



## The right diet

### **Diets of wild small carnivores**

A jungle cat sleeping off a meal in the shade of an equatorial tree has features in common with a recently fed pack of wolves sheltering from a blizzard. With freshly cleaned teeth and distended stomachs the somnolent creatures digest their food and replenish reserves in readiness for the next hunt. Circumstances may appear different for the house cat hiding under the mahogany sideboard or family dog resting under the Scandinavian pine table, but appearances can be deceptive. The inner needs of cats and dogs are the same as those of their wild counterparts.

While few pets justify their existence by catching their own meals, the meals they consume should ensure optimum health and vitality. Establishing with precision the appropriate diet for wild and therefore domestic animals is not easy. Carnivores are frequently shy, nocturnal creatures living in remote areas. Food quality, quantity and frequency may vary with the season, the prey supply and the needs of offspring. Since round the clock monitoring is impossible, biologists employ indirect methods to derive dietary information. Each method has limitations.

Radio tracking of pack animals to locate their kill does not reveal the proportions of each organ consumed by individual members of the pack. Examination of scats (faecal deposits), using a combination of experience, physical and chemical means, may be used to identify components of a carnivore's diet. Better information can be obtained by examining stomach contents of dead carnivores, although this method also has drawbacks. Finding random road kills is at best