

TALES FROM A DOG BEHAVIOURIST:

Domestication

Have you ever noticed that many breeds of dogs, and many mixed breeds, have tails that curl over their backs? Many years ago, Russian scientists caught and tamed wild foxes, which have straight tails. With each generation bred in captivity, the tails curled progressively backwards. No one knows why this happens, but the process of taming wild canids changes their physiology. So what happens if you domesticate them? You get a dog.

Archaeological evidence suggests that the domestication of dogs occurred between 7000 and 14000 years ago in various areas throughout the world. However, new DNA evidence suggests something far more radical: domestication began 100 000 years ago. The ramifications of this finding are huge. If our relationship with dogs is 100 000 years in the making, then they contributed to our evolution, they helped make people what they are, they aided us in our progression through various ages and technologies. Without dogs, we might not be here. Next question, how did this magnificent process happen?

Ancient man did not simply pluck wolf cubs from their dens and tame them, much as they did with cattle and sheep in later times. Wolves came to us for our ability to hunt and provide food, and we accepted them for their ability to aid in hunting and guarding. Something similar happened with cats; they were attracted by the vermin in human settlements and we appreciated the removal of such vermin. However, that was only 4000 to 9000 years ago. This is probably why cats and dogs are such popular companions; the domestication of both was a mutual decision on the parts of both animal and human.

There's no denying the ease of the relationship between dogs and people, and this is due to the tremendous length of time that we've had to develop this relationship. Humans and dogs evolved together. The dog is the only animal that has similar facial expressions to humans, apart from the great apes, and it is their eyebrows that help them do so. Ever noticed that cats don't have eyebrows? That's partly why their faces are so inscrutable. Cats simply never evolved to have eyebrows because they didn't them. But dogs did because we do. Dogs smile, frown and show interest in very similar ways to people. This would have been crucial in ancient times for human-dog communication.

Dogs grew to rely on people for survival, in a nutshell – food. People grew to rely on dogs for survival too, but in a more complex way. We needed dogs for hunting, protection, warmth, companionship and different types of work, such as herding and pulling sleds.

The next time you look down at your furry companion, take a moment to think about how much we owe to our dogs. They truly are our best friends, and have been for 100 000 years. When you look at your dog, you are gazing into a past based on mutual respect and trust, and a future in which dogs will most certainly provide companionship and love. Hopefully we can do the same for them, if only to acknowledge that we wouldn't be here without them.