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Wild Pet Foods

Wild pet foods can be typified as foods imitating market-relevant aspects of the diet that dogs or cats could find in the wild. Commercially prepared wild pet foods belong to the category of grain-free, natural foods, but they go beyond free from grain starch and synthetic additives. Promotional materials for kibbled and canned foods highlight the philosophical basis by terms such as ancestral/evolutionary, instinctual or biologically appropriate ingredient ratio. Frozen and freeze-dried raw foods make the additional claim that raw is the most natural form of pet nutrition. The philosophy backing wild foods can be challenged by contemplative, logical and scientific arguments.

Extruded wild kibbles are generally higher in protein and lower in carbohydrates than other extruded foods in the market; versus extruded wild kibbles, frozen and freeze-dried raw foods provide more fat and less carbohydrates. All production forms of wild foods contain similar levels of protein, when expressed as percentage of dietary energy. Worth mentioning, the wild foods furnish about two-thirds of the amount of protein consumed by wolves and feral cats in the wild. At any rate, complete and balanced wild pet foods all represent appropriate nutrition for healthy dogs and cats.

Foods Designed by Nature

Commercially prepared wild pet foods can adopt the production forms of dry, extruded kibbles, pressed pellets, heat-sterilised moist products, frozen foods or freeze-dried nuggets. They occupy a niche within the market segment of grain-free, meat-first, natural foods. Some wild foods are co-labelled holistic. The phrase 'foods designed by nature' represents the common claim used for wild foods. Different accentuations of the basic philosophy enable individual brands to stand out.

Wild Philosophies

Ancestral or evolutionary pet foods have their roots in the philosophy that dogs and cats should be fed on the meat-based diet of their evolutionary ancestors. Paleolithic pet food refers to the ancestors' diet in the Stone Age. The ancestral approach extends to foods featuring their so-called biologically appropriate ingredient ratio, for instance 80 percent meat, 20 percent fruits and vegetables, and 0 percent grains. Whole-prey foods attempt to simulate the proportion of prey in the diet of dogs or cats if they were hunting in the wild. Alpha food is claimed to mirror the prey parts instinctively selected by the pack leader. Instinctual pet foods reside in the belief that dogs and cats should be fed according to their innate foodstuff preferences which purportedly meet their nutritional needs.

Raw as Nature Intended

Extruded kibbles are cooked under pressure and heated before being formed. Pressed pellets contain thermally treated ingredients. Moist products that can be stored at room temperature have been preserved with heat sterilisation. The premise of raw pet food is to go back to the wild ancestry of dogs and cats and feed a non-cooked diet. Raw is seen as the most natural form of pet nutrition. The concept of BARF, an acronym for Bones and Raw Food or Biologically Appropriate Raw Food, was meant to be practiced as home-prepared, fresh meals. The BARF diet mainly contains raw meaty bones, muscle and organ meats, fresh vegetables and fruits. Some commercially prepared frozen raw foods are positioned as BARF diets. Freeze-dried raw foods are on the rise in the



mature pet food markets. Freeze-drying is a process that removes moisture without heating.

Composition of Wild Foods

As a rule, wild foods are grain-free, but once in while the ingredient list shows oats or rice. Grain-free, dry extruded kibbles do contain starchy carbohydrates carried by purified starch preparations, (sweet) potatoes, peas or tapioca. Wild canned foods can be without or with added starch source(s). Freeze-dried or frozen foods are usually starch-free, but few declare starch-rich ingredients.

Wild, extruded foods for dogs contain higher protein and lower digestible carbohydrate concentrations than the majority of dry kibbles in the market. Different production forms of wild foods vary regarding their energy profile expressed as protein-fat-carbohydrate ratio. Approximate ratios are 35:40:25 for extruded, 35:55:10 for canned and 35:60:5 for starch-free, frozen or freeze-dried canine products. The diet of both wolves and feral cats in nature has an energy ratio of about 53:45:2 and thus, provides more protein than wild pet foods.

Wild in Perspective

Marketers claim that their wild pet foods nourish dogs and cats as nature intended.

What nature intended is not consistently beneficial as illustrated by a natural phenomenon such as disease. As vehicles of nutrients, industrially produced pet foods by definition deviate from what animals eat in nature. Moreover, the wide fluctuations in nutrient availability and variety occurring in the wild cannot be captured in pet food formulas.

Wild animals are well adapted to their diet in nature, but another diet could still be better. A healthy, long life is not guaranteed by the diet in the wild. Indirect, experimental evidence suggests that the high phosphorus intake by free-roaming, feral cats facilitate the development of chronic kidney disease in the senior phase. Wild foods for dogs are inspired by the diet of wolves, but companion dogs may not eat like wolves. Genetic research advances that adaptation to a starch-rich diet has separated domesticated dogs from wolves.

Dr Beynen will be writing this exclusive column on dog and cat nutrition and nutrition-related items every month.