

Shaken sensibilities - Tsunami disaster may reveal a deeper, intuitive reality about animals and ourselves

By BEN BLOCH for the Missoulian | Posted: Thursday, January 13, 2005 12:00 am

Since the tsunami disaster in East Asia two weeks ago, I have been struck by the curious reports about the lack of animal casualties resulting from the catastrophic tidal wave.

Many seem to have responded to a certain sixth sense that prompted them to get to safety before the disaster hit. For example, a herd of antelope in the state of Tamil Nadu was spotted stampeding from the coast towards the forest. In Malaysia's Taiping zoo, journalist Ian McIntyre noticed that animals began behaving in a peculiar manner on the morning of Dec. 26, before the Tsunami hit. Most of them ran to their shelters and refused to come out. And in a wildlife sanctuary in India that was home to 2,000 beasts, only one animal - a wild boar - was found dead after the floods receded.

It has long been known that animals sometimes have the ability to sense impending natural disasters. Some scientists claim that animals have a unique hyper-sensitivity to Earth's electromagnetic fields which are thought to shift before an earthquake. And while it has been nearly impossible for scientists to prove this phenomenon is true (and most seem to regard the eerie facts as not much more than folklore), that hasn't stopped researchers and ordinary observers from paying close attention and even acting upon what they see.

James Berkland, a retired United States Geological Services geologist from California, claims to be able to predict earthquakes with greater than 75 percent accuracy simply by counting the number of lost pet ads in the daily newspaper.

Other reports of unusual animal behavior preceding earthquakes include mice becoming dazed and allowing themselves to be caught easily by hand, deep-sea fish being caught at the ocean's surface (other fish - in particular catfish - have been seen jumping frantically onto land). Homing pigeons becoming notably disoriented, and nocturnal animals like rats and weasels are seen wandering about in the daylight.

Older civilizations like Japan and China seem to give more weight to such evidence. On Feb. 4, 1975, the Chinese successfully evacuated the city of Haicheng several hours before a 7.3-magnitude earthquake. The decision to evacuate was based primarily on observations of unusual animal behavior, including snakes emerging from winter hibernation only to freeze to death on the roads. Ninety percent of the city's structures were destroyed in the quake, but the loss of life was minimized because the entire city had camped outside.

Similarly, the ancient Greeks considered an understanding of the relationship between unusual animal behavior and earthquakes to be an esoteric form of Secret Knowledge.

This kind of reading of events in the world has a relationship to art, especially since it appears to be a form of knowledge that isn't empirically provable. Realizing the possibility for a form of truth to lie in such observance can take on a kind of mystical or magical quality that artists and art lovers strive to present and understand.

Also, when pondering the age-old question of whether humans are just another kind of more evolved animal, it is interesting to consider - and compare - the sixth-sense ability of creatures whose lives we tend to value less than our own. In some sense it could be argued that, like some sort of alien, we work against Earth in a way that Earth's "natural" inhabitants do not, and are thus out of tune with its rumblings.

On another note, it's interesting to take into account the following quote from David Jay Brown's essay on Etho-Geological Forecasting.

"Earthquake experiences often take on dream-like qualities, or have a sense of unreality about them, perhaps because our most cherished notion of what is safe and solid in the world, the very ground upon which we rest, becomes wobbly and unstable. Our whole

sense of reality is shaken with the earth, as one is suddenly lifted up out of the mundane, and thrust into the center of what seems an immensely important drama."

Another bizarre animal story related to the recent tsunami seems to resonate with Brown's dream-becoming-reality metaphor. In a startling coupling, a baby hippo separated from its real mother has apparently bonded with a 100-year-old sea turtle that it now treats as its mother. The duo is said to be inseparable, and for many is a hopeful - and completely unpredictable - symbol in the midst of this tragic narrative. Such a union reflects yet another of the infinite uncanny possibilities in the world, and carries an almost heartbreaking message about the power of endurance and adjustment.

Missoula artist Ben Bloch writes about art for the Missoulian.