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WRITTEN FOR SECOND PRINTING OF:

MONKEYS OF THE MESQUITE

by msm Pavelka

Foreword



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Many primatologists are anthropologists who have taken or taught introductory sociocultural anthropology courses in which ethnographies are a god-send. Ethnographies are short, readable monographs that describe the social and cultural lives of a group of people in an accessible and entertaining manner. For the beginning student or interested novice, ethnographies provide welcome relief from the mental gymnastics of trying to comprehend the kinship structure, marriage rules, or linguistic practices of another culture. An ethnography is a good read that gives the non-specialist a type of affinity with the group of people under study, and insight into them, that would not be possible from sophisticated analyses of summarized data. Ethnographies make the science and the people come alive.

Mary Pavelka set out to provide a similar learning tool for students of primatology—a short, descriptive account of the lives of one group of monkeys, the Japanese macaques of south Texas. Oddly enough, there are very few such descriptive accounts of one species, or one group, available in primatology as compared to cultural anthropology. However, *Monkeys of the Mesquite* does follow in the writing tradition of books such as *Almost Human* by Shirley Strum and *Peacemaking Among Primates* by Frans de Waal. All are much needed books for those of us who teach a science that is highly quantified and examines little known animals to test complex theories from evolutionary biology.

There is an inherent danger for the scientists who try to make their work accessible by describing it in a “story” format. Some scientists are offended by the notion that our life’s work can be told in the form of stories, or narratives, and believe that such an attempt will damage our reputation as objective, rigorous researchers. However, those scholars who study the practice of science itself, tell us that almost all scientific ideas and theories are essentially stories, that is, they are created by piecing together an organized and plausible sequence of events that is intuitively satisfying while at the same time following rigorous, standardized rules. These same science-studies scholars inform us that storytelling itself is one of the defining human traits, that our need for causal and

chronological connection makes us who we are. Every group of humans ever studied shares stories that help to define them, from origin myths to the gossip about what their neighbors did last week. Primatologists at rest tell each other stories about their animals all the time.

But in public, and in print, we scientists usually hide our stories under an armor of specialized language and structural rules of presentation, such that only an expert can decode them. We are always in need of people who can tell scientific stories in ways accessible to a general audience without distorting the expert's perception of the subject matter. To make this translation from scientific "speak" to public understanding is not an easy task, it requires a gift, a skill that is possessed by the author of this book.

As Mary was writing this "primatology," she sent me chapter after chapter to read for what she called "the cringe factor." How many scientists have not cringed when they read a passage in a newspaper or popular journal describing scientific work with which they are familiar? We cringe when we realize that some beautiful, complex, intricate aspect of nature has been grossly oversimplified and indeed sacrificed to produce a catchy headline or a cute angle that the popular writer thinks will resonate with the public. This practice not only annoys the expert, it demeans the reader by assuming that they are not capable of understanding and appreciating the "true story." Suffice it to say that *Monkeys of the Mesquite* does not make a primatologist cringe in order to provide entertaining reading for the non-specialist. Even the experts will learn from and enjoy reading this book. And it does provide the truly fascinating story of the individuals, interactions and events that have made up the history of the Arashiyama West group of Japanese monkeys, stripped clean of the apparatus of authentication—data tables, statistical tests, voluminous citations—that can all be found elsewhere and that only obscure the story for the student and the interested public.

This is one of the books that I assign to the students in my introductory primatology classes, and I also give copies to my friends and relatives who want to find out what it is really like to be a primatologist and to know another species intimately. My students rave about the book, many ask me how they could get to meet these monkeys, and some go on to become primatologists. And, after 25 years of politely accepting copies of my scientific articles and books, my parents read Mary Pavelka's book, and seemed to finally understand what I do and why I have such a passion for studying monkeys. I can think of no more fitting accolade to confer on this book than to affirm that it effectively communicates to our students and to the public at large why our primate relatives are so deserving of our attention and worthy of our consideration. Read it, you will enjoy it.