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Wild Minds: What People Think about Animal Thinking

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Source: [Anthrozoos: A Multidisciplinary Journal of The Interactions of People & Animals](#), Volume 25, Number 2, June 2012, pp. 133-147(15)

Publisher: [Berg Publishers](#)

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Abstract:

The question of how nonhuman animals think is pervasive in the scientific and popular media, yet there is an apparent lack of concordance between findings from research in animal cognition and how this information emerges in popular discourse. The present study investigated the way people conceive of animal thinking, in order to inform the development of an exhibit on animal minds that will address this issue and foster a deeper connection between people and animals. This two-part, sequential study of perceptions of animal thinking used qualitative interviews of visitors to the New York Hall of Science and Staten Island Zoo to develop a quantitative, online consumer survey of American museum visitors. The results show that American museum visitors vary in their perceptions of animal thinking, but appear to be open to new ideas about how animals might think. Participants' responses to the interviews revealed they could easily recognize survival strategies in wild animals, but had reservations about discussions of empathy, deception, and awareness. In addition, animals kept as pets or companion animals in Western culture were commonly perceived to have higher cognitive capacities for thinking than food or other domestic animals. Participants' responses to the online consumer survey appeared to focus on an overall concept of animal thinking, rather than different cognitive dimensions. Although participants were generally neutral in their responses, demographic analysis revealed participants who had dogs and/or cats, a college education, or watched nature shows were more likely to support the belief that animals can think. Participants who had children at home were less likely to support this belief. Further research is needed to determine how different kinds of thought processes are understood by general audiences and how demographic factors might influence perceptions of animal thinking.

Keywords: [ANIMAL THINKING](#); [BELIEFS](#); [PERCEPTIONS](#)

Document Type: Research article

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/175303712X13316289505224>

Publication date: 2012-06-01

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