

Anthropomorphism n. The ascribing of human motivation, characteristics, or behavior to inanimate objects, animals or natural phenomena.

Biologists in general work diligently to avoid anthropomorphism in the interpretation of their data because it is generally considered that anthropomorphic interpretations have major shortcomings. The reason biologists do not like anthropomorphic interpretations is because explanations based on emotions and motivation are easily affected by the personal experiences of the interpreter.

However, there are cases where it is difficult not to anthropomorphize. Discussions of primate behavior are almost always centered around anthropomorphic interpretations because of their close relationship to us. It is difficult not to ascribe emotions and other human motivations in animals that seem so much like us. Evolutionarily, it would be logical to assume that primates have at least some emotion, but there is no emotion gene (that we know of) and no way of knowing how far down the evolutionary tree we would have to go to eliminate the possibility of emotion. Many of us often ascribe emotions to our cats and dogs, but do they really feel emotions in the way that we understand them? Do rodents feel emotions? Snakes and lizards? What about fish?

These questions, on the surface may seem trivial but in fact they can become very important. Many forms of animal research that would be considered inhumane if performed on large mammals, are performed on rats and mice because it is more difficult for us to anthropomorphize them. What are the benefits and detriments to this way of thinking?

The following are some examples of behaviors that are often anthropomorphized. You need to think about these examples from two points of view and be ready to discuss both points of view in the discussion section. The first point of view, is a purely anthropomorphic view. You should be able to describe and explain the behavior entirely based on "human motivation, characteristics or behavior". The second point of view, is from a "biologists" point of view. Things like selection pressures and adaptations should be on your mind.

1. There is a species of ant that enters colonies of other species. They have aggressive encounters with these other species but they are large and often dominate in these encounters. They remove larva from the nursery of the invaded species and take them back to their own colony. The larva are raised to pupation and the young ant becomes a worker for the invading species of ant. These ants will never have any reproductive success and are no longer gaining anything through inclusive fitness or kin selection.
2. Young scrub jays in Florida return to their parents nesting sites after they have fledged, for several years. During this time they aid in raising younger siblings during the breeding season. These animals are often sexually mature and forego their own breeding potential to aid their parents in raising the new chicks.
3. Seagoing humans often run into trouble that puts them in the ocean far from shore. On occasion, when this happens, it has been documented that dolphins passing by these humans have swam near enough that these people were able to grab onto the dolphins. Then the dolphins swam into near shore waters and sometimes, right up to the shore.

Examples 4 and 5 will be shown in section.