



Achieving greater understanding together

Thursday, July 31, 2014

[Welfare/Integration/ Environment/Traffic](#)

"When I teeter homewards with my dachshund ...

... from the wine taverns of Grinzing" – not just a line from a well-known Viennese song, but also a scene that many of us has seen from time to time. Master and dog peacefully united after a convivial evening out on the tiles.

But just how seriously should we take such a partnership? Can we speak of a profound relationship in which we know one another, in which we try to understand our needs, and actually learn from each other in the process? This question can definitely be answered in the affirmative, since people and animals, like people, also form serious relationships with one another. Exploring these relationships is the objective of anthrozoology – the science of human-non-human-animal studies, or HAS



Together with her colleagues, Carola Otterstedt of the "Man & Animal Alliance" foundation has also established so-called "encounter farmyards" where people and animals can coexist peacefully.

Research boom

Anthrozoology is a discipline that is currently experiencing a boom, in a manner of speaking, at least if we can believe the researchers involved in this field. Some 260 of them convened in Vienna last week for the 23rd conference of the International Society for Anthrozoology (ISAZ), in the course of which they exchanged the results of their latest research into human-animal relationships, a field that has received too little attention in the past. And this is a very wide field – as very soon became obvious during a press conference. The research papers presented ranged from projects involving prisoners training dogs and investigations of the microbiomes that exist on both ourselves and our faithful companions to an analysis of the naming of rabbits in kindergarten classes. The last paper was a bit of a cuddly exotic in the congress programme. Research into the effects of animals in therapies appears to be more widespread – like the use of horses for children with autism, for example. This has been a common practice ever since the 1990s. Dogs are also frequently used as co-therapists in an approach that it is not actually such a new one at all. Even Sigmund Freud fetched his chow chow in particularly severe cases, recalls Kurt Kotrschal of the Department of Behavioural Biology at the University of Vienna, which organized the conference in co-operation with Vienna's Messerli Research Institute.

Viennese dogs & wolves

And even if there were no dogs in flesh and blood amongst the speakers, their presence could be clearly felt, at least as far as the choice of topics was concerned. This was hardly surprising, as Vienna is well placed, especially with regard to behaviour research in dogs. For instance, the Messerli Institute, which has been located at the Veterinary University for the last three years, now has a so-called "clever dog lab" in which the cognitive performance of our faithful four-legged friends can be studied. This is one of two facilities in Vienna that have literally gone to the dogs, so to speak. The institutes' second important research centre is located in Ernstbrunn. This is the so-called "Wolf Science Centre", where dogs can be compared directly with their ancestors, the wolves. This gives us valuable insights into what happened in the process of domestication. Similarly interesting research results would be obtained if one were to compare the pig with its ancestor, the wild boar. However, delegates were somewhat reluctant to talk about pigs during the press conference. The issue is a tricky one: after all, these quadrupeds are considered to be particularly intelligent. On the other hand, in view of Austrians' inordinate consumption of pork – often at cheap prices – pigs should perhaps be held in higher esteem.



Kurt Kotrschal and Friederike Range also carry out research at the Wolf Science Centre in Ernstbrunn

Trend reversal

However, according to Carola Otterstedt of the German 'Man & Animal Alliance' foundation, who was also a guest in Vienna, it is generally true that the more similar animals are to people, the more they are appreciated. Kotrschal emphasized that this may also explain the catastrophic living conditions of many fishes, which are still treated completely indifferently. And although things are not going well when it comes to the rights of the lobsters and squids of this world, apparently a certain amount of progress has been made over the course of the years. This can be demonstrated above all by a quick look at any bookcase. Whereas the animal books of the 1980s bore titles like "The Big Book of Dogs or Cats", nowadays the titles express greater appreciation for these pets. For example, *Truly Best Friends* is the title of Kotrschal's latest work, published in September. What the ladies and gentlemen present at the press conference had to say on German dog guru Martin Rütter: there are worse ones. And as the famous comic tomcat Garfield used to say: "Just keep smiling and waving" – a poor choice of quotation, incidentally, for one thing one should never do in one's dealings with animals is to humanize them.

More on the Topic

Human Animal Relationships Research Group: <http://hai.univie.ac.at>

Clever Dog Lab: www.cleverdoglab.at

Wolf Science Center: www.wolfscience.at/de

Messerli Research Institute of University of Veterinary Medicine Vienna: www.vetmeduni.ac.at/messerli

Man & Animal Alliance foundation: www.buendnis-mensch-und-tier.de/

(Sasch)

From: <http://www.wieninternational.at/de/aktuell/wenn-ich-mit-meinem-dackel-de> (1.8.2014)