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**BBC**

**Primates leapt to social living**

By Jennifer Carpenter Science reporter, BBC News

Scientists may be a step closer to understanding the origins of human social behaviour.

An analysis of over 200 primate species by a University of Oxford team suggests that our ancestors gave up their solitary existence when they shifted from being nocturnal creatures to those that are active during the day.

It is likely communal living was adopted to protect against day time predators, the researchers say.

The results are [published in Nature](http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v479/n7372/full/nature10601.html).

From work on social insects and birds, some biologists have suggested that social groups begin to form when young do not leave their natal ground, but instead hang around and help raise their siblings.

Now, the latest evidence from primates suggests that this might not have been the case for our ancestors.

Leaping to sociality

By looking at whether closely related species share similar social structures, the Oxford team of evolutionary biologists shows that a common history is important in shaping the way animals behave in a group.

The team pinpointed the shift from non-social to social living to about 52 million years ago; a switch that appears to have happened in one step, and coincided with a move into daylight.

It did coincide with a change in family dynamics or female bonding, which emerged much later at about 16 million years ago.

"If you are a small animal active at night then your best strategy to avoid predation is to be difficult to detect," explained Oxford's Suzanne Shultz, who led the study.

"Once you switch to being active during the day, that strategy isn't very effective, so an alternative strategy to reduce the risk of being eaten is to live in social groups," she told BBC News.

Dr Shultz thinks that the move to day-time living in ancient primates allowed animals to find food more quickly, communicate better, and travel faster through the forest.

The link between sociality and a switch to daytime living might have been missed until now, she suspects, because biologists interested in this question have tended to work with Old World monkeys, like baboons, which are characterised by female bonded groups, which are not characteristic of many primate species.

Flexibly social

Human societies likely descended from similar large, loosely aggregated creatures, Dr Shultz explained, but the key difference, she pointed out, is that our closest cousins' societies do not vary within a species, while humans' do.

"In human societies we have polygyny... we have monogamy, and in some places we have females leaving the group they were born in, and in others males leave," she said.

Why this difference exist is still unclear.

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**SHACKED UP: Moving in together [...];**SCIENCE AND DISCOVERY IN BRIEF MiniCOSM  
  
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SHACKED UP: Moving in together is usually a major step but primates went from being solitary foragers to living in large groups almost overnight.

This was linked to a shift from nocturnal to diurnal living and may have acted as a defence against predators.

It could provide an insight into early human social behaviour, Oxford University researchers claim.

telegraph.co.uk

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**Origins of human social networks discovered;   
Humans are sociable creatures because our primate ancestors were forced to band together for protection when they stopped being nocturnal, scientists claim.**  
**BYLINE:** By Nick Collins Science Correspondent  
  
**LENGTH:** 244 words

Primates were originally solitary creatures which lived alone and foraged by night, but millions of years ago they switched their habits to become active during the day.

Moving around in daylight put them at greater risk of predators, so they quickly formed groups to reduce their chance of being attacked.

Precious theories suggested that primate social groups built up gradually in size over time, but new research published in the Nature journal suggests the origin of our sociability can be traced to the switch to daytime activity.

Oxford University researchers studied groups of living primates as well information on the evolutionary relationships of 217 other primate species to put together the most likely picture of how grouping behaviour developed.

They found that primates inherited their social behaviour from their ancestors, with more closely related species behaving more similarly to one another.

But unlike other primates, humans are flexible enough to live in a range of different social settings, with a great variety of social groupings such as nuclear families, extended families and monogamous and polygamous relationships.

Dr Suzanne Shultz, who led the study, published in the Nature journal, said: "This flexibility in the human lineage has not evolved to anything like this level in other primates.

Our findings support previous studies that suggest that more brain power is needed for groups that have a more complicated social life."