

## KNOWLEDGE NUGGETS



### Did Animal Domestication Go Too Far?

Cows and pigs revolutionized human economies, but the tremendous biomass reached by domestic animals is now a major concern

Link: <https://lab.sapienship.co/did-animal-domestication-go-too-far/>

In what order were these animals  
domesticated, from first to last?



Dogs are not only man's best friend, but they are also his oldest. They domesticated themselves in Eurasia at least 15,000 years ago, when Homo sapiens were still living a hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Other animals such as sheep, cows, horses, alpacas and pigs were domesticated only after the transition to agricultural societies, and were used as sources of food and muscle power. So, dogs sure got the better deal.

The domestication of animals changed humanity and the world. These animals revolutionized human economies, warfare and transportation: helping transform small communities of farmers into states and empires. As humans benefited from animals' muscle power and food production, their numbers increased.

Today, as the earth is facing a sixth mass extinction of animal species and plants, the tremendous biomass reached by domestic animals is a major concern, as their impact on the environment and their resource consumption is dramatic: two thirds of the terrestrial vertebrate biomass on earth is made of domestic animals; the other third is made of humans, while wild animals only represent 3%-5% of the terrestrial biomass. If all megafauna eventually go extinct, the largest mammals on earth will be cattle. So, while animal domestication helped us build our modern world, it also poses grave danger to this very world.

## Questions

1. Humans domesticated many animals over the course of history. Why did certain animals become pets while others are used for their meat and muscle power?
2. The domestication of cows, sheep and pigs led to mammals in the meat and dairy industries being the most common mammals on earth – their numbers reaching billions, while some mammals living in the wild (like the Black rhinoceros) are on the brink of extinction. Who do you think is better off: farm animals or wild animals?
  - ▶ Article 1: Industrial farming is one of the worst crimes in history. The Guardian, September 2015  
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/sep/25/industrial-farming-one-worst-crimes-history-ethical-question>
  - ▶ Article 2: If you want to save the world, veganism isn't the answer. The Guardian, August 2018  
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/aug/25/veganism-intensively-farmed-meat-dairy-soya-maize>
3. Why do you think most animal species were domesticated in Eurasia and not in other regions of the world?
  - ▶ For an overview of the origins of animal domestication and husbandry, see here:  
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1631069110002982>
4. Some scientists argue that foxes in urban areas are starting to domesticate themselves. What would a human-fox relationship be like?
  - ▶ See here about the possible self-domestication of urban foxes:  
<https://www.science.org/content/article/urban-foxes-may-be-self-domesticating-our-midst>
  - ▶ For an explanation on the “domestication syndrome”, see here:  
<https://aeon.co/videos/why-do-domesticated-animals-tend-to-have-floppy-ears-short-snouts-and-lighter-skin>