

Talking Animals

By: Ashley Van Wieren

It's a common misconception that humans are the only animals capable of language. However, it can't be refuted that other animals have diverse and often times complex forms of communication. Animals use different methods to communicate, including chemical (smell), sound, visual, and touch signals.

Communication can greatly increase the survivability of a species. It allows animals to warn each other of predators, attract mates, ward off predators and competition, and express individual wants and needs.

New uses of communication in non-human animals are always being discovered. More complex communication occurs in highly social species, after all what would you have to say if there was no one around to talk to?

Cetaceans (dolphins, porpoises, and whales) are known for their higher social structures and communication abilities. Cetaceans are capable of vocal learning. Whales exposed to humans have displayed spontaneous human vocal mimicry in which they alter their usual vocal characteristics to the components and patterns heard in human speech. Several dolphins have been spotted mimicking whale songs hours after hearing them.

It is no surprise that dolphins are capable of complex communication considering they are one of the most intelligent species, even being able to recognize themselves in a mirror. Dolphins and whales both use whistles for communication and a signature whistle allows them to recognize each other.

With chimpanzees being our closest living relatives, it's easy to draw parallels between their methods of communication and our own. Chimpanzees use vocalizations such as pants, grunts, and screams, as well as non-vocal methods such as gestures, facial expressions, and olfactory signals to relay messages. They have different call types that can be used for anything from predator warnings to describing a food source they've found.

Other non-human primates have numerous gestures, even ones asking others for food. I have experienced this behavior from a capuchin monkey in the Amazon that gestured for me to handover my banana. I've also seen it in my dog, gesturing to his food bowl when it is 10 minutes until dinnertime.

The communication abilities of Prairie dogs, however, could outweigh the abilities of cetaceans and even non-human primates. In an interview on The Current, Con Slobodchikoff, a biologist who studies animal communication, explained his team's revelations in prairie dog vocalizations. According to Slobodchikoff, prairie dogs can articulate the difference in species of

predator, along with other describing characteristics such as the color of a person's clothes, size, and shapes all "into a single chirp lasting a tenth of a second." [1]

Animals such as cetaceans, non-human primates, and prairie dogs use a wide range of vocal and non-vocal methods to achieve complex communication. We might not always be able to understand them, but the animals around us are talking! We can learn from the scientists that to understand we must first listen and observe.



Caption: A capuchin monkey in the Amazon using a gesture, extending an outstretched hand, to ask for food.

Photo taken by: Ashley Van Wieren

Source:

[1] Prairie dogs' language decoded by scientists. (2013). In The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). CQ-Roll Call, Inc.