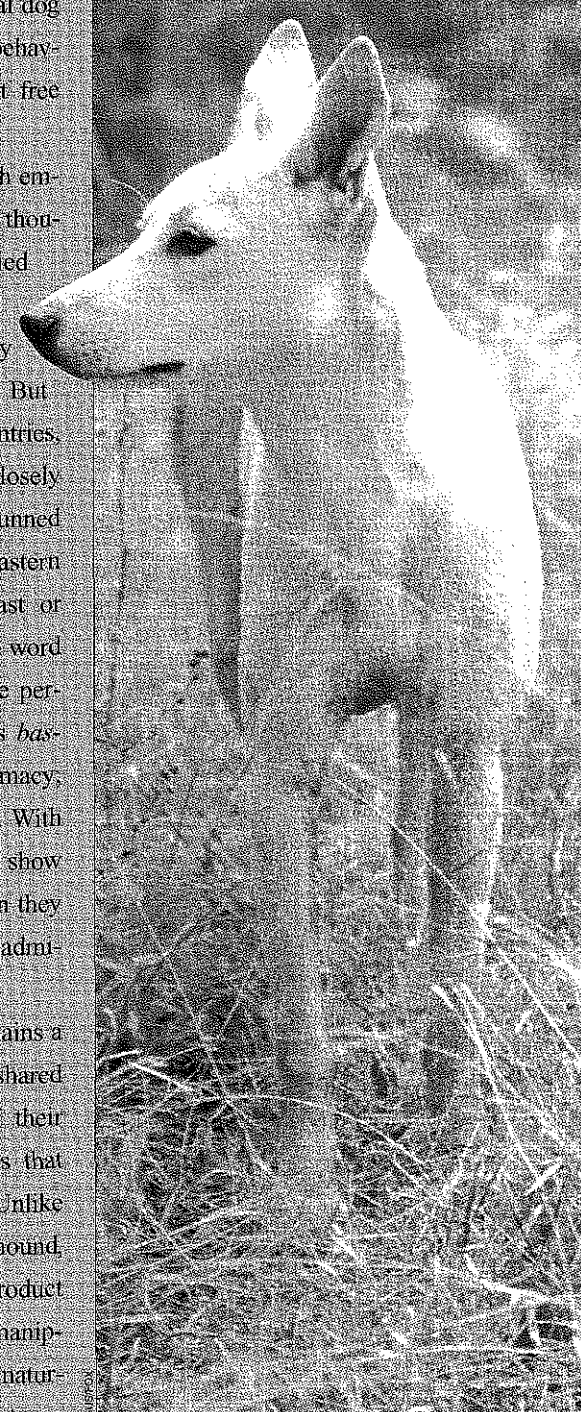


By Michael W. Fox, D.Sc., Ph.D., B. Vet. Med., MRCVS

Long before anyone ever conceived of purebred dogs, "natural" dogs lived in close association with humans. Today natural dogs still live throughout the world, looking surprisingly similar to their distant cousins in other lands. Researchers have concluded that the natural dog represents—in both appearance and behavior—canine characteristics as they exist free from genetic manipulation by humans.

Throughout history humans have both embraced and spurned dogs. Six to eight thousand years ago, ancient Egyptians deified the dog as Anubis, the dog-headed god of their zoomorphic pantheon; reverently they sculpted and drew the dog's image. But today in Egypt, as in many other countries, the natural mixed-breed dogs who so closely resemble their ancient forebears are shunned as *pariahs*, *curs*, and *bastards*. The Eastern term *pariah* refers to a human outcast or member of the lowest caste; the Western word *cur* is synonymous with a contemptible person. The French call mixed-breed dogs *bastards*, suggesting inferiority and illegitimacy; Americans call them *mongrels* or *mutts*. With increased understanding, people would show natural dogs the respect and compassion they deserve and would speak of them with admiration rather than contempt.

While the origin of natural dogs remains a mystery, their worldwide presence and shared characteristics make them a class of their own, distinct from the specific breeds that have arisen from selective breeding. Unlike breeds such as the toy poodle, basset hound, and Great Dane, the natural dog is a product of natural selection rather than human manipulation. The Australian dingo is a large natural dog that has become feral (returned to an



In Praise of the Natural Dog

undomesticated state). The African Basenji is a local natural dog that has, more recently, been selectively bred in the West to propagate and exaggerate certain traits, such as curled tail and wrinkled forehead.

Village dogs in the Andes, East Africa, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere show the natural dog's typical form: body weight of forty to seventy pounds; short, smooth coat varying in color from grayish brown, tan, or red to piebald, brindled, or entirely white; long, strong, and graceful limbs; deep chest and narrow waist; almond-shaped eyes ranging from gold to deep copper; ears either erect and pointed or slightly folded (never heavily pendulous like a cocker spaniel's); and long tail, curled slightly upward.

Generations of rigorous natural selection, ensuring survival of the fittest, underlie the natural dog's adaptiveness. The natural dog's haunches are well muscled, for speed. The front paws are extremely flexible, giving a catlike dexterity. The front dew claws can be used, like thumbs, to hold and manipulate objects. An extremely intelligent, alert, and agile animal, with superbly developed senses, the natural dog combines the best qualities seen in various dog breeds. Possessing what geneticists call hybrid vigor, the natural dog is generally healthier than purebreds, who represent a far less varied gene pool.

Propagating traits such as extreme size or flattened face requires the breeding of closely related dogs, since those traits naturally occur only rarely. The resulting inbreeding increases the likelihood of genetic disorders in the offspring. Propagating even seemingly minor changes in body size or shape can profoundly affect dogs' overall health and well-being. Exaggerated chest depth, abnormally lengthened back or shortened legs, and other unnatural characteristics cause health problems in purebred dogs.

Veterinarian Wayne H. Riser, who has studied the health problems that result from human interference with the dog's genetic integrity, notes: "Dogs that have the same skeletal proportions, slow maturity rate, and comparable muscle mass and development as the ancestral dog have few orthopaedic diseases. The incidence of orthopaedic abnormalities increases as the dog's characteristics vary from ancestral type." Orthopaedic disease is relatively rare in natural dogs; generally their trunk, head, and legs are well-proportioned and, as mentioned earlier, their body weight lies within the range of forty to seventy pounds. The more a dog's body weight lies outside this range—exceeding what his/her musculature and bone structure can



support—the greater the dog's risk of orthopaedic disease, most notably when the body weight is above ninety-five pounds or below fifteen.

Natural dogs are able to live and multiply in the wild, and in villages and towns, as solitary or pack hunters and scavengers. Female natural dogs are indulgent, protective mothers. The males, usually larger and more powerful, often have a harem of three or four females. This nuclear pack has its own hunting and scavenging range and a home territory, often closely guarded, for resting and for raising pups. Adolescent males generally roam increasingly far from the natal pack, especially when food is scarce. If such roaming males survive in territory between neighboring packs, they may form their own nuclear pack. Temporary packs usually consist of several males following a female in heat. When a dominant male (sometimes accompanied by a subordinate male) stays with one or more females, a more permanent nuclear pack is established. Generally, the more stable the nuclear pack, the healthier its members.

Pack stability is ordinarily ensured when humans allow the dogs to scavenge the neighborhood; it is further enhanced when a human family or individual regularly provides the dogs with food and water. The dogs quickly learn not to kill or injure domesticated animals, such as chickens and sheep. They also defend their territory from intruders, including dogs newly arrived from other territory.

When village dogs are well cared for, they have no need to roam far in search of food. This reduces the chances that, while foraging or hunting in the jungle or bush, they will acquire a communicable disease—such as rabies, distemper, or mange—and transmit that disease to humans, domesticated animals, or wildlife.

In less industrialized countries, natural dogs bring clear public-health and environmental benefits to the human community. As hunters they control the number of disease-carrying "pests." As scavengers they keep the environment clean. Village natural dogs eat such organic waste as discarded food and human excrement, even keeping human infants clean by licking them. Through their digestive processes, natural dogs transform human pathogens, such as potentially harmful bacteria, into harmless by-products. In poor communities that

lack sewage and garbage-disposal services, these dogs play an important public-health role.

Natural dogs also readily adapt to living with humans and domesticated animals if they are raised in such an environment from puppyhood. Natural dogs become very protective of their adoptive human "pack," including the family's territory and property. They play with and guard young children, protect livestock, and, in the jungle or bush, hunt and roam with men and boys who forage for food or tend livestock. Indirectly, natural dogs may even benefit other free-living animals by scaring them away from the fields and livestock of farmers who would retaliate for any damage done.

Yet, natural dogs remain widely feared. While some people befriend them, even take them into their homes, many react to

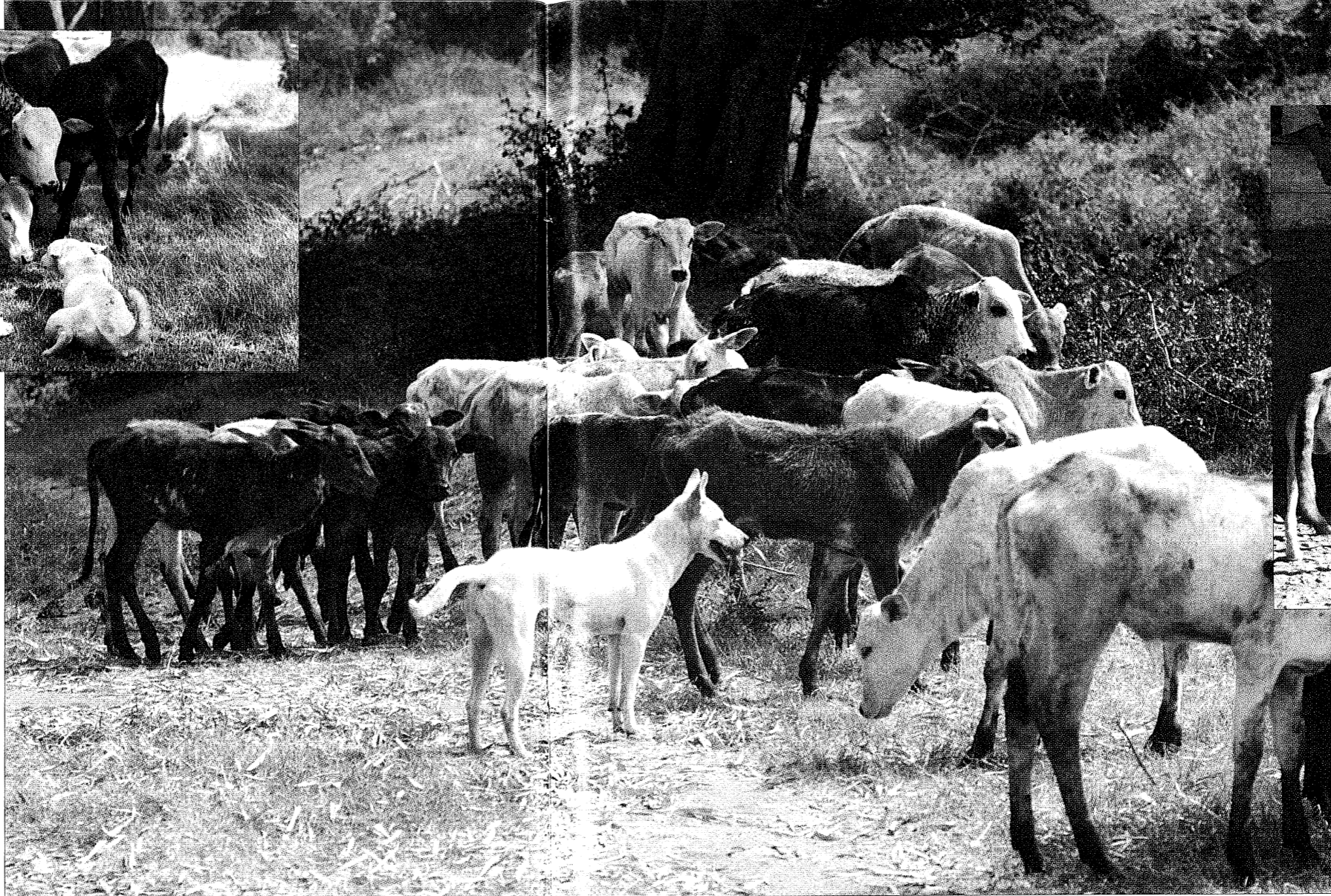
the dogs' presence with indifference or active hostility. When free-roaming dogs suffer a rabies epidemic, for example, villagers often respond by clubbing, spearing, or stoning *any* sick dogs, including those who are not necessarily rabid. Like other prejudices, the negative attitude toward natural dogs arises from ignorance. Fifty years ago Mahatma Gandhi noted that lack of compassion for India's roving dogs reflected human "ignorance and lethargy."

Although natural dogs may seem paragons of self-sufficiency, within human environs they often have difficulty subsisting. When war, drought, or famine afflicts the human community, the natural-dog community also suffers. In some societies the dogs may be eaten. Subsidized rabies and distemper vaccinations, routine anti-parasite treatments, and effective birth control are needed to help free-roaming

dogs whose circumstances cause them to suffer.

Natural dog look-alikes can be found from Detroit to Delhi, Rio to Rome. Anyone looking for a good canine companion should visit his/her local animal shelter. Natural dogs, and those who resemble them, have excellent temperaments, provided they have been socialized and not abused. I can virtually guarantee that, at any shelter at any time, you will find at least one such dog waiting to be adopted into a loving home. With a little experience or advice, you can easily pick out an adult or puppy with the exemplary traits of the mixed-breed natural dog. ■

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Natural dogs protect livestock and guard the territory of their adoptive human "pack." Inset, left: To avoid frightening inquisitive calves, a natural dog approaches them with a nonthreatening crawl. Above: Humans who befriend free-roaming dogs and provide them with handouts help protect the dogs from diseases they might otherwise acquire while hunting or foraging for food.