

Dear Editor,

I would like to make a plea for the Thai dingo, which suffers from a lack of recognition and confusion with free-ranging domestic dogs. Research by Laurie Corbett and others, which is summarized in his book, “The Dingo in Australia and Asia” (Comstock/Cornell, 1995), highlights the facts that the dingo is a primitive dog native to Asia, and in eastern Asia it still exists and has never been domesticated. To me, the implication is that the dingo is actually part of Thailand’s native fauna but as far as I am aware this has never been acknowledged in other texts covering Thai mammals.

In summary, the evidence points to the dingo having evolved from Asian wolves with the driving force probably having been a closer relationship to a population of people who were becoming more sedentary and offering more scavenging opportunities. Corbett believes that in western Asia the dingo was then fully domesticated, and that this was the beginning of the process that eventually led to the complete range of today’s dog breeds. However, in eastern Asia the relationship between dingo and human has remained commensal with never any deliberate selection pressure from us. Therefore, the dingoes that remain in Thailand (and surrounding countries), which easily get dismissed as “stray” dogs, are in fact part of the native fauna, albeit heavily influenced by proximity to man.

The close relationship between the grey wolf, the dingo and the domestic dog is reflected in the confusion over their classification. Until relatively recently the domestic dog was usually considered a separate species (*Canis familiaris*), with the dingo either referred to as a subspecies of the dog (*C. f. dingo*) or given specific status (*C. dingo*). However, although not universally agreed, they are both now generally placed with the grey wolf amongst 26 subspecies of *Canis lupus* (namely, *C. l. familiaris* and *C. l. dingo*). Corbett actually suggests that the Thai dingo is sufficiently distinct to merit the separate subspecific status of *C. l. siamensis*.

Dingoes are visually very similar to some domestic dogs. General dingo characteristics are erect ears, a moderately bushy tail, and a body colour that is commonly some shade of ginger but can vary quite widely and includes black-and-tan, completely black or completely white. The muzzle is often dark and any white patches on the feet, chest and tail-tip lack mottling. One clear physiological difference from domestic dogs is that dingoes, like wolves, can only produce one litter a year (two in dogs).

There are two more very pertinent points in Corbett’s book. One is that at the time of the research there were more pure dingoes left in Thailand than anywhere else, and secondly, that dingoes everywhere are fast disappearing through hybridization with domestic dogs. This research is now twenty years old, and the status of pure dingoes in Thailand must be considered fragile at best.

The suggestion to include the Thai dingo as part of the country’s natural fauna may not be accepted without further evidence and debate but the danger is that the animal will be hybridized out of existence before any steps are taken to conserve or study it. It is actually difficult to see quite what could be done in the face of such a ubiquitous threat from free-ranging domestic dogs, which is an even more serious problem here than in Australia due to the Thai dingo’s closer relationship to people. This would also make it difficult to follow any conservation model adopted in Australia, with any measures taken here needing to be specific to the Asian situation. Perhaps the first step is simply to acknowledge that dingoes do exist in southeast Asia and *could* be considered part of the native fauna.

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