

Making Ripples

Do Plants Have Feelings Too?

by Amanda Bancroft

“But plants have feelings, too!” is a common argument against veganism which defends eating meat. The unfortunate part of this argument isn’t that it tries to refute veganism (there are much better arguments that use science truthfully) nor that it uses a somewhat sick morality (we should cause animal suffering because we cause plant suffering, apparently) but that it obscures our knowledge about plants. Plants are vitally important to our understanding of Earth, life, and health. What we eat is not relevant to the question of plant biology. Plants either feel pain and use language, or they don’t. That’s the science. What you do with that information later is your personal choice.

So, do plants suffer? Do they communicate with each other using language? According to spiffy media headlines intentionally designed to grab your attention, yes, plants do. But the scientific answer, as far as we know today, is no. Plants are more complex than most people assume, and they can both emit and respond to chemicals, gases, temperature, light, gravity, parasites, disease, touch, and vibrations (but not to classical music). Daniel Chamovitz, scientist and author of “What a Plant Knows,” has been interviewed by the BBC, Scientific American, and others. “Do I think plants are smart? I think plants are complex,” he says. “Complexity should not be confused with intelligence.” Plants are complex but can’t feel pain because they lack a brain, neurons, nervous system, and hormones related to pain and pain alleviation.

So why do we read about plants feeling pain? For example, one bestselling book, “The Hidden Life of Trees” by Peter Wohlleben, is an enjoyable and highly recommended read with great reviews and valid criticisms from scientists due to its anthropomorphizing of trees and misrepresentation of cited studies. Because appealing to human emotions has been proven to make an audience empathize and care about the subject matter, some writers anthropomorphize plants to convey a point. Emotional appeals often come in the form of metaphors like “plants feel pain just like humans do,” which is intentionally misleading. But it’s fun to read about a romantic forest world, and we can certainly appreciate the poetic as long as we remain aware of the science and the fiction (and it’s possible to enjoy both). A fairytale approach can even open minds to explore the natural world.

We don’t need to mislead people, though. When our arguments contain little lies, we lose the whole truth, and losing the truth not only makes it easier to attack our arguments but it also jeopardizes the goals of justice and environmentalism by creating pseudoscience that isn’t taken seriously. It shouldn’t be necessary to anthropomorphize plants in order for us to love and respect them. We already know they are a complex, cool part of an interdependent system of life, and that’s reason enough.

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