Political Animals

Author: Beardsley, Timothy M.

Source: BioScience, 62(6) : 527

Published By: American Institute of Biological Sciences

URL: https://doi.org/10.1525/bio.2012.62.6.1

BioScience®
A Forum for Integrating the Life Sciences
American Institute of Biological Sciences

Political Animals

If animals have personalities, as is indicated by the research discussed by Leslie Evans Ogden in her article starting on p. 533, should humans be more aware that their relationships with animals are in some sense personal ones—or that those relationships might with benefit become more deliberate? And how might such a deliberate sense of a personal relationship affect how scientists who aspire to be leaders approach questions about humans' uses of—and effects on—animals?

Needless to say, most of us come across very few animals, besides companion animals, with which we could or would want to have a relationship that is personal in the usual sense of the term. But a relationship based on the joint recognition of another individual and tied to norms of behavior is not the only kind of personal relationship. Research on animal personalities—different suites of behavioral tendencies that are apparently widespread—at the very least reminds us of similarities in how behavior often develops in human and nonhuman animals. In both, it is often idiosyncratic, integrating individuals' physiology and history. Since human behavior is subject to the same natural laws as other creatures', the commonality warrants reflection about how we behave personally with respect to the (behaving) natural world.

The recognition of this commonality does not have to lead to animal rights. They are a contested extension of a philosophical tradition that is itself far from universally accepted. However, coupled with the manifold benefits that we derive from animals (including psychological ones) and our knowledge of vast uncharted phenotypic differences between individual humans and animals, the commonality suggests that deeper and more widespread understanding of the human–animal relationship could extend the benefits on both sides. How this might be done, exactly, cannot be predicted, but the number of critical areas calling out for improvement points to a large potential. The articles by Catherine Reidy Liermann and her colleagues on p. 539 and by Irving A. Mendelssohn and his coauthors on p. 562 document the immense consequences for fishes and other animals of energy technologies that support human culture. The impacts are about far more than so much protein.

The hold that animals have on the imaginations of children, as well as their importance for food, for recreation, and for employment (to name just a few connections) strengthen the case for specific educational roles—formal and informal—for would-be leaders who want biology to support decisionmaking. The case argues that they should actively support opportunities for the public to learn about, witness, and deliberate over the full range of human transactions with other members of our kingdom. It seems likely that such efforts—aimed at adults as well as children—can disseminate a resilient basis for enjoying life. They could also lead in due course to wiser societal decisions, because deliberation can generate good ideas.

Our species' growing reliance on technology allows many of us to forget that we all have a relationship with animals that, because of their similarities to our kind, must be at some level personal. Most of us do not see where our food comes from or learn about how humans are decimating animal populations. But as feminists declared a long time ago, the personal is political.

TIMOTHY M. BEARDSLEY
Editor in Chief

doi:10.1525/bio.2012.62.6.1