

Why do animals trust humans?

by Mark Pavilons

We intelligent bipeds share this planet with billions of other creatures.

We'd like to think we're on top of the food chain, but we still have a long way to go. And we have much to learn from our animal brethren.

I am constantly amazed by videos and stories on social media about the strong bonds between animals and humans. From geese running to owners with outstretched wings, to giant lions giving their human friends a hug, it's all really fascinating.

I have read many stories of marine creatures like whales, dolphins, etc. who seek out human assistance when one of their own is in distress. How would they instinctively know to do this? Such a creature spends its whole life in the depths of the ocean, likely never running into a human being. And yet, when circumstances dictate, they dash off to find the nearest compassionate person.

A recent video I saw showed a beluga whale pointing a diver to the amount of garbage on the sea floor. What? That's advanced thinking skills.

Octopuses are known to be remarkably smart and scientists have found they share a genetic quirk also found in humans. They have jumping genes which are regulated by the brain and are important for learning and memory function. They've been known to open jars from the inside.

On a good day, I can untangle by key chain!

Our language has the defamatory term 'bird brain,' but that can't be further from the truth.

The corvid family of birds (crows, ravens, magpies) are incredibly smart, known to use tools, solve puzzles and team up together. They rank next in intelligence only to us and dolphins.

Dolphins are likely the most intelligent species on the planet (ours is constantly in question).

Related to the cow, they apparently evolved twice they came out of the water and then went back in.

Chimpanzees, elephants, parrots, bonobos, horses, squirrels and even bees, ants and spiders have all shown high levels of thinking and problem-solving.

And we're the tops? It is to jest.

According to author Carl Safina (National Geographic, By Simon Worrall, July 15, 2015), creatures do know who they are they have a sense of self.

They have ambitions for higher status. They compete. Animals are no different from us in that regard and I think that their presence here on Earth is tremendously enriching.

If you watch mammals or even birds, you will see how they respond to the world. They play. They act frightened when there's danger. They relax when things are good. It seems illogical for us to think that animals might not be having a conscious mental experience of play, sleep, fear or love.

?People who watch wild animals don't question whether they're conscious or not because we see incredible intricacies of behavior and vast ranges of personalities.?

Animal lovers will agree that it's obvious that animals are conscious and exercise judgment.

?Many people think that empathy is a special emotion only humans show. But many animals express empathy for each other. There are documented stories of elephants finding people who were lost. In one case, an old woman who couldn't see well, got lost and was found the next day with elephants guarding her. They had encased her in sort of a cage of branches to protect her from hyenas. That's seems extraordinary to us but it comes naturally to elephants.

?People have also seen humpback whales help seals being hunted by killer whales. There is a documented account of a humpback sweeping a seal on its back out of the water, away from the killer whales. These things seem extraordinary and new to us because we have only recently documented these incidents. But they have probably been doing these kinds of things for millions of years.?

So, my friends, there's no question that animals are able to engage in a high level of abstract thinking and are capable of balancing risks and chances, of assessing individual human personalities.

Abstract thinking, cultural learning, experience, communication as well as excellent observational skills all play a role. Most of the time we humans are not even aware that the wild animals around us are watching us.

Many species are capable of facial recognition, and seem to be able to avoid the trap of dangerous situations.

Dog lovers know just how ?human??their four-legged family members are. We love them with all of our being. As you watch them grow from pups, you really see their personalities, intelligence, quirks and habits.

The only thing they can't do is speak to us in full sentences, but they communicate all the time. They know when you want to take them for a walk and they rush to greet you whether you've been gone all day or for just 10 minutes. They know things and they have a full range of emotions.

Many say their perception is more vivid than ours, given their heightened senses. They hear and smell things we can't. But alas, their sense of taste isn't quite as sharp, as witnessed by the strange array of items they will chew on and digest.

Our two Belgian Malinois crosses have a habit of trying to stick their noses right inside our mouths, presumably to snatch up some leftover tidbits. I've never found dog noses or tongues gross at all, just the price of doing business with canines. But personality??Tons! I?only wish could tap into those dog brains and get a glimpse of their thoughts. Or at least capture a fraction of their boundless energy!

I?can't image a day without a tail wag, kiss or nudge from our best friends.

Uber smart or not, our animal friends are very special.