

Too close for comfort



The Royal Parks had a publicity campaign last autumn to dissuade people from crowding round stags fighting and mating during the rut, because of the

stress caused to the deer and disruption of their normal behaviour.

In Bushy Park over the summer people were often feeding and stroking the fallow deer, and even holding children on their backs. You could then see those same deer invading family picnics, wanting more food, and people grabbing their children and running away in panic.

These incidents raise questions about what should be our relationship to wild (or actually semi-wild) animals. Can we use them for our entertainment or should we leave them alone and be content to see them only at a distance or through a wildlife documentary?

As more of us live in cities, fewer of us have contact with wildlife other than urbanised foxes and birds. We've closed down animal circuses and zoos have fewer large animals because of stricter animal welfare regulations. We travel more and further but human destruction of wildlife habitats and the declining numbers of many species means there are far fewer wild animals to be seen anywhere in the world.

Wildlife documentaries are a wonderful way for us to appreciate wildlife but because we see David Attenborough getting close to animals, we want to have the same experience – without

the physical and intellectual effort of his patient waiting and even more patient understanding of the animals.

All this means that we flock to places like Richmond Park where with minimal effort we can see, touch, feed and take selfies with 'wild' animals. We're not concerned that this might stress the animals; our and our children's entertainment is more important.

Occasionally, the animals hit back – as red deer do when they trample dogs or corner humans against a tree (both have happened in Richmond and Bushy in the last couple of years). Deer like those in Bushy that aggressively invade picnics will probably have to be killed because of the risk they pose to people.

Why can't we accept that we can't all see wild animals 'up close and personal' as David Attenborough does? And that using them for our entertainment degrades both them and us – and indeed destroys the wildness for which we come to see them?

Instead we might just learn to keep our distance and see their intimate habits in documentaries. I know badgers and barn owls and stag beetles exist in Richmond Park. I've occasionally seen them in my 35 years living here, but I'm content just to know that they are there. Isn't that sufficient?

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