

Understanding Your Dog's Behavior:

A Special Interview with Dr. Isla Fishburn

By Dr. Karen Becker

KB: Dr. Karen Becker

IF: Dr. Isla Fishburn

KB: Hi, this is Dr. Karen Becker. Today I have a very special guest, Dr. Isla Fishburn. Dr. Fishburn has a bachelor of science in zoology, a master's in biological science, and a PhD in conservation biology. She's passionate about creating coexistence between people and wildlife. She has really extensive qualifications in the realm of animal behavior and conservation.

It was Isla's desire to focus her research on carnivore ecology and conservation. Isla has worked with wolves, wolf hybrids, and domestic dogs for many years now, and she continues to have a passion for working with mega fauna and bridging the gap between the animals and the people that they come in contact with.

As such, Isla has established a commitment to canine conservation specifically. Isla wants the world to love animals, but in her realm, and for people to, at first, bring conservation into their home by loving the animals they live with. For Isla, this focus is dogs. Isla owns Kachina Canine Communication, where she is a holistic dog behaviorist. She applies her knowledge of animal behavior, zoology, ecology, and conservation by teaching people why these hairy subjects must be understood to better the lives of their domestic canine. Welcome, Dr. Fishburn. It's a pleasure to have you.

IF: Hi, Dr. Karen. It's lovely to be here. Thank you.

KB: Dr. Fishburn, I know exactly who you are and what you do. But for the people that aren't familiar with you, tell us a little bit about what you do.

IF: OK. I'm Dr. Isla Fishburn. As you very well know, I'm a holistic dog behaviorist. I work with dogs. I work with canines. My focus really is to look at the fundamental needs of dogs, one of them being really safety. The fundamental need of any animal is to feel safe. I'm very focused on helping optimize the dog's well-being, maximize the dog's well-being potential, and with that, helping the dog align with its natural self.

KB: I know that you have always loved all animals. I know this about you. But you have some really specialized, really unique, and exciting training. When you were a little girl, did you know that...? You've always connected with dogs. Did you know that you wanted to pursue this as a lifelong career? How did that come about?

IF: As an adult, I'm probably quite crazy, but as a child, I was really, really crazy, because I always ask for a wolf and a bear when I was really, really young. For some crazy reason, I always ask for a fireman's ladder as well. To this day, I do not remember why. But I always wanted a wolf and a bear.

I became a little bit older. I kind of realized getting a wolf and a bear was impossible, not only because they don't live in my country, but also because in my crazy imagination, this wolf and bear had to be real,

but small enough, so that they live inside my pocket and so that they could go everywhere with me. They could go wherever I went. I got a bit older, and I realized that was a bit mad. Obviously, not realistic at all.

I've always had this love for animals. I ended up getting a rabbit. But I really, really wanted a dog. It might be cliché. It might be controversial. It might be a bit sickening. But wherever it came from, from a very, very... I've always had a rich fascination with American culture, beliefs, traditions, music, and all kinds of different things. That's kind of what got me started. I always, always had this connection, this fascination with animals. That's kind of made me, what drove me on to do my zoology degree. I did my BS in zoology.

Actually, I never really want to do it with dogs. I always had in my life path that I was going to do carnivore conservation. I was going to become a carnivore ecologist and work with every kind of big predators out in the wild. The opportunity arose after my PhD in conservation biology, where I worked with wolves for three years, a pack of wolves, that I started to meet with a lot of people who have dogs.

From there, I kind of realized that conservation for me needs to begin with domestic animals, all domestic animals. We hear all the time about the heartache, the sadness, the emotional state of domestic livestock. But also that can stem to hamsters, guinea pigs, and all animals really. For me, it's for dogs. We need to conserve our dogs.

Why? We mess around with their genes so much. We don't know what we're doing. We mess around with their diet. We need to conserve their diet. We need to conserve their behavior. For me, conservation has to begin at home. Hopefully, once we've mastered that, we can really focus on the conservation of our wild animals.

KB: I know that your initial focus, like you mentioned, was really conservation biology, in terms of wild species. But then the calling in terms of the need – the public's need, the pet owner's needs... People have got serious behavior problems with their dogs. Because of your expertise with wolves and because of the correlation between wolves and dogs, it probably was... I don't want to say natural evolution, but you probably got a whole lot more questions about dogs than you did wolves from the general population.

IF: Yeah.

KB: Your approach to domestic dog behavior is different, and I love it. It's fresh and it's renewing. But it's different for so many reasons. Tell us a little bit about... When you get a call, I'm sure most of the time it's for behavior problems. Every now and then, you get that refreshing, young dog, and people just want to do it right.

IF: You're right.

KB: But most of the time, you do have those calls where there's a problem. How is your approach different, Dr. Fishburn?

IF: That's a great question. First of all, I'm not a [givr 05:34] or anything. It's really, really hard. It's really mentally exhausting. That's kind of what it should be, right? Because you're working with another species. You're working with a live animal. They are intricate. There is a complexity to them.

For me, as a zoologist... Yes, I'm an accredited animal behaviorist now, but everything goes back to zoology. What do I know about zoology? What do I know about nature? What do I know about how animals work?

For me, I've kind of devised a list really of causes of behavior. The first and foremost thing that I look at is, again, an animal wants to feel safe. What is this animal trying to tell me? I really try and listen to that animal from what I know. From a behavioral point of view, I look at the different cause of behavior. I include such a wealth of things – genetics, the mother, epigenetics, diet, disease, trauma, the number of vaccinations the animal had – absolutely everything.

But then I kind of just take that zoological approach. I look at ecology. I look at competition. I look at natural diet. I look at social interactions. Dogs can be and are social group animals. They form social groups. Then we see how that behavior has changed really depend on how they interact with each of the individual around.

This is a huge, huge concept. A lot of people kind of have just one dog. They don't really understand the importance and relevance of group composition. That's kind of my take on things. All encompassing, what I really focus on is the emotion, the emotional state of the animal, because, of course, that's what drives behavior.

KB: Yes. Several compelling things you mentioned when I met you at the Natural Dog Conference is about nourishing the pack differently. You feed the more dominant animals in a pack differently than you would feed the subordinate animals. You had mentioned so many interesting things. You mentioned to me just behind stage. You were talking about the time of month that a puppy is born and when you raise a puppy – spring, fall, or winter. There are so many things that traditional behaviorists don't necessarily take into consideration when they're looking at the whole picture of how and why certain behaviors came about.

But on that vein of nutrition, you also gave a really compelling and very interesting lecture about the correlation between dog and wolf nutrition. Give me the 30-second, pared-down version of your viewpoints in terms of, first of all, the rule of nutrition when it comes to dog behavior, but then what we can do to potentially enhance a dog's well-being, including their mental well-being through species-appropriate nutrition. What's your take on that?

IF: Great. I love diet. I'm a behaviorist. I'm a zoologist who looks at behavior. I'm not a nutritionist. I'm not a vet or anything like that. I really just take a very naturalistic approach to diet. But diet is so important. Diet is so important to understanding behavior. Diet and disease are linked. Also diet and communication. How dogs communicate with each other through what they've eaten, how that's metabolized, and how that comes through with that chemical scent.

We are doing so much better than what we did kind of last year. They are so, so much left alone, which is amazing, because we have to learn how and be able to maximize our dog's well-being. That's kind of what my focus is.

Again, looking at our dogs zoologically and from that zoological approach. They are canines. I know there's this whole debate of our dogs, are they omnivores? Are they carnivores? What type of carnivores are they? When we look at carnivores anyway... If you look at pandas, now pandas are (I could be wrong here, but I'm sure I'm right) carnivores, but most of their diet is vegetation. You have to kind of look at what animal you're referring to in the first place.

But for me, we see anatomical similarities and taxonomic similarities between our dogs and our wolves. First and foremost, we have the wolf known as *Canis lupus*. Our dogs are known as *Canis lupus familiaris*. For me, that means OK, our dogs are classes of subspecies. That means, OK, we've got some differences, which kind of domestication also creates and which I'll talk about in a moment. But they've got so many similarities to them that that's kind of why they're kind of grouped in the same taxonomic

group as it were. Anatomically, they've got canines. They have teeth. They tell us they are supposed to have meat. They are supposed to have bone.

[----- 10:00 -----]

There's a whole thing about real food, real food, real food. But it's fresh food. Fresh food is so important for our dogs. That's really, really my focus for their health. We're learning all the time about what food is appropriate. This is why we know we really have so much more to go.

When we look at a wolf's diet... Again, people come to me all the time. They know that I work with captive wolves. They say, "A wolf does this, doesn't it, Isla?" I'm like it depends on what wolves we're looking at, because we have individual differences all the time. We have individual differences in our dogs. We have individual group differences within our wolves. This is what we have to look at. We have some wolf groups that will feed on, for example, moose, deer, and wild boar. We have other wolf groups that will just eat wild boar. We have to look at why.

Now, it's very, very hard to do these days. But for me, I would always say that actually our dogs need to have a wild prey diet. That is because there are so, so many bad things going on with our domestic livestock. They're put on hormones. They're put on antibiotics.

One of the biggest things that I really want to understand and look at more is, say, for example, we have a cow, that cow is slaughtered at seven and put in for dog food production. What happens if that cow had seven years of neglect, seven years of a hellish life? That negative emotion our dog is going to feed on is guaranteed going to affect the health of our dog. These are things that we really need to focus on as well. Not just about the well-being of our dog, but the well-being of the prey animal that the dog's going to feed on.

For me, again, when we look at wolf groups, what wolves feed on, predominantly, yes, we could reduce the use of livestock. But livestock tends to be taken when their preferred prey – wolves have a preferred prey – population density is really, really low. But the question is why are they taking this wild prey and why is it so much healthier than our domestic livestock? Of course, there are a lot of answers for that. But for me, that is a very good focus.

Also with that as well, wolves are very restricted in their prey choice. We kind of say that wolves have a large diet breadth, but really, they don't. Some wolves have just one preferred prey animal. Some have one, two, or three. That prey source is kept really low. Now, again, for our dogs, there's a whole lot of information and a whole lot of conversation going on about we have to vary the prey source for our dogs, so we get these different nutrients.

This, of course, is massively important. But most of these needs have to be natural in wild canines like how wolves to find out. What's going on with them, what's going on with them physiologically and health-wise if their diet is more restrictive? Now, that might be because simply they're having wild animals, and wild animals have just so much better quality than what our prey animals offer our domestic dogs.

[----- End of part 1 -----]