

TALKING TO THE ANIMALS

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Interspecies Communication



The American Indians held nature to be a conscious entity; everything from rocks to grass to coyotes was thought to possess a clear voice and the ability to speak and be understood. Today, we peruse the traditions and wonder how in Heaven's name could a people who, otherwise, seemed to understand nature so well, have so exaggerated the intellectual prowess of the animals. At best, we relegate the matter to our anthropologists, who tend to persuasively explain the matter as a religious myth constructed to explain an otherwise unfathomable environment. The problem with this line of reasoning lies in the fact that the environment was, indeed, not unfathomable; that the Indians possessed an admirably deep knowledge about the natural world. Yet, their concept of the talking animals was quite universal. Could we be missing something? Is there any possibility whatsoever that the Indians' intimacy within nature also included some "secret doorway" into the recesses of animal consciousness?

The Indians' worldview may best be described as an ecological democracy, an environment and a society where animal, vegetable, and mineral live and die in communication and, yes, in service to one another. Before killing a buffalo, the Lakota would first, with all due courtesy, beg the animal's forgiveness. Wondering whether or not the perception of the talking buffalo was the cause or the effect of this courtesy view leads us to the very heart of the matter: did the animals seem to answer because the Indians were always talking to them, or did the animals actually speak, which prompted both a reply and, over time, an entire social/ecological etiquette?

Unfortunately, when we Moderns imagine such a world today, the results always seem naive, if not a bit fatuous. For example, picture an army of hard-hatted contractors halting construction of the World Trade Center because a spider chose to weave its web

on site the night before construction was to commence. Again, imagine all the employees of a large mining company first praying for forgiveness from the Earth for the coal that they are about to wrest from Her body. An idealist might argue that if we would only begin to emulate the Indians, we would soon solve all of our ecological problems. Or, turning the concept inside out, the ecological crisis is now upon us because our civilization has no ecological etiquette. If only the animals would start talking again, so that we could hear them. It would probably be the best thing for the environment since the EPA.

But unlike the Indians (and, of course, our own children), we adults no longer accept the supposition that animals, plants, and rocks can, or for that matter, ever could, talk. We look to science and find that there are many researchers working on the problem. But significantly, and most unfortunately, none has yet cracked the code. Whales and birds may sing, chimps and crickets chatter, vervet monkeys pronounce a few scanty sounds to signify this or that enemy, but as of yet, there has been no hard evidence forthcoming in support of the Native American Worldview.

There are many critics of science who argue that even if the animals do talk, scientists will not be able to hear them. The reasons advanced rest upon those twin pillars of contemporary scientific methodology: the objective observer and the controlled experiment. These tenets operate together to separate and dissociate all of us from what the



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Indians understood as the community of Nature. As philosopher Huston Smith points out, that which we are able to control we must ultimately regard to be inferior to us. Current zoological methodology attempts to set us up outside of and superior to this so-called community. It is as if we were to peer at Nature through a thick storm door through which no meaningful sound could ever enter. Perhaps this is the very door that opens upon the "secret doorway." But how do we learn to pass through that doorway?

Inevitably, and with this image in mind, we turn our attention to the language studies perpetrated upon an entire menagerie of large brained mammals. We immediately note that all of this research takes the form of the controlled experiment. But since the experiments are human controlled, necessarily all of the parameters for pronouncing success or failure are humanly derived. At best, this



entire line of language research succeeds as no more than an indicator of whether or not any species has the ability (I could say "will," but that is a can of worms in itself) to simulate human intellectual and linguistic models in return for the survival necessities of food and companionship. That is why chimps always seem to fare better than dolphins, despite the fact of the latter's larger brain: chimps are more like humans. Lastly, and most significantly, we must note that all of this language research is being perpetrated upon animals in the physical medium of the cage, the house trailer, the concrete swimming pool. As MacLuhan says, "the medium is the message."

And success is a dolphin in Hawaii who,

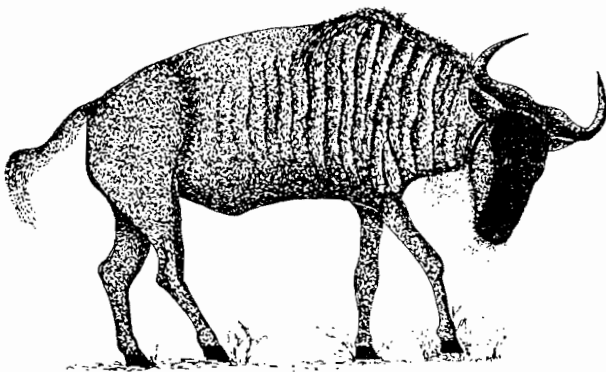
after years of incessant training, learns to communicate quite a bit less emphatically than my own twelve month old daughter. Or, in California, success is a gorilla who has learned to sign a remarkable number of words in Ameslan but whose psyche is sometimes depicted as in some strange limbo between human toddler and ape. Lastly, in several different programs levied against captive chimps, the results are so impenetratingly muddy that even the researchers themselves seem unable to agree whether or not anything of substance transpired beyond their own uncontrollable desire for success. I acknowledge my own oversimplified descriptions of what has been years of experimentation. But the point I am making is simple, although its import is critical.

If interspecies communication is happening, how easy it should be to tell. All you need to do is speak, listen, comprehend, and then reply. You are it. And, by comparison, how numbingly counterproductive to set up an elaborate double-blind experiment in an attempt to nullify the intrusion of shared sentiment or dialogue. How else but through the apperception of dialogue can any of us ever perceive communication? It seems significant to add that when dialogue between subject and researcher does rear its head, it is most often described as a pleasant anomaly and documented with refreshingly minimal explication. What can you say about it other than here it is and it happened outside our field of data control? It happened despite our incredible lack of courtesy.

Dian Fossey, who lived so closely to the highland gorillas for so many years, remarked that she was initially accepted by the local troupe after she had learned to enunciate a basic gorilla vocabulary of body movements. The language revealed itself, but then she seemed either unwilling or unable to delve deeper. One wonders how much more articulate a talented dancer might have been in a similar circumstance.

Then there is the example of the musical communication research being undertaken with free swimming orcas. A boat is moored in one spot, live music is transmitted through the water, and if the whales are interested, they come around to jam. On certain nights they seem very interested and improvise all sorts of musical theory and fancy with the ship-board musicians for hours on end. Other nights they pass by without a peep. In gen-

eral, the research eschews control, promotes a method of invitation, and communicates a personality of musical and species kinship. The resultant dialogues do not communicate "language" as we humans often tend to narrow its definition. Rather, this interspecies music communicates an energy exchange of harmony, rhythm, timing, and phrasing. Each parameter contains its own measure of acoustic, behavioral, and cultural reality. Like any successful musical event, the interactive experiment is sustainable as long as the participants coexist in the present. What this implies in actual practice is that the human being must first acknowledge the other being as his or her equal. Here is the courtesy method of the American Indian clothed in the garb of explorational language research. And if it all seems a tad too much like "New Age" Shamanism, then it is probably that as well. But the audio data from these musical events has been documented and analyzed over a seven year period of interaction. For this reason alone, we must call the research science, even though it springs full blown from an entirely new methodological paradigm that makes hay of traditional field biology. It is a paradigm that tends to base itself upon a very ancient, native heritage. Not incidentally, the accumulated data succeeds most strongly by shedding light upon both the Indian perception of Nature, as well as upon the controversy of whether or not animals actually do talk to one another.



Results? Well, they tend to be very encouraging, if you ask someone in touch with the dynamics of music. There is the tape of the night an orca sang a lead line over a reggae rhythm progression played on an electric guitar. The orca started each phrase right on the tricky downbeat and then correctly improvised a melody as the human musi-

cian changed chords. Most people who hear the tape seem to hear something harmonious and inventive right away. But one animal researcher has commented that the tape is useless as proof of interspecies communication because the musical exchange is entirely non-replicable. That is true--after seven years of research, no orca has ever again answered quite so obviously. But such criticism makes sense only when the research is judged in terms of the controlled experiment. From the point of view of the language of jazz, such criticism sounds like nonsense. It has always been true that the most evocative and, yes, communicative jazz musicians are those who have developed their own unique style. They don't repeat themselves.

I will not attempt here to delineate the complex vocal behavior of the orcas, whether from the perception of a musician or from that of cetacean bioacoustics. But I shall be so bold as to state that trying to translate any human tongue back and forth from "dolphinsese" seems most analogous to attempting to translate a Beethoven symphony into English.

But in all fairness, it must be stated that many linguists would laugh to hear that there are laymen who lump both English, Ameslan, and music all in the same category of "language." Why stop there; maybe we should include color, gravity, snow. Here is where the matter becomes bogged down in whose definition one prefers to use. After all, it seems a virtual truism that most musicians believe music to be every bit as much a language as any mere human tongue. And it is upon this very point that the claims of the Indians start to sort themselves out. The native American, uninhibited by a modern (and criminally anthropocentric) definition of language, probably studied many unique sensory languages in order to converse with nature. In perception the "talking" is very little different from a geologist who looks at a cliff to "read" 100 million years of environmental history.

Yes, in a way we have arrived right back where we started. The Indians did, indeed, talk to animals, just as they said they did. But also, it is equally true that the animals do not possess a "language" as contemporary researchers assay that concept. Ultimately, the truth is like the punchline to a cosmic joke: it all depends on whom you want to talk to.