

AUG 10 1975

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THE GOOD EARTH / Mel Ellis

A tribute to our animal helpers

OUR DEBT to the less articulate of the world — not even counting pigs, cows, sheep, chickens and such other domestic creatures as feed and clothe us — is as monumental as it is varied.

This is entirely aside from the pig's unlikely talent to sniff out truffles for the gourmet and aside from the lead dogs that guide the thousands of blind through their dark worlds. There are regiments of animals who have already given us survival clues that have added not just years, but decades to the lives of men and women otherwise doomed prematurely by heart, liver, kidney, lung and other organic diseases.

What's more, the contributions of these allegedly dumb creatures has not only prolonged lives, but also, in many instances, provided the information medical men and therapists require to make an older's last years a time of fulfillment and reward instead of senile confusion.

Such experiments as can be performed on the fertile yet short lived mouse to establish basic tenets in the biology of heredity — genetics — can provide important facts in, let us say, 10 years. It might otherwise take a hundred or a thousand years to accumulate the data if we had only men himself to study in our search for the regulating procedures of transmissible mental and physical traits — good or bad.

Books have been filled with the heroic deeds of dogs. But largely because of the protests of antivivisectionists, their major contributions in the field of medicine have been soft pedaled, even though, in the majority of cases, the dogs earmarked for experimentation lead happy, comfortable lives.

But, lest we permit vivisection to sidetrack us, what better way to study, restudy and study again the progress of a fetus than in the pouch of an opossum where the embryos couldn't care less that we

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chart this mysterious time in their lives in full color.

But please, just one more word for the dog — who just might be man's best friend — because in a truly dramatic experiment at Ohio State University, Dr. Samuel A. Carson gave friendly dogs to 50 seriously ill mental patients. These patients had not responded to conventional therapies (including drugs and electric shock). And, can you believe it, all but two of the patients accepted the dogs and began to improve, several (including one catatonic schizophrenic) improving enough to be discharged.

What the primates — chimps, monkeys, orangutans — have revealed about our own past is invaluable. What they may yet add to our future as a hopefully non-warrior, unprejudiced society of compassionate peoples might yet be revealed. Sociological studies of their ways just might reveal how we, in the first place, became deconstructed by greed, envy, pride . . . human vices that have pitted vast populations into warring.

There are simpler, less disturbing and complicated contributions, too, such as that made by the skunk whose last sight he visited my lawn for a nest of grubs. Or the humbirds, and their cousins, who keep about the bushes and backcountry around the world. Or the mouse, who if he steals my wheat, evens the score by lurching on a hibernating cluster of elm leaf beetles. Or the bat, bird, toad, frog, fish, snake, lizard . . . pottering the alky, voters and secret earth crumbles for whole squaddies and menageries and schools of mosquito wrigglers, moths, chiguns, olive fish, woodpeckers . . . which prey on me and my house and my garden and the precious maple I planted marking the birth date of my first born.

And kudos to the dolphin, which can locate underwater objects with unerring accuracy that is not possible by man's most sophisticated sonar equipment. And if they were used in war to guard harbors, and accused of carrying explosives to make kamikaze raids on enemy shipping, blame man, not the dolphin.

The USSR even claimed that the US was using cougars to locate submarines, bats to get incendiary devices to enemy population centers, and (would you believe it?) skunks to root guerrillas from underground hiding places. The accusation brought a prompt US denial that no animals were being trained to harm themselves in any military venture.

Even so, some historians claim that the bat turned the tide in the war of 1812 when their droppings, or guano, were used by this country to make gunpowder when the British blockade shut off munition deliveries from France.

Aside from the more obvious contributions which animals make to man, important is their role as an early warning system of impending danger to the environment, kinder in some respects to the role the caped canary once played by dying to warn miners of lethal concentrations of coal gas.

The swordfish first alerted man to the dangers of widespread and indiscriminate use of mercury compounds in agriculture and industry. The peregrine falcon brought to man's attention how excessive use of certain pesticides upset reproductive processes. The common tern first sent out warning signals that PCB, highly toxic relative of DDT, was causing genetic defects resulting in birth abnormalities.

But I don't have to go to the scientist for evidence that animals provide ample warning of environmental dangers. All I have to do is look out a front window and see if there are too many salt hungry cottontails congregating on my roadway. If so, I know for sure I'll have brown lawn patches because I walked too heavily when the ice was thick, and that even if it may leech all the way down to my ponds and streams and perhaps even kill the fish.

Our debt to the animal world? As I said in the first paragraph, it is monumental and varied — so vast it would need volumes to detail — and that's not even counting such nebulous contributions as make my heart beat faster when a cardinal dips like a glowing spark to accept a sunflower seed from my bird feeder. □

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