

# Amazing apes

It seems that humans are not the only ones who can act. Recent studies of orang-utans in Indonesia show that these animals can also communicate through mime.

A Canadian team carried out the studies on groups of orang-utans which were living semi-freely, making observations on the animals over a 20-year period. What they found was surprising. The orang-utans 'acted' on several occasions, mainly to humans but also to other orang-utans. In fact, the researchers identified 18 different mimes used by the animals and they recently published their findings in scientific journal *Biology Letters*.

Many of the mimes related to requests: the apes gestured to humans when they wanted something. For example, when one orang-utan wanted her coconut opened with a knife, she handed the coconut to a human, made an 'I give up' gesture, and made chopping movements using her arm and a stick. She then waited for her coconut with her arms folded!

Another example of a request was when an ape asked a human to clean his face, using a leaf. He handed the leaf over and when the researcher 'played stupid', he explained by rubbing the leaf on his dirty forehead. Other mimes were used in a similar way, for example to ask for a scratch. The orang-utans also occasionally gave instructions through mime, for example 'Eat this fruit'.

Some of the mimes in the study were even more sophisticated. One ape wanted to share an experience (or perhaps show thanks) with a worker who had treated her successfully after a stone had become stuck in her foot. When she met the person a week later, she acted out exactly what had happened, including putting on some cream. Three months later, she held up her problem-free foot to the same person! In this way, she told a story.

Acting in this way shows how developed the minds of these great apes are. Experts feel that such studies reveal their intelligence and creativity. To use gesture in this way is sophisticated; it can show, for example, that they understand when there is a breakdown in communication.

Scientists believe that mime is probably only used in the wild when other means of communication fail. However, it is a powerful and sophisticated tool and it opens up a whole new level of communication. According to some views, it might also help to explain the origins of human language, which may have been preceded by miming.

**1** Group discussion. In what way are humans different from other animals? Try to think of at least six ways.

**2** Decide if the following describe humans (H), animals (A) or both (B).

- a They use tools. \_\_\_\_\_
- b They show emotions. \_\_\_\_\_
- c They can act to communicate a message. \_\_\_\_\_
- d They build shelters. \_\_\_\_\_
- e They form groups and have relationships with others. \_\_\_\_\_
- f They share past experiences. \_\_\_\_\_
- g They mourn when one of their group dies. \_\_\_\_\_
- h They make requests. \_\_\_\_\_
- i They use language to communicate. \_\_\_\_\_
- j They look after their young. \_\_\_\_\_
- k They communicate with animals from other species. \_\_\_\_\_

3 Read the first two paragraphs of the text and find out what researchers found out about orang-utans.

4 Read the whole text to identify which of the points in exercise 2 are talked about.

5 Circle the correct answers.

- 1 The research was carried out by an *Indonesian / Canadian / international* team.
- 2 The studies were done over a period of *10 / 20 / 30* years.
- 3 The researchers identified *18 / 20 / 38* different mimes.
- 4 An orang-utan used a *stick / fruit / leaf* to show that he wanted a wash.
- 5 One orang-utan got a stone stuck in her *leg / arm / foot*.
- 6 Another animal showed a human that she wanted her *fruit / mouth / coconut* to be opened.
- 7 Many of the mimes were used to show a breakdown in *health / communication / relationships*.

6 Complete the sentence by adding the appropriate particle, eg *in, out*, etc to complete the phrasal verb.

- 1 The team carried \_\_\_\_\_ the research on orang-utans which were living semi-freely.
- 2 The orang-utan handed \_\_\_\_\_ the leaf to the human, in order to clean his face.
- 3 The ape gave the coconut to the human and made an 'I give \_\_\_\_\_' gesture, to show that she wanted help.
- 4 When the injured orang-utan met up with the worker who had helped her a week later, she acted \_\_\_\_\_ exactly what had happened.
- 5 The orang-utan even mimed the worker putting \_\_\_\_\_ the cream.

7 Think about the following questions before discussing the points in your group.

- 1 'Orang-utan' means 'person of the forest' in the Malay/Indonesian language. In what way do you think we are similar to orang-utans, having read the article?
- 2 Do you agree with the researchers' findings, or do you think they may have interpreted what they saw as human-like behaviour because that is what they were looking for?
- 3 Can you think of any other instances where animals appear to have human-like behaviour?
- 4 What sort of personality and qualifications do you need to be a good observer of animal behaviour? Would you like a job like this?
- 5 How do you think a great ape might mime the following: *Can you peel that banana? / I've got tooth ache! / Do you remember when I climbed that tall tree to get the fruit and fell down?*

### Glossary

**ape** (*noun*) - a large monkey without a tail

**breakdown** (*noun*) - a situation in which something has failed or is beginning to fail

**cream** (*noun*) - a thick, smooth substance that you put on your skin, for example when it is dry. Some medicines are in the form of cream

**gesture** (*noun, verb*) - something that you do to communicate your intentions

**mime** (*noun, verb*) - to tell a story using only the movements of your body and face, not using words

**precede** (*verb*) - to happen or exist before another person or thing: *these exercises must be preceded by a warm-up*

**request** (*noun, verb*) - an act of asking for something in a formal way

**scratch** (*verb*) - to pull your nails along your skin, especially because you have an itch: *scratch my back for me!*

**sophisticated** (*adj*) - complicated and advanced: *this is very sophisticated electronic equipment*