

## “Nature’s Breeding Practices”

by Dawn Bannister, Schipperke and Belgian Tervuren breeder

Arguing that Westminster should not be aired on TV, PETA founder Ingrid Newkirk recently wrote: “Since dog breeders routinely use incestuous inbreeding and genetic manipulation ... it’s not surprising that as many as one in four purebred dogs is plagued with a serious genetic problem.”

Aimed at serious breeders, the above statement uses incestuous to incite the negative emotions of the populace. Yes, dog breeders have used inbreeding and line breeding in their programs - the same tools that nature has used to create unique species. The real fallacy is that nature somehow promotes outcrossing and thus promotes genetic health. Nature has used and still uses inbreeding and line breeding to create species and subspecies within a population. This primarily happens in three ways: distance, social behavior and preferences, and social groupings and structures.

**Distance:** If a small group of animals breaks from the main, they naturally choose mates that are close to them. In isolation, they will continue to choose mates among their small family group, generation after generation. Over time, a small family group of animals creates its own species or subspecies. A good example of this is the Baiji dolphin, one of four dolphin species in the world to make fresh water its sole habitat. This happened when a few dolphins, long ago, swam up the Yangtze River and made a home there. Isolated from the rest of the dolphins, they bred with each other, using a much smaller gene pool.

**Social behavior and coloration patterns:** Creatures in the wild choose their mate not only from what is available, but from what is similar to them—by what they were raised. There have been creatures called Leopons bred in zoos—the offspring of male leopard and a female lion. Why don’t these creatures cross in the wild even though they are close enough to? Part of it is the coloration pattern: A creature raised by other leopards will recognize them as his own, but will not recognize a lion. The other factor is social structure: Lions live in prides, while leopards are solitary creatures. Therefore, a lioness being bred to her father is likely, but an outcross to a leopard, though not impossible, is unknown in the wild.

**Social groupings or structures:** Consider herd animals like the horse. A wild herd is likely to have one breeding stallion and four to six mares, though it is said that a single stallion in the wild could breed up to 20 mares. Is that not what dog breeders have done when we select a particular male to service multiple bitches? Similarly, in wolf packs, it is usually only the alpha male and female who breed; often the alpha bitch will chase males away from another bitch who is in season. This makes sense when considering available resources: The fewer bitches having pups, the more food there is available for the bitch that actually does have them. This practice has often been noted as allowing only the strongest to carry their genetic material to the next generation, thereby improving the species—but how does it differ from a dog breeder selecting only the most typical, healthy animals for their breeding program and placing the rest as pets?

What is it that makes the Baiji dolphin a unique species worth saving, but makes our various breeds of dogs nothing but the result of “incestuous inbreeding and genetic manipulation”? We as dog breeders need to realize the truth - our dogs are no less unique and beautiful than any of the wonderful species in the wild, and they were created using the same methods, equally deserving of preservation. Hypocrisies stand because we do not challenge them - don’t you think it is time we did?

*This article was published in the June 2009 edition of the AKC Gazette.*