

Animal Management

You might think that humans have conquered the globe thanks to our superior brain power. World-changing discoveries such as fire, inventions like the wheel, and our ability to communicate through language have all certainly helped! However, another secret to humans' success has been our ability to domesticate animals. Humans around the world have been doing this successfully for thousands of years. But what is domestication?

Domestication describes the process of changing animals over many generations so that they (and their descendants) can live with and benefit people. Some animals – such as dogs, cats and rabbits – are domesticated as pets, whereas livestock animals are domesticated to provide food and clothing, or are used for work on farms.

Although small mammals, poultry, fish and even insects have been domesticated, historically the most important livestock animals have been the large mammals, those generally weighing over 45 kilograms. These provide the most food and can do the heaviest work. Of the large land-based mammals, only five have been successfully domesticated throughout the world: the sheep, goat, cow, pig and horse. Nine others, including the donkey, reindeer and camel, have been domesticated in certain parts of the globe only.

You will not see a gorilla or a hippo working on a farm, so why have some species of mammal been domesticated while others have not? Not all animals can be domesticated – and even those that have, can sometimes revert to their wild ways.

On the following pages, the internationally published biologist Jared Diamond proposes a list of characteristics that animals need to possess in order for them to be successfully domesticated. Lacking even one of these characteristics usually means that domestication fails.

