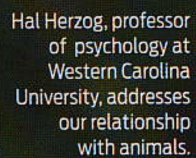
A complicated affair

BY JEREMY LLOYD



Hal Herzog, professor of psychology at Western Carolina University, addresses our relationship with animals.
MARK HASKETT PHOTO

"Do you think we'll see a bear?"

It is question-and-answer time with a group of fifth-grade students preparing to embark on an eight-mile wilderness hike with me in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Like the rest of her classmates, the girl asking the question has come to live and learn at Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont, a residential environmental learning center located in the heart of the Tennessee side of the park. Some nervousness is detectable in the girl's voice, but I can tell she hopes that we will, in fact, set our eyes on one of the most beloved and fearsome animals roaming the mountains. When I explain that our chances are small considering the size of our group, her eyes register relief—and some disappointment, too.

"But maybe we'll see a snake," I say. "At least, I hope we do."

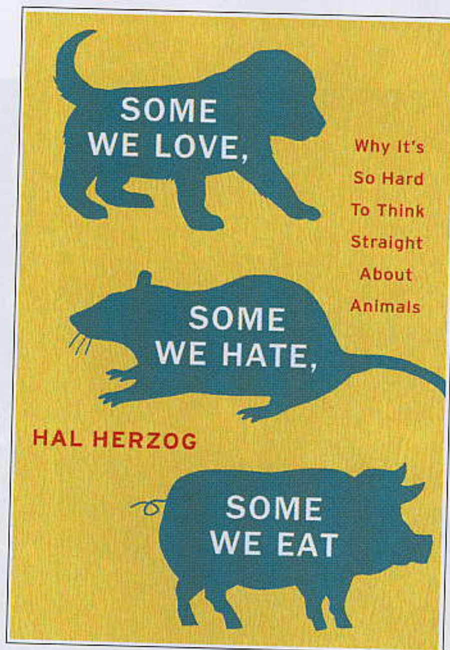
Granted, I wasn't always fond of snakes, and even now, picking up a non-venomous red-belly makes me flinch a little. But all in all, the snake world is one I have come to admire. But the kids' faces are aghast. "He can't be serious," the kids' expressions say. But I am, of course.

You may very well be thinking, "I'll side with the kids on this one. Snakes are scaly and slither on the ground, and unlike bears they simply aren't, well, cute."And you would be right. The differences between bears and snakes are many. Yet just why do we humans draw these distinctions, giving approval to some creatures while fearing others? Why do we put some animals on our dinner plates without feeling an ounce of guilt yet consider the consumption of others as morally repugnant?

These are just a few of the quandaries raised in a fascinating new book, **Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat**. Hal Herzog, the author, teaches psychology at Western Carolina University and has been asking these questions for a long time.

Uncomfortable facts crop up frequently in his book's pages. Take, for instance, the following words delivered over the radio in Germany in 1933: "Animals are not merely creatures in the organic sense, but creatures who lead their own lives and who are endowed with perceptive facilities, who feel pain and experience joy and prove to be faithful and attached." The speaker is none other than Nazi war criminal Hermann Goring, who also threatened to send anyone treating animals as property to a concentration

As an "animal person" himself, Herzog is most conflicted not about eating meat, or using animals for research, but about being a cat owner. His cat spends nights prowling outdoors and brings back birds and voles, clearly a needless waste of wildlife. (Outdoor cats kill an average of 500 million songbirds in the United States every year.) However, it cuts both ways. A previous cat Herzog owned did not come back one day and was never heard from again. It was around this same period that Herzog observed a coyote visiting his neighborhood.



"My moral issue is not just that my cat kills things, but that I'm putting her at greater risk letting her do that," Herzog said. "On the other hand, I think if I were a cat, would I rather be forced to live in a giant cage called Hal Herzog's house as a bystander looking out the window at the world going by? Or would I rather be able to go outside and hunt and take my risks with the coyotes and owls?"

Herzog is well aware that indoor cats live three to four times longer than outdoor cats. Even so, he's chosen otherwise. "I let her go outside and take her chances because that's what I think I would like. But maybe I'm just projecting my morality on an animal that's not me. It's an unresolved moral quandary," he says with a palpable uncertainty in his voice.

When it comes to the perplexing attitudes humans exhibit towards animals, whether they are bears, snakes, cats or a hundred other kinds, we humans would prefer that everything ... him into deeper shades of gray.

In his early days as a biologist, Herzog studied alligators, personality differences between baby snakes, and cock fighting in Southern Appalachian culture. His career took a left turn after he attended a meeting of animal behaviorists. Sitting across from a tiger trainer, he realized he was in the presence of someone who knew more about animals than the entire group of scientists in the room put together. "It turned my head around," he told me. The field of anthrozoology—the study of human-animal relationships—was just getting started, and Herzog decided he wanted to explore the psychology of human-animal relationships. The psychobiologist was born.

My own work in the national park prompts me to think about human relationships towards animals and how we care for the creatures that make their home in this place we have set aside to let nature take its course.

Unlike Herzog, I don't own any pets, but I've often thought that I don't need to for the simple reason that a greater diversity of life exists in the Great Smokies than anywhere else in North America. Among the animal kingdom this includes 64 species of mammals, 240 species of birds, and perhaps as many as 600 species of spiders. In the Tremont area alone, as many as 700 species of moths and butterflies make their residence. And 31 species of salamanders make this region the salamander capital of the world. This astounding diversity is at once daunting and exhilarating. There's so much here to learn about and fall in love with that it's easy to feel overwhelmed. But it's a good kind of overwhelmed, and it reminds me that we may never discover every mystery the natural world holds secret, which may be a good thing.

The classroom where I teach is the great outdoors, where kids and adults encounter nature unmediated by television or textbooks. I sometimes wonder how we humans relate to animals living in a wild setting, especially those that epitomize the very essence of wildness. The eastern cougar comes to mind. Despite untold numbers of sightings many people claim to have made, no evidence of a viable cougar population has existed in the Southern Appalachians in nearly a century. No paw prints, no scat, no feed sites—nothing. Still, there's something about cougars that light a spark in the imagination of people who live in the Appalachians.

"The animals we're most afraid of we attrib-

Mysticism aside, the coyote is one of Herzog's favorites in the Smokies—a surprising answer given the apparent loss of a beloved pet to one, but then Herzog is quite comfortable with contradictions. He admits a fondness for creepy crawlies as well. "I'm the guy who whenever I go for a walk, I turn over rocks looking for salamanders. There's this whole other world going on at your feet in mountain streams," he said.

I experience a kind of therapy myself whenever I hike, basking in each season's sensory delights and encountering the unexpected, which often as not includes spotting wild turkey or a ruffed grouse that flushes at my approach, scaring me half to death. This therapy is not the kind for which one must pay thousands of dollars in doctor bills. It's not the only reason to go exploring, of course. There's plenty to learn and enjoy simply from a natural history point of view.

But what about people who seek a stricter kind of animal therapy? Dolphins provide one such example. Advocates of dolphin therapy claim the alleviation of everything from deafness to chronic back pain to eating disorders. An hour spent with a dolphin in the water at the Curacao Dolphin Therapy and Research Center in the Netherlands Antilles will set you back $700. Is it worth it? Not according to the latest scientific research, Herzog's book shows. If anything, it's a grand waste of money. Furthermore it means putting into service a wild species that's been relegated to captivity.

Of course, most Americans choose instead to rely on their pets for whatever therapeutic value they might gain from close interaction with animals. But are pets actually good for one's health? It's a mixed bag according to the science Herzog shares with his readers. While there's some evidence that owning a dog improves one's cardiovascular functions, there's a downside, too: more than 85,000 Americans are injured each year as a result of tripping over their pets, mostly dogs. One in six dog owners have wrecked their car thanks to Rover bounding around while the car's in motion.

Ever catch a child frying ants with a magnifying glass or aiming a BB gun at a squirrel? If like me you've got a thought bubble floating above your head right now that all but screams "guilty as charged," there's no need to worry. It seems to run in all of our genes, and the assumption that animal cruelty will lead to criminal activity in adulthood is for the most part unfounded. Instead, what researchers call "dirty play" represents a common, if beastly, behavior among children, who by and large grow up to become responsible citizens.

Jeremy Lloyd rest on a hill in a stand of beech trees along the Appalachian Trail with a group of adult students working on Southern Naturalist Certification through one of Tremont's many workshops. DONATED PHOTO

Herzog busts more myths when it comes to meat eating. Despite the rise of the animal rights movement, the amount of meat the average American eats per year has soared from 176 pounds in 1975 to almost 240 today. And despite the perceived rise of vegetarianism and veganism as a dietary choice, strict adherents number only between 2 and 6 million Americans. Another study concluded that less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the U.S. population is truly vegetarian. Either for health reasons or because of a dearth of available food choices, most vegetarians eventually return to eating meat.

Taboos about eating certain kinds of meat likely stem from arbitrary cultural traditions. For instance, one anthropologist concluded that the reason Hindus don't eat beef is because cattle provide milk, dung for fuel, and farmers a way to plow their fields. Next door in Pakistan, however, cows are used for all the same reasons—and eaten, too. Jews and Muslims are forbidden from eating pork (one theory suggests the reason is to protect humans from trichinosis). Just try convincing an average citizen of the American South that they should do the same.

But what if every American was required to slaughter his or her own meat? Would that reduce our consumption? By way of answering this question, Herzog asked a group of Warren Wilson students who slaughtered a steer to fill out questionnaires related to their experience. While most admitted becoming nauseous during the butchering process, none gave up eating meat. Instead, most said the experience helped clarify their values.

Just what those values are, and how they inform our attitudes toward animals, isn't always clear. One thing is certain: it benefits an animal to be cute. One evening as I sat reading Herzog's book, I came across the following sentence: "What is it about human psychology that makes it so difficult for us to think consistently about animals?" The very next day I encountered a yearling bear cub in the woods that appeared to be starving or diseased, and which died before park rangers were able to help it. As I stood by unable to do anything, it occurred to me that bears die in the mountains all the time, out of view of any human eyes. This is the natural way of things. The singularity of this particular bear got to me though, and because it wasn't a bug or a snake,

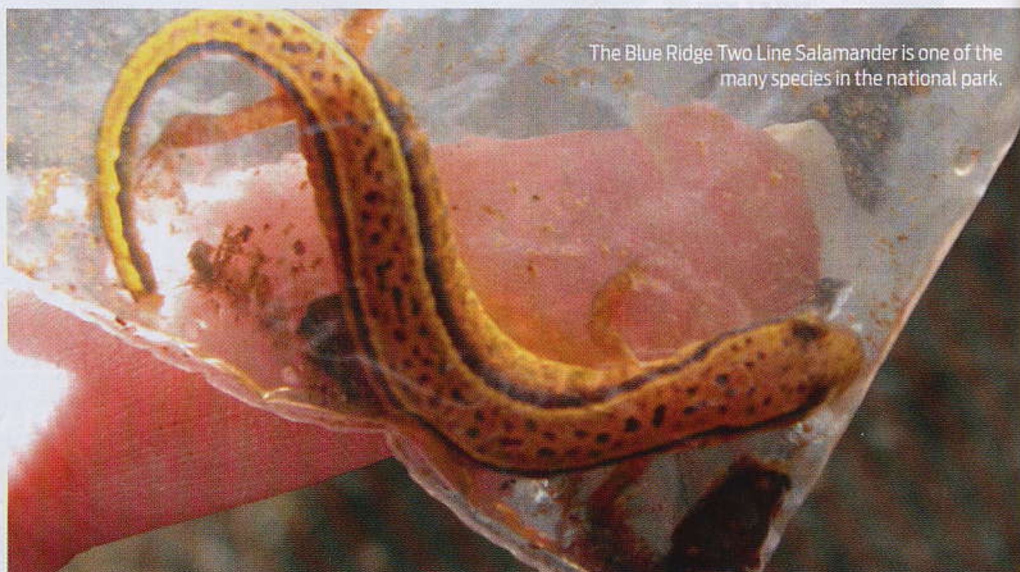
Students at Tremont investigate a millipede while on a hike in the GSMNP.

the situation seemed more dire. But was it really? Or was I only projecting my own values due to the cuteness factor? There's no clear answer to this question. I know though what a psychobiologist would tell me: it's because as a human I possess a big brain, and also a big heart.

When I asked Herzog to describe his book in a nutshell, he admitted he struggled with this. Ultimately, he said, it's the title of the book itself—**Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat**. Put another way, our words and our deeds are often at odds and don't make logical sense. William Faulkner said in a speech he made when accepting the Nobel Prize in literature that the aim of all good books was to illustrate "the heart in conflict with itself." Is that what Herzog's book is ultimately about? "Exactly!" he said. In the end, it's less about animals than about the dilemma humans face every day when making choices, conscious or not, about the animals in our lives.

By way of advice for how to act ethically regarding animals, Herzog quotes a man he met named Michael Mountain: "You can't save all the animals in the world, but the ones that come into your care, you are responsible for." Most animals will never enter our lives directly because they live in the wild. Are we not also responsible for them? Right now we are facing the sixth great extinction event in earth's history, which is human-caused, and unless we are fine with more creatures going the way of the passenger pigeon, the answer better be a resounding yes. Setting aside more land for nature to take its own course, for bears and salamanders and the endangered northern flying squirrel to lead self-willed lives, is one answer. Another, of course, is taking care of the public lands we already have.

An educated public is necessary in order to accomplish this, and it's this I keep thinking of as a new batch of students arrives by bus to spend a week in the mountains. The next generation of people who will love some animals, hate others, and be an unknown friend to many by helping preserve special places such as the Great Smoky Mountains. **SML**


The Blue Ridge Two Line Salamander is one of the many species in the national park.