

Prairie dogs kiss more when being watched

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Prairie dogs. Image: Wikimedia Commons.

(PhysOrg.com) -- Researchers in the US studying the behavior of black-tailed prairie dogs at a local zoo have discovered they behave differently, kissing and cuddling each other more when people are watching than when they are unobserved.

Black-tailed prairie dogs (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) are known for their extremely [social behavior](#), which includes kissing, grooming and touching each other. They are also known for their complex language of around 100 different barks, chirping sounds and yelps that convey information about predators, including the type of predator, their size, direction of travel, speed, and even their color. Previous research has

shown they can also describe different human beings.

Groups of prairie dogs live in large, complex, and interconnected underground tunnels. They post look-outs on mounds near the tunnel system to warn of predators such as foxes, bears, snakes, [predatory birds](#), and humans.

The researchers, led by Dr Adam Eltorai of Washington University in St Louis, Missouri, recorded the behavior of a group of 25 black-tailed prairie dogs at the St Louis zoo, and at the same time counted the number of zoo visitors observing them. Dr Eltorai said their study showed that like humans, the prairie dogs often behaved differently when they were being watched, and many seemed to enjoy the attention, becoming more relaxed and spending less time watching for potential dangers as the numbers of visitors increased.

As crowd numbers increased, the adult prairie dogs spent less time fighting and showed more affection toward one another, kissing and cuddling up together. The juveniles behaved differently, seeming more tense as the number of visitors to their enclosure increased. The young prairie dogs kissed and cuddled less and fought more as visitor numbers increased.



Photo courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Dr Eltorai said the behavior of the adults was surprising because humans are one of their predators, and the team expected them to be less relaxed when people were watching. He said the behavior of the young prairie dogs was possibly normal behavior for them, but becomes amplified under the stress of large numbers of observers.

Black-tailed [prairie dogs](#) are native to North America, being found in much of the western parts of the US and in southern Saskatchewan in Canada.

The researchers say their study may help other scientists unravel normal behavior from behavior while under observation, and may help in the design of zoo enclosures that benefit the animals.

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