



Animal Welfare: Animal Communication

Most humans have a lot to learn when it comes to interacting with the other animals. Too often, we forget that verbal communication is least important to them and most important to us. We human beings depend upon our vocal capacities to carry us through almost every interaction we have, whether that's with other people, with our pets or with strange animals. When we talk with our voices, we assume the other party understands and is listening to our words. And it is due to this mistaken assumption that, too often, there is miscommunication.

Domesticated equines (donkeys, mules and horses) communicate through their entire bodies. What they see, what they hear, what they smell, what they touch, how they are touched: for them, these are the important elements in a conversation. If you begin to approach an equine, and they can see you, they're paying very close attention – right from your first movement. They watch your entire body, your hands, the way you hold yourself, the speed at which you move – all these signals are a source of communication.

Put yourself in a donkey's place and consider a human who approaches. Too often, the movement is very fast, hands are outstretched, and words spoken are just so many unintelligible sounds. How would you react in that situation? Would you want to have your forehead rubbed by a stranger, or have hands placed all over your face and sensitive ears without warning? Would you feel comfortable?

Few Things to Remember:

- Think ahead. What are you trying to achieve? Do you want to touch the animal? Why? Where? You are initiating a relationship here, what do you want to accomplish?
- Walk S L O W L Y and keep your talk, talk, talking to a minimum. The animal is not attending to your words; rather, he or she is concentrating on the signals your entire body is transmitting. Swift movements are unsettling.
- Pause, and see if the animal wants to approach you and, if so, stand still. Is he or she nervous, trying to move away? If so, remain standing quietly and let a few moments pass.



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- Begin to approach again and keep your hands lowered and expect the donkey will want to smell them. If you raise them high, the animal might think it is going to be struck.
- Be prepared to be smelled all over. Your body odor is VERY significant to them and, if you are nervous, that is picked up immediately.

Ears

- Both ears forward: the donkey is tuned in to something on or behind you. The donkey is watching your movement, your speed and where you're going.
- One ear forward and one back: the donkey is very curious, checking out all environmental sounds.
- Ears flat out to the side: the donkey is resting.
- Both ears back and up: something is going on behind them but it is still watching you with its eyes.
- Ears back and down: there is something wrong. Do NOT approach.

Body Movement

- Nudge with the nose: a jennet will often do this to her foal in order to encourage him or her to move forward. OR, a donkey will nudge a person if the person is in the way of food.
- Nipping movement with the mouth: this can be a cautionary signal. Basically, the donkey does not want you or another animal too close. For example, when Anu was nursing Odin, she would make this movement if anyone approached too closely while he was suckling.
- Or a donkey will pull at a sleeve if he or she wants something that you have. This reaction can be painful if the donkey's teeth bite into one's arm and the habit should be discouraged by use of the voice and a loud, abrupt, "No!" is expressed.
- Standing with one leg raised: If a donkey is eating, that is its total focus and a movement from behind can startle the animal. The raised leg is a warning to move away.



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- Resting the head on a human's shoulder: the donkey is very relaxed and comfortable. Indeed, if a donkey is comfortable with you, it will always approach.
- Turning around and placing the hind end to the person: this is always a sign the animal is nervous around people. Some equines will allow the rump to be patted but not any other part of the body. At the same time, turning around is a nervous response and could signal the animal is set to kick out in defense.
- Tail switching: The animal is annoyed about something. Look around to find the cause for concern and/or reexamine what you are doing.

Words

- The human voice can have a powerful effect on a donkey. But one must always remember it is the level and tone that are equally, if not more, important than specific words. It's good to remember that once the voice has been heard, the animal uses its sight to 'read' what's meant. A stream of words has little, if any, meaning.
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- The use of specific, single words can be effective so long as they are used consistently. Donkeys will come to understand, "No" if it is used in specific, repeated circumstances. At the same time, overuse of this word can render it meaningless. In English, it is easy to forget that 'know' and 'no' sound the same.
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- Additionally, the level and tone of the voice can be used very positively. For example, Saucy is a little mule who suffered severe mistreatment before coming to the DSC. She's been with us for 18 years and has continued the entire time to be exceptionally nervous around people. Recently, however, one of our volunteers has discovered Saucy will calm down noticeably when she's alone with the little mule and sings quietly to her.
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- The use of soothing sounds is an area that needs considerable research in interspecies communication. At the same time, one should remember the use of a soothing tone can go only so far. If the animal is upset about something, it is inclined to follow its instincts. Always remember the sound of your voice is but one of countless cues (sight, smell, motion) the animal receives.