

Shh...

THE ANIMALS ARE TALKING

The San Bushmen and other indigenous peoples have always insisted that they can communicate with the natural world around them. But can we modern humans do the same? **Geoff Dalglish** spends time with an animal whisperer who says that we can. ▶

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What is this leopard thinking? More and more people are accepting that two-way communication between humans and animals is possible, whether they are free-ranging, domestic or habituated.

We can probably thank Hollywood for popularising the idea of interspecies communication, especially in the wake of the recent wide-screen blockbusters *Avatar* and *Alice in Wonderland*. (How ironic that humanity's disconnection from nature is so pervasive that many of us only entertain the possibility of other levels of perception – and communication – while sitting indoors, wearing 3D glasses!) Of course, interchanges between species aren't new to movie-makers. Decades ago Rex Harrison paved the way, delighting screen audiences with his charming portrayal of Dr Dolittle, an eccentric physician in Victorian England who

spoke a number of animal languages. More than any other film, though, it was *The Horse Whisperer* of 1998 that lent credibility to the concept, as celluloid hero Tom Booker, played by Robert Redford, helped heal a seriously injured young girl (Scarlett Johansson in one of her early roles) and her psychologically scarred horse.

Fact or fancy? Can some of us really communicate with animals? I conducted a random survey, expecting ridicule, and was surprised by how many people are emphatic that not only is it possible, but desirable and important to the future wellbeing of the planet and all its inhabitants. I also encountered a number of wildlife and conservation professionals who either practise forms of interspecies communication or routinely call in an

'animal whisperer'. (Some birders are even beginning to see it as a way of interpreting what birds are saying, appreciating that our feathered friends are the journalists of the bush, with a story to tell anybody who stops to listen.)

Animal communication is not a gift,' training facilitator Anna Breytenbach insists. 'It is a natural ability that we all have. It is simply a matter of getting in touch with our intuition and accessing something that isn't part of our everyday five-sensory reality. The First People (Native Americans) and indigenous tribes like the San Bushmen were able to communicate telepathically with all of nature quite easily and didn't consider this unusual.'

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She continues, 'Every person in the tribe had the ability to connect in non-five-sensory ways with their surroundings; to know from the animals where they were, which was a good animal to hunt or which plants would be medicinal, toxic or nourishing.'

So how, exactly, does it work? 'Animals interact by using physical actions (body language), their own complex languages (vocalisation) and telepathy,' Anna explains. 'People receive the messages to the degree that they are listening and can tune in to the same energetic wavelength, a bit like twirling the dials of an old radio. From there, telepathic communication involves the direct transmission of feelings, intentions, thoughts, mental images, emotions, impressions and pure knowing.'

This was starting to sound like something out of *The X-Files*. 'Actually,' says Anna, 'the mechanism for this lies in the field of quantum physics. Thoughts and emotions generate electromagnetic impulses in the brain, and these frequencies are available for perceiving by scientific equipment – or our own more complex receiving device, the mind.'

She too, though, admits she was deeply sceptical when she originally encountered the concept of animal communications while working as an IT professional in the US. 'My passion has always been wildlife and nature, so I decided to do tracking training at the Wilderness Awareness School outside Seattle. Because I grew up in South Africa, I didn't know a thing about North American animals. I could look at the tracks and recognise that the animal had four toes, but I had no idea what might have created them.'

Her instructors told her to simply sit with the tracks and see what impressions came her way. 'When I closed my eyes I got mental flashes – brief images of various animal faces or bodies,' she says. 'This happened with a coyote and a mink, neither of which I had ever encountered. When I described my mental visions, the instructors confirmed that it was indeed those animals that had left the tracks.'

a thanksgiving

Anna remembers a rescue in South Africa's Karoo region where a grey rhebuck was freed from the metal jaws of a gin trap, then transported for an hour on the back of a vehicle. 'She was in extreme shock and close to death with a low body temperature, glazed eyes and three very deep wounds right down to the bone,' she recalls. While Anna's companions phoned for emergency medical advice, she sat with the injured antelope, gently reassuring her that she was safe and urging her to ignore the frightening and unfamiliar sounds and smells.

'Our plan necessitated shoving an ointment containing various plants and natural remedies deep into her wounds and applying it to the exposed bone. To do this we had to undo the straps on her legs, which was potentially very dangerous as earlier she'd been thrashing about. Again I communicated, explaining what I was going to do. I asked her to stay still, even though it was going to hurt when I pushed my fingers into her wounds. I explained that if she could tolerate the pain, it would be over soon and she'd stand a better chance of survival.'

Anna then applied the ointment. 'Amazingly, the rhebuck complied and just fixed her big, brown eyes on mine while I administered the medicine. It was agonising for her but she bore the pain for the five minutes it took to tend her wounds. We decided to release her back into the wild immediately and I asked her to tolerate another ride to where we could set her free.'

The team drove to the release point and gently lifted the rhebuck out of the vehicle, coaxing her to her feet. 'The moment she was able to move, she bounded away from us,' recalls Anna. 'When she was 30 metres away, she turned back and looked each of us in the eyes. Into all of our minds, and even those who weren't overtly communicating, came the phrase: "Thank you".'

BELOW Sharing a joke? 'Animal whisperer' Anna Breytenbach insists that all humans have the ability to conduct non-verbal communications with animals, provided there is mutual understanding and respect.

BOTTOM Walking in nature is a good way to begin the process, as these guests at the Knysna Elephant Park in South Africa's Garden Route discover.



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There was nothing within Anna's 'logical and ordinary upbringing' that could explain it, and at first she thought it was a fluke, or a lucky guess. 'Eventually,' she says, 'I decided to research this phenomenon and discovered that interspecies communication was well established in the US, with a host of workshops, courses, teachers, institutes and books to choose from.'

While continuing her day job, she studied through the respected Assisi International Animal Institute, which operates on the basic premise that all animals – human and nonhuman – are sentient beings, can express their intelligence in various ways and are able to communicate with each other. After conducting numerous case studies and having the results validated, Anna was finally convinced that what she was experiencing was real. She completed several other courses, then returned to her native country, where she has been consulting and running workshops for the past seven years.

While formalised interspecies communication courses are relatively new in South Africa, the benefits are increasingly being appreciated by wildlife managers, conservation officials, environmentalists and veterinarians. Anna is one of a handful of full-time communicators in southern Africa, consulting with organisations as diverse as The Global White Lion Protection Trust, Jukani Predator Sanctuary, Baboon Matters, Monkeyland and CapeCROW (Centre for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife).

'I'm not teaching people anything new,' she says. 'I'm merely helping them remember what's already within them. I think that it's important to experience a deep connectedness with nature again. When we achieve a direct empathetic connection with another being, we're much more inclined to understand the perspective of that being and the challenges it faces, particularly at the hands of humans and what we are doing to this planet.'

My own curiosity about the subject was aroused when I faced possible death after being charged by eight elephants in a camp bordering Zambia's South Luangwa National Park. Terrified, I hid behind a tree and attempted to silence my ragged breathing and slow my hammering heart as the enraged animals trumpeted their fury and tusked the ground just metres away. With a determination born of pure terror, I attempted to communicate telepathically that I meant no harm. I have no idea whether the message was received, but gradually their emotions subsided and they moved off and began foraging. Imagine my gratitude when I subsequently learned that the same animals had killed two local villagers in previous, separate incidents, and have killed again since.

In an attempt to understand that experience better, I signed up for one of Anna's workshops. And that's how I came to be in the somewhat surreal situation of being surrounded by a dozen of these giants at South Africa's Knysna Elephant Park.

According to Anna, the same techniques can be applied to free-ranging, domestic or habituated animals, and she is often called in to calm a wild creature that has been rescued or is being rehabilitated. 'In these situations, wild animals are incredibly stressed at suddenly being trapped in confined surroundings with all the noises of people, cars and machinery,' she says. Her role is to reassure the animal that the people are there to help, while explaining what is required of them.

Recently a rescued baboon orphan was transported from Baboon Matters in Cape Town to the CapeCROW rehabilitation project at Barrydale, in South Africa's Western Cape province. Before it set off, communicator Wynter Worsthorpe prepared the young animal for its journey with an assurance that it would be safe and soon among its own kind. It remained calm and quiet throughout, without sedation. CapeCROW co-founder Nola Frazer says that before a baboon is introduced to a troop within the sanctuary, it is routine to check how the resident animals feel about the newcomer, to ensure harmony and prevent a possible fatality.

Anna believes that communicators can be especially helpful in enhancing relationships between medical professionals and their animal patients. 'For example, vets can find out directly – from the horse's mouth, so to speak – what the animal's experience of their pain or discomfort is, where in the body it occurs, what might have caused it and even what might make it better. This is immensely helpful to medical practitioners who otherwise have to rely on observation and other diagnostic measures.'

In the wild, communicators can assist by warning of impending danger, like the presence of poachers, and can even suggest – through mental imagery – possible safe escape routes. With programmes that return animals to the wild, such as the reintroduction of captive lions into a natural environment, it is also useful to convey the perils



what the experts say

Clive Walker, renowned conservationist, author and co-founder of the Endangered Wildlife Trust, believes the issue of animal communication needs to be better understood. 'There is communication that we as humans don't always understand,' he says. His wife Conita has reared black and white rhinos, as well as a hippo, establishing close connections and a form of communication with the animals. His own experience has extended to elephants and a two-year study of baboons in the wild, convincing him that it is possible to win the animals' acceptance provided a low profile and non-threatening attitude are adopted. He also believes that a potential disaster may have been averted when he spoke gently to a wild elephant that was advancing towards a group he was leading.

Animal behaviourist Janice Horsnell, who runs an animal shelter north of Johannesburg, is adamant that animals in her care go to new homes only once she has established that they are happy with their would-be custodians. She says interspecies communication is fundamental to understanding the creature's needs. 'I focus all my attention on the animal when it meets a prospective new owner and listen to what it says – in this way we find ideal matches.'

Medical doctor Barbara Zeisler works closely with animals and their humans. 'In five years of working as an alternative healer using animal communications, I have enjoyed far greater success than in the previous 25 years as a GP,' she insists. 'Conventional medicine treats symptoms by dispensing drugs instead of healing the illness at the core. Physical issues clear up when you address the deeper emotional and spiritual issues of the animal.' She says that animals often take on the illnesses of their humans. 'When you heal the animal, you heal the human and vice versa.' She feels that communicating with animals is also more straightforward than it is with humans. 'They have no hidden agendas and are brutally honest.'

of targeting particular prey species. Giraffes, for example, could inflict a devastating kick to a naive predator. This involves sending clear and graphic telepathic images of the injuries that could result.

Interspecies communication is not confined to moments of stress or danger, however. Anna also tries to find out about creatures' day-to-day existence. 'If animals ▶

ABOVE The eyes of an elephant are certainly expressive, but often more can be learned through telepathy and body language.



For Anna, the goal is to
mentor more communicators to help resolve the
challenges of living harmoniously with animals

Anna believes that animals transmit feelings, thoughts, intentions and mental images in ways that don't always use the five senses.

are happily going about their business in the natural environment, I might communicate with them about their lifestyles. It is a great opportunity to find out what it is like to be in those paws,' she says. 'So I might ask a leopard, "How does it feel to drag an impala kill up a tree?" The response I'll get is a very real sensation within my own body of absolute power, strength and latent potential.

'I could ask a sleeping lion how it is experiencing its body and its surroundings, and feel this fantastic sense of complete relaxation as if I'm meditating deeply myself. And, if I ask one of the antelope species about its favourite food, the answer might be a mental image of the animal stretching its neck up to browse a particular bush, or a taste in my own mouth of the acidity of a leaf.'

For Anna, the goal is to mentor more communicators to help resolve the challenges of living harmoniously with

tips for would-be whisperers

- Sit quietly and calm the mind to access your subtle intuitive senses.
- Set an intention to have clear communication and visualise establishing a telepathic connection with the animal.
- Send your message, be it an image or envisaged words, trusting that it will be received.
- Observe any subtle impressions or feelings, which can be an answer in the form of mental images, emotions, physical sensations, words or thoughts.

animals. She says, 'Interspecies communication brings about mutual understanding and respect, along with the possibility of co-creating solutions for even the trickiest situations where wildlife and humans come into conflict.' ■

Anna Breytenbach's work is the focus of a forthcoming documentary by the Natural History Unit, due for release in 2011. Find out more about her workshops and philosophy at www.animalspirit.org

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From 25 August – 1 September Anna Breytenbach will be responding to your thoughts, comments and queries on FACEBOOK. To join the discussions and post your insights, visit the Africa Geographic FACEBOOK page.