

## Case study:

# animals and Islam

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### Introduction

Reading the Qur'an, a verse that sums up Islamic teachings on the animal world is found in the sixth chapter, *Al-Ana'am*: 'And there is no creature on [or within] the Earth or bird that flies with wings except [that they are] communities like you. We have not neglected in the Register a thing. Then unto their Lord they will be gathered' (Qur'an 6.38).

All creatures are entitled to respect and compassion – animals, birds, fish, insects ... they all have their own needs and wants, their own family units and social structures and their own forms of communication. They are an essential part of what makes the universe whole and balanced, created and watched over by the Almighty. Like all living things, they too, are mortal and must come to an end. *Al-Ana'am* is often translated into English as 'cattle' or 'beasts of burden', but it means so much more. The root N-A-M-A in Arabic signals  *blessings, bounties, mercy, plenty* and so on.

### Animals as a gift to humanity

Muslims see the whole animal world as a blessing, a gift to humanity given by Allah. Humans are urged to reflect on the wonders of creation and to feel awe when contemplating the glories around them, from the tiniest ant to the regal camel, from the seemingly insignificant flea to the powerful elephant. Five other chapters in the Qur'an are named after animals: Chapter 2 *Al-Baqarah* (The Cow), Chapter 16 *Al-Nahl* (The Bees), Chapter 27 *Al-Naml* (The Ants), Chapter 29 *Al-Ankabut* (The Spider) and Chapter 105 *Al-Fil* (The Elephant).

The Qur'an draws attention to the miraculous nature of animal biology that humans seem to take for granted in their daily lives. For instance, both cows and bees are referred to as having 'stomachs' (plural), from one of which emerges 'liquids that nourish, heal and delight' and that are 'diverse in taste and hue' according to where they have pastured/collected their nectar:

**And there is a lesson for you in cattle: We give you a drink from their bellies, from between waste and blood - pure milk, refreshing to the drinkers. And from the fruits of date-palms and grapevines, you derive sugar and wholesome food. In this is a sign for people who understand. And your Lord inspired the bee: Set up hives in the mountains, and in the trees, and in what they construct. Then eat of all the fruits, and go along the pathways of your Lord, with precision. From their bellies emerges a fluid of diverse colours, containing healing for the people. Surely in this is a sign for people who reflect.** (Qur'an 16.66–69)

## Learning from animals

We can enjoy the beauty of the animal world when watching it. Humans are encouraged to be humble and grateful, considering the many ways in which we all benefit from animals – for food, clothes, transport and so many others. Animals are capable of coping with hardship, and often show a resilience far greater than ours. We can learn lessons in virtues such as patience, perseverance and loyalty (e.g. the story from Chapter 18 of the sleeping men in the cave, guarded by their faithful dog).

**And the grazing livestock He has created for you; in them is warmth and [numerous] benefits, and from them you eat. And for you in them is [the enjoyment of] beauty when you bring them in [in the evening] and when you send them out [to pasture]. And they carry your loads to a land you could not have reached except with difficulty to yourselves. Indeed, your Lord is Kind and Merciful. And [He created] the horses, mules and donkeys for you to ride and [as] adornment. And He creates that which you do not know.** (Qur'an 16.5–8)

Regardless of size, whether many consider animals to be useful or harmful, they are created by God, and there is much to learn – teamwork, organisation, perseverance. Even a fly can be unstoppable:

**O people, an example is presented, so listen to it. Indeed, those you invoke besides Allah will never create [as much as] a fly, even if they gathered together for that purpose. And if the fly should steal from them a [tiny] thing, they would not be able to recover it. Weak are the pursuer and the pursued.** (Qur'an 22.73)

On the other hand, the same animals are also used as examples of how not to be, where Luqman the Wise teaches his son to 'be moderate in your pace [when walking] and lower your voice; indeed, the most disagreeable of sounds is the [braying] voice of donkeys' (Qur'an 31.19).

## How to treat animals

As a Muslim, I believe that humans are tasked with being Allah's *vicegerents* – Allah's representatives on Earth – to cultivate it, and to care for the environment with all that involves. Any practice that involves cruelty, harm or suffering to creatures is unacceptable, except in self-defence. Examples would include so-called 'sports' such as bull-fighting, hare-coursing, fox-hunting and the like.

Keeping animals in unsuitable conditions purely for human entertainment and/or profit (e.g. circuses) is also frowned upon, especially if the animals are treated cruelly. Most Muslims would also agree that animal testing should be avoided at all costs, except in cases where there is no alternative and the substance being tested has the proven potential to save lives (for example, cancer research).

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is reported to have told one of his companions off for gently holding a chick that had fallen out of its nest whilst its mother flew around in distress. The Prophet pointed out that even though he meant no harm and would eventually return it, he caused the chick's parent terrible anxiety. There is a well-known *Hadith* (prophetic saying) that narrates the story of a parched traveller who came across a well in the desert. He went through great hardship to climb down and scoop water into his leather socks, carrying them up with his teeth and then sharing the water with a thirsty dog. The traveller was promised rewards in Paradise.

Passages in the Qur'an refer to orders given by the Prophet Sulayman (pbuh) instructing his army to take care when marching so that a colony of ants would not be destroyed:

**Until, when they came upon the valley of the ants, an ant said: 'O ants, enter your dwellings that you not be crushed by Sulayman and his soldiers while they perceive not.' He [Sulayman] said: 'My Lord, enable me to be grateful for Your Favour which you have bestowed upon men and upon my**

**parents and to do righteousness of which you approve. And admit me by Your Mercy into [the ranks of] Your righteous servants’.** (Qur’an 27.18–19)

### Dietary rules

A prominent theme in the Qur’an is that of punishment befalling ‘cruel, arrogant’ peoples such as the people of Thamud. They tortured and hamstrung the Prophet Salih’s she-camel and incurred Divine Wrath.

This principle also applies to livestock. Just as humans benefit from animals in many ways, we also have a responsibility and moral duty to care for them adequately. They are to be provided with shelter and appropriate nourishment, and are to be cared for and treated with compassion.

For Muslims, decisions about dietary practice (vegetarianism, veganism, etc.) are purely a matter of personal choice, apart from four specific categories that are forbidden:

- blood
- any product from pigs
- any food/drink containing alcohol
- carrion or animals that have not ‘had the name of God recited over them’ (i.e. slaughtered according to Islamic teachings)

These teachings stipulate that:

- no animal should be tied prior to killing them
- they should have been well fed and watered
- other animals are unable to hear or see them
- their head is turned away from the knife, and
- the knife is razor-sharp, swiftly cutting through the carotid artery only, in order to ensure the animal dies as swiftly and as painlessly as possible

Fish and any other type of seafood are considered pure and permitted at all times.

Muslims are encouraged to use their perceptions of the animal world as a vehicle for reflecting on the Glory of Allah’s creation, as ‘there is none like unto Him’ (Qur’an 42.11). Muslims believe that as animals are not in possession of free will (a human characteristic), they will be neither resurrected nor judged in the Hereafter.

### Some ideas to get you thinking

- a. Before reading this article, work with a partner and note down what you think of animals, and make a list of the ways you think animals should be treated. Talk about why you think this.
- b. Read through Basma’s article. Note down what she thinks of animals, and make a list of ways she says animals should be treated. How many of her ideas about animals and their treatment are like yours? Where are there any differences? Talk with your partner about why there are any differences.
- c. Basma quotes some vivid passages from the Qur’an. Choose passages that you found most interesting, surprising and/or puzzling, and say why.
- d. With your partner, create a summary document about animals in Islam. Start with a list of dos and don’ts, to do with how Muslims should treat animals. Add at least three reasons *why* this is important for Muslims.
- e. Use what you have learned from Basma’s article to write about a range of responses to this statement: ‘Muslims should be kinder to animals than non-Muslims’. Use some evidence to give a thoughtful written response.