

Maternal Altruism In Dogs

Human beings are capable of and often display maternal altruism well beyond our own species. We adopt other people's children, yes, but we also adopt dogs and cats, even trees and roadways. Viewed through an evolutionary lens, this is interesting. Why aren't we focusing on the survival of our own species—even our own tribe—instead of wasting precious energy and resources on stray cats or endangered fungi? Scientists explain this peculiarity by pointing to our sophisticated cognitive equipment. Because we can project thoughts into the future, we're able to see the long-term view. The bigger perspective. We understand the principle of goodness and know that caring for others not only makes us feel good, but also sets a standard for kindness that strengthens our community and the potential for reciprocal help. In other words, what goes around comes around.

But if that explains why humans show maternal altruism, what about dogs (and other animals) that do the same? Charles Darwin's original theory that animals should behave only in ways that ensure their own survival crumbled when he discovered copious evidence of interspecies altruism. Take a few recent examples of the sorts of things he must have encountered: In 2006 in Varanasi, India, a Pomeranian named Guddi adopted an orphaned baby monkey, carrying it around for years. In 2012 in Berlin, Germany, Baby the French bulldog adopted six wild boar piglets she came across in a forest near her home. An English news crew filmed Baby grooming and playing with the piglets, and to watch her, you would swear she believes these are her puppies.

Behaviorists have a hard time explaining these and other examples of interspecies maternal altruism. We humans know that by preserving the animal and plant life around us, we are protecting the health of the planet and enriching the future lives of our offspring. Baby the French bulldog isn't capable of such an advanced assessment. Is it plausible that dogs and other animals sense our planetary connectedness at an instinctual level we don't yet understand? If so, it would explain many an odd adoption story from the animal kingdom. And it's a feel-good thought, too.