

# Conference Report

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*Exploring Human-Animal Relationships*. The 14th Annual Conference of the International Society for Anthrozoology

On July 11 and 12, 2005 the International Society for Anthrozoology (ISAZ) held its 14th annual conference in Niagara Falls, New York. ISAZ is a nonprofit, nonpolitical organization founded to be a world-wide supportive organization for the scientific and scholarly study of human-nonhuman animal interactions. Its primary focus is to encourage and publish research and hold meetings for disseminating information. Previous conferences have been held throughout Europe and North America. The conference title this year was, "Exploring Human-Animal Relationships."

The conference began with a keynote address by David Wolfson, who, in addition to his day job as a corporate lawyer, practices animal law. Wolfson discussed the legal status of animals as property and described other models that might serve to protect animals more effectively. He gave examples of the often-contradictory laws concerning animals and the many loopholes that undermine animal welfare. He pointed out that there are laws regulating the transportation and slaughter of animals raised for food, but there is very little protection for these animals on the farm. The field of animal law is growing exponentially, and the course he offers on the topic is very popular. Unfortunately, lamented Wolfson, animal law is anything but lucrative, and most of his work is pro bono.

The remainder of the presentations over the next two days covered a wide range of topics that included both research-based and practitioner-based content. We heard about a variety of animals, including Alex the Grey Parrot. I had imagined Alex to be simply a parrot who did amazing tricks, but he is much more than that. Irene Pepperberg, who works with Alex, presented a talk entitled, "In Search of King Solomon's Ring: Cognitive and Communicative Studies on Grey Parrots." She explained that she has taught Alex to identify, request, comment on, or refuse more than 100 items. He can make judgments about relative size, quantity, similarities, and differences among objects—and he can count. Pepperberg's primary interest in Alex is what can be learned about cognitive functioning. For this audience, however, she concluded with some comments about the responsibility of people who have captive parrots to ensure that they have an enriched environment, appropriate for an animal who has the intelligence of a 4-year-old child.

Anthony Podberscek presented provocative results of a study on the consumption of cats and dogs in South Korea. The contradictory complex of attitudes that he described was striking to my North American perspective. Podberscek showed slides of dogs being sold for food while others were being sold as pets in the same marketplace. The results of a poll showed that South Koreans are not unanimous about the ethics of eating cats and dogs, but they do view Western pressure to ban the practice as an attack on their culture. This highlighted the importance of cultural sensitivity in order to work effectively in the area of animal welfare. The International Federation of Animal Welfare is to issue a full report, including the results of a poll on attitudes among Koreans.

I was particularly taken with Helena Pycior's discussion of the historical significance of Franklin D. Roosevelt's dog, Fala, and his contributions to the American War effort. Fala was enrolled as a private in the Dogs for Defense Reserve and joined the President in tours of military bases, defense plants, and on visits to troops at home and abroad. He was described as a well-loved and highly visible symbol of the war effort, who, no doubt, brought smiles to faces during a very grim time. The talk reminded me of a visit to the Roosevelt monument in Washington, D.C. and how seeing Fala depicted along with the President and Eleanor Roosevelt touched me.

Other presentations included descriptions of a walking-for-health program, an historical perspective on the soldier-horse bond in Finland during World War II, a research project investigating whether horses recognize our faces, an evaluation of a program using dogs to assist autistic children, and a discussion of policy regarding human-wildlife interaction. These examples illustrate the multidisciplinary nature of the conference. There were qualitative and quantitative research reports, historical and cultural perspectives, and descriptions of various types of therapy using animals. Altogether, there were more than 30 oral presentations and more than 40 poster presentations. The abstracts can be downloaded from the ISAZ website ([www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/CCAB/isaz.htm](http://www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/CCAB/isaz.htm)), by clicking on "meetings" and then clicking on "ISAZ2005".

The strength of the conference was that there was something for everyone and that we were exposed to topics and methodologies outside our own, individual fields. At the same time, however, the overall theme was too generic to provide a sufficiently strong foundation to pull the presentations together. I wonder whether, as the field of human-animal interaction grows, conference attendees will look for opportunities for more intensive focus in their own areas of interest.

I was struck by the number of attendees who had started studying the human-animal bond later in their careers. After a long-standing interest in human-animal

relationships or, perhaps, a life-long love of animals, they were able to integrate this interest into their career. Lisa Marie Beck presented a poster describing research into people's attachment to their pets, with traditional attachment theory among humans as the starting point. I met several others who, like me, simply jumped ship, pursuing human-animal studies as a second phase of their careers. This meant there were a lot of relative newcomers to the field. I met several participants who came to the conference knowing no one and were highly motivated to network. The resulting atmosphere was very conducive to meeting people and making connections.

Overall, this was a worthwhile and interesting conference, and I look forward to the next one—to be held in Barcelona in the fall of 2006.

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## **Note**

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