

Scientist Wonders Why Dolphins Turn the Cheek?

If sociobiology is right then evolution has favored selfish behavior. According to the “selfish gene” theory widely accepted among evolutionary biologists, natural selection favors organisms that pass on their genes successfully. Even cooperation supposedly is motivated by selfish interests. Individuals cooperate with one another because it enhances their reproductive success.

By living in a pack and hunting together, wolves can kill larger animals and eat more meat and be more likely to reproduce more successfully than wolves that do not live in packs. The genes for cooperative, pack-living are passed on to the offspring.

The same principle applies to species like baboons which, because they live in groups are better able to detect and evade predators as well as compete against smaller troops for safe sleeping sites.

Sociobiology even has a selfish explanation for altruistic behavior including self-sacrifice. An animal or human might risk or lose their life to save a child or close relative. In doing so they may actually enhance the survival of kin. Closely related individuals share many of the same genes, so by sacrificing itself for a relative’s survival the gene for self-sacrifice may be passed on.

Altogether, the selfish gene theory seems to account for the origin of social behavior and cooperation among many animal species including humans.

According to Dr. Randall Eaton, an internationally known sociobiologist who directs the Dolphin and Whale Society, dolphins may break the rules. Eaton said, “From a strictly scientific perspective, it is problematic that dolphins save people by pushing them to shore or driving sharks away. Because dolphins also have been known to push human property to shore, a Cambridge University scientist dismissed dolphins saving people as a misguided instinct to clean up the oceans. Tell that to the Dutch pilot whose plane crashed in the Indian Ocean, and a dolphin spent six days of its life pushing his raft to shore. Dolphins with an instinct to clean up the oceans would have died from exhaustion years ago.”

So why do dolphins save human lives? What’s in it for them? Eaton thinks it is conceivable that dolphins are intelligent enough to know that their altruistic acts toward us might benefit the survival and reproduction of their offspring and kin. Their helpful behavior could result in us killing fewer dolphins, even cleaning up the oceans.

Dolphins have been saving humans and guiding ships to safe harbor for thousands of years. Around the ancient Mediterranean, dolphins were held in high esteem. Though slaves could be legally killed, killing a dolphin was punishable by death in early Greece. Eaton agrees that the helpful behavior of dolphins in recent times has motivated people to protect them and lobby for decreased marine pollution so perhaps it will pay off for them.

Dolphins helping humans catch fish has been documented in many places, and some

cases appear to go back centuries or millennia. To Eaton, cooperative fishing involves not

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only the investment of the dolphins' time and energy, but also could mean sacrificing their food supply for humans.

“Though the local people who benefit from the dolphins' efforts on their behalf are extremely thankful and appreciative, it is difficult to see how cooperative fishing benefits dolphins in any way, so it may qualify as genuinely unselfish behavior,” Eaton said.

What intrigues Eaton more is the tendency of dolphins to turn the cheek when humans slaughter them and their babies. “You can see how spending time and energy to save and protect people could enhance the survival of a dolphin's young or relatives, but for years in the Iki Islands of Japan entire herds of dolphins including babies were slaughtered by fishermen, babies, too. The dolphins were herded into nets and the fishermen walked around in water deeper than their waists spearing dolphins to death.”

What's wrong with this picture, Eaton asks? “The mystery is that the dolphins did not resist the humans at all. They are powerful predators, larger than a human, able to ram and kill sharks that menace their young. So why didn't they ram the fishermen who were stabbing them and their young? Dolphins can get moving very fast in a short distance even in shallow water. They not only did not charge their killers, they did not slap them with fins or tails or bite them. Why not?”

He explained that its one thing for an animal or human to sacrifice its life to benefit the survival of young or the breeding success of close relatives, but when entire herds including offspring and kin are exterminated there can be no reproductive benefit from turning the cheek.

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“Here is a case of animal behavior that warrants close attention because it appears that dolphins are deliberately sacrificing their lives as a genuine act of altruism unmotivated by selfish gain. Perhaps they know something we don’t know. Perhaps they are teaching us compassion,” Eaton concluded.

To volunteer for Eaton’s interspecies communication project in Careyes, Mexico, or for his long-term study of orca whales in the Pacific Northwest, visit:

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