Sport Fans and their Endangered Mascots: What do they Know and What can they Do?

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In March of 2014 the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) released a report entitled, Mascot Madness: How Climate Change is Hurting School Spirit. This report detailed how the effects of climate change are adversely impacting the fate of mascots that represent schools like the University of Florida (Gators), Kansas State University (Wildcats), the University of Memphis (Tigers), and even The Ohio State University (Buckeyes). Things like extreme weather, warming temperatures, rising sea levels, and extreme droughts have put the long-term survival of mascots like the University of North Carolina’s ram, Baylor University’s bear, the University of Michigan’s wolverine, and Syracuse University’s orange into question.

Sport team nicknames, and by extension team mascots, typically reflect certain attractive qualities (i.e., strength, valor, power, etc.) and/or link teams to specific regions or locations. For fans, spectators, players and so on, mascots are physical and symbolic representations of athletic teams to which strong attachments can be formed. Physically, mascots can take the form of living beings both human and non-human, inanimate objects, geographical landscapes, weather disasters, and so on. Symbolically, sport mascots represent things like “domination, luck, authenticity, and nostalgia” (Slowikowski, 1993, p. 30) and function to create allegiance to a team, an emotional connection with a team, and a collective identity of fans (Callais, 2010). At the business level, mascots help create brand identity and, in turn, competitive advantage (Dalakas & Rose, 2013). Most importantly, and to the potential benefit of nearly every interested party, mascots are believed to help teams win (Cohen, 2014).

It is undeniable that mascots carry a great deal of importance within the sport context. In fact, it could be argued that they are fundamentally necessary entity in a sport team’s existence. With the exception of Native American mascots, however, little attention has been paid to preserving the actual object, environment, or creature of which a mascot is representative. Simply put, a school may have a black bear for a mascot, but there are rarely, if ever, efforts in place to protect the black bear, its species as a whole, and its natural habitat from harm, exploitation, and even extinction. Thus, despite being a valued and integral entity, the mascot is perhaps the most overlooked and disadvantaged member of a sport team and sport organization. Further, to the extent that little or no effort is being made to preserve and enhance the livelihood, conditions, and experiences of the entities mascots represent, it could be argued that they are being exploited through their use within the sport setting. This latter point suggests the existence of a structural injustice characterized by hegemonic processes that renders that which is represented by a school mascot, relatively powerless. Thus, it also highlights a shared responsibility that sport organizations, fans, athletes, and so on possess in securing the survival of their affiliated mascots (Young, 2006).

Most modern cultures possess anthropocentric norms that hierarchically structure humans as superior to all other living entities and thus, the central focus of society. According to Animal Standpoint Theory (AST), however, this view is myopic, as nonhuman animals have been vital factors in shaping human thoughts, morals, experiences and overall history (Best, 2009, 2012). From this perspective, the existence of humans cannot be separated from the existence of nonhumans across all contexts of life, including sport. Further, AST suggests that because of this co-evolutionary relationship, a great deal of insight can be gained from examining the power relations between humans and nonhuman animals from the standpoint of the oppressed – in this case, the animals.

Sport and sport organizations have long been characterized as institutions fraught with inequities and injustices (e.g., Cunningham, 2008). Traditionally, researchers have discussed and studied these characteristics in relation to social groups of humans, social categories affiliated with groups of humans, and individual members of social groups. While important, this way of studying sport is driven entirely from an anthropocentric perspective and overlooks non-human animals as agents worthy of inquiry. Thus, we employ AST as a way to drastically alter the focus of analysis within the sport context to animal societies, their nonhuman animal inhabitants, and their natural
environments (Best, 2012). Specifically, we sought to focus on and address the current status and needs of an endangered animal whose likeness is used as a mascot at a Division I university in the Eastern United States by assessing the implementation of an advocacy program within the student branch of the school's athletic booster club.

The goals of this program are threefold. First, the program will create awareness of the status of the animal whose likeness is used as a mascot. Secondly, and by working with the athletic department, student booster club members, and a regional coalition whose purpose is to educate about and preserve the animal, the program will inform the community about the needs of the animal whose likeness is used as a mascot. Thirdly, the program will get students actively involved in conservation efforts by connecting their fan identities with the affinity felt toward their school mascot. Working with a national coalition whose mission is to empower and mobilize students into action at schools with another endangered mascot, the implementation of this program will help develop students into leaders of the community and active, contributing members of society.

Program implementation and data collection will begin in November 2014. Members of the research team will attend student booster club meetings to speak with students about their connection to the animal represented by their mascot, and distribute a questionnaire assessing fan identity (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), awareness of mascot status (Baltz & Ratnaswamy, 2000), any additional comments made, and demographic information. Once collected, the data will be analyzed using SPSS and results will be used to inform the next phase of the advocacy program whereby student-led initiatives aimed at satisfying the program goals will be put into place. In this second phase, students will be encouraged to actively advocate for the survival of their animal mascot by learning about its endangered status, creating awareness of its endangered status within the community and providing information about actions that can be taken to ensure survival of the animal's species.

The implications for this study and the project contained within it are numerous. First, this study adopts a perspective that is unique to sport management – that of the animal standpoint. Second, and by way of adopting an animal standpoint, the study identifies entities within sport organizations whose use and exploitation have been overlooked. Next, by recognizing this, students have the opportunity to become actively involved in their school community and athletic department, and thus take a degree responsibility for the future of the endangered species that represents their mascot. Also, actively engaging on behalf of the school's mascot will shine a positive light on the athletic department as a whole, as the actions of student booster club members will reflect back upon it. Finally, students, adults, children, and the like will all benefit by the presence of an initiative that focuses on conservation, preservation, and the overall good for our planet.