

Sociozoologic Chronicles: Pantanal Creatures' Narrative Shift from 'Demons' to Adored 'Pets' Through Media's Lens

Eveline Baptistella and Cecília Nobre

Abstract: Considering the media influence, this work studied the representation of animals in the media in the episode of fires in the Brazilian Pantanal biome in 2020. The study analyzed the content of 175 news articles published on the portals UOL and G1 to identify the social roles attributed to the species portrayed and to promote a reflection based on the theory of the Sociozoologic Scale and Critical Animal Studies. Our findings showed a representation of animals that reinforces their subordinate position in relation to humans, assuming the role of victims of the anthropic action. The press depicts nonhuman animals differently, depending on the social position in which they are established. However, there was also evidence of networks of relationships between human and nonhuman animals based on concepts of animal protection, highlighting relationship configurations that aim to preserve species.

Keywords: Animal Representation; Critical Animal Studies; Sociozoologic Scale; Pantanal; Jaguar; Animals and disasters.

1 Introduction

This article aims to discuss the representation of nonhuman animals in the media and reflects on how media narratives impact the hierarchization of species in our society. We analyzed the media coverage of environmental disasters that occurred in the Brazilian Pantanal at the beginning of the decade, especially the forest fires in 2020. Given that this biome serves as both a cultural landscape and habitat for wild, farmed, and domesticated animals, our objective was to analyze the various approaches presented in the news. We also discussed how news characterizes the relationships between human and nonhuman animals in this context. The sample was selected from two of Brazil's main news websites, G1 and UOL, and analyzed employing the content analysis methodology. The theoretical framework used was the one of critical animal studies¹ and the sociozoologic scale².

The Brazilian Pantanal is located in the midwest region of Brazil, in the states of Mato Grosso and Mato Grosso do Sul. It is one of the largest wetlands on the planet, with an area of 160,000 km²³, and one of the best places in the world for the practice of wildlife tourism. Its main ecological characteristic is the “flood pulse”, an annual

¹ Margo DeMello, *Animals and Society: an introduction to human-animal studies* (Columbia University Press, 2021).

² Arnold Arluke and others, *Regarding animals*. (Temple University Press, 2022).

³ Willian Mitsch and James Gosselink, *Wetlands* (Wiley & Sons, 2015) 77.

system of flood and drought that determines variations in the landscape, and in the spatial distribution of nonhuman animals, favoring encounters between species⁴. Besides tourism, another economic activity developed in the region is cow and buffalo breeding. It is one of the main productive chains and has been in the region for at least 100 years⁵. The two activities coexist in the region but under conflict and tension. In fact, the fires evidenced such a situation, since the Federal Police investigations revealed that at least five ranchers deliberately set fire to the vegetation in order to open pastures⁶. As in all regions with human occupation, the Pantanal has its own pet population, especially dogs and cats. Thus, we have a good starting point to study the hierarchization of nonhuman animals in society and how culture assigns different social roles to certain species.

2 The Good and the Bad or the Submissive and the Defiant? Nonhuman Animals and the Sociozoological Scale

Throughout history, the relationship between human and nonhuman animals in society has unfolded in different shades, going from love to fear, repulsion to admiration, and devotion to exploitation. It is not different in contemporary society. Despite all of the animal rights advances, we still see – in all forms of relationships between species – aspects of anthropocentrism.

According to Thomas (2010)⁷, our asymmetric behavior towards other animals is a legacy of modernity, with its ideals of control over nature. This pattern finds new expressions over time and becomes evident in the attribution of hierarchies that define the type of consideration given to nonhuman animals in our daily lives – either through direct coexistence or through the media.

Human societies classify other animals according to perceptions oriented by culture, gender, geographic location, and other criteria⁸. According to Descola⁹, humans have more sympathy for those animals they think are closer to their species, and mammals have a better consideration and are at the top of this imaginary

⁴ Eveline Baptistella, *Animais não humanos e humanos no turismo do pantanal mato-grossense: da representação midiática ao encontro*, 2020, Doctoral dissertation (Doctorate in Contemporary Culture Studies), Contemporary Culture Studies Graduate Program, Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso.

⁵ Fátima Costa, *A história de um país inexistente: o Pantanal entre os séculos XVI e XVIII* (Estação Liberdade, 1999) 107; J. Franco and others, *Biodiversidade e ocupação humana do Pantanal mato-grossense: conflitos e oportunidades* (Garamond, 2013) 90.

⁶ Vinicius Lemos, 'Incêndios no Pantanal: por que o fogo ainda ameaça o ecossistema mesmo após a chegada das chuvas' (BBC News - Brasil, 7 November 2020)

<<https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/internacional-54848995#:~:text=%22Os%20atuais%20focos%20de%20calor,alguns%20pontos%20e%20muito%20calor.&text=Levantamentos%20na%20regi%C3%A3o%20apontaram%20que,outubro%2C%20foram%20causados%20pelo%20homem>> accessed on 7 October 2022.

⁷ Keith Thomas, *O homem e o mundo natural* (Companhia das Letras, 2010) 77

⁸ Susana Costa and others, 'Especiessismo – Percepções sociais portuguesas e guineenses sobre os outros' (2008) VI Congresso Português de Sociologia

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242459300_Especiessismo_-_Percepcoes_sociais_portuguesas_e_guineenses_sobre_os_outros> accessed on 20 November 2022.

⁹ Phillipe Descola, 'Estrutura ou sentimento: a relação com o animal na Amazônia' (1998) 4 (1) *Mana*, 23, 45 <https://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0104-93131998000100002> accessed on 7 November 2022.

hierarchy. Leach¹⁰ also sees mammals at the top of this “pyramid,” but establishes a social distance criterion. He states that domesticated and wild animals are classified differently since the latter does not establish such strong coexistence bonds with humans.

Arluke et al.¹¹ created the sociozoologic scale, in which nonhuman animals are ranked based on their utilitarian purposes and, ultimately, their degree of submission to humans. According to the authors, our degree of consideration for other animals is a social construct based inherently on moral judgments: there would be “good” and “bad” animals. “Good animals” are those so domesticated and tame that they submit themselves to human desires. They are divided into two categories based on the supposed supremacy of our species over other life forms. The first category is that of “pets”, whose subordinate relationship to us is based on affection. The second category is called tools, consisting of both laboratory animals and industrially raised animals, mostly for food production. In this case, they are objectified beings, and their nature is reconstructed so that they are considered only as food or scientific data. “The place of good animals, whether human or nonhuman, is clear in the social order. They participate as ‘decent citizens’ of a sort by being trustworthy, predictable, and obedient in their given roles”¹².

On the other end, we have the “bad animals”. Basically, those that escape our control and do not conform to the human desire for absolute submission. They do not fit into the social roles that are considered “good” and are a challenge to our authority.

Some animals, however, have a problem with their place in society. They may be freaks that confuse their place, vermin that stray from their place, or demons that reject their place. They are oddities that cause repulsion, unwelcome visitors that provoke fear, or dangerous attackers that rouse horror. In turn, society may ignore, marginalize, segregate, or destroy them.¹³

Costa¹⁴ termed freaks as “weird” and defined them as animals whose social position is ambiguous. They live on the margins of society because they are not considered dangerous. Therefore, there is no urgency to destroy them. In this hierarchization of “bad animals”, vermin would be one step down as they are considered dirty and “[...] cross human boundaries threatening order and the environment”¹⁵.

We also have species that not only provoke feelings of repulsion but are also vectors of disease. They are seen as threats to humans, and their killing is considered justifiable. At the lowest level would be the “demons”:

Below vermin on the sociozoologic scale are the worst animals – commonly portrayed in popular culture as fiends, predators, or man-eaters – that contest the established social order itself. Vermin may refuse to stay in their lowly place, but demons mount a more serious and

¹⁰ Edmund Leach, *Antropologia* (Ática, 1983).

¹¹ Arnold Arluke and others, *Regarding animals*. (Temple University Press, 2022) 223.

¹² Arnold Arluke and others, *Regarding animals*. (Temple University Press, 2022) 225.

¹³ Arnold Arluke and others, *Regarding animals*. (Temple University Press, 2022) 229.

¹⁴ Susana Costa, ‘Letting people speak: the importance of locals’ attitudes for effective conservation programmes’ (2016) 2 (2) *Journal of Primatology*.

<<https://fatcat.wiki/release/kcil6b5usjcxlia5drbarznfv4>> accessed on 20 November 2022.

¹⁵ Ibid.

“evil” challenge to the way things “ought to be” by trying to reverse the fundamental master-servant relationship present in the traditional phylogenetic order.¹⁶

Animals that are physically able to do this are placed in the demon category, such as the jaguar, the caiman, and the giant otter. However, as Costa¹⁷ reminds us, although this scale is shared among most individuals of the same culture, it is flexible, and the same species can transition into different categories. A good example is the jaguar (*Panthera onca*), which is regarded negatively by farmers because it is considered a threat to the bovines, which they call “livestock”¹⁸. At the same time, they receive special consideration from tourists, who pay large sums to observe them in the wild¹⁹. For the latter, the jaguar's life is valuable and must be preserved, while for the farmers, their existence means harm and their proximity is undesirable.

In contemporary society, this mobility is driven strongly by the media, since, especially in urban areas, most of our coexistence with other animals still happens through what Thompson calls mediated worldliness: the way we interpret the world, especially what is beyond the reach of personal experience, is shaped by the mediation of symbolic forms.

The spatial horizons of our understanding are greatly expanded since they do not have to be physically present at the places where the observed phenomena occur. The extent to which our understanding of the world has been shaped by media products today is so profound that when we travel the world to further places as visitors or tourists, our experience is often preceded by a set of images and expectations acquired through our prolonged exposure to media products²⁰.

This is also true for the kind of consideration given to nonhuman animals: the way they are represented in the media determines how they will be seen and treated by humans²¹. In this sphere, journalism contributes to promoting sorts of behavior towards nonhuman animals, which can be either positive or negative in terms of granting rights.

Journalism acts beyond the production of news, of mass consumption of information. It is a vehicle for reinserting the audience into the social universe. We speak, then, of a sociocultural process of production, transmission, and absorption of the facts of everyday life, which act in

¹⁶ Arnold Arluke and others, *Regarding animals*. (Temple University Press, 2022) 233.

¹⁷ (2016) costa susana.

¹⁸ Felipe Sussekind, *O rastro da onça: as relações entre humanos e animais no Pantanal* (Letras, 2014) 54.

¹⁹ Eveline Baptistella, *Animais não humanos e humanos no turismo do pantanal mato-grossense: da representação midiática ao encontro, 2020*, Doctoral dissertation (Doctorate in Contemporary Culture Studies), Contemporary Culture Studies Graduate Program, Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso.

²⁰ John B. Thompson, *A mídia e a modernidade: uma teoria social da mídia* (Vozes, 2011) 61

²¹ Evelilne Baptistella, *A representação dos animais na imprensa: uma proposta de reflexão ética*. *Revista Comunicação, Cultura e Sociedade*, Tangará da Serra, v.8, n.8, p. 3 – 21, 018. Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329629317_A_REPRESENTACAO_DOS_ANIMAIS_NA_IMPrensa_UMA_PROPOSTA_DE_REFLEXAO_ETICA>.

the social construction of reality, as they become shared world experiences²².

This imagination, also constructed by the information obtained through the media contributes to the mobility of nonhuman animals within the sociozoologic scale. Thus, they can be considered in different ways in different social groups, and their classification may fluctuate within the same population. For example, for a long time, giant otters were related to aggressiveness in the Brazilian media due to an episode in the Brasilia Zoo in 1977: a man was killed after jumping into the mustelid habitat to save a child and could not resist the injuries caused by the animals²³. Nowadays, the species is benefiting from a positive representation, which highlights aspects of its social organization that are highly valued in contemporary Westernized societies, such as strong family ties²⁴. Thus, we see that they have moved from the position of “demons” and are now represented as “good” animals.

Based on these reflections, we will analyze the representation of the nonhuman animals inhabiting the Brazilian Pantanal in the coverage of the fires that ravaged the biome between the months of May and October 2020. We investigated where the species were situated on the scale and what the journalistic narratives revealed about the social position occupied by these animals in the contemporary imagination. After all, how were they portrayed by the media, and how can this influence the consideration given to certain nonhuman animals?

3 Methodology and Theoretical Framework

Besides the sociozoological scale theory, this research is based on the theoretical framework and the interdisciplinary approach of Critical Animal Studies²⁵ or Human-Animal Studies²⁶, especially Critical Animal and Media Studies²⁷. The critical approach

²² Luiz Gonzaga Motta and Others, ‘Notícia e construção de sentidos: análise da narrativa jornalística’ (2004) *Revista Brasileira de Ciências da Comunicação* 27 (2) 33, <<http://portcom.intercom.org.br/revistas/index.php/revistaintercom/article/view/1067>> accessed on 24 January 2022.

²³ Luis Vidigal, *Morte de sargento que salvou menino no Zoo completa 40 anos* (Correio Brasiliense, 31 August 2017) <https://www.correiobrasiliense.com.br/app/noticia/cidades/2017/08/31/interna_cidadesdf.622536/morte-de-sargento-que-salvou-menino-no-zoo-completa-40-anos.shtml> accessed on 05 May 2020.

²⁴ Eveline Baptistella, *Animais não humanos e humanos no turismo do pantanal mato-grossense: da representação midiática ao encontro, 2020*, Doctoral dissertation (Doctorate in Contemporary Culture Studies), Contemporary Culture Studies Graduate Program, Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso.

²⁵ Paul Waldau, *Animal studies: an introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁶ Margo DeMello, *Animals and Society: an introduction to human-animal studies* (Columbia University Press, 2021); Gary Francione and Anna Charlton, *Coma com consciência: uma análise sobre a moralidade do consumo de animais* (Exempla Press, 2015); Melanie Joy, *Porque amamos cachorros, comemos porcos e vestimos vacas: uma introdução ao carnismo: o sistema de crenças que nos faz comer alguns animais e outros não* (Cultrix, 2014).

²⁷ Nuria Almiron and Matthew Cole, ‘The convergence of two critical approaches’ in Nuria Almiron, N, Matthew Cole and Carrie Freeman (eds), *Critical animal and media studies*: Communication for nonhuman animal advocacy (Routledge 2016); Eveline Baptistella, ‘A representação dos animais na imprensa: uma proposta de reflexão ética’ (2018) 8 (8) *Revista Comunicação, Cultura e Sociedade* <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329629317_A_REPRESENTACAO_DOS_ANIMAIS_NA_IMPRENSA_UMA_PROPOSTA_DE_REFLEXAO_ETICA> accessed on 14 November 2022; Debra Merskin, *Seeing Species: Re-presentations of Animals in Media & Popular Culture* (Peter Lang Inc, 2018).

seeks to include the voices of human and nonhuman actors in the research and has a direct link with activism. It is a knowledge field where academic work has the premise to discuss and denounce animal suffering and maltreatment²⁸. Various studies have identified the links between media depiction and violence toward other species, highlighting the importance of an ethical turn in this domain²⁹.

In this research, we adopted the content analysis methodology. This method was chosen because it consists of a model for selecting, systematizing, and treating data that allows us to reflect on cultural and social behaviors regarding animals at a given moment³⁰.

Analysts take advantage of the processing of the messages they manipulate to *infer* (logically deduce) knowledge about the sender of the message or its medium, for example. Like a detective, the analyst works with *indexes* carefully highlighted by more or less complex procedures³¹.

The sample was selected after a period of floating reading, seen as the first contact with the object of study³². We did that by reading the news about Pantanal on the leading Brazilian news websites between July and September 2020, collecting initial considerations about the theme. That allowed us to get to know the object to the point of being invaded by impressions and orientations³³, which helped the rise of hypotheses about the subject and build the research goals.

Then, using the rules of exhaustiveness, representativeness, homogeneity, and relevance³⁴, we chose the portals G1 and UOL for analysis. G1 is the news website of the most extensive media conglomerate in the country, the Globo Organization - which holds the most prominent Brazilian broadcast network, a radio network, a streaming service, a newspaper, several magazine titles, and a publishing house. The company tends to support neoliberal policies, but this did not happen with Jair Bolsonaro, president of Brazil from 2019 to 2022, an extreme right-wing politician. UOL is one of the most-read websites in the country and part of a conglomerate that has a newspaper, a streaming service, an online bank, and a postal service. It usually supports neoliberalism as well but has also taken a stand against Bolsonaro's term of office. Brazil's former president was openly contrary to the ecological agenda and a climate change denier. More than this, he was aggressive towards journalists and usually criticized the traditional media, supporting and spreading fake news, especially about COVID-19 and its vaccines. Both media conglomerates marked their position against these practices and beliefs. So, it was less likely that they would publish material with misinformation or that they had some hidden agenda to endorse government practices against the environment.

Moreover, we chose these two websites because they have ethical guidelines, and their reporters have at least an undergraduate degree. Likewise, both websites

²⁸ Nuria Almiron, N, Matthew Cole and Carrie Freeman, *Critical animal and media studies: communication for nonhuman animal advocacy* (Routledge 2016).

²⁹ Eveline Baptistella, *A representação dos animais na imprensa: uma proposta de reflexão ética*. *Revista Comunicação, Cultura e Sociedade*, Tangará da Serra, v.8, n.8, p. 3 – 21, 2018. Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329629317_A_REPRESENTACAO_DOS_ANIMAIS_NA_IMPrensa_UMA_PROPOSTA_DE_REFLEXAO_ETICA>.

³⁰ Lawrence Bardin, *Análise de conteúdo* (70, 2015).

³¹ *Ibid* 45.

³² *Ibid* 45.

³³ *Ibid*.

³⁴ *Ibid*.

were easy to track down and had journalists working in the field, following what was happening in Pantanal. It is worth noticing that because many websites just copy the news from other vehicles.

Daily monitoring was performed from September 14 to October 14, 2020. Even though the fires began at least in June, it was our choice to cover the period above because it was when all of the national media started covering the situation in the wetland. The commotion started on Sunday, the 13th, when “Fantastico,” a famous news show, broadcasted a report about the fires in Pantanal.

We had a total sample of 175 news reports analyzed. G1 had published 125 reports about it, while UOL was responsible for 50 news. After reading all the articles in full, we inserted the information obtained in a table³⁵ with six categories: portal, headline, section, date, most used terms, and link. We searched for news that mentions nonhuman animals in the context of the fires and the approach journalists used to represent nonhuman animals. The texts were categorized and classified according to the content released, mentioning nonhuman animals and if they were depicted as “good” or “bad”, according to the sociozoologic scale. The criteria to be placed in the “good” category was to be depicted not only as a “pet” or a “tool”, but also as somehow submissive or submitted to humans. The “bad” animal criteria followed the “vermin”, “freak,” and “demons” created by Arkule et al. (2022)³⁶, and we searched for depictions that somehow highlight the defiant behavior that is part of this concept.

4 Results/Analysis

In the media, nonhuman animals are no longer in the exclusive domain of the environment section and appear in topics ranging from health to celebrities³⁷. So, in the present analysis, we tried to verify in which section the news pieces about nonhuman animals were placed. For example, were the nonhuman animals part of the news in the behavior or in the economics sections? We also wanted to check how they were depicted according to the sociozoological scale. By that, we can verify if nonhuman animals are regarded merely as commodities or depicted as people with rights and agency³⁸.

Among the 175 articles analyzed, 87 mentioned nonhuman animals, whereas 88 focused on the biome and its situation. In other words, the number of news reports addressing problems with nonhuman animals was almost the same as those addressing fires with subjects linked to different editorials, such as economics and politics. Most of the reports that addressed the situation of nonhuman animals orbited around the survival conditions of the species and were linked to ecological issues, such as extinction and loss of habitats. Nevertheless, a tiny part of the sample was in the ecological section. The most significant sample piece was published without editorial tags and connected with the daily news coverage.

Regarding the Pantanal animals, 54 articles used general terms such as “fauna”, “other species”, “small animals,” and dead animal (Chart 1). Only a few species were treated individually and have received greater prominence. Even when there was a

³⁵ Table available at:

<<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1RHPegbPCbZv9YJZc7on4j3BVGStO6v42TAjLfWfCna4/e dit?usp=sharing>>.

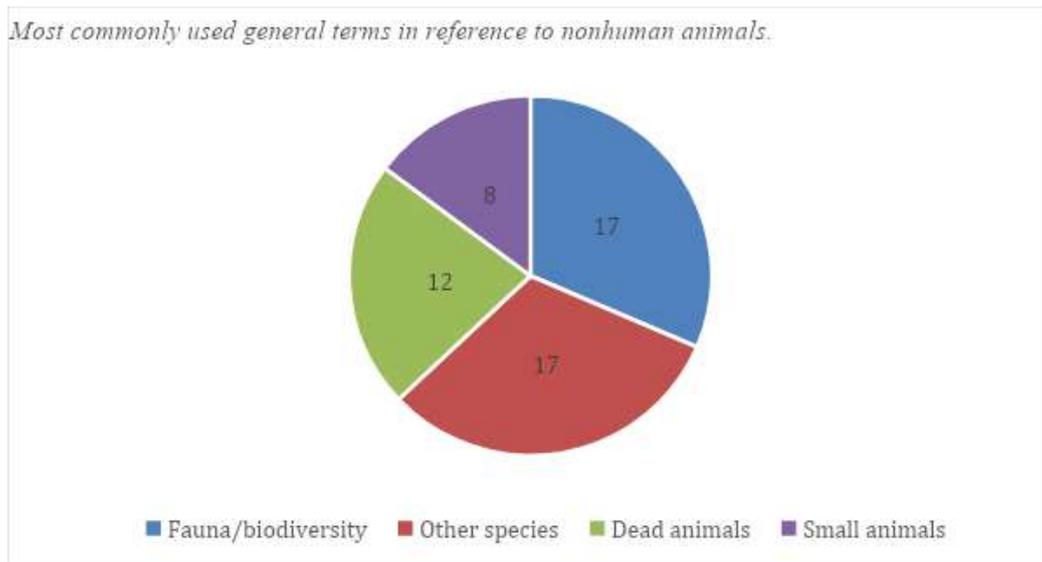
³⁶ Arnold Arluke and others, *Regarding animals*. (Temple University Press, 2022) 233.

³⁷ Eveline Baptistella and Juliana Abonizio, ‘*A relação homem X animal na mídia: uma análise de editorias especializadas*’ (2015), Encontro Nacional de Pesquisadores em Jornalismo Ambiental, 3.

³⁸ Bruno Latour, *Jamais formos modernos: ensaio de antropologia simétrica* (Editora 34, 2001).

general approach, reports mainly highlighted the suffering of nonhuman animals. Records of charred bodies or dead animals from smoke poisoning were widely explored. The use of images of the rescued animals, in which most had burns or severe injuries, was another highlight of the news. The reports emphasized the pain, hunger, and thirst of nonhuman animals. Human sources were interviewed to speak about the animals' suffering. For example, Cristina Gianni, founder of the NEX Institute, stated to G1: “The burns on their paws, it is easy for us to put ourselves in their place and imagine the pain of stepping on hot coals.”

Chart 1



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

In the field, veterinarians, firefighters, and volunteers gave names to some rescued nonhuman animals. The press quickly focused on these animals, and the reports highlighted their personality traits, expressing the individuality of each one. At UOL, images of nonhuman animal suffering had a “trigger warning” (Figure 1), alerting the reader at the beginning of each report of possible discomfort caused by seeing the images of injured animals. A resource often used in articles that deal with violence against humans. In contrast, at G1, this alert was not displayed (Figure 2).

Figure 1

Alert used by UOL to prepare the reader for the images of injured or dead animals throughout the text.

Esta reportagem tem imagens de animais feridos que podem ser incômodas para algumas pessoas.

Source: UOL Notícias.

Figure 2

Image of a jaguar with severe burns on its paws, released by G1, without a warning to the reader.



Cuidador mostra queimaduras nas patas de uma onça-pintada adulta chamada Amanaci sofrida após um incêndio no Pantanal, enquanto o animal passava por tratamento com células-tronco, na ONG Instituto Nex, em Corumbá de Goiás — Foto: Ueslei Marcelino/Reuters

Source: G1 — Portal de Notícias.

Wild animals were depicted as victims not only because of the fires but also because of human actions. On the other hand, several pieces featured the relationship between human volunteers and nonhuman animals, pointing to an emotional bond between the victims and the humans who decided to help them.

The sample had 15 species mentioned (Table 1), particularly emphasizing the jaguar. The giant feline was a highlight in 25 News reports. Among wild animals, anteaters also stood out and ranked third in the number of times mentioned in the media. Due to their ability to generate significant public interest, these species received increased coverage. Both species are in the list of Pantanal flagship species³⁹.

In some articles, the condition of tourist attraction was outlined, and the two species were named the “postcards of the Pantanal” — some reports even stated that these animals were the most “coveted” by the tourists that frequented the region. The extinction risk was another criterion highly quoted: species considered endangered or vulnerable were more valued in the narratives.

Throughout the reports analyzed, when the subject extended to other species than the jaguar and the anteaters, we observed the use of vague terms such as “fauna,” “other animals,” “small animals,” and “other species.” This use of words demonstrated the attribution of certain inferiority to the unnamed animals if compared to the “postcards of the Pantanal” - as if humans' predilection for certain species made others invisible.

Still, all the wild species affected by the fires in the Brazilian Pantanal were portrayed as victims, animals that deserved not only sympathy but also demanded human protection.

³⁹ Eveline Baptistella, *Animais não humanos e humanos no turismo do pantanal mato-grossense: da representação midiática ao encontro*, 2020, Doctoral dissertation (Doctorate in Contemporary Culture Studies), Contemporary Culture Studies Graduate Program, Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso.

Table 1*Nonhuman animals mentioned throughout the articles.*

Nonhuman animals	Number of mentions
"Jaguar"	25
Bovines ("Livestock"; "Cattle"; "Production animals"; "Targeted cattle grazing")	10
"Anteater"	9
"Alligator" ("Dead alligator"; "Charred alligator")	8
"Fish"; ("Tuvira"; "Fish mass mortality"; "Tilapia skin")	7
"Deer"	6
"Blue Macaw"	5
"Snakes"	5
"Tapirs"	4
"Tortoises"	4
"Monkeys" ("Spider monkey"; "Capuchin monkeys")	4
"Frogs"	3
"Toucans"	2
"Tuiuiú"	2
"Otters" ("Little otters")	1

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Bovines – regarded as “good animals” for being confined to the imposed role of a food product – failed to prove worthy of the same commotion, and the images of the charred bovines were not given the same prominence or similar consideration in the journalistic discourse. Despite being the animal with the second highest number of mentions, their suffering was hardly mentioned in the news and little discussed.

Bovines have mainly emerged as a target of controversy due to the position of federal authorities advocating what has become known as the “firefighting cattle” theory (Table 2). Some reports highlighted the speech of the Minister of Agriculture, Tereza Cristina, in a Public Hearing in the Senate, that a wider presence of cows in the biome would reduce fires because the animals would have the role of reducing biomass. Arnildo Pott, currently a researcher at the Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation (Embrapa) and creator of the term “firefighting cattle” – a type of targeted cattle grazing – in the 1980s, says that his research was based on small properties in the Pantanal, with low-scale livestock production and low productivity. It is the opposite of what currently happens in the Brazilian agribusiness since bovine breeding

has increased significantly in recent years in the Pantanal⁴⁰. According to the National Center for Monitoring and Early Warning of Natural Disasters (Cemaden)⁴¹, the Pantanal has been facing the worst drought in the last 60 years. The dry climate and the arson fires are the main reasons for the disaster in the biome.

Table 2

Terms used to refer to bovines.

Terms in the news reports	
-	"Firefighting cattle"
-	"Fire reducing cattle"
-	"Cattle that prevents fire spreading"
-	"Combat cattle"
-	"Production animal"
-	"Fire victim (semi-pulled horn)"
-	"Dead cattle"

Source: Elaborated by the author.

Another species received a utilitarian treatment in the news: the fish (Table 3). Most articles mentioned fish as food for other animals. Only two species were named in the seven news reports where fish were in the spotlight: tuvira and tilapia. The latter is not a local species, but its medicinal purpose was featured since its skin was used to treat burns on animals such as the jaguar and the giant anteater. Tuvira appears as food offered by volunteers to mitigate the hunger of nonhuman animals. In this case, mentions of fish mass mortality only highlighted that such a fact compromises the survival of various species that feed on these animals.

⁴⁰ Cleyton Vilarino, *Conceito do 'boi bombeiro' está sendo distorcido, diz pesquisador que criou o termo* (Revista Globo Rural, 16 October 2020) <<https://revistagloborural.globo.com/Noticias/Sustentabilidade/noticia/2020/10/conceito-do-boi-bombeiro-esta-sendo-distorcido-diz-pesquisador-que-criou-o-termo.html>> accessed on 27 November 2020.

⁴¹ Cemaden, *Seca do Pantanal é a mais intensa dos últimos 60 anos, estimam pesquisadores do Cemaden* (Cemaden, 18 August 2020) <<http://www2.cemaden.gov.br/seca-do-pantanal-e-a-mais-intensa-dos-ultimos-60-anos-estimam-pesquisadores-do-cemaden/>> accessed on 9 September 2020.

Table 3

Terms used to refer to fish.

Terms in the news reports
- "Dead fish"
- "Tuvira as food for otters"
- "Fish carcass"
- "Food for tuiuiús"
- "Seed-dispersing fish"
- "Fish mass mortality"
- "Piracema"
- "Tilapia Skin"
- "Burn Treatment"
- "Skin discarded by fish farming"

Source: Elaborated by the author.

Despite Pantanal's having human communities, there was no mention of pets. In the reports analyzed, we see that the characterization of human animals and their relations with other species is set in a duality. On the one hand, the news positively characterized humans mobilized to relieve, rescue, and treat nonhuman animals. On the other hand, we see the human being as the tormentor, responsible for the fires, or negligent about the protection that the biome demands. In this case, the negative representation fell on the large landowners, pointed out as the main suspects of the fires in several reports, and on the government leaders, who would be failing to fulfill their role in terms of environmental preservation.

5 Final Remarks

Arluke and others⁴² point out that the meanings attributed to nonhuman animals vary in our society because they are social constructions. The media is part of this process because "(...) as a social institution whose influence is barely rivaled by family, religion, or education, the mass media provide a curriculum, a way of learning about ourselves and the world"⁴³. Most of us will never have the chance to meet a jaguar, so we tend to form our opinion about them based on the information the media provides. Thompson⁴⁴ calls this process mediated worldliness, meaning that part of our life experience is built through media products, such as movies, documentaries, and news reports. So, the nonhuman animal depiction largely influences how humans behave towards other animals⁴⁵. For example, Brazil had an outbreak of yellow fever in 2016. As the press failed to explain the monkeys' role in the disease cycle, many simians were violently killed all over the country because humans were afraid of them⁴⁶. Especially to nonhuman animals, being depicted as "good" or "bad" is a matter of life or death.

⁴² Arnold Arluke and others, *Regarding animals*. (Temple University Press, 2022) 7.

⁴³ Freeman and Merskin, 2017, p. 208).

⁴⁴ John B. Thompson, *A mídia e a modernidade: uma teoria social da mídia* (Vozes, 2011) 61.

⁴⁵ Eveline Baptistella, *A representação dos animais na imprensa: uma proposta de reflexão ética*. *Revista Comunicação, Cultura e Sociedade*, Tangará da Serra, v.8, n.8, p. 3 – 21, 018. Available in: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329629317_A_REPRESENTACAO_DOS_ANIMAIS_NA_IMPRENSA_UMA_PROPOSTA_DE_REFLEXAO_ETICA>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

In the present work, we verified that wild animals were mainly portrayed as “good animals.” In the context of the sociozoologic scale, the jaguar, traditionally classified as a “demon” for being an animal that does not submit to human control, appears in a new light, portrayed as a victim. Ocelots, caimans, and other species that would be in this sphere are represented in the same situation. Despite being neither domesticated nor exploited for human purposes, these animals still appear as the target of our dominance. A control against which they cannot rebel since the anthropic action unequivocally affects their survival conditions.

If there are conflicts between human and nonhuman animals in the region — primarily arising from the predation of farmed animals — there is no mention of such species in the sphere of “bad animals” in the reports. In addition, being positioned as a charismatic species in tourism reinforces the idea that such individuals do not pose a risk and coexist peacefully with humans. A process called “petification” of wild species, which are now represented as close to domesticated animals⁴⁷. For example, otters were called “little otters” in a specific news report. We can also mention the practice of naming injured animals, which resembles how humans treat their pets. One specific Jaguar was named “Ousado” (bold in English) and became so famous that he was the subject of various reports even one year and a half after the fire. Other rescued jaguars did not have the same media attention.

They are “good” because they are victims of our actions and have become so vulnerable that they depend on our help to survive the consequences of the fires. However, we still have clear hierarchies within that spectrum. Flagship species are the most explored in the reports not only because of their privileged status in the social imagination but also because they are considered endangered, which increases their value. The media also displayed these animals as beings with personality and consciousness, struggling for their lives. Even their suffering was considered a sensitive matter for UOL and tagged with a trigger warning.

Thus, broader ecological issues found resonance in these reports, but we also observed a view of nonhuman animals as individuals outside of a utilitarian representation. That is, as beings whose existence has an intrinsic value, a term proposed by Godfrey-Smith⁴⁸. On the other hand, bovines and fish, as animals exploited/used for food production, have their suffering almost completely ignored and have their lives treated from a utilitarian viewpoint. These two species were positioned as “tools” in the domain of the “good animals.” The sample revealed fish regarded as food or medicine. Some may say that their suffering may be hard to depict because they live underwater, but by that moment, there was not only the fire but also a severe drought that highly impacted their habitats.

Although cows are more visible, the press still fails to recognize their individuality and right to a dignified life. The bovines were commodified and mentioned chiefly in the economics section, often treated as “economic losses.” Their suffering was little discussed, and even the federal government quoted distorted theories (the firefighting cattle) that placed cows as mere tools. Despite the reservations about this theory in the reports, such discourse highlighted the asymmetry in the social position of nonhuman animals. Going through the same problems derived from fires wild species faced, farmed animals did not have their

⁴⁷ Eveline Baptistella, *Animais não humanos e humanos no turismo do pantanal mato-grossense: da representação midiática ao encontro*, 2020, Doctoral dissertation (Doctorate in Contemporary Culture Studies), Contemporary Culture Studies Graduate Program, Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso.

⁴⁸ William Godfrey-Smith, *The value of wilderness* (1979), *Environmental Ethics* 309.

suffering considered in the same way, and only a utilitarian point of view prevailed about them.

Then, we see a scenario in which there are advances in representing wild animals, especially because their right to live and have a good life was highlighted. However, asymmetries and hierarchies remain, as seen in the treatment given to fish and bovines. These animals still lack a media representation that positions them outside the spectrum of tools, food, or other products.

Francione and Charlton⁴⁹ state that our society suffers from moral schizophrenia. According to them, despite recognizing that it is wrong to impose suffering on nonhuman animals, people still maintain practices that harm other species. In contrast, Joy⁵⁰ uses the term psychic numbing for the mechanism that leads people to like animals and eat meat. Our sample reflects these moral contradictions, as some animals are better regarded than others. It is also a reminder of how economic issues tend to mingle in the news discourse⁵¹. Charismatic species such as jaguars are now in the “good animals” sphere also because they are “workers” cooperating with tourism activities⁵². In turn, the bovines are mammals, just like the jaguars. However, as they live and die only to be exploited by humans, news that features their feelings would raise discomfort and might even promote aggressive responses from society. More than this, we cannot forget that reporters are also part of a carnist culture and, probably, most of them see cows only as products and jaguars as magnificent animals that will perish due to our irresponsible behavior towards other forms of life.

Nevertheless, our analysis showed that some important topics to the animal rights movement were addressed, as wild animals were depicted as persons with the right and the will to live. As an ironic note, the humans were the ones placed in the “bad animals” field. Given that, it is urgent to acknowledge that the press influences our cultural patterns and enhances works to promote ethical guidelines in the media representation of other animals. That is a call and mission not only for Critical Animal and Media Studies researchers but to all advocates of the animal rights plea.

⁴⁹ Gary Francione and Anna Charlton, *Coma com consciência: uma análise sobre a moralidade do consumo de animais* (Exempla Press, 2015) 37.

⁵⁰ Melanie Joy, *Porque amamos cachorros, comemos porcos e vestimos vacas: uma introdução ao carnismo: o sistema de crenças que nos faz comer alguns animais e outros não* (Cultrix, 2014) 41.

⁵¹ Nuria Almiron and Matthew Cole, ‘The convergence of two critical approaches’ in Nuria Almiron, N, Matthew Cole and Carrie Freeman (eds), *Critical animal and media studies: communication for nonhuman animal advocacy* (Routledge, 2016).

⁵² Eveline Baptistella, *Animais não humanos e humanos no turismo do pantanal mato-grossense: da representação midiática ao encontro, 2020*, Doctoral dissertation (Doctorate in Contemporary Culture Studies), Contemporary Culture Studies Graduate Program, Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso.