

Topic 3: Living with wild animals

Text 1 – 21st-century fiction

In this extract from a novel, the narrator is explaining how he interacts with Richard Parker, the Bengal Tiger he has been travelling with.

One day, I was on a walk in the forest. I was walking vigorously, caught up in my own thoughts. I passed a tree – and practically ran into Richard Parker. Both of us were startled. He hissed and reared up on his hind legs, towering over me, his great paws ready to swat me down. I stood frozen to the spot, paralysed with fear and shock. He dropped
 5 back on all fours and moved away. When he was gone three, four paces, he turned and reared up again, growling this time. I continued to stand like a statue. He went another few paces and repeated the threat a third time. Satisfied that I was not a menace, he ambled off. As soon as I had caught my breath and stopped trembling, I brought the whistle to my mouth and started running after him. He was already gone a good distance, but he was
 10 still within sight. My running was powerful. He turned, saw me, crouched – and then bolted. I blew into the whistle as hard as I could, wishing that its sound would travel as far and wide as the cry of a lonely tiger.

That night, as he was resting two feet beneath me, I came to the conclusion that I had to step into the circus ring again.

15 The major difficulty in training animals is that they operate either by instinct or by rote¹. Therefore, imprinting in an animal’s mind the artificial connection that if it does a certain action, say, roll over, it will get a treat can be achieved only by mind-numbing repetition. It is a slow process that depends as much on luck as on hard work, all the more so when the animal is an adult. I blew into my whistle till my lungs hurt. I pounded my
 20 chest till it was covered with bruises. I shouted “Hep! Hep!” – my tiger-language command to say “Do” – thousands of times. I tossed hundreds of meerkat morsels at him that I would gladly have eaten myself.

25 The training of tigers is no easy feat. They are considerably less flexible in their mental make-up than other animals that are commonly trained in circuses and zoos – sea lions and chimpanzees for example. But I don’t want to talk too much credit for what I managed to do with Richard Parker. My good fortune, the fortune which saved my life, was that he was not only a young adult, but a pliable young adult, an omega² animal. I was afraid that conditions on the island might play against me, that with such an abundance of food and water and so much space he might become relaxed and confident, less open to
 30 my influence. But he remained tense. I knew him well enough to sense it.

Glossary

¹ rote – constant repetition.

² omega – an animal who chooses not to be powerful.

Text 2 – 20th-century literary non-fiction

In this extract from her autobiography, the naturalist, Jane Goodall, talks about her experiences with chimpanzees. At the start of this extract, her colleague has just explained that one of the chimpanzees has come into their camp.

5 This was fantastic news. For months the chimps had been running off when they saw me – now, one had actually visited my camp! Perhaps he would come again. The next day I waited, in case he did. What a luxury to lie in until 7:00AM. As the hours went by I began to fear that the chimp wouldn't come. But finally, at about four in the afternoon, I heard a rustling in the undergrowth opposite my tent and a black shape appeared on the other side of the clearing.

10 I recognised him at once. It was the handsome male with the dense white beard. I had already named him David Graybeard. Quite calmly he climbed into the palm and feasted on its nuts. And then he helped himself to the bananas I had set out for him. There were ripe palm nuts on that tree for another five days and David Graybeard visited three more times and got lots of bananas. A month later, when another palm tree in camp bore ripe fruit, David again visited us. And on one of those occasions he actually took a banana from my hand. I could hardly believe it!

15 From that time on things got easier for me. Sometimes when I met David Greybeard out in the forest, he would come up to see if I had a banana hidden in my pocket. The other chimps stared with amazement. Obviously I wasn't as dangerous as they had thought. Gradually, they allowed me to move closer and closer.

20 It was David Graybeard who provide me with my most exciting observation. One morning, near the Peak, I came upon him squatting on a termite mound. As I watched, he picked a blade of grass, poked it into the tunnel in the mound, and then withdrew it. The grass was covered with termites all clinging on with their jaws. He picked them off with his lips and scrunched them up. Then he fished for more. When his piece of grass got bent, he dropped it, picked up a little twig, stripped the leaves off it, and used that.

25 I was really thrilled. David had uses objects as tools! He had also changed a twig into something more suitable for fishing termites. He had actually made a tool. Before this observation, scientists had thought only humans could make tools. Later, I would learn that chimpanzees use more objects as tools than any creature except for us.