Living with animals

Animal Management

A Donkey in Corfu

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Introduction

These texts explore our relationship with animals.

The first text is about the way that humans have used animals for food and work, and what makes animals suitable or unsuitable for this.

The second text is an extract from a book by the naturalist Gerald Durrell, recalling a childhood memory of being given an unusual pet!

Animal Management

You might think that humans have conquered the globe thanks to our superior brain power. World-changing discoveries such as fire, inventions like the wheel, and our ability to communicate through language have all certainly helped! However, another secret to humans' success has been our ability to domesticate animals. Humans around the world have been doing this successfully for thousands of years. But what is domestication?

Domestication describes the process of changing animals over many generations so that they (and their descendants) can live with and benefit people. Some animals – such as dogs, cats and rabbits – are domesticated as pets, whereas livestock animals are domesticated to provide food and clothing, or are used for work on farms.

Although small mammals, poultry, fish and even insects have been domesticated, historically the most important livestock animals have been the large mammals, those generally weighing over 45 kilograms. These provide the most food and can do the heaviest work. Of the large land-based mammals, only five have been successfully domesticated throughout the world: the sheep, goat, cow, pig and horse. Nine others, including the donkey, reindeer and camel, have been domesticated in certain parts of the globe only.

You will not see a gorilla or a hippo working on a farm, so why have some species of mammal been domesticated while others have not? Not all animals can be domesticated – and even those that have, can sometimes revert to their wild ways.

On the following pages, the internationally published biologist Jared Diamond proposes a list of characteristics that animals need to possess in order for them to be successfully domesticated. Lacking even one of these characteristics usually means that domestication fails.

Requirements for Domestication

Diet – For an animal to grow to full size, it takes an awful lot of food. Domesticated animals need to eat food that is relatively cheap and easy to grow, such as grass or grain, so herbivores like cattle and sheep are ideal candidates. Animals that are finicky in their food preferences simply won't do.

Facts about feeding

The elephant, rhinoceros and hippo are all herbivores: they live on plant matter and lack the sharp teeth needed to tear meat.

We think of dogs as carnivorous, since they mostly eat meat, but they are capable of surviving on grain and fruit products.

Growth rate – To be worth keeping, domesticated animals must grow quickly. That cuts out gorillas and elephants, for example, even though both are herbivores prepared to eat a wide range of foods. No farmer would be prepared to wait 15 years for their herd to reach adult size. Elephants are tamed for work in some countries, but they are usually taken fully grown from the wild.

Breeding in captivity – Domesticated animals need to breed easily in captivity. Cheetahs were much prized by the ancient Egyptians as hunting animals, but they were never successfully bred in captivity. It seems that cheetahs need an elaborate courtship ritual that involves running large distances, which is incompatible with being in a confined space.

Character – A tendency to kill people causes immediate disqualification for many candidates that otherwise seem ideal. Think of the grizzly bear: it grows relatively quickly, to an enormous size, on a broad and mainly vegetarian diet, and thrives on human rubbish. If only they would do as they're told! A hippo would be a great barnyard animal if it wasn't so lethal. They kill more people each year than any other African mammal, including even the lion. Although you might expect zebras to behave like their equine relatives, horses and donkeys, in fact they grow consistently more vicious and likely to bite as they age.

Response to danger – When faced with a threat, some species, such as antelope, are nervous and inclined to flee immediately, while others stand their ground. The nervous ones are not suited to captivity: in an enclosure they are likely to panic, and may even die of shock.

Hierarchy – Almost all species of domesticated large mammals had wild ancestors that lived in herds, with a well-developed dominance hierarchy. This arrangement allows many animals to exist peacefully together without constant fighting. All humans need to do in order to control the animals is to become dominant in the hierarchy.

Animals used to being in herds can tolerate crowded conditions, and can be readily driven by a shepherd or a sheepdog. One domesticated animal is an exception to this: no-one has worked out how to herd cats. Their value to humans is as solitary hunters or pets.

You can see that domestication is actually a tricky business. Not all animals make the grade. So the next time you pass a herd of grazing herbivores, stop and think: where would we be without them?

Being the boss

The head of a social group or dominance hierarchy is often described as the 'top dog', the one who gets compliance – or obedience – from those below.

This is an extract from a story set on the island of Corfu, Greece. The author, Gerald, has just woken up to find that his family (his mother, brothers Larry and Leslie, and sister Margo) have given him a very unusual birthday present.

A Donkey in Corfu

The donkey stood there looking like a refugee from a circus, chewing a piece of tinsel meditatively, while I scrambled out of bed and flung on my clothes. Where, I enquired breathlessly of Mother, was I to keep her? Obviously I couldn't keep her in the villa in view of the fact that Larry had just pointed out to Mother that she could, if she so wished, grow a good crop of potatoes in the hall.

'That's what the house Costas built is for,' said Mother.

I was beside myself with delight. What a noble, kindly, benevolent family I had! How cunningly they had kept the secret from me! How hard they had worked to deck the donkey out in its finery! Slowly and gently, as though she was some fragile piece of china, I led my steed out through the garden and round into the olive grove, opened the door of the little bamboo hut and took her inside. I thought I ought to try her for size, because Costas was a notoriously bad workman. The little house was splendid. Just big enough for her.

I took her out again and tethered her to an olive tree on a long length of rope, then stayed for half an hour in a dreamlike trance admiring her from every angle while she grazed placidly. Eventually I heard Mother calling me in to breakfast and I sighed with satisfaction. I had decided that, without any doubt whatsoever, and without wishing in any way to be partisan, this donkey was the finest donkey in the whole of the Island of Corfu. For no reason that I could think of, I decided to call her Sally. I gave her a quick kiss on her silken muzzle and then went in to breakfast.

After breakfast, to my astonishment, Larry, with a magnanimous air, said that if I liked he would teach me to ride. I said that I didn't know he could ride.

'Of course,' said Larry, airily. 'When we were in India I was always galloping about on ponies and things. I used to groom them and feed them and so forth. Have to know what you're doing, of course.'

So, armed with a blanket and a large piece of webbing, we went out into the olive grove, placed the blanket on Sally's back and tied it in position. She viewed these preparations with interest but a lack of enthusiasm. With a certain amount of difficulty, for Sally would persist in walking round and round in a tight circle, Larry succeeded in getting me on to her back. He then exchanged her tether for a rope halter and rope reins.

'Now,' he said, 'you just steer her as though she's a boat. When you want her to go faster, kick her in the ribs with your heels.'

If that was all there was to riding, I felt, it was going to be simplicity itself. I jerked on the reins and dug my heels into Sally's ribs. It was unfortunate that my fall was broken by a large and exceptionally luxuriant bramble-bush. Sally peered at me as I extricated myself, with a look of astonishment on her face.

'Perhaps,' said Larry, 'you ought to have a stick so then you can use your legs for gripping on to her and you won't fall off.'

He cut me a short stick and once again I mounted Sally. This time I wrapped my legs tightly round her barrel body and gave her a sharp tap with my switch. She bucked several times, indignantly, but I clung on like a limpet and to my delight, within half an hour, I had her trotting to and fro between the olive trees, responding neatly to tugs on the rein. Larry had been lying under the olives watching my progress. Now, as I appeared to have mastered the equestrian art, he rose to his feet and took a pen-knife out of his pocket.

'Now,' he said, as I dismounted, 'I'll show you how to look after her. First of all, you must brush her down every morning. We'll get a brush for you in town. Then you must make sure that her hooves are clean. You must do that every day.' I enquired, puzzled, how did one clean donkeys' hooves?

'I'll show you,' said Larry nonchalantly.

He walked up to Sally, bent down and picked up her hind leg.

'In here,' he said, pointing with the blade of the knife at Sally's hoof, 'an awful lot of muck gets trapped. This can lead to all sorts of things, foot rot and so forth. It's very important to keep them clean.'

So saying, he dug his pen-knife blade into Sally's hoof. What Larry had not realised was that donkeys in Corfu were unshod and that a baby donkey's hoof is still, comparatively speaking, soft and very delicate. So, not unnaturally, Sally reacted as though Larry had jabbed her with a red-hot skewer. She wrenched her hoof out of his hands and, as he straightened up and turned in astonishment, she did a pretty pirouette and kicked him neatly in the pit of the stomach with both hind legs. Larry sat down heavily, his face went white and he doubled up, clasping his stomach and making strange rattling noises. The alarm I felt was not for Larry but for Sally, for I was quite sure that he would exact the most terrible retribution when he recovered. Hastily I undid Sally's rope, flicked her on the rump with the stick and watched her canter off into the olives. Then I ran into the house and informed Mother that Larry had had an accident. The entire family, including Spiro who had just arrived, came running out

into the olive grove where Larry was still writhing about uttering great sobbing, wheezing noises.

'Larry, dear,' said Mother distraught, 'what have you been doing?'

'Attacked,' gasped Larry in between wheezes. 'Unprovoked... Creature mad... Probably rabies… Ruptured appendix.'

With Leslie on one side of him and Spiro on the other they carted Larry slowly back to the villa, with Mother and Margo fluttering commiseratingly and ineffectually around him. In a crisis of this magnitude involving my family, one had to keep one's wits about one or all was lost. I ran swiftly round to the kitchen door where, panting but innocent, I informed our maid that I was going to spend the day out and could she give me some food to eat. She put half a loaf of bread, some onions, some olives and a hunk of cold meat into a paper bag and gave it to me. Fruit I knew I could obtain from any of my peasant friends. Then I raced through the olive groves, carrying this provender, in search of Sally.

I eventually found her half a mile away, grazing on a succulent patch of grass. After several ineffectual attempts, I managed to scramble up on to her back and then, belabouring her behind with a stick, I urged her to a brisk trot as far away from the villa as possible.

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