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# A Scientific Mystery: Do Wild Baboons Kidnap Puppies for Pets?

Harold Herzog, *Animal Studies Repository*



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Hal Herzog, Ph.D., Animals and Us

# A Scientific Mystery: Do Wild Baboons Kidnap Puppies for Pets?

Do wild baboons really keep puppies for pets?

Posted Dec 21, 2011

In a previous Psychology Today blog, I argued that humans are the only species to keep pets. (Calm down - I know about Koko's kitten, etc., etc. While long-term odd couple attachments between species are common in homes, wildlife parks, and in captivity, they don't seem to exist in the wild.)

But a three-minute YouTube video clip I saw via Facebook last week raises serious questions about my pet theory. The video depicts a troop of pet-keeping Hamadryas baboons living in a garbage dump outside of Ta'if, Saudi Arabia. It's a sweltering lunar landscape not far from the Red Sea. Amazingly, the baboons' pets are dogs. Before going on, I suggest you watch the video. While the first 30 seconds are a little upsetting, trust me, it ends well. Watch it NOW!

In the first part of the clip, a male baboon manhandles a hapless puppy which, clearly, would prefer not to become the big monkey's "companion animal." Thankfully, in the next scene, the dogs and baboons are peacefully hanging out as the God-voiced narrator claims baboons now consider the dogs part of their family. They groom the dogs, and the dogs happily eat, travel with, and sleep among the baboons. As the cinematic sun sets in the background, the narrator sagely explains that both species benefit from the relationship. The baboons' dogs chase off wild dog packs. In return, the baboons treat the dogs, well, "like family pets."..... The End.

## Searching The Story on Facebook

Largely because of Facebook, the baboon-dog YouTube video has gone viral (nearly 400,000 hits as I write this). I was certainly haunted by it, particularly because it undercuts my contention that only humans keep pets. Hence, I spent hours searching the scientific literature for a legitimate reference to this pet-keeping baboon troop. I found zip. Then I put the clip on my Facebook page and contacted some researchers who study canine behavior and evolution: James Serpell, Clive Wynne, Alan Beck, Julie Hecht, and Adam Miklosi. While all of them were fascinated by the video, none of them knew anything about the baboons and their pet puppies.

I got a break when the ever-curious David Hinton decided this was worth chasing down. David soon discovered that the YouTube clip was from a British nature series called *Animals Like Us*. Then we stumbled on the Facebook page of the Saudi Arabian American Baboon Research Association ([here](#)). I contacted them immediately. They were, indeed, familiar with the Ta'if baboon troop, but they knew of no documented evidence that the baboons kept dogs as pets.

The researchers had seen baboons kidnap kittens, but they have not studied these relationships systematically - a future project, they promised.

But the big break came when we decided to try to trace the baboon-dog connection through the dogs. The dogs at the trash dump appeared to be a type of natural breed called Canaan dogs.

Natural breeds, sometimes referred to as "pariah dogs," are found in many parts of the world, often on the outskirts of human settlements. They tend to be mid-sized animals with short hair and pointy ears (here). Often tan or brownish, they resemble Australian dingos in size and shape. They are called "natural breeds" because the dogs pick their own mates and are not subjected to the arbitrary aesthetic rules of human overlords.

Within a couple of hours, David and I had independently contacted a microbiologist and Canaan dog expert named Duncan Schroeter. Duncan became interested in Canaan dogs while he was engaged in a research project in Saudi Arabia and had adopted several of them as pets. In an e-mail, he told me he knew about the baboons at Ta'if and had tried, unsuccessfully, to get Saudi wildlife officials to investigate their curious relationships with dogs. He also mentioned that baboons and dogs easily intermingle at a different site in the Asir region of Saudi Arabia.

### **The Big Question**

Then Duncan raised the big question. He wrote, "Are these baboons and dogs merely tolerating each other in areas where both can find food or are they truly living together with the dogs staying with the baboons when they move away? It is easy and more sensational to put any interpretation on commercial "documentaries." In short, are the Ta'if baboons really keeping dogs as their personal pets or is the YouTube clip just another example of Animal Planet type TV bullshit?

For what it's worth, here's what I think we know about the Ta'if baboons and their "pets":

1. The baboon/dog interactions were filmed in a garbage dump in Saudi Arabia by a French film crew. (I have e-mailed the director but have not heard back from her.)
2. Ta'if baboons have regular contact with humans and are sometimes fed by people.
3. The dogs appear to be free-ranging Canaan dogs. However, as Christy Hoffman of the University of Chicago, astutely pointed out to me -- on Facebook -- the large white dog that appears toward the end of the clip seems to be wearing a collar. This is unusual in Saudi Arabia where dogs are generally considered vermin.
4. Dogs and wild baboons occasionally play together in other parts of their range.
5. Young male baboons do kidnap infant female baboons, presumably to become incorporated into their harem.

So, are the baboons of Ta'if really keeping puppies as pets? Some authorities are doubtful. The anthrozoologist Boria Sax, author of the wonderful new book *City of Ravens*, wrote (again, on Facebook), "You can't tell just what is happening from the video alone, and we have only the

word of the narrator that the dogs are kept as pets. I am skeptical." Eniko Kubinyi, a canine ethologist at the Family Dog Project in Budapest was more blunt, "Dogs as pets of baboons? Science fiction. Baboons and dogs share the same environment, and they are socially plastic, so they enjoy the company of others. It seems the male is just 'playing' with the puppy, I wouldn't call it kidnapping. Additionally, a pet should be fed, at least. Do the baboons feed the puppies? I wouldn't think so."

### **My Questions**

I am skeptical, too. But I have been obsessed by the video for a week. It raises a host of questions in my mind. For example,

1. How long do the dogs live with the baboons? Is it a long-term or temporary arrangement?
2. Do the baboons get anything from the dogs other than somebody to love and play with? How do the dogs benefit?
3. Do baboons ever kill or eat puppies. ("Pet-keeping" has been described in chimps - but within an hour the "pet" always seems to wind up dead.)
4. Is the baboon-dog relationship affected by the fact that the "pets" and their "owners" live in a garbage dump? Is there enough edible human refuse (literally, "junk food") to keep everyone fat and happy so the monkeys and dogs don't compete for food?

If I learn more about the mystery of Ta'if "pet-keeping" I'll post it here. If you know more about it than I do, send me an e-mail or write a comment at the end of this post.

And, if you are a grad student looking for a doctoral dissertation, this could be a winner.