

PROMPT: Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

Pecked

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I have been pooped on many times. I mean this in the most literal sense possible. I have been pooped on by pigeons and possums, house finches and hawks, egrets and eastern grays.

I don't mind it, either. For that matter, I also don't mind being pecked at, hissed at, scratched and bitten—and believe me, I have experienced them all.

I don't mind having to skin dead mice, feeding the remaining red embryonic mass to baby owls. (Actually, that I do mind a little.)

I don't mind all this because when I'm working with animals, I know that even though they probably hate me as I patch them up, their health and welfare is completely in my hands. Their chances of going back to the wild, going back to their homes, rely on my attention to their needs and behaviors.

My enduring interest in animals and habitat loss led me to intern at the Wildlife Center of Silicon Valley over the summer, and it was there that I was lucky enough to meet those opossum joeys that defecated on my shoes whenever I picked them up (forcing me to designate my favorite pair of shoes as animal hospital shoes, never to be worn elsewhere again). It was there that a juvenile squirrel decided my finger looked fit to suckle, and that many an angry pigeon tried to peck off my hands.

And yet, when the internship ended, I found myself hesitant to leave. That hesitation didn't simply stem from my inherent love of animals. It was from the sense of responsibility that I developed while working with orphaned and injured wildlife. After all, most of the animals are there because of us—the baby opossums and squirrels are there because we hit their mothers with our cars, raptors and coyotes end up there due to secondary rodenticide poisoning and illegal traps. We are responsible for the damage, so I believe we are responsible for doing what we can to help. And of course, there is empathy—empathy for the animals who lost their mothers, their homes, their sight and smell, their ability to fly or swim. I couldn't just abandon them.

I couldn't just abandon them the same way I couldn't let big oil companies completely devastate the Arctic, earth's air conditioner. The same way I couldn't ignore the oceans, where destructive fishing practices have been wiping out ocean life.

These are not jobs that can be avoided or left half-finished. For some, the Arctic is simply too far away, and the oceans will always teem with life, while for others these problems seem too great to ever conquer. And while I have had these same feelings many times over, I organized letter-writing campaigns, protested, and petitioned the oil companies to withdraw. I campaigned in local parks to educate people on sustaining the seas. I hold on to the hope that persistent efforts will prevent further damage.

I sometimes wonder if my preoccupation with social and environmental causes just makes me feel less guilty. Maybe I do it just to ease my own conscience, so I can tell people "At least I did something." I hope that it's not just that. I hope it's because my mother always told me to treat others as I want to be treated, even if I sometimes took this to its logical extreme, moving roadkill to the bushes along the side of the road because "Ma, if I was hit by a car I would want someone to move me off the road, too."

The upshot is that I simply cannot walk away from injustice, however uncomfortable it is to confront it. I choose to act, taking a stand and exposing the truth in the most effective manner that I think is possible. And while I'm sure I will be dumped on many times, both literally and metaphorically, I won't do the same to others.