CONFERENCE REPORTS

MARGARET SCHNEIDER

People and Animals: A Timeless Relationship: The International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organisations, Glasgow, Scotland. October 2004,

In the mid-1990s, my family unexpectedly acquired a second dog—a purebred from an uncommon breed. Soon after he arrived, he developed some puzzling behavioral problems. Hoping that I could find someone familiar with the breed, I attended a local dog show known for attracting exhibitors from across North America. Not only did I find the help I sought, I also discovered the Human Animal Bond Association of Canada (HABAC). It had a booth at the show. That was the beginning of my involvement in the study of human-animal interactions, which has included serving on the Board of Directors of HABAC. It has culminated in my beginning my own program of research in the field. In October 2004, the International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organisations (IAHAIO) sponsored a conference in Glasgow, Scotland “People and Animals: A Timeless Relationship,” which I attended.

IAHAIO is an umbrella organization, founded in 1990 and based at the Delta Society in Renton, Washington, to provide a structure through which national organizations could communicate. Its mission is, “To promote research, education and sharing of information about human-animal interaction and the unique role that animals play in human well-being and quality of life.” It has three broad goals:

1. “To promote new research, educational and practical development in the field of human-animal interaction”;
2. “To provide a forum for sharing ideas and information between IAHAIO member organizations” and;
3. “To educate policy makers at local, national and international levels about the benefits of human-animal interaction.”

IAHAIO holds an annual meeting for representatives from its member organizations and, every three years, an international conference. The international conference in Glasgow was the 10th; the next, in 2007, will be in Tokyo.

All three goals were addressed at the conference; however, the first and second goals were most evident. The conference provided a forum for researchers, educators, and practitioners to share ideas and information. With more than 50 oral presentations
and 79 posters—and because the topics were so varied—it is somewhat difficult to characterize the conference overall. A predominance of presentations related to the therapeutic role of animals with a variety of populations that included children, the elderly, trauma victims, and the disabled. Others focused on legal and social policy issues, improving the care of companion animals, the training of veterinarians, and humane education. Most of the discussion pertained to companion animals. There were a few presentations on animal cruelty and animal welfare, although the subject of animal rights was not an overt part of the lexicon. There was considerable emphasis on practice and education with less emphasis on research.

As a researcher in the area of human-animal studies (HAS) I am quite isolated, and I suspect that I am not alone—as it were—in my isolation. My colleagues in my academic department view my interest in HAS as a hobby, and I am aware of others in academic settings who perceive that their work is marginalized. To be at a conference where everyone was interested in HAS was a rare treat. I cannot remember being so captivated at a professional conference. However, having had a few months to reflect on my experience and having the chance to write this article, I wanted to make some observations about the state of research in the study of HAS. To do that, I will focus on three presentations that made a particularly positive impression on me.

The first was a plenary session presented by Arnold Arluke, a sociologist from Northeastern University in Boston, entitled, “Understanding the ‘No-Kill’ Controversy: The Role of Surface and Deep Tensions in Humane Communities.” Arluke described his ethnographic research into the controversy within humane communities regarding the best way to deal with animal overpopulation. The conflict centers on the use of euthanasia, dividing workers in “open-admission” shelters and “no-kill” shelters, respectively. Arluke spent six months as an observer in two shelters in the United States to identify the components of the controversy and explain its intensity. Arluke identified several contributing factors including two different paradigms and definitions of being humane; perceptions of honesty and dishonesty; and, ultimately, the role of identity as a shelter worker. However, his research also revealed some common ground upon which the two factions might reconcile their differences.

In a different vein, Judith Levicoff described a school-based program that was hands-on, in which children learn about monarch butterflies by raising them, observing them, and planting gardens to attract them. The program combines the science involved in understanding the monarchs—their physiology, reproduction, and migration patterns—and an appreciation of the monarch as a living being. Levicoff spoke with an enviable intensity about a topic that obviously is very close to her heart.