

MARCH 8, 2010, 3:58 PM

Lessons From Frogs

By [LISA BELKIN](#)

Oh, the lessons to be learned from the male Peruvian poison frog, also known as *Ranitomeya imitator*.

Off-putting name aside, he is a loyal and nurturing chap, thought to be the only monogamous frog out there (the other 403 species are apparently gigolos). Your average frog — that cheating *Ranitomeya variabilis* for instance — hops away after fertilizing a cluster of eggs, but the loyal poison frog stays close, then carries the newly hatched tadpoles on his back to small pools of water and plays stay-at-pond dad; the mother shows up mostly to lay unfertilized eggs for the babes to eat.

A [study](#) to be published in next month's issue of [The American Naturalist](#) theorizes that behaviors like monogamy and co-operative parenting are directly linked with the availability of resources. The poison frog is almost often found in teeny tiny pools — less than two tablespoons of nutrient-weak liquid — and researchers theorize that's because larger frogs claimed the more luxurious digs first. Close quarters and scarcity of food mean offspring need the attention of both Mom and Dad to survive, turning strapped parents into more cooperative partners.

Might this tell us something about when and why our human ancestors shared domestic chores? The evolutionary ecologists from East Carolina University who conducted the frog study suggest it might. The scramble for food and shelter, along with the fear of predators, kept early humans close together, which might make them less likely to (literally and figuratively) stray.

We've talked a lot about [equal parenting](#) here on Motherlode. Could the answer be as simple as less money and less space?