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A bug's life for model citizens



Some bees will sacrifice their lives for the greater good of their community, scientists say

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Bees and ants have long been recognised as tireless workers, but new research suggests they can also behave like selfless model citizens.

A study has found that some bees and ants do operate in the best interests of the group to which they belong - creating a "superorganism" - and can even sacrifice their lives for the greater good of their community.

But scientists at the Universities of Edinburgh and Oxford found the same could not be said for other animal groupings, such as herds of bison or shoals of fish.

In those instances, where individual animals appear to be acting like team players, they are actually putting their own interests first, researchers found.

Dr Andy Gardner, of the University of Edinburgh's School of Biological Sciences, explained that theories about the existence of superorganisms - where many individuals work within a self-sustaining social unit for a common purpose - have been much maligned over the years.

He also argued that theories about superorganisms have been "over-stretched", for example by those who suggest that human beings act as part of one giant unit.

Dr Gardner said of his research: "On the one hand we're saying that the theory does have some place. On the

other hand, we're saying let's be careful about how we use it."

The researchers studied the way in which co-operative groups of animals evolve, using mathematical models. They found that some insects, such as honey bees and leaf-cutter ants, do seem to put the interests of their group above their own selfish interests.

"Looking at a honey bee hive, it does strike you as being like an organism," he said. "What we've done is show formal mathematical backing for that idea."

The findings, funded by the Royal Society, are published in the Journal of Evolutionary Biology.

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