

Some thoughts on feeding raw food diets...

By Beth Duman

I know that all of us doggie lovers want the best for our buddies and are constantly being challenged to make changes that will assist them in living long, happy, and healthy lives. We try to stay alert for advances in training, exercise, and diet that will facilitate their longevity and quality of life.

We are also always comparing what we do with the methods used by our fellow dogaholics and are goaded into making changes as we learn from them. We are also sometimes stimulated to “jump on the bandwagon” because some things are just in vogue and we feel like better dog parents if we can compare ourselves to those who have not yet joined our clan. I know I certainly proselytize for positive training methods and yearn for the “less informed” force trainers to join with me on my journey.

I am writing this note for those who are feeling left out and haven't quite moved to feeding one of the in-style raw food diets to their dogs. Maybe you are one who is beginning to feel guilty because your dog's food still comes in the multi-colored bag from the pet store.

I want to raise some issues that may even the score a bit.

1. Since domestic dogs are descended from wolves you might want to start by looking at what wolves eat. Unlike some of their close cousins such as foxes who sometimes eat as much fruit as they do meat, wolves subsist primarily on dead animals. Sure they'll chew a little grass or eat an occasional wild blackberry, but their primary diet is animals that they have killed or scavenged. (Some Michigan wolves have learned the glories of hunting roadways for “road pizza”, those unfortunate animals that forgot to look both ways before crossing the road!) Most of the animals that are killed by wolves are ungulates. Here in Michigan their main food is white-tailed deer in the Upper Peninsula and moose on Isle Royale. They also may grab a bunny, vole, or even a grasshopper snack, but, when we necropsy dead Upper Peninsula wolves in the forensic lab, we find deer stuff; hair, soft tissue, muscle, bone fragments, skin, and dewclaws.

When wolves kill a large ungulate, they eat the soft tissue first, the lungs, spleen, heart, kidneys, and intestines. The stools that they produce from these yummys are runny and pretty gross. During follow-up meals at the kill site, the wolves will continue eating the dead animal's muscles, hide and bones. The stools from these meals contain mostly hair wrapped bone fragments. By the end of the feast there will be few leftovers, maybe a jawbone or hoof and a pile of green glop. This green yucky stuff is the contents of the animal's rumen or stomach. Despite what some proponents of raw food dog diets might claim, wolves, rather than eat the stomach contents of an animal. They might gobble it down when they're gorging on a smaller animal like a rabbit, but when they eat a larger ruminant, they leave it behind. Wolf researchers typically use the site of this pile of rumen contents to mark the place where the wolves made their kill.

So, if you, the perfect dog owner, choose to feed your dog the diet of his wolf ancestors, you would do best to feed him raw whole dead beasts. Much of what you would be feeding is what is commonly called “by products” or “offal”, organs, skin, and hair, and the contents of the intestines. When you feed him bones, he would also be eating lots of hair to cushion their passage through his gut. You’d skip any un-predigested plant fiber material, no raw broccoli and spinach. Your dog doesn’t have the intestinal flora to get much nutritional value from these anyway. You might season the foods with some deer pellets (poops) as they may contain some vitamins that your dog cannot synthesize himself. As a downside to this diet, your dog may harbor a few more parasites that you’d rather he didn’t have and the slimy poops would be a bear to shovel!

2. Although biologists agree that domestic dogs originally came from wolves, many researchers are starting to believe that the more recent direct ancestors of our domestic dogs are the non-breed village dogs that make up the bulk of the canine population around the world. They believe that some wolves moved into the ecological niche provided by the human move into communal village living over 10,000 years ago. Rather than being hunters like their wolf ancestors, the “pariah” dogs became dependent on humans, scavenging around their settlements for food. These village dogs make up the bulk of the population of dogs worldwide. Although we like to imagine doggies bonded with their human families and eating specially prepared diets put into their little doggie dishes, this is not the way most domestic dogs survive. They eat garbage, waste from human settlements. Their diet depends on the locality and what sort of waste might be available in that culture. Kaddi, our African Village dog was born into the Wolof culture in the small village of Chamen in the West African country of The Gambia. The villagers live primarily on a diet consisting of rice, millet, peanuts, and fish. The villagers keep chickens primarily for their eggs, a few cattle for their milk, and occasionally slaughter a goat for a religious feast or special event. The dogs of the village rarely get more than a little leftover food dumped on the ground or some fish bones spit out on the floor. No one prepares their food. (With the exception of the Peace Corps’ pet, “Harit”, none of the dogs is regularly purposefully fed.) In this village setting, their diet would have little protein, no raw vegetables, and be predominantly grain-based. This sort of diet would characterize village dogs in most parts of the world. Food waste is not a chunk of meat. At best, it might be a bottom of goat leg, or maybe some skin.

In a few areas, such as Arctic climates, the village dogs would eat a high protein diet of seal and fish scraps, but in most of the world, dogs would be eating a diet higher in carbohydrates that corresponded to the food waste produced by the indigenous people of that area.

When you begin to compare both the wolf diet and the village dog diet with some of the raw food diets that are now being proselytized, you begin to see that there may be some incongruities. When wolves eat a dead animal, they are not just eating the muscle meat and bones. A large part of their diet consists of the organ meat and visceral tissues. Most village dogs of the world are adapted to a grain-based diet higher in carbohydrates.

The saving grace in this discussion is that dogs are a highly adaptable species and manage to do well on a variety of diets. Many dogs thrive to a ripe old age on some of the most basic prepared dog foods. Although we like to imagine that the more we dote over them, the longer and healthier life they will live, this does not always prove to be true. Some recent studies have linked higher protein diets with higher levels of aggression in some dogs, and studies have linked serotonin-inhibiting corn based diets on increased territorial aggression in some dogs. Prepared moist kibble foods are packed full of excess sugar and would be extremely low on my choice of food items for my buddies. I also avoid products with strange preservatives whose names I cannot pronounce or look like a bottle of red dye # 4 has been dumped on their contents. On the other hand, unless I was feeding chicken that I was certain was raised with no antibiotics or growth hormones and was certain to harbor no scary germs like Salmonella, I would be very careful to limit the amount in my dog's diet.

So, going back to the original issue of the "super" Moms and Dads who just can't wait to make me feel left out by continuing to feed my own dogs high quality kibble. I wonder what's really going on here? Are the raw diets filling some other emotional need about being super parents that has little to do with the realities of what most canines in the world eat? Why is it that many of the folks that I know who feed these diets are still showering their dogs with second-hand smoke from their cigarettes, and eating greasy, fattening, fast foods themselves? Maybe the best gift we could give our dogs would be to treasure and nurture our own health so we can be the companions and active owners that can allow their lives to be the best they can be!