

# The Compassionate Animal

BY MARC BEKOFF

OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH NONHUMAN animals range all over the place. They're complicated, frustrating, awkward, loving, and challenging. Around the world we gawk at animals in wonder, experiment on them, eat them, wear them, write about them, draw and paint them, make decisions for them, and move them from here to there as we "redecorate nature." Yet we often ignore who they are and what they want.

In truth, science has discovered a lot about the inner lives of diverse species, more than we often give ourselves credit for. Indeed, animals' lives aren't all that private, hidden, or secret; a flurry of research has offered insight into the emotional lives of animals. We now know that animals have a point of view and that they experience deep feelings.

Two recent discoveries speak to the emotional lives of vastly different species, mice and whales.

In 2006, a Canadian team of neuroscientists showed that mice are empathic beings that feel the pain and suffering of other mice. McGill University's Dale Langford and colleagues injected acetic acid into the paws of one or both members of a pair of adult mice, causing a painful burning sensation. Mice who watched their cage-mates in pain became more sensitive to the same painful stimuli, indicating that they had a notion of what the others were experiencing. A mouse injected with acid writhed more violently if his or her partner had also been injected and was writhing in pain.

Of course, it's ironic that painful experiments like that one are used to uncover animal emotions, when observations of these rodents and many other animals clearly show that they experience empathy and other feelings. These scientific facts haven't yet entered into discussions about the well-being of mice.

Anyone who has worked with whales intuitively knows they're extremely emotional, but only in the past few years have researchers uncovered biological evidence for this fact. They've found that many types of whales have specialized "spindle cells"—cells important in processing emotion and developing intelligent behavior—in brain regions linked to social organization,

empathy, intuition about the feelings of others, and rapid gut reactions. Humans have spindle cells in the same brain regions, and previously these cells were thought to exist only in humans and other great apes.



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## Animals have a point of view and they experience deep feelings.

The presence of these spindle cells suggests that whales have advanced abilities to experience emotion, and we can find plenty of real-world evidence to back this up. In December of 2005, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported on a 50-foot, 50-ton female humpback whale who had been caught in a net near the Farallon Islands, off the California coast. After rescuers untangled her, the humpback swam up to each of them and winked before swimming off. According to the story, the rescuers all agreed that she was expressing gratitude.

These discoveries surely make us rethink how we treat animals. But cruelty to animals has serious implications for humans as well.

Studies by Frank Ascione, Phil Arkow, Barbara Boat, and many others show that children who are cruel to animals are significantly more likely to commit violence against humans later in life—the absence of empathy for one indicates lack of empathy for the other. Indeed, studies of prison inmates reveal that as many as 75 percent of violent offenders had early records of animal cruelty.

When we link these studies in cruelty with new discoveries about the inner lives of animals, our relationships with animals take on greater importance: It becomes clear that compassionate relationships with animals are integral to a more compassionate world.

There are two main steps we can take toward fostering these compassionate relationships. First, we must recognize that animals have active minds and deep feelings. Second, we must "mind" them as their caretakers in a human-dominated world, where their interests are continually trumped in deference to ours.

Many programs have tried to make this ideal of minding animals a reality. I serve as a roving ambassador for Jane Goodall's Roots & Shoots Program, which helps kids learn how to care for animals, the earth, and people. The Humane Society of the United States has a program, called "First Strike," devoted to learning more about the connection between cruelty to animals and to humans. The Society & Animals Forum and the Human/Animal Violence Education Network have also launched similar programs that deserve our support.

Ultimately, I believe compassion for animals will make for more compassion among people, weaving more empathy, respect, dignity, and love into all our lives. Animals and future generations of humans will surely thank us for our efforts.

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