

Healing Animals With Plants and Helping See Pets in a Different Light

A Special Interview With Dr. Zach Scheurich

By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Dr. Karen Becker:

Hi, I'm Dr. Karen Becker and I'm very excited that today Briana has nominated Dr. Zachary Scheurich, and he's joining me today. He is the recipient of a Game Changer award and he's taking time out of his busy schedule as an integrative veterinarian to join me right now. So, welcome Dr. Zach, and congratulations on your Game Changer award.

Dr. Zachary Scheurich:

Thank you, Karen. I appreciate being here today [inaudible 00:00:23].

Dr. Karen Becker:

It's so wonderful that you are going to share with our listeners, readers and viewers a little bit more about your work as a holistic veterinarian. And I know that you do a lot with herbs, and I know that you actually use many different integrative modalities in your practice, but for people that aren't familiar with you or your practice or even how you became an integrative veterinarian, would you back up and walk us through your desire to become a veterinarian and then your interest in becoming an integrative veterinarian? How did that come about?

Dr. Zachary Scheurich:

Yeah. So yeah, probably most people don't know me. I'm a really small guy here in Arkansas in terms of my client base and platform. So, I started out planning on doing wildlife. I wanted to go into wildlife biology and decided to go ahead to go to vet school, wanted to be a wildlife vet. And through the course of vet school, I was tracking exotic animals. And through the course of vet school, I decided that I didn't want to go into wildlife, but I had a lot of experience with that, kind of defaulted into just private practice and dogs and cats, for the most part. But where I went in Washington after school, there wasn't a lot of people that saw exotic animals. So, I ended up seeing a fair amount of exotic animals, having had experience with wildlife and kind of tracking that way through school. But [I] knew that I didn't really want to do just the general private practice. I was kind of looking for what else I may want to kind of get into.

Eventually, I had kind of the idea of nonprofit work, but generally wasn't sure where to go. I'm a very nature-oriented sort of person, and so over the course of being outside learning about plants, the use of plants – there's this idea in exotic animal medicine that when someone comes in with a problem, there's something wrong with say a bird or especially reptiles or amphibians, that there's some sort of husbandry issue and you just have to figure out what's going wrong, what is happening either with the setup – most people often get those exotic animals without really knowing what to do. So, they often don't know how to keep them or feed them appropriately. So, it's like this investigation or mystery. What's going on with the husbandry?

So, there was this point that I started to recognize that was happening a lot of the times with dogs and cats too. A lot of pets, a lot of animals, there's often something we can find out that'll help us ultimately solve the problem, solve the solution with the animal. Not just whatever treatment they might need, but also that lifestyle or husbandry change. So that was kind of a wake-up point for me I think, as a dog and cat vet, sort of realizing that things like diet and lifestyle can actually be major components of trying to get them through their issues. The other part of it was, like I mentioned, just kind of spending a lot of time outside. I was in Washington state right after vet school, getting to know that area, learning all the plants, kind of getting into the whole homesteading survival sort of mindset around different things, wanting to learn foraging skills and things like that.

I was learning lots of plants to eat and then there were lots of plants that when I was looking them up, I would learn that they also had a lot of medicinal uses as well, or there were some that people don't eat this, but they use it for medicine. Mushrooms kind of the same way, learning mushrooms. So that sort of got me wanting to try things out with my patients from that herbal perspective. I had some good mentors being up in Washington, shout out to Donna Kelleher. And I was then encouraged to take an acupuncture course up there, and so the idea was to get an energetic base for the herbal medicine that I was learning. That turned into me having no idea how much I would use Chinese medicine and acupuncture in my practice with my patients.

I primarily use Chinese medical diagnosis and then usually formulate herbs specifically for each patient based on their – or western herbs through a Chinese medical pattern or diagnosis. So that's been really integral and kind of the backwards way that I got here and still interested in nonprofit work. I still work with a shelter in the area and go out to the Hopi Reservation in Arizona and do work out there, and I also kind of have a desire to bring more holistic options to those worlds as well. Sort of trying to integrate, partially, maybe more holistic treatments, but also more of a holistic mindset to the animal welfare world, or other kind of aspects as well.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, that's wonderful and much needed and beautiful. I have found that when I work with rescue groups in any location, and certainly in indigenous cultures, people that live a little bit closer to the natural world, incredibly open and receptive to using plant medicines as an option and, in fact, get much more excited than potentially some of my other colleagues that are confused about what I'm doing and why. So that's wonderful that you're using what resonates with you as a veterinarian in helping the groups of people that you are supporting and working with. It's wonderful, and I'm sure that they're incredibly thankful that you have this expanded knowledge base and tool base or tool kit, tool belt at your disposal. Dr. Zach, when you as a – so really you have wildlife skills, you have exotic skills, you have dog and cat skills, small animal skills, but I believe you also treat large animals as well. You really kind of treat the entire animal kingdom. Is that true?

Dr. Zachary Scheurich:

Yeah, I mean I think coming on with sort of the wildlife or exotic background – and I realized quickly that's why a lot of vets don't like treating exotic animals because you may treat three or four different snakes or tortoises or something like that, and they all have a different ecosystem

from which they come from and therefore have different requirements for how they're kept. So, a lot of times they just don't want to mess with having to get into that or learn all that or figure all those things out, which not that I have learned at all. It's fairly easy to quickly reference, but to know that you need to know all that stuff kind of, you know – so it's been relatively easy with large animals, and I grew up around horses and cows and things too, so it was relatively easy. Not that it's easy to treat them, but the intimidation factor was a little less.

Plus, I love being outside as well, which is [the] nice thing about treating large animals. The jumping over fences and gates and things. It's kind of exciting sometimes. But yeah, having that perspective, maybe that's one of the advantages that veterinarians have to even human doctors, in terms of flexibility, is their ability to be able to bounce in between species and have some level of comfort and understanding for how you can kind of do that.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, that's wonderful. So, you've got this diversified career in the sense of what you do and the species you're working with and the amazing rescues, clients, the organizations you're working with. It's awesome. What do you love most about the work that you're doing?

Dr. Zachary Scheurich:

Probably just creating. I mean, I have a fairly chaotic mind and often kind of a chaotic life. And I have a desire to want to do things kind of my own way and getting outside of the box has allowed me to really kind of create my own way of practice and an ability I think to continuously evolve how I practice and how I just think of things.

It truly feels like not only am I continuously gaining knowledge in all these areas that I can help with, what people are kind of coming to me for in the treatment of their animals, but also that I'm truly gaining this wisdom over time of how I can guide people to have better relationships and interactions with their animals, and also rethink or reimagine the lifestyle that they see for their animals. And I'm sure you and lots of other holistic vets are aware of this, but people often come looking for holistic treatments but still have a fairly conventional mindset around what they're looking for. And so, I feel like a huge part of what I do has been just to try to mitigate their expectations.

Like a lot of times, whether it's a first visit or whether it's over the period of a year, sometimes just trying to keep coming back to what the goals or what a successful treatment or outcome would actually look like for their pet or their family, all that sort of thing. And people often come to me in sort of a bargaining stage for their animals because, especially where I am now, they may not be aware of what I do or other alternatives to kind of the standard care. It may be even late in the process by the time they actually get me. And so, it's hard to get people sometimes in that phase, to step back and really take a look at what they really want and where they are in their relationship with their pets. That's been an ever-evolving sort of a thing. And often, it seems like really what I've been developing, more than even my knowledge base around animals and medicine, herbal knowledge, all that sort of thing.

Dr. Karen Becker:

I am at the same place you are in that part of my responsibility as a veterinarian serving my community is to care for the animal that they bring me. But much of my focus has been helping to retrain my clients' mindset when it comes to how they look at their relationship with their animal, but also their relationship with food and their relationship with the earth, their relationship in their home and their animals' place and their place. Helping to retrain mindsets has, what I've realized is – yes, I'm providing care, but maybe a bigger role and a bigger piece of what I am meant to do for that animal involves helping my clients rearrange their thought process about their role and my role in this animal's life and the position in the world of what we can do in terms of helping them. Sometimes our biggest role is helping our clients see things in a different light from a different perspective.

And it sounds like it's exactly what you are doing, too. I also think the older we get as integrative holistic veterinarians, we recognize the moving pieces and our role oftentimes is bigger and very different than what we thought when we started 20 to 30 years ago. So, it's interesting how many of us are coming to the same conclusions as where we see our role in that relationship and in the healing journey. Sometimes just opening doors and giving our clients a different perspective on what they thought the issues were, I guess.

Dr. Zachary Scheurich:

Yeah.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So, looking at all that you've done and how you are perpetually learning and growing, you're sharing what you've learned with people that are choosing to come and be in relationship with you. You're giving and learning, and there's this exchange of knowledge going on. If you could share one thing with the world in terms of what you're thinking now and where you think you'll be in the future, if you could share one tidbit or morsel with our listeners, what would it be?

Dr. Zachary Scheurich:

It feels like I could speak for an hour on this question and still have a hard time knowing where to exactly start with it. The thing that I think about, especially looking at the way the world seems to be going, the thing that we all kind of seem to be aware of in terms of where humanity is headed and how hard it is to kind of wrap your mind around so much of what decent living looks like, I feel like our relationship with our pets is something that grounds us in humanity in some ways. And I think there's lots of reasons for that. I think everyone has this idea that we can learn something from our animals. Dogs are kind of the quintessential examples of that unconditional love and how difficult that can be often for our fellow humans, but can be possible with our animals.

And obviously that's at least our dogs. Some cats, sometimes, I guess it's a little questionable maybe, not that it's impossible. And other animals as well; I had a horse growing up that I felt like – I remember saying “horses are man's best friend, not dogs” or something. I've been able to have – I had pet rats and snakes and all these, and I had close relationships, but dogs kind of are

like the thing. What I often say is, “Well, they're the only species that chose to be domesticated.” So, there's this contract almost with them, but our relationships with our pets, especially dogs, I think, but I may be focusing too much on that, but it's like this opportunity that we have to learn all sorts of decent human interaction. And it's so much different than other relationships. Like with our children, they're going to be off on their own someday.

Spouses, there's obviously lots of different dynamics within that. Friends come and go, but our animals, we know from the beginning that they're going to be there for this chapter of our life, like a beginning and an end. And especially in having gone through so many experiences with people at the end of their animals' lives and seeing – it's almost like through that whole process, they kind of let you see into their soul in some ways, when you're going through all of that process. And it is such a way for us to interact with our emotions and develop relationships with love and loss and all of these different things that they are amazing teachers at, really.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah.

Dr. Zachary Scheurich:

I think that it's an opportunity for us to be really intentional and for us to see that relationship through. I often wish people could have the perspective on their pets that they have at the end of their life through the entirety of their life, and to be able to maintain all those perspectives, which people often get in those moments of vulnerability. And they are like the perfect teachers. And often, that's one of the things that I do try to remind people at the end of their animals' lives: We don't just want to focus on getting them better and trying to get more time with them.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah.

Dr. Zachary Scheurich:

You've nurtured this relationship for 13, 15, 20 years sometimes. These are the moments you're going to remember. It isn't about time so much.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yes.

Dr. Zachary Scheurich:

Every little thing you do is not so important, but what is important is make sure you're spending that time and creating something that you're going to look back on and feel good about.

Dr. Karen Becker:

You and I are two peas in a pod, and I think, if I could summarize, if could speak back to what I interpreted, animals give us this gift of being present and they're amazing teachers allowing us – if we focus and listen and watch, the life lessons that they teach us are invaluable. And knowing that we never have enough time with them, us being able to sit grounded and present, and receive

the lessons that they are teaching us is one of the best ways we can grow, is through emulating our animals because they are here teaching us in powerful ways if we're present enough to see those lessons. Briana, the lovely woman that nominated you, we're thankful that she took the time to nominate you. She said that you are impacting people and allowing them to be able to expand relationships and view their relationship with their animals in different lights. And I'm so thankful that she's taken the time to nominate you. And congratulations, Dr. Zach on your Game Changer Award.

Dr. Zachary Scheurich:

I appreciate it.