

Can't We All Just Get Along?

Adapted from Wallace Craig's 1921 article: "Why Do Animals Fight?"

Many of us have heard some pacifist argue that, "We humans are the only animal that fights its own kind." But that's just not true. Male lions fight each other. Chimpanzees have been known to make war on other chimp groups in the battle for resources. The question we must ask ourselves is not, "Do animals fight?" rather, "Why do animals fight?" In other words, why are some animals aggressive toward their own kind, while others are not? What is different about competitive species compared to cooperative species?

One of major factors that dictates the behavior of animals is their environment. In fact, it may be the only factor. Different species have evolved in different ways. Some compete with each other for hunting grounds (lions), some animals form clans that fight each other (chimpanzees), and still others work cooperatively in close quarters (bees). But why do these animals behave so differently? It all comes down to their environment.



Male lions evolved to be aggressive and mean toward other males; each male rules about 100 square miles.



Bees evolved to be friendly and work cooperatively with their own species, because food is plentiful but space is limited.

With aggression, just as with any trait, there is a good side and a bad side. An aggressive animal is more likely to find food, water, shelter, open space to hunt, and a mate. However, there is a bad side to being aggressive too. Animals that are aggressive with their own species tend to fight. And when they fight they are liable to get hurt or even killed. Aggression is a trade-off.

In environments where animals have room to spread out, like the African savannah, animals can afford to be aggressive. In fact, each male lion is said to "own" about 100 square miles of territory. On the other hand,

bees can't afford to be aggressive. They don't have enough room! Any aggressive bees would have died in fights thousands of years ago. So bees evolved to work cooperatively as a team. An animal's attitude is largely a product of their environment. When there is lots of space, and food is hard to come by, species evolve to be aggressive. When there is sufficient food, but not a lot of space, species evolve to be friendly.