

Abstract

This essay aims to highlight the uniqueness of koi carp and goldfish and is a call to action for promoting aquatic animal welfare and accountability for mistreatment of aquatic animals. I touch on the traits, personality characteristics and perceived and observed intelligence in domesticated carp species.

Introduction

Have you ever wondered about what a fish thinks, or how they feel and interact with their environment on a deeper level? Then you're not alone. Fish are some of the most impressive creatures on the planet, especially carp and their resilience and adaptability. Koi, a descendant of the common carp, and goldfish, the descendants of the crucian carp are some of the longest lived and intelligent of all fish species. They remember routines, have unique personalities, sleeping preferences and habits, swimming styles, eating habits and preferences. The domesticated carp is not only long lived, majestic and elegant, but their most standout feature is undoubtedly their emotional and cognitive intelligence.

Koi and goldfish have become some of the most popular aquatic pets worldwide but their care is often underestimated and understated. Domestic carp have problem solving abilities and the emotional capacity akin to that of a 2-4 year old child, (depending on the carp species or breed). Just because they lack distinctly human ways of expressing their emotions, needs and environmental requirements doesn't make them any less intelligent, of course if we look at domestic carp through a human lense they would undoubtedly appear dull; upon closer observation that couldn't be further from the truth.

I've closely observed the behaviour of three separate fish for months, including two male short bodied koi and one male Oranda. Within what seems like a brief time they've expressed such emotional depth and distinct personalities that I can't help but to advocate to increase awareness for the need for fish to have rights equal to other domesticated animals like dogs, cats or birds. It's outright cruel to house a fish in a smaller than recommended tank size, especially if paired with low water quality and poor aquarium maintenance. The way I view it is how would you feel if the very air you breathed was riddled with toxins and irritants? Most other domesticated animals never have to deal with that injustice and inhumane treatment. Even birds, dogs and cats

have relatively clean air at all times, but the same cannot be said for an under maintained rot improperly maintained aquarium, pond or tank.

Observations that Signal Human-like Intelligence

The thing that separates Koi and Goldfish apart from most other fish species is how distinct their behaviors and personalities typically are. Some may be much more shy or reserved, while others show a greater degree of boldness and will approach the surface first for food and are less hesitant of human contact. Some will immediately eat directly from my hand, while another was very shy for months and would only approach with another member of the tank alongside him. It's interesting how that one fish in particular was very shy and reserved and the other two fish's I have are much more bold and eager to interact with me. Something equally as interesting is that shy koi when handled would remain completely calm and still where the bolder one seemed much more anxious to leave my grasp and go back to their water even though he seems less shy when approaching for food. It may have been because he wanted to remain as still as possible to avoid predation or maybe he was just comfortable and knew I wouldn't hurt him but yet simultaneously was still shy to approach the surface for other reasons. This signals a complex expression of boldness and meekness.

One of my Koi Ira even uses the top ridge of my stock tank to rest one of his pectoral fins on because he has buoyancy issues. This helps him remain balanced while he rests. This would signal complex problem solving abilities equivalent to a young child. His ability to adapt to his life circumstances shows a level of awareness and intelligence often overlooked in carp species.

Sleeping habits

I noticed that each fish has a different and unique resting position and a specific spot in the tank where they decide to rest at. My Oranda Nemi rests near the top of the water slightly nose down on top of my synthetic aquarium plants, whereas my short bodied koi Ira hides amongst them and uses them to maintain buoyancy because he has swim bladder issues that cause him to go nose down and vertical; these observed behaviours demonstrate high adaptability to novel situations and the ability to creative problem solve. Some goldfish and koi even take more daytime naps than others whereas others are more active during nighttime; this trait is quite similar to how humans have varying sleeping and resting habits.

Food preferences and eating habits

They even have distinct styles of eating. Some more rushed and antsy to acquire the food, and others more laid back and graceful when eating. As far as food preferences go some seem to prefer floating to sinking and vice versa. I also noticed my Oranda seems more eager for certain foods like northfin bug bites, whereas my Koi is more keen on floating 4mm size northfin koi supreme pellets. Some seem so forage more like my oranda, whereas my koi prefers to gracefully swim around or hangout near the top of the water moving his pectoral fins slightly to just relax and tread water.

Personalities differences and distinctions

Some domestic carp prefer to be alone while others will swim together more often. When my short bodied koi Solon past my other koi Ira was quite lonely looking until I acquired my oranda, his newest friend. In a way I still feel like he misses Solon and it's been a few months. He doesn't act exactly as he did before and doesn't swim as synchronized with Nemi as he did with Solon, maybe in time he will become more outgoing again. I can easily tell them apart. Even if they all looked the same their fin motions, the way they swim and move around their environment and tank shows precision, calculation and individuality. They always swim to the top because they know I'm their caretaker. Where I was away from home for a few weeks my fish wouldn't come to the top of the tank to eat unless my mom (who was caring for them at the time), left the room because they knew she wasn't me, therefore they don't just associate you with food, they understand you as a distinct individual.

Conclusion

Domestic carp are individual, distinct, and unique in their personality, temperament, and sociability. They all have a unique way of interacting with their environment and display unique social connections and relationships, favoring some individuals over others. When their aquarium water is less than optimal they may seem more lethargic, rest more or even appear very stressed, (clamped fins, less swimming, rapid bursts, rubbing against decor and substrate, or even going upside down in severe maltreatment of lack of aquarium maintenance, or stability.

Fish deserve the same rights as other animals, popular culture often refers to goldfish in particular as having a “five second memory” or being unable to feel pain. These are common misconceptions and myths that should be properly addressed and brought to the public’s attention. So please next time you see a fish in distress, please take action to help and aid them just as you would any other animal, aquatic or not.

A good aquarist ensures environmental stability and the fish’s quality of life, as all empathic humans should. The knowledgeable and empathic aquarist maintains pristine water via dechlorinated water changes (20-30% weekly or biweekly), adequate filtration and tank size, and proper varied species specific diet.

The next time you consider getting a fish or adding to your tank or pond ask this... Am I able to provide an environment that’s clean, stable and optimally mimics their natural habitat? If the answer is no, then you shouldn’t get a fish. They’re not just a graceful swimming water jewel to regard as purely a piece of art. They’re living, breathing creatures that deserve not only to survive, but to thrive in harmony with their environment.