Animal Photojournalism v.6\_mixdown

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**SPEAKERS**

Marina Black, Jo-Anne McArthur

**Marina Black**

Many journalists are driven by the desire to expose wrongdoing and push for change. This mantra is truly at the heart of what's called Animal photojournalism. This genre of photo journalism was coined in 2020 by award-winning photojournalist Jo-Anne McArthur and her animal rights organization. We animals. It's journalism that focuses a lens on animals we live closely to, the ones that become our leather shoes or put on our plates for food, yet their lives often pan out behind the doors of farms and factories away from our eyes. We met with Joanne to talk about sneaking past sleeping guards with her camera, challenging how we see and treat animals and why mindfulness is key to sticking to the beat. My name is Marina Black, and I'm your host, and here's our conversation with Jo-Anne McArthur. Let's start by understanding what you do. It's not wildlife photography, nor is it human interest journalism. Can you tell us what animal photojournalism is?

**Jo-Anne McArthur**

You're exactly right, that it's not quite a whole bunch of other things. And when I told people what I did, I'm an animal photographer, for example, they'd kind of go, oh yeah, wildlife or cool conservation or pet photography. That must be fun and and that persisted for, you know, over a decade. These these other genres. So for example, photo journalism is largely about the human condition. It may have animals tangentially, but it's about the human condition. And then wildlife photography and conservation photography have always been exclusive to specific animals. And then there are the billions of animals that we have a very close relationship with, but we fail to see. We fail to consider. We reject these animals as sentient beings, and because, you know, we think of them and not as animals, but as parts wrapped in cellophane, grocery store for coats and so on. And their stories are completely untold. They are kept in, you know, buildings far off the road, windowless and so on. Yet they are as sentient and therefore as important as the wolves we want to protect, the elephants we want to protect, the animals we revere and want to admire. And so my organization and I, the organization is called We Animals, and we decided to create a genre, and it's very simply called animal photojournalism, and it includes everyone. It's not just that, but that's the basic premise.

**Marina Black**

You've worked in this field for over 20 years and have gone to over 60 countries. Can you tell us what it's like to be on the ground photographing the treatment of animals?

**Jo-Anne McArthur**

It is unpleasant, and I think that a lot of photo journalism is that way, especially conflict and war photography humanitarian work, it can be pretty upsetting to go to the front lines of where there Is mistreatment and cruelty and exploitation generally, though, the kinds of industries we want to expose are not open to photographers, to say the least. And we always try the front door, meaning we always try and engage with farmers or researchers or rodeo owners. Sometimes you get let in, but often you don't. And so that is where this inglorious history of deception based investigations comes in, and that's something that we often have to do as animal photojournalists, or APJs for short, because we're not often welcome in the places that we want to expose, then we will do employment based photography. You get a job somewhere, and you wear a hidden camera, or you take photos while you're there, or you go in securely with a team at night, and you go in and you document everything, and you leave with this essential material that we need to show the world. So that's, unfortunately, something that we have to do. I wish that all industries that used animals were open to the public, frankly, but they are not. So

**Marina Black**

Was there an experience, a reporting experience, that left a lasting impression on you, something that you felt defined your career?

**Jo-Anne McArthur**

You know, there are so many of those. But something that comes to mind is when I became interested in bear bile farming, and so that it happens across several countries in Asia. They keep Asiatic Moon bears or Malaysian bears in small cages, and they tap their gallbladder for bile, which is used in traditional Chinese medicine. And for many years, 10s of 1000s of these bears were kept in, like, factory farm conditions. And I really wanted to investigate this hard to get in, you know, very, very near impossible to get into these places. So a colleague and I posed as buyers of bear bile, and we went to a farm in Southeast Asia, and while he was busy being a client and a purchaser, I snuck into the back where there was the farm with the animals. It was total Hi Jenks, honestly, there was a sleeping guard in the hallway. It was like out of a movie, and I had to tiptoe with my cameras past a sleeping guard. My heart, you could see it like it was just pounding. And you don't know what kind of danger you really can get in in these situations, you should be very careful. You know, we could have gotten beat up, we could have had our cameras smashed. We could have been put in jail for trespassing. Nevertheless, I did get in, and I got about five minutes of photos and videos before we were discovered, and then I just played a dumb tourist who had wandered into their bear bile farm, and then we quickly waved and said goodbye. You know, with those important images safely tucked in our cameras, and those images have gone on to be used in many for many NGOs, non government organizations and animal advocacy groups who have been able to show this is how animals are kept, use them in their campaigns. Help to advocate for change.

**Marina Black**

We will talk a little bit about the anxieties of later, but I am curious. I want to follow up. Have you ever had your camera smashed? Have you ever had to face legal repercussions because you've gone into somewhere that you weren't allowed?

**Jo-Anne McArthur**

Many of my colleagues have I have investigative colleagues and APJ colleagues who have been beat up or severely beaten up, or who have been caught trespassing and put in jail. You know, more broadly, journalists are facing this in many countries. We hear that a lot with humanitarian and environmental photo journalists, especially in places like Brazil and Mexico and and many other countries I have, I've certainly had many serious issues. I had to flee. I had to flee a country which, you know, is now a comment that I won't be going back to for a little while, on the advice of several lawyers, all sorts of, all sorts of things.

**Marina Black**

Yeah, no, it definitely keeps you on your toes. And so let's talk a little bit about some of the challenges that you faced

**Jo-Anne McArthur**

Well, as there are more and more investigations into the exploitation of animals, there's more retaliation from industry to prevent us from being able to take any kinds of images. And so, have you heard of Ag Gag laws? Yeah, why don't you tell our listeners a little bit. Ag Gag laws are an advent of the last decade or so. It started in the US with the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act, which would essentially make me a terrorist in that country if I were to do things like trespass or take images illegally on a farm, Ag Gag is spreading from state to state and province to province in Canada as well. These laws are all eventually overturned because they are unconstitutional. However, we do have to deal with them, and they are very serious. So we did have a gag in Ontario. It has been overturned, and there are ongoing challenges around that. But essentially that meant that I couldn't go closer to, you know, very close to a truck that's carrying animals to photograph who's inside. I couldn't go on a farm. I'd face very severe trespassing fines and perhaps jail time if I were to go into a farm. And some of these laws were quite extreme, like, for example, in the US, I can't remember which state, but you couldn't photograph the outside of a factory farm from public property. So you know, these laws do get overturned, but they are a big pain in the butt for people who want to expose cruelty, whether you're doing employment based work or the kind of work that I do.

**Marina Black**

Tell me why. Why is photography a powerful way to tell the stories of these animals? What impact does showing have, as opposed to writing?

**Jo-Anne McArthur**

That's the beauty of photography. It can reach someone in a millisecond, and that's why good photo journalism is very important. The hidden camera stuff is more a production of proof of how animals are treated, for example. But if you are taking artistic, poignant images of individuals trapped in gestation crates and rabbit farms and mink farms and all these things. Taking good pictures means showing not just the animal, but showing their experience, showing the confines, showing how they can't turn around in their cages. And a lot can be said in a photograph, as opposed to the writing. The writing is crucial. Social, the facts, the locations, the stories, interesting information about how those animals behave in the wild, all of these things illuminate just how bad the problem is, but the photographs can take that fundamental first step in showing and shocking. I will say that I became aware of factory farming. When I saw some pamphlets from PETA and I saw photos of hens in cages and pigs in crates, I was shocked, and then I wanted to learn more, so I can even attribute a couple of average photos for you know, charting, charting my my life, really?

**Marina Black**

Yeah, having seen some of your work, Joanne, it's gonna stay in my brain forever. Now.

**Jo-Anne McArthur**

Sorry, and you're welcome? Exactly right.

**Marina Black**

It's, it's very bittersweet. Animal photo journalism, I find you know you're you're shedding light on something that we really need to discuss, and the pictures are artistically crafted. However, it is such an upsetting image that we are looking at right I want to talk about your work and your agency. We animals, your agency. We animals aims to encourage swift and necessary change on behalf of beings in the frame. Tell us about your impact and how you've seen change so far.

**Jo-Anne McArthur**

It's a little bit radical, you know? And we're saying, Okay, we're journalists, and we are we are trying to create change. There are the legions of people who follow our work and write to us every day and say, I stopped eating pigs when I saw your pig pictures. I stopped wearing fur because I didn't know animals were killed for fur like people, yeah, people don't know a lot of things about how we treat animals. We investigated a number of fur farms, and there was one in particular that was just really horrific, that was in Quebec. And we went several times, and we documented very thoroughly how the animals were living, and we gave that work to the Montreal SPCA. And with that work, they were able to obtain a warrant to go onto the premises and look at the animals, treat the animals, euthanize the animals, and confiscate the animals. So in addition to that, they were able to lay the first ever criminal charges against a fur farmer in Canada because of the the welfare standards. I mean, the place was absolutely shocking. Animals were half dead, animals were missing limbs, animals were starving. And that is also really the kind of change we want. So there are a lot of layers to it, and it's also that as many people as possible will see see the animals. That's the thing about photography. We just want people to look and to not turn away, which is hard because it's really difficult subject matter people don't want to look, not only because people don't want to look at suffering, but it also creates an internal conflict. We inherently believe ourselves to be good people, and really, most of us are. And so let's say we look at a pig in a gestation crate, but we eat pigs. We see that this is wrong. It's filthy, it's it's, there's suffering there, but we eat pigs, but, oh, but I'm a good person, and am I really contributing to that? And what about my culture and what about my tradition? Those are good things. So how can the, you know, the eating of this animal, be wrong? It's very, very conflicting. People feel defensive. There's, there's a lot we have to do as APJs to reach people. We have to meet people where they're at, you know, I'm not going to go around and scream at people like this is horrendous. Like, you know, stop, stop taking part in this. You need to take beautiful images, to let the images do the talking and then facilitate conversation.

**Marina Black**

Yeah, it's interesting having that conversation. It is really important in this day and age. You know that's how change happens, is if we talk about it, and showing the evidence, as in your work, is important. I will say, though, in your photos, they are very hard to look away though you are just curious about what is happening in that shot. Yes, these images are so upsetting, but I'm I just want to know more about what's happening in that particular setting.

**Jo-Anne McArthur**

I think I just to add to that a very successful image, in my view, is one that answers a lot of questions, and we can often do that with a wide angle. There was one shoot where the calf was newly born, and they they picked her up and put her in a wheelbarrow and wheeled her to the veal crates where she was going to live. And so you see her in the wheelbarrow. In the foreground, wide angle, she's wet from birth. There's eye contact. But in the background, it's the long rows of veal crates, and there's someone preparing a veal crate. You know exactly what's happening. There's a whole story there.

**Marina Black**

Animal photojournalism can host some pretty distressing images, as we've mentioned. Where does your work find a home in today's news climate.

**Jo-Anne McArthur**

It's a difficult one, and there are many answers to this. So our work is dispersed organically. Thank goodness we have a stock site of 35,000 images, and over 125 photographers have contributed their APJ work to the stock site, and it's free for anyone to use. We have 1000s of users and and people share our work on social media spreads like wildfire, and so there's the organic spread of the work, and then there are media who are looking for this type of image, and so they write to us, and it gets out that way, but there's a lot of resistance in mainstream media to publishing our work. They're trying to cover their butts. If we trespassed in order to gain the material, they'll say like, oh, this would be a perfect image, but you know, we we can't publish things that were shot illegally. We could be held liable. It's an uphill battle because our work is seen as biased. They'd rather not use it sometimes. But that's not always true. There are plenty of people who are interested in the stories in our work, the image, the the animals in our work, and also this strange thing, this strange APJ, who are people who go to the front lines, put themselves at risk, financial risk, psychological risk, you know, physical risk to because they believe so much in in telling the stories of animals.

**Marina Black**

I read once you were diagnosed with PTSD due to the intensity of your work, I can only imagine how, how do you cope with the realities of what you see and capturing this for your job as a photographer?

**Jo-Anne McArthur**

Yeah, us photo journalists, it's not unusual for us to be diagnosed with PTSD. We go to the front lines of violence, suffering, exploitation, murder, and come back and what we're supposed to just fit right back into the normal world, people coming and going, regular conversation, shopping, work. You know, it's it's very disorienting to witness suffering, and it it messes with you in ways that it can be a little bit hard to explain. But I think we know a lot about PTSD now and how it can cause long term suffering, long term confusion about your your place in the world and what's happening in the world, and how there can be so much distraction from from suffering and from other things that matter. And I learned to cope through therapy and also deciding not to live in the pain that I have witnessed. And so what I imagine are two tracks, just picture like a train track, for example, and they're running side by side, and one, one is like pain, and one is regular life. And you know, my two wheels are in the in these tracks, maybe not train track, but like ruts in a dirt road. And if I find that I'm over in the left hand one which is these constant thoughts of the incredible suffering and the death unnecessary cruelty that I've seen, if I'm just there too much, I pluck myself up and I put myself on the other track. I'm always going in this direction. The suffering is alongside me all the time. I know it's there, but I don't have to be there. I can just be like working with all of this suffering. I don't have to be experiencing the suffering. And I was diagnosed with PTSD when I realized I couldn't stop thinking about suffering. I couldn't stop picturing animals and and I am a very joyful person, but I found I was, you know, less joyful, and I have this one precious life, and I want to live it, and I want to have a great time. And so I don't want to live in the suffering. I just want to, like live in service of alleviating it. So I just learned to live in that happy space.

**Marina Black**

And that's very mindful of you. I think myself as a younger journalist, I struggle with that, you know, how can I cope with even just reading the news of the day while I have to write my own story that's due tomorrow or something? And so I find that mindfulness that you describe is so important in this space, and it's probably how a lot of people cope.

**Jo-Anne McArthur**

Well, I think as journalists and as photo journalists, we are wonderfully poised to take action. That's what we're doing. And so some of us reading the news don't have something that we feel is really actionable, like the news is depressing. But what am I going to do? I'm going to go to my regular job, but we have jobs where we can affect change in the world. And so when I'm upset about suffering, I'm like, Well, I'm going to do something about it, and my career is literally doing something about it, so I can feel good about that and know that I'm doing my best. But for all the people who don't have careers in change making, you still can change make. That's great thing about being live right now. You can change your consumer habits. You can speak. Up, you can take part, and now more than ever, is the time right.

**Marina Black**

Through the years of award winning reporting, what have you learned about humans relationship with animals?

**Jo-Anne McArthur**

Well, that our relationship with animals is speciesist, and that's a philosophical idea that explains that we put ourselves above all other species, that we feel we are more important and better, and that's why we prioritize everything that we want to do over any prioritization of them. It's conflicting. There's cognitive dissonance. We say. A lot of people say we love animals, but we are unknowingly or semi knowingly, like treating them very poorly. So we have to all learn about that. And also, we don't have relationships with animals at all in that we forget they're animals. So when they're on our plate, and when we buy them in the store, it's, you know, pink flesh wrapped in cellophane. There's no idea about the animal there. It's just like chicken that we want to eat that night. So there's a long way to go. There's a lot of exposure. There's a lot of conversations that need to happen, a lot of compassion that needs to happen, not just towards animals, but towards each other. Let's talk about it, you know, and and learn from each other and go from there.

**Marina Black**

Yeah. And to wrap up our conversation, tell me what's next for Joanne McArthur?

**Jo-Anne McArthur**

Oh my gosh. Joanne McArthur and We Animals are one in the same it seems like this project that I came up with over two decades ago is really my life. I'm very, very fortunate to have built it into a nonprofit and a career. And what we want to do at we animals is just continue to do better with what we're doing. We have a good, solid groundwork. We have the stock platform, we have some recognition when we just really need to go farther. So we need to tell more stories, better stories, do more with them and reach more people. For me personally, that means more writing, more speaking, a little bit more shooting. I used to shoot six to eight months a year, but now I just do a few shoots a year because I'm running We Animals and just finding ever better ways to to reach people where they're at.

**Marina Black**

Awesome. Well, Jo-Anne, thank you so much for coming on pull quotes and sharing more about your incredible work in animal photojournalism.

**Jo-Anne McArthur**

I'm so glad you're interested in APJ, and I love talking about it. So thank you for inviting me. Thank you.

**Marina Black**

This episode was hosted by me, Marina Black. It was produced by Livia Dyring, Chloe Kim, and me. If you enjoyed this episode, explore our past episodes in the podcast tab at reviewofjournalism.ca, I'm your host. Marina Black, thanks for listening.