Understanding Perceptions of Sentience from Human- and Animal-Being Interactions

Katie Avore, Carmen Hamm, Elizabeth Spitzenberger, Karolin Velliste, Jacob Yeskis

Boston College, Morrissey College of Arts & Sciences, Environmental Studies Program

Introduction

Engagement with *animal beings* is thought to increase *compassion* among individuals, and those who do so tend to have more positive experiences with other sentient life (Hosaka and colleagues, 2019).

Our research focuses on showcasing and exploring the perceptions of three categories of animals: **companion animals**/pets, **liminal animals**/pests, and **animals referred to as "wild"**. Moreover, we long to understand more intimately the interconnection between these interactions and the perceptions of Boston College participants.

This information can enhance *dialogue* at Boston College with valuable insight into the strengths and barriers that are involved when learning about what shapes certain perceptions of animal beings among the Boston College community.
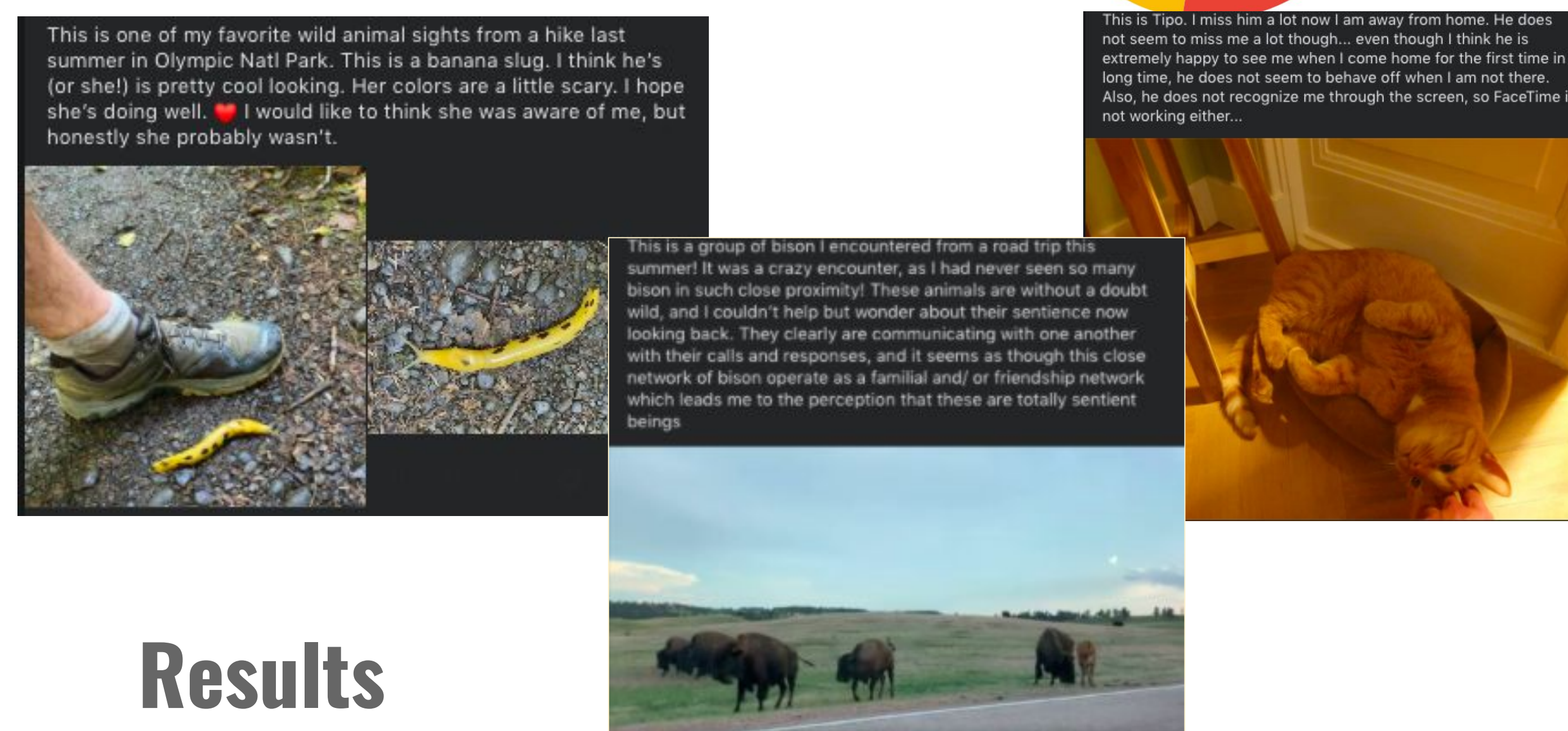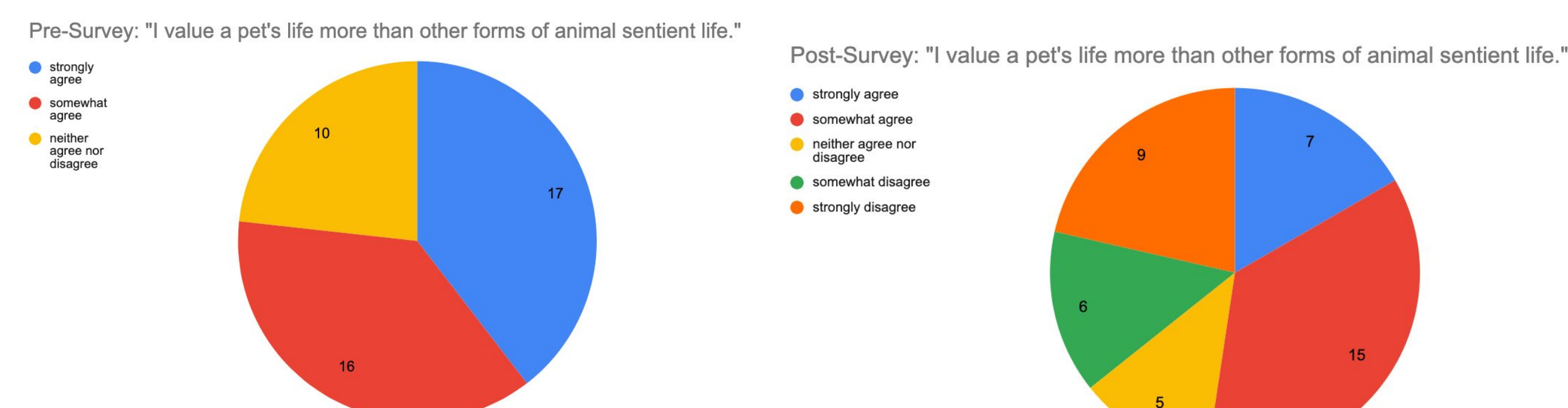
Research Proposal

The average person may not have frequent *conversations* about non-human sentience, and if they do, it most likely relates to their pets/companion animals. In addition, many people view non-human animals such as insects and rodents, as nuisances and pests (Fowler and colleagues, 1989). Similarly, society often portrays large, predatory animals or "wild" animals as species we should avoid or be afraid of.

Currently, people may feel very disengaged and unconnected from other species; this attitude is *anthropocentric*, and people are not always likely to view all other species as sentient. The issue with weak or non-inclusive definitions of sentient species is the lack of support it warrants for **protection** and **conservation** of ever important non-human species.

How do profound interactions with wildlife affect perceptions of various sentient life such as companion animals/pets, liminal animals/pests, and animals often dubbed "wild"?

Our Sentient Interaction
Private group · 31 members

Methods

We created a Facebook group that created a *community*. Such served as a platform where posts--including text, audio, and images--from students at Boston College invited *critical thinking* and a *willingness to participate* in sharing their nonhuman animal interactions. We encouraged the use of a multispecies framing of companion animals, liminal species, and other wildlife. As researchers, we ourselves participated in the community, fostering **a shared, vibrant collectivity** with guiding posts and comments. In order to track changes in their definitions of sentience, we administered surveys before and after participation in the Facebook community.

Data

Pre-Survey: "I value a pet's life more than other forms of animal sentient life."

Post-Survey: "I value a pet's life more than other forms of animal sentient life."

Results

With our *multispecies ethnographic work*, we are **overjoyed** by the vibrancy of our research that has led us to the following findings pertaining sentience. Among our key findings, we witnessed a shift in the *multispecies definition of sentience*. Our human participants grew to *embrace* such after interactions with the Facebook community as indicated in tone and attitude analysis of the individual postings and communications, revealing positive attitudes and strong emotional connections and reactions to each of the three multispecies categories. The pre- and post-survey result comparison showcased significant shifts in participant agreement with statements like the one illustrated in the charts above, indicating an overall trend *away* from **human or companion animal superiority** and *toward* a **multispecies approach to sentience**.

Results (continued)

Proximity and **location** have been found to heavily influence sentience perception. For example, pertaining to the identified classification of liminal species/pests, we noted when these interactions occurred in or around the house, human participants overwhelmingly noted that the "pest" had *lower* perceived levels of sentience. While, with "wild" animals, these interactions occurred from the *furthest away* on average and *higher* levels of sentience were reported from the greater distances.

Discussion

STRENGTHS:
1. Create a sense of community through an online platform during a global pandemic
2. *Participatory action research model* that allowed us to engage in dialogue with our participants
3. Unique combination of **qualitative** and **quantitative** data

KEY TAKEAWAYS:
1. Research brought forward *advances dialogue* surrounding perceived levels of sentience
2. Shifting modalities toward *coexistence* observed through responses, building off (Schauer, 2021) and evolving definitions of animal sentience
3. Proximity and Location rooted in principles of coexistence help illustrate perceptions in manners that affect each grouping of animal participants *differently*

LIMITATIONS:
1. Did not produce generalizable data for the BC community or beyond
2. **Societally-constructed classification** groups created difficulties when attempting to classify certain beings (e.g. feral horse)

Future Implications

- Implications
  - Creating and fostering an atmosphere where *narratives* in a community setting have been demonstrated to alter individuals' perceptions of sentience
  - Sentience of different species is **socially constructed** and can be **relearned**
  - **Subconscious biases** that value certain species over others can be brought to light with active introspection
- Future directions
  - How does consistent reflection on animal sentience *dismantle biases* towards animal beings?
  - How can research on animal sentience perspectives *enhance conservation* efforts for all species?