Back to basics: What wolves can teach us about dogs in an animal management context

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Abstract

In order to fully understand dogs it is necessary to peel away our tired perceptions of them and consider their original beginnings and function. Dogs as a species are less than 15,000 years old. This is a mere evolutionary blink compared to their ancestral species, the gray wolf (Canis lupus), which as a species is around 5 million years old.

To examine canine behaviour at its most basic, dog trainer Tracey Murray and myself went on a pilgrimage to Wolf Park, a wolf research facility in Indiana, USA. There we were able to observe raw, primal canine behaviour and appreciate the subtle complexity of the social life of wolves. This amazing experience has given us further insight into the behaviour of domestic dogs and has enhanced our ability to work with them. We hope that what we have learnt can be used by those who work in the animal industry, including Animal Management Officers.

Introduction

This paper discusses why we wanted to study wolves in order to learn more about dogs and why we chose Wolf Park as our place of research. It explains the basis of our observations being on the social behaviour of wolves, with emphasis on agonistic behaviour. It also discusses the importance of canine body postures in conveying social status and the ability for people to apply like signals to defuse anxiety and aggression during interactions with dogs.

Why wolves?

Since dogs are descended from wolves, the behaviour of wolves is much like that of dogs. Because the behaviour of the two species is so similar watching wolf behaviour can give us clues about why our dogs act the way the do. That can help us better understand, train and handle our dogs and give them better lives with us (Willard 2001).

Studying wolves rather than dogs also helps us to gain a fresh perspective of canine behaviour, because we tend to be more attentive to the experience of observing an exotic species as compared to a domestic species. People are familiar with dogs – we would argue too familiar in terms of really noticing behaviour. In the study of human psychology it is recognised that when people become familiar with something they often stop paying attention to it. People do not see new things because they are not expecting to see them (Grandin & Johnson 2005).

Consequently, we in the animal industry can develop set expectations about animal behaviour and resist, either consciously or unconsciously, alternate ways of thinking (Neill 2006). Scott & Fuller (1965) have observed this, stating that one of the difficulties with studying dogs is that everyone knows dogs. During their classic study on genetics and the social behaviour of dogs they reported that each of the researchers tried to write down what the dogs did. *"Being well-trained scientists, we tried to be accurate and conscientious as possible…(however) we were so familiar with the details of dog behaviour, such as tail wagging, sniffing the ground, etc, that we overlooked them entirely."*

By observing wolves we can be more conscious of canine behaviour and less inclined to attach anthropomorphic meanings to it.

Why Wolf Park?

The wolves at Wolf Park are captive raised, meaning that they are fairly comfortable with the presence of humans. Researchers are therefore able to easily observe the wolves, that are kept in semi-natural conditions on a 75 acre reserve, without having to deal with the half kilometre flight distance involved with studying wolves in the wild. Because the wolves have been under daily watch virtually since birth, researchers have ready access to data on each of individual's history and pack dynamics.

Wolf Park offers a number of learning opportunities for suitably interested parties, including seminars, ethology practicums and internships.

What did we look for?

In preparation of our visit to Wolf Park, it was necessary to for us to consider what knowledge of dog behaviour is important in an animal management context. We examined the dog management related tasks that Animal Management Officers are likely to execute and streamlined them into the following categories:

- Capture/impound/handle dogs;
- Make decisions on the keeping and management of dogs; and
- Assist dog owners in achieving compliance by giving advice on behavioural issues such as barking and aggression.

Looking at these tasks it was reinforced to us that the ability to identify and respond to canine body language is a crucial tool in the Animal Management Officer's repertoire. As discussed above, we believed that we have been missing canine signals, either by not seeing them or dismissing them as unimportant. What we wanted to learn from the wolves is what exactly we had been overlooking. Furthermore, we wanted to learn more about the effects of our own body language during interactions with the wolves.

Agonistic behaviour

The wolf's complex social organisation is paralleled by a great range and subtlety of communication between individuals, using facial features, body postures, vocalisations and chemical communication (Barash 1997). Goodenough et al (1993) refer to it as a multi-media approach to communication, conveying messages in a variety of sensory modalities.

Of particular interest to us during our stay at Wolf Park was the display of agonistic behaviour – the complex of aggression, threat, appeasement and avoidance that often occurs during encounters between members of the same species (McFarland 2006). Agonistic behaviour is highly ritualised and most conflicts are settled by means of social signals which eliminate the need for overt fighting. The display of threatening or submissive social signals without actual fighting is by far the most common form of agonistic behaviour and most animals quickly recognise and respond to such gestures. It is because these rituals are so effective that overt fighting becomes unnecessary. The preponderance of ritualised combat over physical combat is illustrated by a study of agonistic behaviour among elephant seals.

It was reported that for every actual fight there were 67 aggressive encounters which never went beyond ritualistic threats (Johnson 1972).

At Wolf Park we observed countless displays of ritualised aggression amongst the wolves, many displays occurring literally at our feet when we happened to be in the enclosure with them. While spectacular to behold in sight and sound, actual bites were rare and the one injury we sighted was minor. We learnt that such agonistic behavioural patterns are especially important in establishing and maintaining dominant-subordinate relationships amongst the pack members and occur frequently throughout the day (Goodman 2007, Klinghammer 2007).

A lesson specifically learnt by the author was the extent to which body placement is important in defining social relationships and structure in canines. Where the wolves stood, sat or lay down was as equally important in conveying their degree of dominance or subordination within the pack as any other form of visual communication. This is not a newly discussed issue in the dog world, but some have dismissed the issue as myth (Donaldson 1996). However, upon arriving home from five weeks of intense wolf observation I was able to freshly view my own dog's behaviour and I was surprised at what I had been previously missing.

With this in mind, do we consider that owners should take notice when their dogs push past them to be the first out the door, stand over them, or seat themselves where their eye level is higher than theirs? There is absolutely no doubt in our minds that the dog is making an important statement about their standing within the 'pack'. Please note that we are not saying that the dog in question is terribly disobedient, out of control, or even that there is a particularly big problem. What we are saying is that dog owners should be aware of the signals that dogs give as indication of social standing and attitude, as agonistic behaviour can be interspecific (Hart 1985). People commonly enter the social order of dogs, horses and cattle, therefore knowledge and use of appropriate signals can be valuable in such interactions.

Employing species specific signals

Reading canine body language is not new to Animal Management Officers. However, employing the use of the species own signals to aid communication is a more recent strategy that has been described by Rugass (1997) in her work on calming signals in canines and McAuliffe and Smith (2003) when working with pinnipeds and birds. The latter report that animal handlers who employ somatic communication (body language) techniques have been able to improve their ability to communicate to animals concepts such as lack of aggressive intent and defuse anxiety levels.

At Wolf Park we experienced first hand the benefits of using somatic communication with the wolves. Breaking eye contact by blinking and head turning often elicited a reciprocal response, minimising challenge situations. We incorporated displacement behaviours such as yawning or turning to divert a wolf's attention if we considered they were becoming too focused on us. We responded to high blink and respiration rates – indicators of excitement or anxiety - by slowing movement, even stopping movement altogether. The objective here was to present ourselves as boring or unremarkable. Similarly, Animal Management Officers can defuse aggressive dogs in the field by signalling confidence and lack of aggressive intent through relaxed posture, head turning, rear approach and yawning.

While certainly beneficial to people working in the animal industry, knowledge and use of these signals should not be viewed as their exclusive domain.

We consider that they could be used to great advantage by the everyday dog owner, particularly in reducing the number of aggressive incidents that occur in the family home. When investigating dog attacks in our respective roles as dog trainer and animal management professional, it is apparent to us that dog owners simply do not see the indicators that warn an aggressive incident is forthcoming. People are often heard saying that the dog attacked without warning or without provocation, yet the reality is that they did not see or understand the warnings in the first place. Some knowledge in this area could have seen a remarkably different and certainly more positive outcome.

Conclusion

Wolves have much to teach us about dogs – how to better understand, train, handle and live with them. All of these factors contribute to the overall management of dogs in our community, and the depth of understanding involved determines the quality of the situation.

While our time at Wolf Park was relatively short, the experience was highly revealing and rewarding. We would urge other parties to take the time to observe these amazing creatures. We guarantee that you will never view dogs the same way again.

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About the Author/s

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Selina Neill is the Supervisor Animal Management for the Gold Coast City Council. She has been in Local Government for over 12 years and has previously held field positions in animal management as well as coordinating a comprehensive public awareness and education program.

Selina holds a Graduate Certificate in Public Sector Leadership, a CIV in Business (Frontline Management) and a CIV in Training & Assessment. She is currently enrolled in a CIV in Animal Control and Regulation. She was Team Leader of the 2002 UAM AMO Team of the Year and in 2004 she was awarded UAM AMO of the Year.

Tracey Murray

Tracey Murray has been involved in the Dog Training field for the previous 15 years. She is co-owner of Craig A. Murray Dog Training. She has co-authored dozens of print media articles on dog training for family pets and specialist search, scent, law enforcement and assistance dog training. She also wrote a weekly Pet Column where she advised on Industry products and behavioural issues for pet owners. She has co-presented for Animal Industries Resource Centre on the Certificate IV Animal Control and Regulation, Identify and Respond to Animal Behaviour Unit of Competency. She has been travelling to Japan lecturing and demonstrating in Colleges for Dog Trainers in four major cities for the past 7 years. She has been involved in many University Lectures and demonstrations and has also appeared on several television programs. She also co-presents for local Government School Education Programs.

Wolf Park

For more information about Wolf Park, including opportunities for ethology practicums and internships, visit their website at www.wolfpark.org