



PERSPECTIVES ON A 2019 TIGER-HUMAN INTERACTION INCIDENT IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract: This article describes a 2019 incident in Malaysia in which two tigers were seen near a village. After providing context on the situation of tigers internationally and in Malaysia, the article reports an ecolinguistic study of 10 online articles on the incident from established media sources. Categories used in analyzing the articles were human concern for tigers, tigers owned by humans, tigers provoking fear, animals for human entertainment, tigers as criminals, use of pronouns to refer to tigers, and provision of background on the situation of tigers in Malaysia. The analysis found that the online articles reflected a human-centric perspective. This perspective contrasts with a humans-as-fellow-animals view. The latter view is supported by cited studies of people's perspective in rural India and of the status of a wide variety of nonhuman animals as thinking, feeling beings. Recommendations are made that the adoption of a humans-as-fellow-animals perspective may be important to the welfare and continued existence in the wild of tigers and other endangered species.

Key-words: Endangered species. Malayan tigers. Human-centric perspective. Humans-as-fellow-animals perspective. Animals as criminals. Anthropocene

Resumo: Este artigo descreve um incidente em 2019 na Malásia, no qual dois tigres foram vistos próximos a uma aldeia. Após apresentar o contexto sobre a situação dos tigres em nível internacional e na Malásia, o artigo apresenta um estudo de 10 artigos *online* sobre o incidente na mídia. As categorias usadas na análise dos artigos foram preocupação humana com os tigres, tigres de propriedade de humanos, tigres provocando medo, animais para diversão humana, tigres como criminosos, uso de pronomes para se referir aos tigres e apresentação do contexto dos tigres na Malásia. A análise mostrou que os artigos *online* refletiam uma perspectiva humano-cêntrica, que contrasta com a visão de humanos-como-parceiros-animais. Essa última visão é comparada a

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estudos mencionados sobre a perspectiva das pessoas na Índia rural e ao *status* de uma variedade de animais não humanos como pensantes, sencientes. Sugere-se que a adoção de uma perspectiva humanos-como-parceiros-animais pode ser importante para o bem-estar e continuidade da existência de tigres em estado selvagem, bem como a de outras espécies.

Palavras-chave: Espécies ameaçadas. Tigre malaios. Perspectiva humano-cêntrica. Perspectiva humanos-como-parceiros-animais. Animais como criminosos. Antropoceno.

1. Introduction

Some estimates place the formation of the Earth at 4.5 billion years ago, with the first organisms appearing 3.8 billion years ago, and the first human species 2 million years ago. For almost all the time humans have been here, we have been a rather insignificant species (HARARI, 2015; 2017). For instance, Harari (2015) speculated that some of the hunting that earlier humans did amounted to waiting for top predators, such as lions, to kill prey, such as antelopes, wait for the lions to eat their fill, and then wait for scavengers, such as jackals, to pick meat from the prey's bones, before finally, humans could use their stone tools to break the antelopes' bones in order to eat the marrow. Such was the low, third-level status of humans.

For most of our time on the planet, humans were just one among many animals, not at all an animal of special status. Indeed, such was the relative weakness of humans that only one human species, homo sapiens, has survived, while others, for example, homo habilis and homo erectus, are extinct. Humans had no choice but to co-exist with our fellow animals and with the plants. Thus, one perspective on the interface between humans and other animals is that humans are just one of many animals; we are unique, as is every animal and plant species, but we have no special rights. This humans-as-just-another-animal view is no longer the dominant perspective among humans, but it continues especially among animal welfare advocates and some traditional peoples. For instance, Jasudon (2001) quoted a village headman in an area of Malaysia with tiger presence as stating, "We are all part of God's creation, and we learn to live in harmony with the animals. They are only trying to survive, just like we are."

Times have changed. We now live in what many scientists call the anthropocene, the geologic age dominated by humans (STEFFEN et al., 2011). From being a low status and inconsequential animal species, humans have risen to become the main influence on the other

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animals, as well as the plants, the air, and the water. We no longer need to co-exist with other species; we can dominate them and separate ourselves from them. This empowerment of humans has given rise to a different perspective on the interface between humans and other animals. In this human-centric (also known as anthropocentric) perspective, humans are above the other animals. Furthermore, despite what evolution theory (DARWIN, 1859/2004) may show us, in this perspective, humans are not considered to be animals; instead, we are distinct from and superior to other animals. In fact, calling a human an “animal” is to insult them (DUNAYER 2001; STIBBE, 2015). Of course, as with most situations, more than two perspectives exist on the interface between humans and other animals. Plus, perspectives overlap.

This paper investigates the issue of humans’ perspectives toward animals using media accounts of an incident in which two tigers were seen entering a village in rural Malaysia. First, background is provided on the situation of tigers generally and then of tigers in Malaysia. Next, the incident is described. The largest section of the paper is an analysis of 10 media reports related to the incident. The paper concludes with suggestions on the reporting of future tiger-human interactions and on how tiger-human interactions might be mutually beneficial.

2. Tigers Today

Tigers are apex predators, i.e., they are the top predators in their habitats, with no animals who naturally hunt them. Killer whales are another example of an apex predator. Apex predators, like other animals and plants, play important roles in the ecosystems in which they live. In the case of tigers, they maintain a balance of species, both animal and plant species, in a habitat.

Wild tigers live only in Asia, and only about 3900 remain, as human action – in such forms as habitat destruction for agriculture and housing, and poaching - has caused tiger populations to drop by 97 per cent (WWF, 2019) from before the ascent of humans. Researchers divide tigers into six species, with those in Malaysia and southern Thailand classified as Malayan tigers. Approximately, 200 Malayan tigers remain in the wild, and at least one researcher predicts that the species will go extinct by 2025, if not earlier (WWF, 2019).

Tigers and humans can pose a danger to each other. As mentioned above, humans are responsible for the deaths of many tigers, such as when humans destroy the forests where tigers

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live or when humans kill tigers in order to sell and buy the tigers' flesh or body parts, often in the mistaken belief that by partaking of products from tigers, humans can gain the powers that tigers allegedly possess. The huge drop in Malaysia's tiger population illustrates humans' deadly impact on tigers.

Tigers can also kill humans, although this seems rare with no recent reports of human fatalities due to Malayan tigers. Jasudon (2001), from almost 20 year ago, quoted a Malaysian wildlife officer as saying that "once it [a tiger] starts attacking humans, it is either very ill and weak or injured. It will continue killing people." In fact, as to animals who kill humans, tigers are far from the top of the list, although that may be partly due to the diminishing number of tigers. The top two animal killers of humans are mosquitos and other humans (CAPPIELLO, 2019; CUTOLO & LABIANCA, 2019).

3. The Research

The Incident

In mid-July 2019, two tigers were seen walking along a road in a rural village in the Malaysian state of Terengganu. This incident received a great deal of coverage in the Malaysian media. Subsequently, Malaysian government officials detained one of the tigers, while the other one, to date, has not been seen again. The captive tiger died shortly after being captured, perhaps from canine distemper. At least one government official hypothesized that the two tigers were not wild but instead had been taken and perhaps released by someone who wanted to have tigers as pets.

Methodology

Via a Google search, 10 English language online articles on the incident were found from recognized media sources. Only English language articles were used, as English is widely used in Malaysia, and it was the only common language among the researchers. See Appendix for a list of the articles, including their urls.

The authors read through the articles and highlighted points that seemed to display one of the two perspectives on tiger-human interface described in this paper's introduction: (a) humans should strive to co-exist with tigers; (b) humans are superior, and tigers exist only when the existence supports or at least does not interfere with human desires.

4. Results and Discussion

After taking notes on the 10 articles about the July 2019 tiger-human incident in Malaysia, the researchers formed seven categories: human concern for tigers, tigers owned by humans, tigers provoking fear, animals for human entertainment, tigers as criminals, use of pronouns to refer to tigers, and provision of background on the situation of tigers in Malaysia. Below, each of these seven categories is discussed with reference to the content of the 10 articles.

Human concern for tigers. Although human activity has devastated tiger populations in Malaysia and elsewhere, the articles did show some indication of human concern for tigers. For instance, Tan (2019) mentioned that one of the tigers was “in safe hands”, being supervised by veterinary officers, and likely to be transferred to a tiger rescue center. Another article (ROSLI ZAKARIA, 2019) reported that the Terengganu state director of Malaysia's National Parks and Wildlife Department had urged people not to harm the tigers.

Furthermore, another of the articles quoted a government official as stating that “The Malayan Tiger is a species of animal that is fully protected by law” (“Canine Distemper Virus”, 2019). Yet, despite tigers having the benefit of this legal protection, their habitats continue to shrink and poachers continue to operate.

Another way to generate concern for tigers is to give them names. For example, the tiger whom the humans held captive was given the name Awang Besul (“Terengganu Tiger Probably Has Canine Distemper”, 2019). However, humans also give names to non-humans whom we keep as pets. (See the next section for a discussion of the pet issue.)

Tigers owned by humans. Some of the articles reported speculation that the two tigers in the incident had been held captive by humans, perhaps as pets. Indeed, the trade in capturing wild animals and selling them as pets has a long history. Wild animals as pets fits the human-centric

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perspective. Indeed, several of the articles talk about the tigers as ‘pets’ and the tigers “may have been set free by their owner” and “allowed to wander” (“Two Tigers Spotted in Terengganu”, 2019). Compared to a human-centric view, a humans-as-a-fellow-animal perspective condemns the wildlife trade (TRAFFIC, n.d.), as well as the trade in domesticated animals, such as the existence of special breeding facilities to produce pets, e.g., puppy mills (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 2013). Furthermore, this alternative perspective sees animals who live with humans as companions to be respected, not as property to be owned.

Tigers provoking fear. Several articles talked about humans’ fear of tigers, e.g., people “running for cover after tigers were spotted (HARIMAU TERENGGANU, 2019), “ease the villagers’ anxiety and worries” (“Two Tigers Spotted in Terengganu”, 2019), “dangerous animals” and “tigers on the loose caused panic”, (CORDOBA, 2019), and “many [people] continue to fret and fear for their safety” (“Tiger Sighting”, 2019). In an effort to reduce people’s fears, “a search and trap operation undertaken by a 22-men strong team of Perhilitan officers and Rangers was initiated at 9.30am today” (“Tiger Sighting”, 2019). At the same time that such a force was used to protect people from tigers, efforts to protect tigers and other animals from poachers are often understaffed (SIM, 2019). Similarly, efforts to protect forests from illegal logging may be under-resourced (FITRI NIZAM, 2018).

Animals for human entertainment. One aspect of a human-centric view of the world is the use of fellow animals for any purpose human wish without regard to the welfare or feeling of the other animals, e.g., humans use of animal-based food. Another example involves using non-human animals for entertainment. Tan (2019) reported that the tigers’ “*antics* (italics added) were earlier captured on video and went viral over social media.” This is reminiscent of “funny animal videos” on YouTube, e.g.,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KY0Dp4fvxa8>.

The feelings of the non-human animals are not taken into account.

Fortunately, the use of non-humans to entertain humans has been restricted, e.g., the use of wild animals in circuses is banned in Singapore (ACRES, 2019). ACRES explained, “Watching animals performing circus-style tricks teaches the audience, especially impressionable children,

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that animals are ours to be used for entertainment and humiliated at our will. In many cases they also give a totally false impression of how animals behave naturally.”

Tigers as criminals. After the two tigers were sighted, government officers came and took possession of one of the tigers, but they were not able to find the other one. Language used in the articles to describe this process of searching for the tigers included that the tigers were “still at large” (“Harimau Terengganu”, 2019; “Tigers Spotted in Terengganu Could Be Pets”, 2019; “Two Tigers Spotted in Terengganu”, 2019). However, if the tigers had been humans who had gone outside the usual places they frequent, perhaps “missing” or “lost” would have been used, instead of “at large”.

Similarly, one of the articles (ROSLI ILHAM, 2019) reported that one of the tigers had been “caught”. However, if humans had become lost and were seen wandering in what was for these humans a strange place, perhaps words such as “rescued” would have been used instead. In another example of language possibly equating tigers with criminals, the search for the tigers was described as a “hunt” (ROSLI ILHAM, 2019), as though the tigers were escaped prisoners being hunted by the humans. In a related manner, when humans enter tigers’ habitats, the humans may be hunting the tigers.

Use of impersonal pronouns to refer to tigers. Use of the pronouns ‘it’ (as opposed to “she” or “he”) and “which” (as opposed to “who”) (DUNAYER, 2001) suggests that the tigers have more in common with objects than with thinking, feeling beings. Examples from the articles include “the tiger which was caught on Friday”, “don’t try to get close to it because if it felt threatened, it might attack” (“Two Tigers Spotted in Terengganu, 2019), and “it wandered in Kampung Besul Lama” (“Canine Distemper Virus”, 2019).

Provision of background on the situation of tigers in Malaysia. Most of the 10 articles treated the case of the two tigers as an isolated incident, without providing context about the plight of Malayan tigers. Only one of the articles (HARIMAU TERENGGANU, 2019) included information that tigers “are listed as critically endangered, with estimates placing their numbers at somewhere around 250-340 in a 2013 survey.” However, the role of humans in tigers endangered status is missing. Another article (ROSLI ZAKARIA, 2019) did supply the background information that tigers are nocturnal animals. Without context about the current situation of tigers,

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readers may be less likely to understand and sympathize with tigers. Instead, readers main emotion in regard to the tigers may be to fear them.

5. Conclusion

The results of this analysis of a small sample of articles about a July 2019 case of interaction between humans and other animals in Malaysia suggest that the main perspective in the articles was human-centric. While some concern was shown for tigers, in general, the articles presented a view that tigers are objects, not fellow animals, and that these striped objects exist for human use, such as to be pets or to be used in entertainment. Furthermore, the articles showed fear not sympathy as the standard human reaction to tigers and suggested that when tigers seek to share space with humans, these tigers deserve to be treated as criminals.

The situation in Malaysia in regard to tiger populations and tiger-human interaction differs somewhat from that in India where tiger numbers, while still far from those in the past, are now rising (“India’s wild tiger population jumps”, 2019). Part of the explanation for the increased number of tigers in India could be the presence of a less human-centric perspective among some people in India. For example, Keim (2019) described the findings of a team of conservation psychologists (DHEE et al., 2019) who interviewed people who live in an area of India in which humans co-exist with leopards, a big cat cousin of tigers. The people whom the team interviewed saw leopards as complex, thinking beings. Such a tradition-based, “unscientific” view finds support in recent academic research on cognition and affect in a wide range of animal species (DE WAAL, 2016), including fishes (BALCOMBE, 2016). The interviewees in India felt that they could coexist with the leopards by negotiating use of their shared space.

In conclusion, crucial to the survival of Malayan tigers and, indeed, other endangered and incarcerated nonhuman animals is a change of perspective on the part of people, away from a human-centric view which sees tigers and other nonhuman animals as objects to be feared, owned, and used for entertainment, as criminals who trespass on humans’ territory. Instead, we humans need to move towards a tigers-as-fellow-animals perspective and understand the dire situation which our actions have created for tigers and other nonhumans. Only then will we be more likely to stop the destruction of the habitats of tigers and others and to end the use of tigers and other

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fellow Earthlings for their flesh and body parts. The media have a role to play in such a perspective pivot. The first author of this paper is an activist on behalf of tigers and other nonhuman animals, and the main reason he undertook the writing of this paper was to use linguistic analysis in the service of that activism.

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Acknowledgements: The authors thank Vilma D’Rozario and Nina Venkataraman for their useful input.

Aceito em 13/11/2019.

ECOLINGUÍSTICA: REVISTA BRASILEIRA DE
ECOLOGIA E LINGUAGEM (ECO-REBEL), V. 6, N. 1, 2020.