



Are Dogs Really Pack Animals?

For generations, dog trainers repeated many times per day the phrase “dogs are pack animals.” This piece of information was never questioned: dogs were strong bonding animals and fit well into human families, sometimes to the point of developing disorders like separation anxiety. And a lot of dog behavior was interpreted with social hierarchies in mind. Nobody ever examined what dogs do when they are not inserted into human families, i.e. are free-ranging. But now more is known about feral or semi-feral populations of dogs around the world. It turns out there are many such populations. And it turns out - to everybody's surprise - they don't live in packs.

For example, during the tenure of dictator Nicolae Ceaucescu, a poorly thought out reconstruction effort in Romania resulted in the demolition of thousands of houses and the relocation of thousands of families into small apartments throughout the country. For family dogs, this meant being turned out onto the street, where they have multiplied and eked out a marginal existence ever since.

Although a sad situation, the explosion of free-ranging dogs in Romania has provided information that challenges the idea that dogs really are “pack animals.” The dogs in Romania have not formed packs. Their associations with one another are brief and casual: a couple of dogs may hang out together temporarily and then part company. Dogs are often drawn together by a scarce resource like a food source but once this magnet is gone, they go their separate ways.

Significant populations of free-ranging domestic dogs also exist in sub-Saharan Africa, South America, India, Mexico, Tasmania (Cook Island Dogs), Hawaii, Bangkok and, in a situation paralleling that of Romania, in Moscow. Pariah dogs on the Indian subcontinent are thought to be the longest-running continuous population of feral dogs – 14 000 years, nearly as long as archaeological evidence has existed for domestic dogs.

In all these populations, there are cases of dogs joining with one or more dogs for days at a time, and dogs being drawn into proximity to each other by food sources, however none of the above populations form packs the way wolves do. Males, in fact, do not participate in the rearing of puppies, which is the foundation of a wolf pack (see below). And, feral dog populations rely far more on scavenging than on hunting, which is another difference from wolves, who primarily hunt for their food.

Dingoes are also a kind of dog. Accounts regarding their social behavior are much more conflicting. Often the same source will in one paragraph say that Dingoes are primarily loners that only occasionally pack up with a few others to take down a large prey item and later state that Dingoes are pack animals with stable hierarchies, like wolves. Recent genetics research has showed that Dingo-domestic dog hybrids are often outwardly indistinguishable from pure Dingoes to an untrained eye. So it could be that these disagreements are partially due to some observations being of hybrids and some of pure Dingoes.



Veterinarians and veterinary technicians who volunteer in the Cook Islands to provide veterinary care to the feral dog populations have observed two things: a large numbers of short-legged dogs (achondroplasia, as seen in Bassett Hounds), and the absence of social groups. The medical staffs expected and *looked for* packs, having heard and repeated for years, as we all have, that “dogs are pack animals.” Again and again, they witnessed no packs. Instead, they observed what Dr. Ian Dunbar has termed “loose, transitory associations.”

Such observations of feral dogs contrast with wolves who do in fact live in packs. As explained by University of Minnesota wolf biologist David Mech, each pack is a nuclear family consisting of a breeding pair and their offspring. When the offspring reach maturity around two years of age, they disperse to avoid inbreeding depression and, if they live long enough, mate up and start their own packs. The male and female are pair-bonded and often remain together for life, in contrast to free-living dogs.

Help for Free-Ranging Populations

To help dogs in Romania, go to www.romaniaanimalrescue.com.

To help dogs in Moscow, go to www.moscowanimals.org.

To help Bangkok’s dogs, go to www.scadbangkok.org.

To help control the stray dog population in India humanely, go to www.wsdindia.org.

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