

# Understanding Feline Social Structure



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH  
The Royal (Dick) School  
of Veterinary Studies

The Jeanne Marchig  
International Centre for  
Animal Welfare Education

## Introduction:

For anyone who has ever lived with a cat, you will know that they are usually not nearly as sociable as dogs.

Dogs appear to want to please us and will often do as we ask eagerly, but cats are a little more discerning and sometimes it can feel like we are the ones that are eager to please them!

Cats can certainly enjoy human company, stroking and gentle grooming and many cats will seek out human interactions, but they are not as reliant on us as dogs are and will happily spend much of the day on their own.

Whilst dogs are very sociable animals, greeting most humans and dogs they come into contact with, cats are selectively social and very discriminatory with whom they interact with.

It is important to understand what their natural social structure and normal behaviour is, in order to provide good welfare for them.



## Social structure

- Cats are small, solitary hunters that predate upon small rodents, birds and lizards. Hunting together as a pack does not occur.
- Cats don't mate or pair up for life. The female cat is mated by a male cat who may have got every other cat in the neighbourhood pregnant.
- The father plays no part in raising the kittens – the mother raises the offspring on her own but may also be helped by a female relative whilst she goes out hunting.
- Social groups with an internal structure, are formed whenever there are sufficient food resources to support them.



- Cats are generally solitary but can be 'selectively social' (they choose carefully who they allow into their life). When naturally formed social groups do occur, they are matrilineal (blood related through the mother's line). It is the affiliative, co-operative relationships between females that provide the social structure upon which the group or colony is based.
- There is no linear hierarchy (social structure with clear ranking where each animal in the group is dominant over those below it and submissive to those above it) within these social groups but conflict over resources can occur.
- Cats recognise colony members vs. non-colony members.

