# Mongooses help neediest in group for a 'fairer society'

*By* **Max Stephens**

MONGOOSES have a "fair society" because they do not know which children are theirs, a study has found.

Mothers in banded mongoose groups all give birth on the same night, creating a "veil of ignorance" over parentage in their communal group of babies.

In a study, led by the universities of Exeter and Roehampton, half of the pregnant mothers in wild mongoose groups were regularly given extra food, which led to increased inequality in the birth weight of pups. But after giving birth, the well-fed others gave extra care to the smaller pups born to the unfed mothers – rather than their own pup. This resulted in the differences in size quickly disappearing.

Dr Harry Marshall, of the department of life sciences at the University of Roehampton, said: "In most of the natural world, parents favour their own young. However, in banded mongooses, the evolution of remarkable birth synchrony has led to the unusual situation that mothers don't know which pups are their own, and therefore cannot choose to give them extra care. Our study shows that this ignorance leads to a fairer allocation of resources – in effect, a fairer society."

Synchronous birth in mongooses evolved to reduce the infanticide that would otherwise be used by older females to keep the younger animals from successfully producing offspring.

Researchers looked at seven groups of banded mongooses in Uganda. Half the pregnant females in each group were given 50g of cooked egg each day, while the other half were not given extra food. They found that inequality at birth was wider in breeding periods when food was provided than in periods where no extra food was given.

Professor Michael Cant, of the University of Exeter, said: "Those most able to help offer it to the most needy, and in doing so minimise the risk that their own offspring will face a disadvantage."

The study was published in the journal *Nature Communications*.



**Banded mongoose parents do not know which pups are their own**