ISSN 2624-9081 • DOI 10.26034/roadsides-202100604

Electric Refuge:
The Shock of Animal Infrastructure in Jordan

Kate McClellan

In 2017, a young male lion named Kahraba was part of a contingent of wild animals rescued from an abandoned, war-ravaged zoo in Aleppo, Syria, and transported to Al Ma'wa, a new animal sanctuary in the hills of northern Jordan.[1] Billed as the first of its kind in the Middle East and as an alternative to zoos, the main goal of this sanctuary – a 110-hectare facility with sprawling animal enclosures – is to rehabilitate and protect the thirty-plus wild animals in its care.

Kahraba, whose name in Arabic means 'Electricity', was named by Yusef, an animal handler from a nearby village. Yusef was there when Kahraba was introduced to his new enclosure at Al Ma'wa, a much larger, more naturalistic space than he had ever known. As Yusef tells it, Kahraba became so crazy – in ecstasy almost – when he saw the trees, grass and spaciousness of his new home that he repeatedly ran into the tall, electrified fence surrounding his enclosure, despite the shocks he received over and over. Some might read Kahraba's behavior as a desperate bid to escape captivity, but Yusef and others at Al Ma'wa instead stress the silliness and almost cuteness of the incident; in their reading, Kahraba is not a victim but, as the sanctuary's website describes him, a "calm, happy-go-lucky lion" who has been given a second chance

at life. Though he no longer touches the electric fence, his name has stuck, and his story at Al Ma'wa has become one that, via electricity, shifted from immense trauma to exuberant happiness.

Kahraba ('Electricity'), a lion rescued from an abandoned zoo in Aleppo, Syria, resting in his enclosure at Al Ma'wa, Jordan.
Photo: courtesy of Saif al-Rawashdeh.

How does the violence of electric shock become a story of redemption and care? Here, I use Kahraba's story to think through the political and sensory aspects of infrastructural experience at Al Ma'wa. Scholars have shown that infrastructure is always political (Anand, Gupta and Appel 2018) and always mediated by sensory experience (Schwenkel 2015); and a growing body of literature aims to decenter the human in infrastructural studies by examining the relationships between infrastructures and the ecologies – human and nonhuman – that surround them (Krieg, Barua and Fisher 2020). Drawing on these insights, I consider how the infrastructure of electric fencing at Al Ma'wa is politically potent because of, not despite, the fact that its intended subjects are nonhuman. I suggest that it is precisely the guesswork involved in understanding how animals sense, feel and think about electric infrastructure that makes electricity a useful tool at Al Ma'wa. The sensation that different animals feel when touching an electrified fence; the ability of animals to sense electricity through sound, sight, touch and smell; the meaning-making process of learning through shock that their enclosures are unbreachable – these experiences are to a large extent unknown by humans. Animal sensations of electric infrastructure are thus easily interpreted and

narrativized to particular ends; as told by Al Ma'wa, Kahraba's story is happy rather than sad, and he feels shock rather than pain.[2]

On a 2019 tour I took of Al Ma'wa, Kahraba was resting in the shade of a tree near Halab and Dana, the other lions in his pride, looking content as he drifted in and out of sleep. Despite being situated about six feet from the electric fence, he gave no indication that he would touch it. He had, in the interpretation of Yusef and others at Al Ma'wa, learned to sense both the danger and the security of living in his electrified refuge. Like Kahraba's enclosure, all the living spaces for Al Ma'wa's animals are surrounded by tall fences comprising double layers of wiring: the first, inner fence consists of horizontal rungs of wire, about a foot and a half apart; the second, outer layer is a chain-linked fence held together by green-painted posts and bars. The fences are designed to reflect the size, ability and characteristics of the animals enclosed within: hyenas, who are excellent diggers but do not jump or climb very well, have the shortest fences, whereas tigers, who are expert jumpers and climbers, have the tallest.[3] Electricity is, literally and figuratively, what gives these fences their power: both layers of fence are electrified but operate on different electrical systems and have separate back-up generators, ensuring that at least one electric barrier would still be working should the power fail on the other.

The electric fencing demands attention from humans and animals alike. As a visitor, one necessarily has to engage with the fences that enclose the animals' spaces: remember to not touch them, take photographs through the small openings in the chain links, and contend with the sounds and smells of the generators that run if there is a temporary

Electric fencing mediates human and animal experiences at Al Ma'wa: visitors' photographs often contain visible reminders of the animals' captivity; and, within some enclosures, even trees are surrounded by electric fencing.
Photos: Kate McClellan, 2019.

problem with the main power supply. They are also always sensorially, materially and semiotically present for the (captive) animals who must live within them. They mark the boundaries of the animals' new homes and, like the infrastructural habitus Barua (2021) describes, they thus define how and where the animals inhabit their worlds. In some cases, the fences even infiltrate some of the features inside the animals' homes; in the tiger enclosure, for instance, trees close to the perimeter are also surrounded by electric fencing to prevent the tigers from using them to climb out.

Unlike human visitors at Al Ma'wa, who are repeatedly advised by staff and signage not to touch the electric fences, the animals at the refuge must tactilely engage with their electrified enclosure – at least initially – so that they associate the shocks with their boundary fences. This takes place through a kind of sensory pedagogy, or what one might call sensory conditioning, in which animals are taught how to touch and ultimately avoid the electricity that surrounds them.

"Animals are intelligent," Yusef said. "They try as much as possible to avoid things that harm them. If an animal is hurt by a wire, then it knows that this wire has electricity and it will stay far away."[4] To facilitate this sensory training, the voltage of the fences' electricity is set to a level that, as Yusef explained, is "just to let the animal feel that there is something there." After initially touching and becoming familiar with the fencing, the animals are conditioned to *not touch*. What remains, then, is a longer lasting, remembered sensation, framed by other sensory reminders of electricity (the sounds of the generators, the smell of electric discharge) that may be meaningful to the animals but that are not marked by the shock of tactile engagement.

The staff I spoke with were reluctant to label the sensation of shock as painful, but rather characterized it as shocking, surprising and enough to teach the animals that they cannot leave. Drawing on his own personal experience of touching the electrified fencing, Sami, another animal handler, took care to distinguish the animals' experience of shock from the painful shocks humans might be familiar with:

> *Do the animals feel pain? When I do maintenance on these wires, I might touch them by mistake… [But] the electrical system we have here is completely different from the system we have at home, [which]… has very strong electricity: if you touch the electricity, it will pull you. What we have here is completely the opposite. When it is touched … there will be a shock, but it pushes the animal away and disconnects at the same time.*

Sami thus reads the shocks the animals receive as a different kind of electric sensation than that which humans experience – a sensation interpreted as uncomfortable rather than painful.[5] But he is still uncertain: "Do the animals feel pain?"

This uncertainty about what it is like for animals to sense electricity – to hear, feel, touch and know its potentials – is in this way politically useful, as it opens up the narrativization of animal lives to a range of options. Kahraba's experience of electricity – and, indeed, Kahraba himself – is thus characterized as happy-go-lucky and free, rather than sad and captive; and Al Ma'wa is not a site of domination and captivity, but rather a place of humane care. These are both narratives that, based on a particular reading

of Al Ma'wa's animals' experiences, support the general ethos of animal rescue work more broadly (Abrell 2021). In this sense, infrastructure itself is a potent storytelling tool used to make meaning for humans and animals alike: it is not only in how beings interact with infrastructure – materially, discursively, sensorially – but also in how those interactions are then interpreted, narrated and used, that infrastructures become powerful mechanisms of both control and resistance.

Notes:

[1] The research at Al Ma'wa took place in 2014 and 2019. Thanks to Helen Ayoub for additional research assistance.

[2] Al Ma'wa is not unique in this regard: the use of electric fences is standard practice in zoos, nature reserves and animal sanctuaries, and is widely viewed as a humane way to control animal movement.

[3] See Barua (2021) and Larkin (2018) for more on infrastructural design.

[4] See, for instance, Whiting 2016, for a review of the use of electric "pain technologies" in controlling animal behavior.

[5] Jane Desmond's discussion of the uncertainty in interpreting bulls' experiences of electrical stimulation (2016: 1–4) and Kay Milton's (2005) notion of egomorphism, which theorizes how humans interpret animal feelings on a person-based level, are both useful here.

References

Abrell, Elan. 2021. *Saving Animals: Multispecies Ecologies of Rescue and Care*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Appel, Hannah, Nikhil Anand and Akhil Gupta. 2018. "Introduction." In *The Promise of Infrastructure*, edited by Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta and Hannah Appel, 1–40. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Barua, Maan. 2021. "Infrastructure and Non-human Life: A Wider Ontology." Pro*gress in Human Geography*. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132521991220

Desmond, Jane C. 2016. *Displaying Death and Animating Life: Human-Animal Relations in Art, Science, and Everyday Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Krieg, Lisa, Maan Barua and Josh Fisher. 2020. "Ecologizing Infrastructure: Infrastructural Ecologies." *Society & Space*. https://www.societyandspace.org/forums/ecologizing-infrastructure-infrastructural-ecologies

Larkin, Brian. 2018. "Promising Forms: The Political Aesthetics of Infrastructure." In *The Promise of Infrastructure*, edited by Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta, and Hannah Appel, 175–202. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Milton, Kay. 2005. "Anthropomorphism or Egomorphism? The Perception of Non-human Persons by Human Ones." In *Animals in Person: Cultural Perspectives on Human–Animal Intimacy*, edited by John Knight, 255–71. New York: Berg.

Schwenkel, Christina. 2015. "Sense." *Theorizing the Contemporary: Fieldsights*. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/sense

Whiting, Terry L. 2016. "Pain in Human and Non-human Animals Caused by Electricity." *The Canadian Veterinary Journal* 57 (8): 883–86.

Cite as: McClellan, Kate. 2021. "Electric Refuge: The Shock of Animal Infrastructure in Jordan." *Roadsides* 6: 24-29. https://doi.org/10.26034/roadsides-202100604

Author:

Kate McClellan is Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology and Middle Eastern Cultures at Mississippi State University. Her research interests include human–animal relations, animal labor and the politics of care on both local and global scales. Ethnographic work in Jordan forms the basis for her current book project, *If We Were Animals: Human–Animal Care and Comparison in Jordan*, which explores the entanglement of human and animal care in social projects designed to improve human and animal lives together. Recent publications examine how animal welfare ethics shape colonial and postcolonial forms of life. Kate is also working on a project on the politics of Islamic environmental ethics that inform the revival of the *hima* system of communal land-use across the Middle East and beyond.

Roadsides is a diamond Open Access journal designated to be a forum devoted to exploring the social, cultural and political life of infrastructure.

roadsides.net
editor@roadsides.net
@road_sides
@roadsides_journal

Collection no. 006 was edited by: Christina Schwenkel
Managing editor: Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi
Copyediting: David Hawkins
Layout: Chantal Hinni and Antoni Kwiatkowski

ISSN 2624-9081

University of Zurich[UZH]
Swiss National Science Foundation
UNI FR
UNIVERSITÉ DE FRIBOURG
UNIVERSITÄT FREIBURG