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Interview with Lori Marino

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of an interview with **LORI MARINO** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 215.*

JASMIN: Lori Marino is a neuroscientist and expert in animal behavior and intelligence who has been on the faculty at Emory University for almost 20 years. She is also the founder and executive director of the Kimmela Center for Animal Advocacy, which is focused on applying scientific knowledge to animal advocacy efforts. She is internationally known for her work in marine mammal evolution, biology and cognition, self-awareness in other animals, comparative neuroanatomy, as well as human-nonhuman relationships. She has published and presented on the effects of captivity on large social mammals, and in 2010, testified before Congress on the paucity of evidence for the educational claims of the zoo and aquarium industry. She is featured in the recent documentary, *Blackfish*.

Welcome to Our Hen House, Lori.

LORI: Thank you very much. It's great to be here.

JASMIN: It's so exciting to have you. We are in awe of the work you do, and we're really looking forward to hearing more about it today. And we're honored that you agreed to speak with us. So, tell us, what exactly does a neuroscientist study and how does that relate to animals?

LORI: Well, neuroscience is an area of study where you look at the biological basis of behavior. And neuroscientists study everything from brain structure and brain function to the chemicals that course through one's body to produce different feelings and behaviors. It is basically a broad range of areas of study. But all of them have in common the study of the brain and the nervous system.

MARIANN: And how does that help us understand what's going on with animals?

LORI: Well, I think that for a long time, neuroscience was using other animals to try to model and understand human brains and human behavior. But what I think is one of the most valuable ways to use the data that we already have is to show that there is no difference qualitatively between humans and nonhumans. And I studied neuroscience for 25 years, and I've done that by studying the brains of dolphins and whales and primates that have died naturally, so I did not do any vivisection. And that told me a lot about who dolphins and whales are, who primates are, and how we are both the same and different at the same time.

JASMIN: Now how did you get involved with *Blackfish* and what was your role in the film?

LORI: Well, my role in the film *Blackfish* was to talk about some of the things we know about orca brains and cetacean brains in general that really are important and relevant to understanding who orcas are, and then the larger picture of why they cannot thrive in captivity. I got involved with *Blackfish* when I was in San Juan Island when they were filming, and I was asked by the director, Gabriella Cowperthwaite, to be interviewed. And I at that time met all of the ex-Sea World trainers that were interviewed in the film as well.

MARIANN: So, have you been surprised about the impact of the film? And do you think it's - we know it's helped people understand what's happening at Sea World. Do you think it's helped people understand more about these animals?

LORI: I think that *Blackfish* has helped the public understand who orcas are by really taking a quite objective look at what their lives are like in the wild and what their lives are like in comparison in captivity. And I think -- I mean, all of us have been stunned and quite thrilled with the impact that this film, *Blackfish*, continues to have.

JASMIN: Yeah, absolutely. It's really incredible, what it's doing to the mainstream. I love it. Every day, there seems to be a new story about it. So, tell us about the Kimmela Center.

LORI: The Kimmela Center for Animal Advocacy is a nonprofit organization that I founded a couple of years ago. And the Kimmela Center is really a combination of science and animal advocacy. The point of the Center is to focus on using scientific information strategically in order to protect and transform our view of other animals. And it came about because I spent so many years studying, teaching very bright neuroscience students, premed students, biology students, you name it. And I realized that science and scientific expertise has a lot to offer animal advocacy, and I wanted Kimmela to be the center that would fill that gap.

MARIANN: I just think this is probably the most important work that could be done. And it's so important that science, which really should be supporting so much of what animal advocates are saying, really has been left out of the picture, or even worse, been kind of hijacked by so much of the industry. And actually, you seem to be at the center of so much cutting-edge work in the animal rights movement right now. Can you tell us about your work with the Nonhuman Rights Project?

LORI: Yes. The Nonhuman Rights Project is a project founded by attorney Steven Wise, and also headed by Natalie Prosin, and in which we are trying to convince a judge that a nonhuman animal is a common law person, and by that, I mean legally a person. Currently, all other animals are property. There is not a single individual that is nonhuman on the planet right now that is worth anything other than your table and chairs at home, legally. And so, what Steve is trying to do and what we're all trying to do is to transform that relationship from human property to person, nonhuman personhood. And it's been very exciting because as you know, we've filed the first cases in December for four chimpanzees who are currently being held captive in New York State. We're currently on appeal. And I think that the rights-based approach is a critically important way to move forward. I don't think that we can depend entirely on welfare-based approaches because it really doesn't recognize the inherent rights of any other beings.

MARIANN: Yeah, absolutely. We're totally with you. And I'm very excited to hear about the synergy between law and science. I mean, it's just so important that lawyers who are working for animal rights have those scientists to bring the research to bear when they're trying to argue cases. And it's just exciting that your work can inform what's being done with the Nonhuman Rights Project. And perhaps most exciting to us is that we're very, very excited to hear that you're working on farmed animal issues. I mean, primates and particularly the great apes, and the dolphins and orcas, they're kind of the most obvious animals, but the farm animals so often get left out of the equation when it comes to accurate science. So, can you tell us about your work with Farm Sanctuary?

LORI: Yes. I'm working as the Science Director for the Someone, Not Something project. And it really is very much in line with some of the other things that we're doing with elephants, great apes, dolphins, and whales. And this project is the brainchild of Bruce Friedrich, and he asked me to come on board. And basically what we're doing here is using the science, applying the science on who chickens, cows, pigs, etc. are, and using those facts to reintroduce the public to these animals in a new light. Rather than seeing them as something that goes on your plate, what we want to do ultimately is change how people see them so that people understand that pigs and chickens, cows are individuals in their own right with their own psychology and their own minds, and essentially their own lives to lead.

JASMIN: We do need to start seeing these animals as individuals, and I think that the work of Farm Sanctuary and other farm animal sanctuaries is so key to making that happen. And we're fans of the Someone, Not Something campaign. And we spoke with Bruce about it on our podcast if people are interested in hearing even more about it. Now, how do we find out, Lori, what animals are experiencing, and is it possible to do so without subjecting them to experiments in which they are harmed?

LORI: Well, this is a very interesting question because one might say, well, in order to do the science that you need to find out about an animal, you have to do something invasive. And a lot of the work that has been done on other animals has been invasive, has been the kind of work that we don't promote. But what we do say is given that we know certain things now, how do we use that information to benefit the animals? There are many ways that you can study other animals, what they're experiencing, what their minds are like, without keeping them in captivity or without vivisectioning them. For instance, again, I've studied dolphin and whale brains for 25 years and never have done anything invasive with them. And I think that you can be a neuroscientist -- what I want my students to know is that if they want to be a neuroscientist, that's great. And if they don't want to hurt other animals, that's also great, and they can do both. There are limitations to what you can do, but there's a lot that we can find out.

One of the things that we want to do with the Someone project is start to establish some sanctuary-based research projects, behavioral research projects. These would be completely on the basis of what the other animals want to do, and they would be done in a sanctuary, not in some lab somewhere. So, science and advocacy and welfare are not antithetical to each other. They can actually work to help and strengthen each other, and that's a very, very important message that I want to get through, through the work that we're doing at Kimmela.

MARIANN: Yeah. This is absolutely, absolutely vital work. Now, I know I've written a little bit about the science on farm animals, just in the context of a couple of cases I've written

about. And it's just so distressing the way it's been conducted in the past. Just something that pops into mind: they did an experiment comparing whether chickens preferred narrow wire or thick wire in their cage, and it's the very question they're asking that is flawed. I mean, chickens probably prefer not to be in the cage. So, asking the right questions is obviously incredibly important, and it sounds like that's what you will be doing.

LORI: We want people to see these animals who are on people's plates as someone, and not treat them as though they're a byproduct of the farming industry. Most of the literature on who chickens and cows and pigs are, and fish as well, is sort of framed within this sort of agricultural viewpoint, that is, how do you get them to produce more? And very little of it is really research on their own terms, to just try to find out what it is like to be a cow or a chicken. And I think more basic research needs to be done that views these animals as cohabitants of the planet and not products that we are trying to make zoom up to be super-products for our consumption.

JASMIN: A lot of people in the animal rights movement shy away from valuing animals more merely because they're more quote-unquote "intelligent" than other animals, they're more like us. How do you feel about this?

LORI: Well, that is a criticism that has been leveled at the Nonhuman Rights Project, for instance, that we are focused exclusively on the big three, the great apes, the elephants and the cetaceans, because they seem to be more like us than other animals. But really, it's a very empirical approach that we're taking. If we want to convince a judge, for instance, that a nonhuman being deserves legal status as a person, we are gonna go with the lowest hanging fruit, if you will. We're going to go with those species for which there is the most data, the abundance of data to convince that judge. But with that said, I think that we need to start moving away from just ranking animals by intelligence and start looking at the other animals with a more complex lens by looking at who they are cognitively, emotionally, socially. And I think if we do that, we're going to start to move away from this anthropocentric viewpoint.

MARIANN: Yeah, I think that's a really great point. You so often see animals ranked or even dog breeds ranked the smartest, the smartest, like, who cares? What does "smart" mean in this context, and who cares anyway? You're not more valuable just 'cause you're smarter. You're more valuable because you are who you are. I know that the animal use industries like to pretend that animals are little more than widgets. But has there been any shift in the scientific community? Are you seeing other scientists step up to the plate here and trying to be more open to truly understanding animals?

LORI: I think that that's happening. There's still a long way to go. The scientific community has always been on the defensive when it comes to animal protection, animal rights, because a lot of the scientific community uses animals in their research in ways that some people deem unethical. And so, there's been this tension between the scientific community and the animal rights community. But I think more and more, scientists are starting to understand that there really doesn't have to be any inherent tension between science and animal protection. Science can be done in many different ways, and science is just simply a way of knowing, a method of investigating things. It doesn't mean that you have to vivisect or do other things to animals that are not right. It is just simply an approach to gaining information, and there's nothing about that that's incompatible with animal protection or animal rights.

MARIANN: Yeah, it's kind of saddening to think that scientists have been so defensive about the use they've been putting animals to that they would stand in the way of truth. But after all, Darwin wrote about emotions in animals a long time ago. Do you think that scientific thought today is starting to catch up to that and recognizing emotions in animals?

LORI: I think so. I think that scientific thought is changing. I have a number of colleagues who are willing to step beyond the boundaries of science, if you will, and start to interpret the results. One of the things that science does is it provides a way for you to interpret incoming data and then change with those data. If you learn a lot and you don't do anything with it, then it's useless. But a lot of scientists think that once you get data on something, that that's as far as you can go. And I don't think that's the case. I think that what we need to do is take the incoming data coming from the science and that has come from the science and decide how that's going to shape how we relate to the other animals. And I think other scientists are starting to realize that as well.

JASMIN: Tell us about hens. What does science tell us about chickens?

LORI: Well, hens, chickens are so interesting. Obviously they really get the short end of the stick when it comes to the public's perception of them. You know, they are not typically considered very intelligent, especially compared with ravens and parrots and those kinds of animals. But in fact, hens are someone; they really have lives to lead. And I think that one of the most important things I've learned about hens is the fact that they are really, really involved parents. One of the things that we looked at is what hens do when they are allowed to interact with their kids, the chicks. And what they are doing are things like protecting them, teaching them or showing them the right things to eat, being concerned about them. And the reason that nobody understands that hens care about their kids is 'cause they're not given the opportunity in factory farms. So, when these animals are given the opportunity to express themselves, then you see who they really are. And they are concerned parents that want to play a role in the lives of their children just as you and I would.

MARIANN: Yeah, they're mother hens. It's funny how --

LORI: They're mother hens, and that goes for the other animals. Cows, for instance, who have their babies taken away for the veal industry, we know suffer a terrible loss. And again, it's the case that if we allowed cows to raise their own kids, we would see all these things. But we restrict the possibility that they could even express themselves in this way.

JASMIN: What are some of the things that you have found out about animals that have truly surprised or shocked you?

LORI: I think -- that's a very good question. One of the things that I think I've found out that maybe didn't shock me but has been a sort of driver has been the fact that we are so similar and so different at exactly the same time. And I think this is something that we've had to learn over time. We are really good at categorizing things, putting things in boxes, so we have humans and we have animals. They're the same or they're different. But in fact, if you really want to understand who we are, who the other animals are, you need to do something more difficult, and that is to take into account the fact that we are essentially all the same and we are all different at the same time. And what that means is that we have to recognize that there is a deep continuity across all life on this planet. There's really been only one way

that nervous systems and brains have been created, and the intelligence on this planet is basically the same intelligence tweaked depending upon the species. So, when we look at animals like great apes or chickens, we see ourselves, and we should see ourselves 'cause we're mainly them but just a different version. And I think that that has been something that I've had to learn over the years, and I teach my students, is not to put other animals in a box, to understand that we are them, and that we can be different and the same at the same time.

MARIANN: Yeah, that's so well said. And it's such an important concept, and one that -- as you say, our need to categorize things seems to get in the way of -- we just want to think of them as the other.

LORI: Exactly.

MARIANN: And tell us, Lori, your work is so exciting to us, and we feel that you're such an important part of the movement. Can you tell us what you'll be working on in the upcoming year?

LORI: Well, this year, I'm working on a number of projects. One of them is the Someone project, and we really have just gotten started with that, so there's going to be a lot of really exciting things happening coming out of that: papers, research, new ways of framing farmed animals in the minds of the public. So, that's really going to take off this year. We've just been in prep mode, but really, it's going to take off in 2014 and keep going.

Hopefully, we'll see more lawsuits for legal rights for other animals because I think that's really where we have to go. I'm also working with a number of people on the plight of elephants, and this is something that I'll be doing a lot more of in 2014. And this includes everything from the plight of elephants in Africa who are poached for their ivory to captive elephants to elephants in Asia who are used for logging and are tormented by the mahouts there for entertainment and other purpose and tourism. And one of the things I will be doing is talking a lot about this film, *How I Became an Elephant*, which if you haven't seen is a wonderful film about a young girl in this country, Juliette West, who went to Asia to look at the plight of Asian elephants and has become an advocate for them. So, I think elephants are on their way out. It's clear that if we don't do something they will be extinct in a few years. And there's a real urgency there to help them.

But who knows? Other things will be coming up. I think there's gonna be a lot more work done on captivity issues, especially for dolphins and whales. *Blackfish* has really started something that we intend to take to the full measure. And so, I really think that it's a cutting-edge time now for animal rights, animal protection. People are talking about personhood issues, and that global conversation is going to continue.

JASMIN: So much to look forward to.

LORI: There's so much to look forward to, yes.

JASMIN: And it's such an important year for animals, and that is largely because of the work that you're doing, Lori. So, thank you so much for everything that you do and for joining us today on Our Hen House and for sharing your story with us. We definitely will stay on top of your happenings, and please continue to keep us posted. We really had so much to talk to you about today that I feel like we could break it down into like 10 different subjects

and have you come on and talk specifically about any one of those, so I hope in the future you will consider that.

LORI: I'd be more than happy to.

JASMIN: I like to ask people questions on the air to put them on the spot.

LORI: I would absolutely be more than happy to. I love what you're doing with Our Hen House.

JASMIN: Oh, thank you. Thank you so much for joining us, Lori. We'll talk to you soon.

LORI: Thank you.

JASMIN: Bye.

LORI: Bye.

JASMIN: That was Lori Marino.