

It's all fur one in tough times

Animals 'babysit' in harsh conditions

■ By DIANE KING

HARSH conditions force some animals to babysit, according to a study published today by Edinburgh scientists.

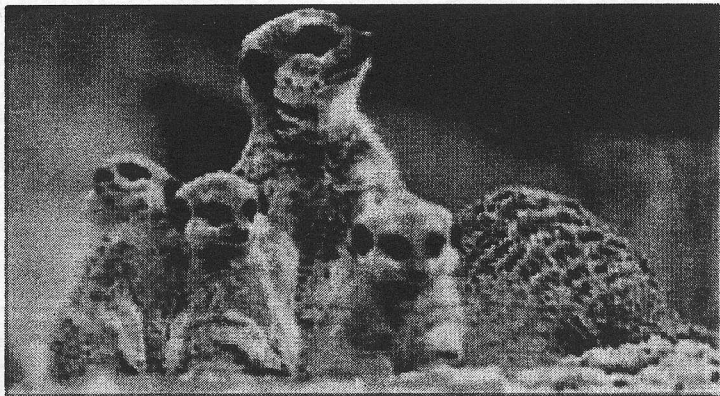
When animals must cooperate to survive, individual animals are more inclined to babysit and help near relatives who have offspring, the biologists at Edinburgh University said.

Benefit

They studied mammals and birds which live in family groups - including meerkats, dwarf mongooses and kookaburras - where there are helpers who assist in the childcare of others, instead of raising their own young.

They found that preferential helping of relatives is most common among species such as pied kingfishers and long-tailed tits, where helping provides a huge benefit to the survival of young.

In contrast, in a species like the kookaburra, such help provides little benefit so there is scant advantage to



FAMILY AFFAIR: The report studied meerkats' cooperation

be gained from relatives being given help, the experts said in the latest *Science* journal. Dr Stuart West, of the university's Institute of Cell, Animal and Population Biology, said: "Cooperative breeding in animals is a controversial area of evolutionary biology.

"There has been much debate over the extent to which cooperative breeding can be explained by kin selection - when individuals gain fitness through the reproduction of relatives. While some have claimed

kin selection is important, others have argued against it. Debate has been fuelled by the variations found in studies which focus on the extent to which individuals help relatives.

"Our study has resolved this problem by explaining these variations across different species.

"We have shown that preferential helping of relatives is more common in species where helping brings benefits - in other words, blood is often thicker than water - but not in every case."