

# How Indigenous philosophies can improve the way Canadians treat animals

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Indigenous perspectives view the relationship between humans and animals much differently than modern western societies. Weaving Indigenous perspectives into how Canadians regard animals could greatly benefit the well-being of animals on several fronts, including agriculture, research, and those kept as pets.

Teaching such views could also transform university curricula, especially in [animal science](#) and biomedical programs, as well as climate change activism and sustainability as we pursue reconciliation.

The [Campbell Centre for the Study of Animal Welfare \(CCSAW\)](#) is a group of faculty, students and staff at the University of Guelph promoting the welfare of animals through research, education and outreach.

[The CCSAW hosted a speaker series this past spring with Canadian senators, academics and Indigenous thought leaders](#) to discuss Indigenous perspectives towards animal use in Canada. In particular, they spoke about how [animal species are regarded as human's close relations](#) deserving of respect, kindness and gratitude from birth to the end of their lives.

## **Captive wild animals**

How can viewing animals as close relations have an impact on current animal use in Canada? One way—currently being considered by the Senate—is by improving the lives of captive wild animals.

First introduced in 2020 by Sen. Murray Sinclair (Anishinaabe and member of Peguis First Nation) and reintroduced in March 2022 by Sen. Marty Klyne (Cree Métis), the [Jane Goodall Act](#) hopes to provide some of the strongest legislation for wild animal protection in the world.

Supported by [Coastal First Nations](#), [the act aims to deliver new legal protections](#) for captive big cats, bears, wolves, seals, sea lions, walruses, certain monkeys and reptiles. These protections include ending the commercial trade, breeding and acquisition of these species.

It will also work to phase out elephant captivity and [roadside zoos](#) in

Canada.

A driving factor in support for the act is the Indigenous consideration and recognition that animals and humans, and the environment surrounding us, are interconnected.

Currently in its second reading with the Senate, this highly anticipated legislation has the potential to make huge strides toward the protection of wild animals by advocating for their welfare through a lens of mutual respect.

## 'All my relations'

Where do these values come from?

During the CCSAW event, [Jesse Popp](#), Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Environmental Science from Wiikwemkoong Unceded Territory, described the concept of "[all my relations](#)." This [cross-cultural Indigenous philosophy](#) is based on the foundation of respect for all living things through co-existence and inherent responsibilities and obligations for all ways of knowing.

There is a disconnect between the hierarchical top-down relationships between humans and animals in modern settler societies and [Indigenous perspectives that incorporate a holistic and circular interconnection](#) among humans, animals and the environment.

The view that humans are separate from nature went against Popp's desire to work with animals, prompting her to incorporate Indigenous views into western ways of knowing to [advance environmental and ecological science](#) that contributes to animal conservation, sustainability and the movement of the natural sciences toward reconciliation.

Maintaining an "all my relations" perspective, many Indigenous cultures also have strong family ties to animals. For Elder [Wendy Phillips](#)—Bald Eagle Clan, Potawatomi and Ojibwa, and member of Wasauksing First Nation—[ceremony and knowledge translation from one generation to the next](#) are key to her practice.

Within the clan system, [animal ties provide clan members with roles](#) within the community. For the Bald Eagle Clan, this is a role of leadership and teaching. Carried over generations, these teachings allow the continuation of ceremonial practice through sustainable management and companionship.

## **Mutual respect and reciprocity**

But does this go far enough? In terms of animals raised for agricultural purposes, Indigenous philosophies of respect, responsibility and reciprocity are all but lost in modern practices.

Agriculture animals experience a lack of agency toward living a natural life by being [forced to live in unnatural social groups](#) and often without the ability to even turn around, let alone fly or run. They also [suffer during transport between farms and slaughterhouses](#) and experience shortened lifespans.

During her CCSAW talk, [Margaret Robinson](#), Canada Research Chair in Reconciliation, Gender, and Identity who is Mi'kmaq from Lennox Island First Nation, described how [modern intensive agricultural practices go against key Mi'kmaq values](#).

The [Mi'kmaq value of non-interference](#) directly contradicts modern agriculture by not respecting the autonomy of the animal. Animals are forcibly caged and their bodies are altered.

The Mi'kmaq value of respect for mothers as matriarchal and community leaders is also violated for many agriculture species as pregnancy is commonly forced and [mothers are separated from their young offspring](#), often very shortly after birth.

## Reconnecting with animals

Robinson also spoke of the disconnect between the food we buy from the grocery store and the Mi'kmaq tradition of giving gratitude at the end of an animal's life. Incorporating these values into current agricultural practices could better protect an animal's autonomy through respect and responsibility.

Ethnobotanist Robin Wall Kimmerer also discusses this disconnect in our food systems in her book [Braiding Sweetgrass](#). She writes:

"Something is broken when the food comes on a Styrofoam tray wrapped in slippery plastic, a carcass of a being whose only chance at life was a cramped cage. That is not a gift of life; it is a theft."

Indigenous views and ways of knowing should be applied to the way we keep, use and kill animals and in how we teach future generations about animal use and their care, particularly within animal agriculture. Animal welfare researchers are on the right track as they strive to understand our impact and treatment of the animals we use and live with.

Instead of separating ourselves from the world around us, we should remind ourselves that we are intertwined with [animals](#), and therefore should uphold respect and responsibility for them. As Kimmerer says, "Sustain the ones who sustain you and the Earth will last forever."

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