

Dogs & Wolves

1 Domestication

A brief consideration of some of the similarities and differences between wolves and dogs



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1 Introduction



In this article I intend to look briefly at some of the similarities and differences between wolves and dogs as well as considering briefly how dogs came to exist in the first place.

The principle gist of this article will be the social problems involved in getting along with a canine companion and how we initiate and manage that relationship in a way which the animals' nature predisposes them to accept. But this also, inevitably,

Greetings !

involves some consideration of various non-social difficulties which affect the quality of the relationship and even the possibility of establishing one at all.

In theory, just about anything can affect the quality of your relationship with a dog and with wolves, just about anything certainly does. With this in mind, I have limited the topics in this discussion almost entirely to those which have the most influence where such influence can be traced to the behaviour and environment of the ancestral wolf.

I am writing this article from the standpoint of a person who has forged a social relationship with captive wolves and maintained it by studying and learning both from the animals themselves and from experienced people who have great practical skill and hands-on experience with wolves. The animals in question belong to the Anglian Wolf Society.

The Anglian Wolf Society is a wolf conservation and canine behaviour study group; One of our principal objectives is to propagate the truth about wolves - warts and all! - and to dispel myth, rumour and misunderstanding. We have two Carpathian wolves which came to us as 12-day old puppies from a surplus litter born in a zoo in Southern England.

Contrary to the current zoo trend of trying to "keep them wild", we have raised them specifically as what are called "ambassador wolves" - that is, wolves which represent their species to ours. We have taken away their inborn and extreme fear of human beings in a process we call "socialisation" and encouraged them to believe that humans are their friends. This causes them to treat us as though we were wolves - although they know perfectly well that we are not - and it encourages them to interact with us in much the same way as they would interact with another wolf.

Fortunately for us, wolves are born with their own whole set of useful rules that govern how they conduct themselves and behave towards the other members of their pack. To a wolf, its pack is its family and its livelihood; The welfare of the pack overrides individual interest in almost every way and at nearly all times. Evolution has attenuated most of the behaviour which could lead to the weakening or break up of packs and every wolf everywhere is born simply knowing how to behave in the best interests of its friends and relatives whilst managing to take good (selfish) care of itself at the same time.

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Provided we understand those rules, apply them to ourselves and expect the wolf to apply them as well then it is perfectly safe to interact with the animal and more than that, it is a highly enjoyable experience for all concerned - especially for the wolf. We walk our wolves on lead, just like a dog, several times a week for most of the year and when it suits them, we take them to all kinds of interesting places where they can explore, meet people and enjoy life.

Our two wolves have always sparred a lot and there is a clear social hierarchy between them. At the time of writing, one has clearly established himself as the Alpha within this hierarchy and will be referred to as Alpha; the other – his brother - will be referred to as Beta.

We often get asked about the relationship between wolves and dogs and having been in the situation of being treated as a wolf by a wolf certainly gives one a few unique insights into this issue.

In the discussions which follow, I hope that you will also gain some insights into the subject.

2 Where did dogs come from ?



Chalk & cheese ? Look closer.

Of all the mysteries surrounding dogs and our relationship with them, the greatest of all has to be the question of how they originally came to exist.

Research as one might, each new fact deepens the mystery and poses more questions than it answers. The further back in time we go, the less specific we can be about what happened. We know that dogs were associated with pre-stone-age humans but we don't know how that situation arose or when. All we know for sure is that dogs split off from wolves in recent geological history and in the mid 1990's, the Smithsonian Institute published the results of global genetic research proving the fact. Dogs are actually so closely related to wolves that they are 20 times closer to wolves than Coyotes are – and most people couldn't tell the difference between a coyote and a wolf. The mitochondrial DNA of a dog differs from that of a wolf by a mere 0.2% (much closer than the much-vaunted 99% DNA-share between humans and Chimps). This genetic closeness is true for all breeds; it is just as true for a giant Irish Wolfhound as it is for a pocket-wolf Chihuahua. A Husky is just as much a wolf as a German Shepherd is. In fact, we know that dogs, wolves, coyotes and jackals all have the same number of chromosomes and can all interbreed producing fertile intermediate offspring but exactly how and when the split between dogs and wolves arose will probably never be known.

What we *can* be certain about is the evolution of the wolf, from which we now know for sure that dogs descended and in the appendix, I have given a quick run-down of the family tree of the wolf.

There is a common misconception that our stone-age ancestors probably took direct, manual control of wild wolves in some way right from the start – somewhere between 14,000 and 100,000 years ago - and deliberately imposed the transformation upon them. The most popular theory seems to be that we stole wolf puppies and raised them in our caves but upon this subject, behavioural evidence has much to contribute and what it contributes does not support this theory. I shall go into all this in more detail later but for now, suffice it to say that wolves are wild animals and although they live in social groups with strong social behaviours designed to hold the group together, those behaviours are not ones that we can co-exist in close proximity with for long. Strongly hierarchical behaviours and intense predatory responses make wolves unlikely long-term, close-up companions for humans.

Given these difficulties, one feels compelled to believe that our ancestors only went to the trouble of “creating” dogs at all for some utilitarian purpose but to be fair, one has to admit the real possibility that wolves were originally raised and kept for no other reason than pleasure or company. Perhaps the question of what “use” they were didn't enter into it. In the author's view,

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archaeology often places too much emphasis on utility and hardly acknowledges the fact that our ancient ancestors liked to relax just as we do. For our ancestors, life wasn't all just a fight for survival. They had a sense of humour, they played games, they drew, they enjoyed company; perhaps they enjoyed the company of animals too. Not every object recovered from a dig needs to have had a utilitarian purpose. Maybe wolf puppies were just pleasure items.

The snag with this line of reasoning though is that you would have to redefine "pleasure" or redefine the behaviour of the wolf to make keeping wolves beyond puppyhood for fun work and that brings us to an interesting, speculative musing.

Although wolves are seriously difficult to live with *today*, maybe they weren't always so difficult. Maybe their behaviour has changed in the intervening millennia since our ancestors first tried to live with them. Perhaps we did just steal wolf puppies! Is there any evidence that wolves were once easier to live with ?

The answer to that has to be "no", there isn't and cannot really be any "evidence" as such because as any behaviourist will tell you "behaviour doesn't fossilise". This means that all we can do is speculate. However, since this is an interesting subject, let's speculate for a moment.

There are quite a few accounts by early travellers to the New World of the surprising gentleness of wolves before the new wave of human settlers moved in and changed everything. Accounts of dogs being allowed to roam the countryside without fear of attack by wolves contrast starkly with modern understanding – that wolves will almost automatically attack any stray adult canine in their territory. The accounts of the deliberate (and appalling) eradication of the Falkland wolf speak of them being so tame that they would take food from peoples' hands – which is how they were lured to their deaths.

We also have to explain the fact that stone-age people in America and pre-stone-age people in Europe were few in number and had to co-exist with large populations of wolves. In theory, our ancestors were poorly equipped and under-manned to deal with determined attacks by packs of wolves. If wolves had routinely regarded humans as any kind of standard prey, the human race probably wouldn't exist. So, maybe they didn't regard us prey at all. It is quite possible that in a more or less stable, pre-stone-age ecosystem, wolves had a rather narrower prey envelope than their modern descendants and human beings simply weren't in that envelope. More than that, given that dogs are typified by scavenging behaviour and evolved from wolves, it is possible that wolves were themselves originally more scavengers than hunters – in other words, perhaps wolves were the original scavenging carnivores and passed that quality on to dogs whilst they themselves later evolved into fully pro-active hunters.

If ancient wolves were less predatory and more scavenging, that would make quite a difference to the survival prospects of any human that wanted to befriend one. Also, with a greater emphasis on scavenging for survival and without so much need for the pack-advantage when hunting, wolves might have required less pack cohesion and therefore less intense pack-related social behaviours which are very difficult behaviours for humans to cope with in a relationship with a modern wolf. Here we can indeed find a little real evidence because modern wolves certainly do scavenge so there is no reason to believe that they didn't always do so and no reason to doubt that they may have done more of it in the past.

Perhaps wolves only became truly diverse and pro-active hunters when the ice-age ended, human numbers increased and we started farming and competing with wolves for food. It is easy to believe - especially in the light of the Belayev experiment (described elsewhere) - that once wolves

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