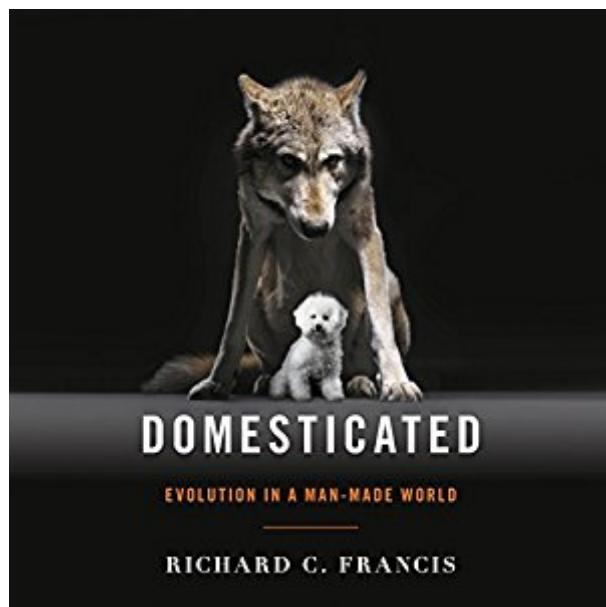


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Domesticated: Evolution In A Man-Made World



Synopsis

Without our domesticated plants and animals, human civilization as we know it would not exist. We would still be living at subsistence level as hunter-gatherers if not for domestication. It is no accident that the cradle of civilization - the Middle East - is where sheep, goats, pigs, cattle, and cats commenced their fatefully intimate associations with humans. Before the agricultural revolution, there were perhaps 10 million humans on Earth. Now there are more than seven billion of us. Our domesticated species have also thrived, in stark contrast to their wild ancestors. In a human-constructed environment - or manmade world - it pays to be domesticated. Domestication is an evolutionary process first and foremost. What most distinguishes domesticated animals from their wild ancestors are genetic alterations resulting in tameness, the capacity to tolerate close human proximity. But selection for tameness often results in a host of seemingly unrelated by-products, including floppy ears, skeletal alterations, reduced aggression, increased sociality, and reduced brain size. It's a package deal known as the domestication syndrome. Elements of the domestication syndrome can be found in every domesticated species - not only cats, dogs, pigs, sheep, cattle, and horses but also more recent human creations, such as domesticated camels, reindeer, and laboratory rats. That domestication results in this suite of changes in such a wide variety of mammals is a fascinating evolutionary story, one that sheds much light on the evolutionary process in general. We humans, too, show signs of the domestication syndrome, which some believe was key to our evolutionary success. By this view human evolution parallels the evolution of dogs from wolves, in particular.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Sorry if this is too long - it is the text of a review I posted on The Panda's Thumb. A number of years ago, I found a family of raccoons living in my chimney.* I got them out by dropping a trouble light down the flue and turning it on for a few days. According to Richard C. Francis, in his splendid book, Domesticated, animals such as raccoons living in urbanized areas represent the first step toward domesticating those animals. The full title of the book is Domesticated: Evolution in a Man-Made World, and Francis shows in considerable detail how various animals became domesticated: dogs, cats, pigs, sheep and goats, reindeer, camels, horses, rodents, and perhaps humans, as well as other predators such as raccoons and ferrets. Each scenario is slightly different, each seems well documented, and each has just a little bit of just-so story in it. The audience for the book is not completely clear. I think the author thinks that the book is written for the lay reader, but at times it got a little hairy, and I recommend that, if you are not a biologist, you keep your computer nearby. Or, if you are younger than I, your smart phone. Indeed, after getting through 50 or so pages of the complimentary copy I received, I bought a Kindle edition, precisely so that I could more easily look up terms that were unfamiliar or not entirely familiar. Lest this paragraph be taken as a criticism, let me make clear that the effort was wholly worthwhile. Francis begins with the now well known domestication of foxes by Dmitry Belyaev in Siberia. Belyaev and his colleagues selected foxes, as Francis puts it, *à œ*for one trait and one trait only: the capacity to tolerate human proximity without fear or aggression.

This is a very good book, but be aware that it is grounded in fairly difficult genetic concepts--I got his basic points but some of the material is beyond my science knowledge, so I'm planning a reread. I read it in chunks over a week (I usually read a book straight through) and found myself chewing over the ideas as I went to sleep. The basic theme of the book is that domestication by humans has become an evolutionary force shaping the animals we have domesticated. But it is more than that; the last part of the book is on domestication of ourselves, essentially, and while difficult to summarize, it's convincing. Francis starts with chapters on specific domesticates. These are written clearly, are fascinating in details and written with verve and wit. The chapters discuss dogs, cats, sheep and goats, reindeer, camels (short but fascinating and funny as well), cattle, horses, rodents (guinea pigs!). The only conspicuously missing domesticates are the birds--chickens, geese, ducks and so on. These chapters discuss the likely circumstances of domestication as well as changes in

the animals over the thousands of years of domestication. These also involve a considerable discussion of epigenetics and plasticity of form. I found the most fascinating chapters to be on cats, reindeer and horses. There's lots of unexpected detail. I had not thought that there was much less genetic distance between a Pekingese and a wolf than between a wolf and a coyote. There's also the matter that we amazingly complex humans have about the same number of genes as a puffer fish.

A very interesting read, especially for anyone who has any pets or other domesticated animals. The case for evolution is clear, but artificial selection by humans speeds up the process, making it visible. Anyone who has looked up pictures of dog breeds from a century ago and compared them to the breed of the same name can see obvious changes in the facial features and other "desired" traits - usually for the worse, from the standpoint of the animal's health. Pug noses, for example, used to be only slightly shortened compared to a typical dog, however, now some of these dogs have such flat faces that they commonly have difficult breathing and their sinuses are always inflamed. Not all the animals covered in this book are ones that most people would consider to be properly domesticated. Raccoons are provided as an example of a species that may be early in the stages of self-domestication, since they have only recently adopted cities as dwellings. Raccoons in cities live in much higher population densities with each other, and are more able to tolerate the presence of humans nearby than non-urban coons. That said, even the author admits that there are no studies of urban-born versus wild-born raccoons to see if these traits are inherited or merely behavioral, forced upon them by their early learning. I rather hope that raccoons are domesticating themselves somewhat, they're darn cute... although I'm sure I won't live long enough to have a raccoon that is fully tamed. I do think that the book could have been somewhat better organized, and felt that the chapter on horses and other equines really shorted the donkey.

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