

Proper Etiquette With Animals
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The Olympic Games have reminded us that in different cultures a greeting or gesture can have different meanings. Americans shake hands while the Japanese bow, for example. What is a friendly greeting in one culture may be an embarrassing gesture in another. The same is true when we communicate with animals of different species. What we intend as a friendly greeting may be taken as a social slight or even as a threat.

As every one who has been around animals knows all too well, other animals don't speak our language and don't use many of our gestures. What is often not as readily appreciated is that other animals interpret our movements and gestures just as if we were one of them! To the woman who approaches an unfamiliar dog tied to a post, her looking at the dog and reaching down to pet it on top of the head is a gesture of greeting and friendliness. To the dog, the direct eye contact and reaching down from above is threatening, because this is what dogs do to each other to threaten a stranger.

When people don't understand the rules of etiquette for the animals that they are trying to communicate with, confusion or even injury can result. The dog that is being petted on the head may become unnecessarily frightened and might pee on himself. He might even become aggressive to the well-meaning stranger. Common courtesy and common sense dictate that we not assume that our words and gestures mean the same thing to other animals. This is especially true for unfamiliar animals. Animals that we live with may learn that our stares and petting are not threats, the unfamiliar animal may not know this.

The fact that different species of animals may interpret our behavior in very different ways makes it difficult to always know what's the proper thing to do. For example, to dogs, standing facing them head-on can be threatening while for cattle turning your side to them can be threatening. Some generic advice for people around unfamiliar animals might include the following. Don't approach or reach for unfamiliar animals. Quick movements towards animals can be threatening. Sticking a hand out for an animal to smell is to be recommended only if you can live without the hand. Direct eye contact is threatening to many species of animals as is standing over them. Speaking loudly or sharply to animals can be frightening and with dogs deep voices may sound like growls. The best advice is to be familiar with the gestures and signals of the animals that you are going to be around. If you're not sure don't risk it.