cull and the ponies were transformed from being 'just there...nothing special' (Peace, 2009, p.64)) to members of the local community. Residents stood up against the outsiders and their views, and championed the right of the ponies to stay in their adopted habitat.

Čapek's (2006) study of a cattle egret colony decimated by developers sheds further light on the potential of this approach. Conway, Arkansas was the setting for the mutilation and subsequent death of around 5000 egrets when a greenfield site was developed for housing. Čapek noted that many residents, whose yards became strewn with bird bodies, saw the dead and dying birds as pollutants or as an economic liability which affected house prices and local sanitation. But she also found that some experienced a change of heart during the disaster and subsequent clean-up. She described finding a mutable nature-self interface that drew people in, saying 'Direct encounters with injured birds began to breach the space usually separating the everyday worlds of humans and cattle egrets in Conway. As new experiences and knowledge entered this space, a new relationship emerged between human beings and birds' (Capek, 2006, p.173). This sense of connection to birds is echoed in Bonta's 2008 writing about ethno-ornithology in Honduras, in which he identifies that 'local people have some sort of 'stake' in 'their' avifauna' (Bonta, 2008, p.4). However, recent surveys suggest that 44% of adults in the UK support a gull cull (BBC, 2015). It appears that much work is to be done if these people are to change their view and see these birds as 'their' seagulls.

PROBLEM ANIMALS

Understanding more about 'problem animals' also provides insight to the animosity humans feel towards gulls. Jerolmack (2008) writes about the feral pigeon's own fall from grace and transition to 'problem' status. He identified a number of factors in this transformation, saying that this 'reveals a cultural anxiety about disorder and a deeply felt need for a sanitized city that goes beyond a concern for diseases pigeons may harbour' (Jerolmack, 2008, p.73). That is to say that the categorisation of these animals is not strictly logical or embedded in scientific truths. This resonates with the views of one of my interviewees who said of gulls, 'They are filthy. I know they can't lick their arses but they have their beaks in rubbish all day.' This, and many other interviewees, saw gulls as polluted, polluting creatures that would not obey human norms. Such is their first 'problem', but things get worse for gulls. Jerolmack argues that humans rank animal worth and usefulness 'based on features such as perceived attractiveness, intelligence, rarity and so forth' (Jerolmack, 2008, p.86). This spells further trouble for gulls, whose intelligent interspecific kleptoparasitism is seen by many in the same way as one interviewee who said gulls were 'mean, and uncaring. They are lazy, ugly thieves.'

TURNING THE TIDE

So, on the one hand we have the media denouncing gulls as vicious and evil. And on the other we have entrenched views within the population that they are dirty scoundrels. How can these kinds of attitudes be changed to prevent gulls being shot and persecuted, and to foster empathy and kindness towards them? How can the boundaries between our species be breached to encourage greater understanding of their behaviours?

The first step may just lie within the very language that we use. Watson (2013) argues that the everydayness of Toronto's Ring-bill gulls *(Larus delawarensis)* has hindered them with a linguistic shackle. In their ubiquity they have become seagulls, rather than ring-bills, a transition that has rendered them unseen in their urban environment. He posits that if gulls are thus invisible to people they become psychologically distant, and disinterest us. Herring gulls appear to have experienced this same fate, being blended with other gull species into a generic seagull. So perhaps we can help them by unpicking the seagull to free the Herring, Lesser Black-backed and Greater Black-backed gulls from this cage.

Once gull species are recognised and individuals can even be indentified it may be easier to forge positive relationships. Čapek (2006), Jerolmack (2008) and Bonta (2008) all remind us of the power of the personal connection in changing views. In Čapek's work this contact took place when the animals were already *in extremis,* their plight visible for all to see. Fortunately, it has been found that intervention through first-hand encounters before any such disaster can also be successful in fostering positive, empathetic relationships between people and animals (Ascione, 1992).

Alongside empathy, animals can also find champions when facing adversity (Peace, 2009), a factor that could work to the benefit of gulls. Perhaps if people knew that gulls had already made their way back from previous near-extermination events (Pierotti and Good, 1994), were in decline currently in the UK (RSPB, 2017), and were also faced with threats to their survival, they might champion their cause.

Potentially, the best hope lies with those who Bonta described as able to 'infect' others with their enthusiasm. He describes how views could be changed through a form of 'viral consciousness' (Bonta, 2008, p.9), and my own interviews with participants in an animal welfare education programme validated this theory of an 'enthusiasm infection' being a powerful force for change. One interviewee told me 'I thought they (gulls) were mean, and they do scare me a bit when they swoop. But I have learned from him (RSPCA staff member). I don't want my daughter to grow up scared like me, so I'm trying to show her they are cool.'

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