Creative Hyenas Make Better Problem-Solvers
For humans, cracking a complicated puzzle often involves more than persistence — it requires thinking creatively and testing many possible solutions. A new study suggests the same holds true for hyenas.

Researchers from Michigan State University (MSU) studied wild spotted hyenas trying to open a steel puzzle box containing raw meat in Kenya. The box could be opened by sliding a bolt latch, but just nine out of 62 hyenas successfully opened it. The hyenas that solved the puzzle tested more potential solutions — including biting, flipping or pushing the box — than the ones that failed, the researchers said. However, sheer persistence didn't pay off.

"While those who gave up quickly were more likely to fail, some hyenas that spent more time with the puzzle box appeared to get stuck in a rut and would often try the same solutions over and over again," zoology graduate student Sarah Benson-Amram said in a statement from MSU.

The wild hyenas had never seen the puzzle box before the experiment. But those that quickly approached the foreign object were more likely to get the box open than the hesitant hyenas, suggesting that risk-taking has some benefits, the researchers said.

Spotted hyenas have relatively large brains and they have been shown to outperform chimpanzees on cooperative problem-solving tests.

"A likely benefit of large brains is the ability to think flexibly about new situations and come up with solutions to novel problems," Kay Holekamp, an MSU zoologist and co-author of the new study, said in the statement.

The research was published in the Proceedings of the Royal Society B.
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