

Crows R Us Christopher Uhl

Reading the CDT over the last several weeks I have learned that Penn State has a problem with the crows that have been congregating along College Avenue. But what if, rather than viewing a crow congregation as a problem, PSU and our community as a whole, chose to see this as an opportunity? How so?

First off, these crows give us a glimpse of ourselves. Think about it: Penn State is upset with the crows because they gather in large numbers along College Avenue and then proceed to create a ruckus and make a mess. This sounds to me a lot like what we humans do from time to time along College Avenue: We congregate, make noise, and create a mess. Yes, “Crows R Us”!

And what if a dollop of crow poop were to fall on each of our heads as we walked along College Avenue? Rather than feel outraged by the poop, we might as easily thank Crow for waking us up to all the ways that we humans, through our waste and pollution, “poop” into the skies, the waters and the soils of this precious Earth.

In addition to helping us see ourselves, these massive crow congregations are providing us with an opportunity to witness one the most amazing phenomenon in the entire animal kingdom. In fact, there are just a handful of bird species that gather in huge swarms and to think that this occurring right in our midst!

Penn State professors in behavioral science, ecology, philosophy, sociology, engineering, and dance, among other fields could be using the crow visitation as an opportunity to observe and teach about social interactions, animal behavior, the dynamics of movement and flight, inspiration, and perception. Instead, we seem to be engaged in abject specieism—i.e., acting as if we are superior and can treat other species as we wish.

But do we really stand above other species? Think about it. Those crows are superior to us when it comes to flight and the ability to live off of Earth’s wild bounty. And what about the elm trees that are being fertilized by the crow’s poop? These trees, like all trees, are far superior to us insofar as they can snag light photons moving at more than 600,000 miles per hour and then use this solar energy to manufacture their own food—a feat far beyond our capacities!

The truth is this: Each of Earth’s life forms, including us, has a particular suite of characteristics that allow for success. There are not superior or inferior species. Thus, there is no justification for claiming that humans are categorically superior and that, by extension, we have some inalienable right to treat other life forms as we please. When we recognize the magnificence of these crows, we give ourselves the opportunity to exercise humility. This might even mean swallowing hard and opening to the possibility that there is no crow “problem”—i.e., there is nothing that needs to be fixed!

But if co-existing with the crows is simply too much to imagine, there is one final opportunity—that is to consider how we human ones might actually communicate our needs to the crows in a way that is respectful. This may seem a bit weird, but think about it: Interspecies communication is what we do all the time with our pets. We talk to them and gesture at them and they, in turn, pick up on our cues.

Penn State is preparing to engage in a decidedly unenlightened method of interspecies communication that entails hiring Terminix to roust the crows from their roosts using a chemical fog. The spraying is scheduled to begin this Monday. At this juncture, PSU could exercise

wisdom as well as fiscal responsibility by putting its initiative with Terminix on hold. This makes sense since the crows will soon be spreading out to breed, leaving their College Avenue roost, not to return again until the Fall.

Given the sensibilities and expertise at Penn State, along with the six-month window of time until the crows return, PSU now has a wonderful opportunity to develop a more intelligent, respectful and frugal approach to the crows and, in so doing, provide an example for other communities and universities in the Commonwealth and beyond.