



## **Why the New Guinea singing dog should be considered a companion animal and not subject to regulation as an exotic animal**

This document has been extracted from the information the NGSDCS is preparing to communicate to USDA/APHIS if necessary to encourage that department to re-consider changing the status of the NGSD in their regulations. It will provide sound talking points if owners have to engage local authorities who intend to categorize the NGSD as a “wild exotic animal.”

### **Abbreviated Rationale**

1. Exotic animals are regulated in many places in order to protect public health, safety, and welfare from dangerous animals and zoonotic diseases, and to ensure the exotics, defined as captive non-domesticated animals, are cared for in a manner that is species-appropriate to prevent animal suffering.
2. The New Guinea singing dog (NGSD) has, until April 18, 2016, been classified under USDA/APHIS regulation as a domestic dog.
3. The vast majority of NGSDs live as companion animals/household pets and are vaccinated and maintained no differently than pet domestic dogs.
4. No NGSD has been reported to be vicious. Rather they tend to be shy and avoid unfamiliar people. They are not more of a danger to people than domesticated dogs of similar size.
5. Changing the NGSD designation from domesticated dog to exotic canid does not serve the purposes of (1) above, and instead will cause significant harm to the owners and the NGSDs. The change of the NGSD scientific designation/name of *Canis lupus familiaris* (dog) to *Canis lupus dingo* (Australian dingo) is not justified by the available evidence. The change was based on only preliminary genetic results and the assumption that the founders of the captive NGSD population were from the wild, free-ranging population.

### **Background**

The NGSD is commonly believed to be a wild-living subspecies of dog closely related to the Australian dingo and secondarily to some aboriginal domestic dogs of South East Asia and China. The only actual hard evidence for this relatedness comes from genetic analysis of some specimens from the captive NGSD population.<sup>1, 2, 16, 20, 21</sup>

Nothing at all is currently known about the wild NGSDs except rare reports of sightings over 7 decades.<sup>13, 15, 28</sup> There are a handful of recent reports of wild dogs from remote mountain areas, but that is all. We have no idea if any of the wild NGSDs are the same genetically or morphologically as the current captive NGSDs.

While it has always been assumed the founders of the NGSD captive population were village-bred from parents or grandparents that were wild-caught as puppies, or wild caught themselves as puppies and raised in the villages, the accounts of those who brought them out of Papua New Guinea and West Papua (formerly Irian Jaya) are unclear on this point. All the founders were obtained from the local people, who said these were from wild dogs, but of course there was, and is, no way to confirm this.<sup>16, 24, 29, 30</sup> A recent paper in *Australian Mammalogy* proposes the wild dogs and village dogs of New Guinea all started from the same domesticated founders.<sup>10</sup> Others have also declared the NGSD is a form of village dog.<sup>3, 7, 12, 23, 25, 26</sup>

The NGSDs, from the first pair on the boat from Papua New Guinea to Australia to the present, have always been noted as friendly to known people when socialized as pups, and curious but cautious around unfamiliar people. They are one of the few canids that zoo keepers can easily handle safely, one that even seeks human attention. The universality of their predisposition to, if properly socialized, accept and seek human attention indicates this is an inherited trait. The NGSD appears to be, if not descended from domesticated dogs, at least “pre-adapted” to co-habiting with humans.<sup>23, 29, 32</sup>

The NGSDs have proven their suitability as companion dogs. Those who received appropriate training and took the tests have passed the American Kennel Club Canine Good Citizen test, other obedience tests, and in one case, a test for tracking a human subject on command. In addition, at least two NGSDs served as visiting therapy dogs, going to hospitals and senior citizen residential establishments, and one is a service dog who alerts on her diabetic owner’s low blood sugar levels. No other “exotic” canid has such a record as a companion animal comparable to domesticated dogs. (Personal knowledge J.K.-M. that can be verified)

Recently, USDA/APHIS announced they were combining the NGSD with the Australian dingo under the scientific name of *Canis lupus dingo*. The current nomenclatural trend of changing the scientific names of all wolves and dogs to *Canis lupus* started with the opinion of one person, C. Wozencraft, who did the canid section of a book of scientific names.<sup>31</sup> Wozencraft justified demoting the dog from its own species name, *Canis familiaris*, which it had been given over two hundred years ago, to *Canis lupus familiaris* because the dog is a domesticated *Canis lupus*, which was an assumption, not a proven fact. Recent genetic research indicates that the dog did not descend directly from *Canis lupus* as assumed, but from a common ancestor with *Canis lupus*.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the dog is not the same species as *Canis lupus* and the appropriate dog name is *Canis familiaris*. Therefore, the NGSD should be either *Canis familiaris* or if it is felt to be a unique subpopulation from other dogs, *Canis familiaris hallstromi*.

Conflating the NGSD and the Australian dingo under one designation is also not appropriate. The two populations are close genetic relatives, and they both are also somewhat more closely related to Chinese and South East Asian aboriginal dogs than to other dogs.<sup>1, 5, 20, 21, 22</sup> However, they are different in morphology/size, behavior, and breeding season.<sup>16, 17</sup> They are not the same.

In summary, while some believe the captive NGSDs descended from wild-caught NGSDs, there is no direct proof of this. Others believe the NGSD is the same as the domesticated village dogs. If so, then the NGSD should be treated as any other “exotic” primitive pure breed of dog whose founders were imported, which is true for several such as the Basenji, Shiba Inu, and Canaan dog.

Currently, the estimate is that 90% of the current captive NGSD population of about 200 in the USA live as household pets. There are a handful of NGSDs in Canada, some as companion animals, and 3 in the UK and three in Germany, all in zoos. The APHIS designation of the NGSD as an exotic wild

canid equivalent to the Australian dingo will be accepted by state and local regulating agencies. In places that forbid or highly restrict the private keeping of wild canids, scores of families will be in jeopardy of losing their companion NGSDs. If removed from their known environment and familiar people the NGSDs would suffer anxiety and might never adapt. (Information from reports by owners.)

In addition, the work of the New Guinea Singing Dog Conservation Society, which includes almost all research that has been done to date, has and will continue to depend on data from privately owned NGSDs. The behavioral reports and the DNA samples for future research will come from owners of companion NGSDs. If people cannot keep them under local regulations for wild animals, research cannot continue, research which has resulted in funding to start preliminary field research to determine what, exactly, the wild NGSD are.

In light of the substantial harm that will result from designating the NGSD in the USA a wild canid, and considering the lack of definitive knowledge about the origin of the captive NGSDs along with their exceptional adaptation to being household pets, the NGSD should remain under the *Canis (lupus) familiaris* or domesticated dog category.

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