

The Just Word Podcast

Transcript of Episode 30: Giving A Voice To The Animal World

Guest: Jo-Anne McArthur

Pat Bolland 00:00

Jo-Anne, a real pleasure to meet you.

Jo-Anne McArthur 00:02

Great to be here. Thanks for having me on the on the show.

Pat Bolland 00:05

Jo-Anne, I read through your website that you have a very interesting story about how you developed your passion, if you will, it had to do with a monkey, just to refresh your memory. And some people might have found it humorous. You didn't? Why didn't you? And what did you do about it?

Jo-Anne McArthur 00:23

Yeah, so I have an incredible passion for photography. And for animals, not just a passion for animals, but a concern for animals and how we treat them, how we see them how we fail to see them. And I was hiking in Ecuador back in 1998. And there was a chained-up monkey. And people were crowded around this monkey taking pictures and laughing and they thought this was kind of cute. And so I, there I was with my camera as well, also taking photos. But it's because I thought this was a really sad situation for the monkey. And I wondered whether I could do something with that image. And so I saw that, you know, I was ... my point of view was different. My point of view was probably more helpful to the animal because those people sort of, you know, saw the animal being treated, being objectified rather, which is how we often treat animals and going off on their merry way with that image. Whereas I thought I could show this to someone, maybe I can use this image of proof of an injustice, which is how I saw it. And it was one of those 'aha' moments early in my career, where I realized again, that the camera is a tool for change. And that's how it's been used in photojournalism for decades; conflict photography, humanitarian work, and not a lot of people were using the camera to help animals. And it was one of those 'aha' moments in front of that monkey that I thought, Okay, I'm onto something here and I can photograph animals stories in a photojournalistic way helps expose their plight.

Pat Bolland 02:00

Interesting. And since then, I went through a litany of some of your pictures and you've worked with zoos, you've worked at factory farms, animal fairs, puppy mills, sanctuaries, circuses? Where do you actually find the most egregious behavior?

Jo-Anne McArthur 02:14

That's a really popular question. I would say that it's everywhere. I've been to over 60 countries now, I travel about six months a year to tell animal stories. And, you know, I look at the individuals, we use animals by the billions every year. And with fish, we don't even count the fish because it's impossible to count them, we measure them by the ton. So we have billions of animals in use in industrial farming,

and in zoos, and animal research labs. But you know, in terms of what's most egregious, then I zoom in on to the individuals, and I look at their loneliness, I look at their confinement, their lack of autonomy. And so I see that in, in every single country, and in every single industry, my focus is on the really large scale industrial farming as well, because we see massive quantities of animals being, you know, being churned out for consumption. And those animals are generally hidden to us. And so while we are very comfortable looking at wildlife, or comfortable looking at our pets or companion animals, there are these categories of animals that we just don't really consider. Yeah, so. So that, you know, this has been well work of about two decades now. It's certainly grown. And it continues.

Pat Bolland 03:42

Yeah. But what's interesting, funny, you said industrial farming, because I come from a farming background. And on one half, on one part, we have a cow-calf operation, and those cows are treated very well. And the other ones are treated in a confined space, but again, very well. And I would suspect that our local farmers, where we're located, would give you significant resistance and saying, you know, we got to feed the world. Where do you find resistance?

Jo-Anne McArthur 04:10

Well, there is a lot of resistance. There are things, you know, be they humanitarian, or in the animal world, or in research where things that happen behind closed doors, because quite often, if the public saw what was going on, they would have some questions. So there would be resistance, especially when it comes to industrial farming. There was resistance from the government, for example, my NGO, it's a nonprofit, it's not a charity, charity because of the illegal nature of our works. So often journalists have to probe farther than what is legal, so we trespass for example. And as a result of that, we were not given charitable status. I know you have a question for me later about how we how we generate revenue for the agency how

Pat Bolland 04:59

you financially Support yourself. This is a business broadcast. And so we're kind of off the reservation a little bit, but very interested. We'll get to that. I want to talk about what you're doing. I think that's crucial...

Jo-Anne McArthur 05:10

Yeah, well, there is resistance. But there is also just a landslide of doors opening to this kind of work. And to these conversations, when I started a few decades ago, there was nowhere to publish images of the suffering of animals. I mean, we cared a lot less and we knew a lot less about ecology, animal behavior, animal sentience, and just how fantastic and brilliant and complex all of these animals are. And so doors are opening everywhere. And we're also seeing that in our business, with the amount of funding and grants and donors that we have, because people want us to do this, do this work, I would love to work more with farmers. But my stance is that we can live happy and healthy lives without using others. And, and so, you know, there's a clash there. And farmers might say to me, Well, you want to take away my business and my livelihood. And it's not that I want to do that, it's that I would love to see other forms of agriculture, replacing animal agriculture so that there's, you know, less suffering and less animals being, families being broken up, cows, pigs, chickens, etc. And because we can feed the world, on all the food that we actually feed to animals. So it's like, animals in a way are a middleman for the

protein that we're, that they are, giving to us when we when we eat them. So instead of eating the animal, we can just eat all of the, you know, the things that we're producing ... The nutrients that go into the animal, and I get that, I have a son who's a vegetarian, and he tells me the same kinds of things. It's not a complete buy-in, I have to be honest, but I mean, everybody's entitled to their opinion, right?

Pat Bolland 06:49

I like that it's a solution to not just the animal question, but the environmental question as well. And how do we feed 7 billion, 8 billion 9 billion people with less environmental effect? Yeah, it's a valid and worthy cause. Let's... talk to me about some of your successes. And I understand you've got a picture recently 'Hope in a Plantation' that's features a kangaroo that's been very popular, then how do you leverage that popularity in terms of your .. I'll call it a business?

Jo-Anne McArthur 07:36

Yes. Okay. I love this. And we're coming back to the camera being a tool for change. There is an image that I photographed recently at the Australian bushfires. So it is of a kangaroo, she's in her burned home, she's in a burned eucalyptus plantation. And she's looking at me, it's one of these, she's kind of in the Hero Pose. Because I'm crouched down low, and I'm shooting up at her, she has a joey in her pouch. And she has become iconic of the climate catastrophe and its effect on animals. And it's an interesting image. Because it's an image of sorrow and devastation, you see that her home has been burned. But you see that she's one of the survivors, and an estimated 3 billion animals died or were displaced during those fires. And people need to see the reality of, you know, the effects on animals. But they also need hope. We know that we're programmed that way. We don't want to feel paralyzed by images of absolute devastation. And when we feel hope we feel more motivated to take part in the change. And so this is an image that has won many of the major awards in the world. And people are saying, you know, this is this is now iconic of animals in the climate catastrophe.

Pat Bolland 08:57

And I saw some pictures too, of Western Canada and the flooding that was happening and cattle being migrated across rivers and those kinds of things. Those would be less effective in transmitting the concept of hope.

Jo-Anne McArthur 09:13

Oh, our images, I say our because it's not just me shooting we have about 65 contributors globally now to our agency. And I would say that we use a variety of images for a variety of campaigns. So while We Animals Media is not a campaigning organization, we provide materials to other NGOs, for their campaigning, whether it's you know, layer hens, or people working with animals and climate change, helping to reduce the number of animals and medical testing ... all of this. And so what our model is, is to look at the trends in animal advocacy, what is needed from NGOs globally, and can we provide them as journalists, as filmmakers and as writers? Can we gather this material for you? We have partnerships with NGOs, where they write to us or call us and say, hey, you know, we want images of factory farming in Poland, or we want images of animals in the climate catastrophes. So we have a budget, can we send you for two weeks? Sometimes we really would like a certain kind of image on our stock site. So we have a stock site, where all of our images are made free to anyone helping animals. And we see we have a deficit of a certain kind of image. So then we will go and shoot, promote that

we're shooting, people donate because we do all these all these projects. We put the images on our stock site, and then we let campaigners know globally, hey, we have images of alligator farming. Now across the world, we now have images of hens in layer facilities, and you're welcome to use them. So it's a it's a really fun and interesting and new business model. Most photo agencies operate for profit. And it's a little bit different for us. So we function from grants, small grants, and very large grants, we have some major donors, including the Open Philanthropy Project. So they are, they give us the bulk of our money for operations. And then we have monthly donors, we have random donations coming in, we apply for for grants as well, for projects, it might be 5,000, 20,000 50,000. It's been really fun to build this out of a project. It used to be the We Animals project ... me and a camera, but I wanted to be more strategic, I wanted to reach more people. And so what did I need any communications and operations people, we needed to build an archive a stock site where all the images would be?

Pat Bolland 11:47

And then you're paying the photographers to go out and take those pictures. So you're providing the financing, as well.

Jo-Anne McArthur 11:55

Yes, thanks for mentioning that, because we do have funding for assignments. So we give assignments, we pay those photographers. And then there are a lot of photographers out there who have shot work already, and who would like a home for their work so that their work is not just sitting on a hard drive, not getting used. And so we have a lot of contributions from existing, their existing, material. We are able to give a kickback to the photographers if people make donations for that use, or if they are licensing the images for commercial use. So if they are for-profit, if they are fundraising off of the images, then they have to buy the images from us. So it's just been like a whole process of figuring out how to make this work.

Pat Bolland 12:44

And how do you vet the photographer's though?

Jo-Anne McArthur 12:46

How do we vet the photographers? Yeah, good question. We have National Geographic photographers, but we also have new photographers who are really keen, scrappy, going out there and doing, you know, learning to do the work. It can be really difficult, this field work, this conflict work, and, but you know, some of these up and comers are taking really good images. So we provide mentorship, we look at their portfolio and say, do more of this, less of that. And we'll take these five images in the meantime. We also have a mentoring program through our Masterclass. So people write to me every single day and say, How do I do what you do? How do you gain access? How do you cope? On and on? So we have a two and a half hour Masterclass. It's eight episodes, it's self guided. It's \$45. So that's also a little bit of revenue for us. And people can learn to be an animal photojournalist through ...

Pat Bolland 12:48

Yeah, ... then is this. I know you've got a project called Unbound that you do with Dr. Kerry Cronin. And it was a book and then you've gone into this project. Talk to me about the project, number one, is

this part of it, these programs that you're putting together. And then number two, what I found curious is it's only for women. So I'd like to know why.

Jo-Anne McArthur 14:00

Oh, yeah. So I would say it's not. It's not that it's only for women. It's about women. I'd love to tell you about that. And a common question. So Unbound is about women on the frontlines of animal advocacy worldwide. And the reason I started this project is because everywhere I was traveling, I was seeing women on the frontlines doing the work, mostly women, way more than men. And I thought, am I just imagining that because I'm a feminist or because I'm a woman. And so I did some research and true to what I was seeing, it's that the animal advocacy, labor's made up 60 to 80% women, but it's often a man who's leading an organization or who is the spokesperson for an organization. And and so and I mean, we see that worldwide, don't we?

Pat Bolland 14:49

In every business? Yes,

Jo-Anne McArthur 14:50

Yes, exactly. And so what I wanted to do was create a project that uplifted the work of women. I do what I do in part because I had women like Dr. Jane Goodall to look up to. And they wanted to uplift the work of these women, whether they are animal rights lawyers, veterinarians, sanctuary founders, artists, and help boost up their work. And so we do articles and films about them. Recently, we did a great little film on an entrepreneur named Miyoko Chinar. And she creates vegan cheeses and she's like, has like millions of dollars in investments coming in every year. Her work is just exploding. And she's just this like, tiny, Japanese-American woman who was like such a powerhouse. And so it was really cool to feature her for example. And, you know, we were going to make a book out of it. But their stories keep changing so quickly, that by the time we get around to doing a book, like we'd have to redo all the interviews, and so we're keeping this to an online project. It's been seven years now we have, like 70 or 80 different features on cool people doing cool things.

Pat Bolland 16:00

Yeah, hence the We Animals Media now...

Jo-Anne McArthur 16:04

yes. So this project turned into a photo agency, so that we could be strategic, so that we could become a not for profit, you know, get funding in that way and keep going. We have six staff full time, part time, lots of volunteers, lots of independent contractors. And I think that we, you know, seem to be on the right side of history and on the right path, because we have just such an incredible swell of support. We're seeing animal stories in the mainstream, all over the place now. And we're really happy to be contributing strong materials and important stories to, to that.

Pat Bolland 16:43

It's so funny. You know, I wanted Animals in the Anthropocene to be the title but absolutely, everyone said 100% no, unequivocally, you can't you can't even pronounce it. Not that you've given up writing ... your most recent book is got an interesting title Hidden. everyone gets what hidden is ... Animals in the

Anthropocene.. And I don't know what that word, I didn't, I Googled it. What is the context? I get them. I'd be on their side.

Jo-Anne McArthur 17:13

Yeah, so we used it as a subtitle and the Anthropocene ... 'Anthro' being man, human ... 'cene' being the epoch. This the Anthropocene is the proposed name for this current geological era. It means that we have absolute planetary domination over the environment, over animals. Every inch of the planet is being exposed to our dominance, our effect, be it through pollution, being it through habitat loss. And so our book shows a really stark look at how animals are living and dying at our hands in the Anthropocene. It's a really harsh book, we didn't want to, you know flinch away from what animals are going through. And wonderfully, it's winning a lot of awards, it won the the top award in one of the international competitions. It was the title book of the year, we were really surprised because these awards go to humanitarian causes for the most part. And so it's great to see these these bodies, these jurying bodies say like, we think now's the time, and animal stories are important as well. And we want to help us with this work. So it's really fun to be doing this work.

Pat Bolland 18:35

Other than awards, though, on the whole, on a holistic basis, is mankind getting your message, is mankind improving?

Jo-Anne McArthur 18:46

I love that question. Yes, one at a time, one person at a time, one company at a time. And this is through multifaceted efforts. So I'm just one piece of the puzzle. We Animals, Media and I, we create visuals that help people understand and relate and feel empathy and compassion. But we're seeing changes in laws globally. Like for example, here in Canada, the transportation laws of animals are absolutely antiquated. And so we have lawyers who are going to bat to improve welfare and transportation. We are seeing improvement in veterinary practices, we're seeing a move away from using primates in research. It'll be a long time before we help the mice and the rats and the guinea pigs. But for now, many countries, chimpanzees are no longer used in research. So we're seeing and we're seeing humane education in schools as well. So I'm a humane educator, and I speak with people of all ages, about animal sentience and behavior and the science behind that it's really exciting. And so with all of this, we're seeing a momentum. Oh, and we're also seeing great momentum in plant-based eating like Beyond Burgers are delicious, and there's so many more options now. They're vegan restaurants everywhere. So with all of this, with all of these businesses and campaigners, we're seeing a change. Now, we're also seeing an increase in meat eating. So we're seeing an increase in veggie and vegan eating, we're seeing an increase in mediating ... it depends on what country we're looking at. We're seeing a ban on fur farming. There was a ban on fur farming in BC here in our country. There's a proposal now in Parliament to ban it globally because of the zoonotic because the cruelty inherent, but also because of transmission of COVID through mink farming. So, you know, we're seeing a ban on fur farming in some countries; Italy, Norway, they have banned fur farming, but then we see a growth in fur farming in other countries. So, you know, the industries are moving. And I think what we need to do is just keep building an understanding and an ethos that animals want to do their own thing. And they don't want to be in tiny cages. They want to choose their families, they want to, you know, do what they want to do. And we deprive them of that. And I think that the growing ethos is their younger

generations, you know, they don't want to see animals in, in confinement unnecessarily and all this. So, this may be a long answer to your question, but there's a lot going on.

Pat Bolland 21:14

Yeah. But the short answer is, and you're doing, this is exactly what you're doing, you're raising consumer awareness, because if you make the consumer more aware, then you'll achieve what you'd like, I think.

Jo-Anne McArthur 21:28

Yeah, yeah, that's the goal.

Pat Bolland 21:31

Okay, so people who are listening may very well be interested in supporting you, how do they do that?

Jo-Anne McArthur 21:36

Thanks. We are supported by grants and by donors and monthly donors as well. So what they would have to do is just go to our website, which is weanimalsmedia.org and they can click the support button, and help us out and you know, people can also send us ideas on things they've seen that they want us to cover. NGOs can reach out to us for partnerships. So there's a lot a lot there. Jo-Anne this was a fascinating story. It went a lot more different than I thought it would. I actually enjoyed it. I thought it's be more, you know, head-butting, but I think your cause is an interesting and a good one. Thanks so much for your time. I really appreciate it. Thanks for the interview.

Pat Bolland 22:24

Jo-Anne McArthur runs We Animals Media.