

History of Consciousness program at the University of California, Santa Cruz, dogs are “companion species” to humans, with both species engaging in a mutually beneficial, co-evolved relationship throughout time (Haraway 2003).

So how did dogs become humankind’s best friend and vice versa?

Dogs broke away from their ancestral wolf tendencies through a process known as domestication. Domestication is defined as the process through which humans exert control over an animal or plant. The domestication of dogs likely happened at several places across the globe and at different moments in time, though it is believed that dogs were first domesticated in either Asia or Europe (Thalmann et al. 2013). Recent evidence suggests dog domestication started in Asia approximately 20,000 to 40,000 years ago (Handwerk 2018).

There are multiple theories as to why and how domestication occurred. Some scholars postulate that wolves started trailing hunter-gatherers, who left behind tasty refuse piles and bones for wolves to consume. Soon, wolves got braver and began approaching hunter-gatherer settlements, with hunter-gatherers feeding wolves in exchange for protection from predators. Aggressive wolves who bit or attacked humans were culled from the herd, while

wolves who exhibited positive, friendly traits were bred by humans. This process of humans selecting desirable traits from plants or animals is known as **artificial selection** or **selective breeding**.

Domestication has come at a cost for dogs. In watching and listening carefully to their human companions, dogs have lost skills that are necessary to survive in the wild. For instance, dogs have lost their ability to work well as a pack due to their reliance on their human counterparts (Handwerk 2018).

What are some examples of artificial selection we can see in dogs today? Scientists have compared the facial muscles and eye movements of domesticated dogs to wolves and have found that dogs are able to produce “puppy eyes” that may release oxytocin in humans (Kaminski et al. 2019). New human mothers release oxytocin so that they can bond with and care for demanding newborn infants and, in this case, with their canine companions. Tail-wagging and eye contact with humans (Hare et al. 2002) are two additional evolutionary adaptations that helped build the bond between human and dog. Dogs continue to serve important roles in today’s society: they aid humans in hunting parties, warn humans of threats by barking, protect the public as police dogs, and work as service dogs to people who are blind, who have epilepsy, and who use wheelchairs.