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2/24/17

An individual thing's reality is shaped by perceptions. The reality of one person to another can be drastically different. The reality of one species to another can be unfathomable. Generally, people understand that animals see and hear things differently, such as dogs are colorblind and can hear high pitch sounds like dog whistles. Less known is that compared to some other species we see the world less vibrantly. Many insects and birds see a much wider range of the color spectrum making an all yellow flower to us an intricate and beautifully patterned runway telling those animals where to find the nectar. These perceptions shape how each living thing responds to the world around it, even if it doesn't match up with a true reality.

Those that work in animal fields try to avoid assuming why an animal is doing something. Instead we observe. We describe not that the animal fears something but that the animal moved away quickly from the object. Could it be fear? Sure, it could but once you assume something you erase other possibilities from the analysis. And erasing possibilities too early can lead to a highly inaccurate idea of why or what the animal is doing. The very worst thing we can do when trying to figure out the how and why of an animal's behavior is projection. We call this anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphism is when you put human concepts and ideas onto the animal. This can be done in several ways. "He feels sad." "The turtle is smiling at me." "He must not like that thing." I have heard all these statements when someone read the behavior of an animal from a human perspective. "No, that is what they do when they are resting." "Turtles don't have lips and can't move their mouths." "In fact, that animal is very much enjoying themselves. What you are seeing is a form of play with that species." Misunderstandings and misperceptions are not only inaccurate, but can be dangerous. Think about what could happen if you misinterpret the posturing of an animal such as a dog on the street? Assuming and projecting ideas onto an animal can lead to tragedy.

Misperceptions are not only dangerous for individual animals, but for industries and conservation. Over the past few years the zoo field has suffered from a public image issue simply due to misperceptions, particularly misperceptions perpetuated by social media and organizations. There are facilities out there that require scrutiny, but there is an easy distinction that many people don't realize, AZA accreditation. AZA, or the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, have standards above what the USDA requires of facilities exhibiting animals. Of the 2,600+ facilities licensed by the USDA only about 230 facilities are accredited by the AZA. Some groups would like the world to perceive all zoos as the worst zoo, but that isn't a true reality. Zoos have many purposes: science, education, entertainment, and most importantly conservation. AZA facilities are at the forefront of educating the public about the plights of our natural world and supporting efforts to slow the rate of habitat loss and extinction. Unfortunately we are fighting a perception by some that there is plenty of wild in the world. The unfortunate truth is there is not. Our modern times allow us to actually look at pictures from satellites and see with our own eyes the decline from unsustainable practices. Because of this legitimate, zoological facilities are more important than ever. When the wild populations succumb to extinction, that will be the end, but with a population in zoos there can be a chance for future reintroduction once we solve whatever caused the extinction in the first place.

Come enjoy and learn at Lee Richardson Zoo and other AZA accredited facilities. When you see the AZA logo you know the animals are well cared for, you will learn something, and you will be helping with conservation in the wild. Keep your eyes open, your mind open, and avoid assumptions. Perceiving a true reality helps us see problems before it is too late. Noticing and acting early, we can all help preserve the world we know and love.