

OPINION

Yes, I was serious; humans are superior



DAVID THORN

About a month ago, the *Emerald* ran an opinion column of mine which generated considerable controversy (*ODE*, Jan. 12). Now that it seems that everyone is done "venting," I'll try to clarify the point I originally made: specifically, that humans are superior to all other forms of life.

I received a lot of criticism, first of all, for even asserting that a particular life form can be superior to another. Most of the arguments stressed the interdependency of species in our ecosystem and implied that humans cannot be superior to other species because we depend on other species for survival.

In my column, I took issue with a bumper sticker that said "All forms of life are equal." If it had said, "All forms of life are necessary" then I wouldn't have had nearly so much to say.

I don't deny that humans need other life forms to survive. We are a part of the ecosystem, and I never argued otherwise. In some small way, every creature on Earth depends on every other creature — although, as one alert critic intelligently pointed out, "If all human life were to be wiped off the planet, would life on Earth continue? The answer is yes." (Shanie Holman, *ODE*, Jan. 19).

Independence is not the standard by which I attempted to demonstrate our superiority. My standard was the application of intelligence, something humans do better than any other species.

In one commentary, authored by Benjamin Ross and Kathleen Van Winkle (*ODE*, Jan. 21), the point was made that "it is a foregone conclusion that the human will be superior" if superiority is judged by human stan-

dards. This is a valid point. Therefore, I will force humanity to demonstrate its superiority under the standard that governs the natural world: survival of the fittest.

Plants and animals, like humans, attempt to use their evolved talents to expand their species' place in the world. Species rise and fall according to the successful application of evolved characteristics. All species compete for resources; we are the best competitor.

Our intelligence has allowed us to cure diseases, stretch our lifespans, eliminate the threat of predators, adapt to varied climates, even make ourselves more fertile. We may occasionally — OK, frequently — make stupid decisions, such as kill each other off. But with all things considered, our intelligence has provided a net benefit to our species. There are five billion people on Earth today. Without our intelligence, we could never have reached such a number.

The most common — and most frustrating — misconception about my column was this: People assumed that just because I thought humans were superior, I also thought we should be able to destroy the environment and wipe out any species we want to and otherwise make planetary asses of ourselves. But that is not what I meant at all. I challenge you to find the words in my column that suggest anything of the sort.

They aren't there. I checked.

What I did say was this: "No other animal is expected to curb its consumption in order to save the planet; animals, left by themselves, will eat entire species into oblivion, and not feel a shred of remorse. If they are capable of destroying the environment, they probably will. And no one would consider it 'immoral.'"

It is not immoral for animals to wipe out other species. It's part of the natural order; it's survival of the fittest. It's happening for millions of years. Those species that died have been inferior to those that survived.

I think it's good that humans are expected to behave differently than animals. I think it's good that environmentalists are raising such a ruckus, demanding that we try a little harder not to destroy the planet. These things are good. As I said in my original column, "Like most other rational people, I think that saving the planet is a very good idea."

Countless letters and commentaries that responded to my arguments trotted out example after example of humans defiling the Earth. I don't deny any of it. Do we shamelessly waste our resources? Sure. Do we strip mine, clear cut, pollute the air? Sure we do. Do I believe those are wise policies? No. And I never claimed to.

All I said was that animals are allowed and expected to consume as much as they are capable of consuming, and humans — thankfully — are not given the same freedom. We possess the power and conscience to make wise choices. Animals don't.

Steve Close (mistakenly identified as Steve Cole in *ODE*, Jan. 19) stated, "Any dolphin knows that the species that systematically destroys its food sources will die off." Excuse me? I wholeheartedly disagree. There is no evidence to suggest that any animal is aware of this ecological reality, even the much revered dolphin. Only humans possess that knowledge.

Consider a population of rabbits in an enclosed field. They will continue to reproduce and eat and reproduce and eat until there is no longer enough food to sustain them all. Some of them will die from starvation, the population will rebound, some more will die, and so on and so forth until the number of rabbits is in equilibrium with the available food. That is how the system works.

Some intelligent animals will limit their own individual consumption to only what they need (rather than eat themselves sick, like a dog), but all species will reproduce until nature will

no longer sustain their numbers. Nature does the limiting, not the animals themselves. It is *not* — as Close contends — because the animals know better.

But that is not the case with humans. Sure, if we over-consume and overpopulate the planet, we will eventually start starving and killing each other for resources. (Some might say this process has already begun.) That would be nature doing the limiting. But we don't have to rely on nature to limit our consumption. If we get our act together, we can limit ourselves, without forcing nature to do it for us.

That is what the environmental movement is about, or should be, anyway: getting humans to place restrictions on our consumption before things get ugly. Homo sapiens is the only species capable of limiting its own expansion. Other species must rely on predators and competition and the scarcity of resources.

There are only two possible categories for humans. Either we are just animals, and we should be allowed to consume as much as we want like animals do, or we are something better than animals, and we can be expected to do our best to be responsible in our consumption. I for one suggest that we fit into the latter category.

That is the difference between us and them. That's one of the reasons humans are superior to all other forms of life.

A number of my critics suggested that I should educate myself about the situation. They told me to watch pets "do a bit of reading," "maybe take a biology class or two," "learn the facts," "take a class in global ecology." One particularly livid individual suggested that "the pressure of factual evidence pitted against your massive denial just might make your head explode."

Well, now who sounds superior?

David Thorn is an editorial editor at the *Emerald*.

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