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Born to Love Cat: The Need to Nurture

By Brad Kollus

Sometimes there are people in our lives who think our love of cats are “unnatural.” Well the next time you encounter a person who just does not understand your love of cats you can tell them about the new scientific evidence which shows your love is not only natural, but affection for animals might even be an essential part of what it means to be human.



A Natural Love of Animals and Nature

In 1986, world renowned Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson proposed what has become known as the Biophilia Hypothesis. This theory states that people have an “innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes” or, that humans have a built in attraction to nature including trees, flowers, plants, rivers, oceans, mountains, and animals. “People have a tendency to attend to other living things. It has so much enormous survival value to be aware of what other living things are doing. I’m sure that would have evolved very early in our evolutionary history,” says Dr. James Serpell, Executive Director of the Center for Interactions of Animals and Society at the University of Pennsylvania and author of *In the Company of Animals - A Study of Human - Animal Relationships*.

Modern day examples of biophilia surround us: the various nature related vacationing people engage in, such as relaxing on seaside beaches, hiking, canoeing, camping in parks, and skiing and snow boarding on mountains, as well as the popularity of gardening. Our love of animals, wild and domestic, is another example of biophilia. “More people go to zoos every year than all spectator sports combined,” says Dr. Alan Beck Executive Director of the Center for the Human-Animal Bond at Purdue University and coauthor of *Between People and Pets: The Importance of Animal Companionship*.

Pet keeping, with more than 55% of all US households having either a cat or a dog, is another modern example of biophilia. “I do think there is an affinity for nature and for many people, the companion animal is their contact,” says Dr. Beck.

Origins of Pet-Keeping

It is often assumed that owning cats and dogs are an invention of modern western society and a product of leisure time, beginning in the 16th century. However, if our attraction to pets is really based in our genes, then pet keeping should be much older, and should have occurred among our ancient ancestors. “Pet keeping might have preceded domestication by hundreds of thousands, if not millions of years,” says Dr. Aaron Katcher, Associate Professor of Psychiatry Emeritus at the University of Pennsylvania, and coauthor of *Between People and Pets: The Importance of Animal Companionship*.

Dr. James Serpell, in his book *In the Company of Animals*, says there is much evidence for this. Pet keeping is found in hunting and gathering societies still on earth today. The conventional theory is that animals were domesticated for food on farms and then later became pets. However, new theories challenge this order with pets coming first. “The theory is that our ancestors were also hunter-gathers. They kept pets just like more recent hunter-gathers, and that these animals hung around and lived in the villages and were appreciated more as a kind of leisure activity than anything else. Then, gradually over time, the economic benefits of having some of these creatures became more evident,” says Dr. Serpell. He says it was then that people began raising some animals as livestock.

Tribal societies are in many ways still living close to Stone Age conditions, and this indicates that pet keeping has a universal appeal and fulfills human needs no matter how “modern” or “wealthy” people may be. These people are not lonely, alienated, or isolated, but live predominantly in communities of extended families or clans with much social support. Yet their pets still fulfill an unmet need for them. One anthropologist that studied the Navajo Indians found that cat ownership was their most usual pet and, while not seeming to fulfill any real economic need, was kept and cherished by their owners just as any urban cat lover would.

Some experts believe there is evidence that our cats don’t just supplement our human relationships, but also complement them. In one study reported in *Between People and Pets: The Importance of Animal Companionship*, Dr. Aaron Katcher, found that “the protective effect of the presence of a pet was just as strong among married patients as among single patients. The data suggest that pets do not just substitute for human relationships; they complement and add to them, giving a special and unique dimension to human life.”

The Need to Nurture

Human children depend on their parents longer than any other animal on the planet and this means that human parents need to have an extremely large supply of love to nurture their children. “People have an innate attraction for nurturing living things, and life,” said Dr. Beck. This great desire to nurture remains if we never have children of our own or even after our children grow up. This need is one of the factors that influences our desires to care for our kitties. “Human beings take care of their young longer than any other animal, and they also take care of people who are not kin. We are designed so that we are healthier when we are nurturing someone else; when we cease to nurture others and take care of others we become depressed, and our physiology deteriorates. The strongest predictor that we know of longevity is social support. It’s vital for our health, and our animals give us this opportunity,” said Dr. Aaron Katcher, also President of People Animals and Nature (PAN).

This desire of being needed by another living animal plays a crucial role in a person’s development and can provide a source of meaning in a person’s life. When people help or nurture another living animal they feel good, whether it’s a child, elderly person or cat. “You know what the helper’s high is, its one of those inborn things which is just as well because if social animals don’t have any rewards for caring for each other they are in big trouble,” said Dr. Beck.



"Pets Are Really the Answer"
- Andy Warhol

Cats as Children

Scientists are discovering what cat lovers have known for along time. People view their cats as children and treat them as such. Dr. Katcher and Dr. Beck assert that most people treat their pets like children, and this can be seen by the fact that we feed them, care for them, and are even willing to handle and dispose of their feces throughout their life; something we don't even do with our human children. Like children, pets are touched at the will of the owner, and they are given names by the owner which makes them unique individuals.

Katcher and Beck asked their subjects in one study to describe their relationships with their cats and dogs. The most common words repeated were "love" "affection" "companionship" "trust" "loyalty" "need" and "care." According to Katcher and Beck, "These words seem to be at the core of almost all descriptions of the bond between people and pets and are also central to any intimate family relationship."

In addition, studies have looked at how people talk to their pets and have determined that they use the same soft high pitched voices that parents use to talk to their children. A recent American Animal Hospital Association Survey found that 76% of pet owners admitted talking to their pets in a different voice. Even the facial expressions of pet owners interacting with their pets mimic the expressions of parents interacting with their children. Nobel prize winning ethologist Dr. Konrad Lorenz has labeled this the "cute response." "This phrase means we are very responsive to young animals, and if you look at how pets behave to their owners, they do give many signals which are youthful, sort of infantile signals, soliciting parenting behavior from us, and we respond very much in that way," said Dr. Serpell.

"Lorenz made this study and observation that a variety of mammals and birds all start by being what we would call cute which is proportionately larger eyes to head, proportionately larger head to body and the diminutive form of nose and so on, the kind of thing you'd find on any hallmark card," said Dr. Beck. "Basically, it was a releaser for nurturing and it's true, people who hate rats look at a baby rat and find cuteness. It's a releaser of nurturing rather than anger - almost no matter what the species is," continues Dr. Beck. This response invokes an innate desire to protect and nurture these baby animals.

Cats are just a little smaller than the average baby, and they have large eyes which are similar in proportion to an infant's eyes. "Cats lucked out, they just have the right eyes proportionate to their head and a pushed in little nose, and it is very much like the juvenile little form," said Dr. Beck. People have an innate attraction to infants whether they be human or other animals. The universal appeal of kittens and puppies is a good example of this. "The cat is our little baby, the cute child. They even luck out with what seems almost as though a baby crying," (by their meowing) said Dr. Beck.

Cats as Friends

There is an abundant amount of information that social support from friends, families and pets leads to better physical, psychological, and emotional health. Dr. James Lynch, the author of *A Cry Unheard: New Consequences Into the Medical Consequences of Loneliness*, and Dr. Katcher worked together years ago to examine the differences in recovery rates between heart attack patients who had pets and those who didn't. The results amazed them. Four times as many heart attack patients without pets died than those with pets. Since then, other studies have had the same results. One study of 5,741 people at the Baker Medical Research Institute in Melbourne Australia found that dog and cat owners had lower blood pressure, triglyceride and cholesterol levels than did people without pets.

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Dr. Lynch has spent a lifetime studying the physiological effects of social support and loneliness, and he has come to some important conclusions. His research shows that humans enter a state of physiological inclusion when they interact with other people or pets and these people enter a state of enhanced relaxation that actually leads to health and longevity. The opposite of this is a state of physiological exclusion, where a person is isolated from other living beings. This state leads to loneliness, social isolation and ultimately premature disease and death.

Dr. Dennis Turner, author of *The Domestic Cat: The Biology of its Behaviour*, has been studying the interaction of cats and their owners for years and has found that they know when their owners are depressed. "I think its fantastic that they can tell when their owner is in a depressive or fearful mood. When the cat senses it, the cat reacts very strongly to help their person out of the depression, and we have been able to measure that," said Dr. Turner.

It turns out our love of cats is not only natural but extremely beneficial both physically and psychologically. The more we find out about the feline-human relationship the more it seems to be purrfect.