



Do goats lend a helping hoof? New FBN study provides evidence of prosocial behaviour in farm animals

Can goats help each other? A new study by the Research Institute of Farm Animal Biology (FBN) in Dummerstorf in collaboration with colleagues from the University of Veterinary Medicine Vienna suggests that goats exhibit prosocial behaviour - i.e. they are willing to help others without direct self-benefit. This could make an important contribution to understanding social cognition in farm animals.

In the study published in the journal Royal Society Open Science, the researchers developed a novel experimental design - the so-called 'fake apple tree' apparatus, which is inspired by the natural climbing behaviour of goats. In this experimental set-up, a goat can climb a platform to trigger a device, the branch of the tree, which moves a food dispenser downwards.

The results show: Goats interacted significantly more often with the device when it contained food for their conspecifics. They also stayed longer in the position in which they only allowed their conspecific to access the food - without reaching for it themselves. Such behaviour is also considered an indication of prosocial motivation in other animal species.

What do these results mean?

The results indicate that goats are quite capable of helping others, even if they themselves do not benefit directly. These results extend the previously limited field of species studied with regard to prosocial behaviour and show that farm animals also display prosociality. Although not all goats showed uniform prosocial tendencies, the variation between individuals offers exciting starting points for further research.

"Our results suggest that prosocial tendencies also occur in farm animals such as goats when the experimental conditions are adapted to their natural behaviour. By developing the "fake apple tree" apparatus, we were able to show that such customised test designs could be crucial to reliably capture social motivations. This approach offers exciting prospects for investigating prosocial behaviour in other animal species in the future," explains Dr Jan Langbein from the Behaviour and Animal Welfare working group at the FBN.

Why goats of all animals?

Goats live in so-called fission-fusion societies - dynamic social structures in which groups regularly dissolve and recombine. Such systems require a high degree of social adaptability and offer an ideal research field for questions of empathy, cooperation and social learning. The current studies complement the previous research work of the "Behaviour and Animal Welfare" working group. With its work, the team is contributing to researching aspects of learning and cognition in farm animals using goats as a model animal and opening up new perspectives on livestock farming.

Original publication:

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Image 1: A goat climbs onto the platform of the 'fake apple tree' apparatus, bringing the food dispenser within reach of a second goat. © FBN

Image 2: A goat stands on the platform of the 'fake apple tree' apparatus, while a second goat takes the opportunity to eat from the lowered food dispenser. © FBN

Image 3: After the goat has left the platform, the feed dispenser rises again. In this constellation, goats often showed targeted behaviour for the benefit of a second goat. © FBN

About the FBN:

The Research Institute for Farm Animal Biology (FBN), based in Dummerstorf near Rostock in the federal state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (formerly the Research Institute for the Biology of Farm Animals), was founded in 1993 and is dedicated to application-oriented basic research in the field of farm animal biology. Around 300 employees carry out interdisciplinary research and work in the four focus areas: Individualising farm animal husbandry, farming animals in sustainable resource cycles, coping with critical life phases of farm animals and promoting diversity in animal farming. The aim is to research responsible animal farming as an indispensable component of sustainable agriculture. The animal is the focus of scientific research, from the genome to metabolism and behaviour.

Research Institute of Farm Animal Biology (FBN)
Wilhelm-Stahl-Allee 2, 18196 Dummerstorf

Press and public relations

Jan Ostermayer

T +49 38208-68 605

E presse@fbn-dummerstorf.de

www.fbn-dummerstorf.de

LinkedIn: [@forschungsinstitut-nutztierbiologie-fbn](https://www.linkedin.com/company/forschungsinstitut-nutztierbiologie-fbn)

Bluesky: [@fbndummerstorf.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/fbndummerstorf.bsky.social)

Mastodon: wiskomm.social/@fbndummerstorf

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