



# MARK CARWARDINE

## WILD THOUGHTS

Conservationists tend to talk (and think) about the bigger picture – population numbers and trends, endangered species, habitat destruction and so on. It can be a rather distant way of looking at the natural world, but it doesn't mean we don't care about individual animals. Far from it – few conservationists I know feel anything but passion about the welfare of every creature, endangered or not.

I've probably seen more than my fair share of cruelty and animal suffering over the years. Pilot whales being slaughtered in the Faroe Islands, dolphins hunted in Peru, seal pups clubbed to death in Canada, bears held captive for their bile in Vietnam – these and many other horrors will haunt me for the rest of my life. But a single ghastly news story prompted me to see the smaller picture and to think about individual animals more acutely than I have for a while.

A Costa Rican artist apparently paid some children to catch a stray dog, which he then tied to the wall of an art gallery in Nicaragua.

The dog, which was named Nativity, was left without food or water to be viewed as a 'work of art' by the gallery's many visitors until it died of starvation. It doesn't get more shocking and disgraceful than that. The artist claims that he was trying to illustrate a point – that tens of thousands of stray dogs starve and die each year in the streets of his home city of San José in Costa Rica, and no one pays them a second thought. But he forgets that most people are already quite aware that dogs are routinely abused, abandoned, tortured, poisoned and starved in many parts of the world. And in no way would the rest of us consider the process art – or worthy of art. Already, more people are getting upset about this than any number of scare stories concerning population numbers and trends, endangered species or habitat destruction. And it's not necessarily a bad thing. We may struggle with the sheer scale of the bigger picture, but concern for one pitiful dog at least shows that we still care.

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, author and tv presenter.



**Stray dog: not a work of art, wherever it is.**

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