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Animal conservation attitudes and perceived cuteness

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Bella Bertolami, Emily Freimuth, Justin Kan, Chia-chi Ma, Isabel Mejia, Zhiyong Ren, Diane Mello-Goldner,Ph.D.

BOSTON UNIVERSITY

Abstract

Climate change and shrinking biodiversity across the globe are hot topics in public discourse, and public attitude is a major factor in the success of a conservation effort. That attitude can easily be influenced, and it is in the best interests of conservation efforts to understand how that attitude is influenced. People's attitudes towards species can be affected by a multitude of factors: body shape and size, species, and importantly, the species' cuteness. Our study found a strong correlation between an endangered species' perceived cuteness and support for its conservation, with cuter species receiving more positive attitudes and higher expressed support towards their conservation.

Introduction

Cuteness and the positive emotions it prompts in adults of the human species likely played a key role in causing parental caregivers to continue their caregiving throughout that period of dependency (Leitão & Castelo-Branco, 2010). This biological integration of a preference towards cuteness seems to extend to animals who have "cute" proportions (Lorenz, 1943). **The objective of this study was to examine how the "cute" appeal of an endangered species affects people's attitudes toward its conservation. We hypothesized that people will express more concern and be more supportive of the conservation of species they perceive to be very cute than those they rate as less cute.**

Method

Participants

We surveyed 99 college students, most of whom were students at Boston University.

Materials

This study was conducted using Qualtrics, an online survey software. Participants were recruited via email or word of mouth and asked to fill out a brief questionnaire.

Procedure

Upon agreeing to a brief consent form, participants were shown various images of endangered species, first asking them to evaluate whether or not they wanted to conserve the species on a 7-point Likert scale. They were then shown the same images and asked to rate the perceived cuteness of each animal on another 7-point Likert scale. Participants also answered the public-consciousness scale and demographic questions. Participants were then thanked and debriefed.

Results

"Cute" vs. "Not Cute"

Researchers categorized the 12 species as either "cute" or "not cute." The star-nosed mole, bearded pig, vampire bat, proboscis monkey, almiqui, and giant anteater were categorized as "not cute," and the quokka, monk seal, sea otter, black-footed ferret, slow loris, and flying fox were categorized as "cute." **The perceived cuteness rating for the "cute" group was significantly higher than the "not cute" group**, t (99) = 21.45, $p < .001$. **The conservation score for the "cute" group was significantly higher than the "not cute" group**, t (98) = -4.25, $p < .001$.

Table 1

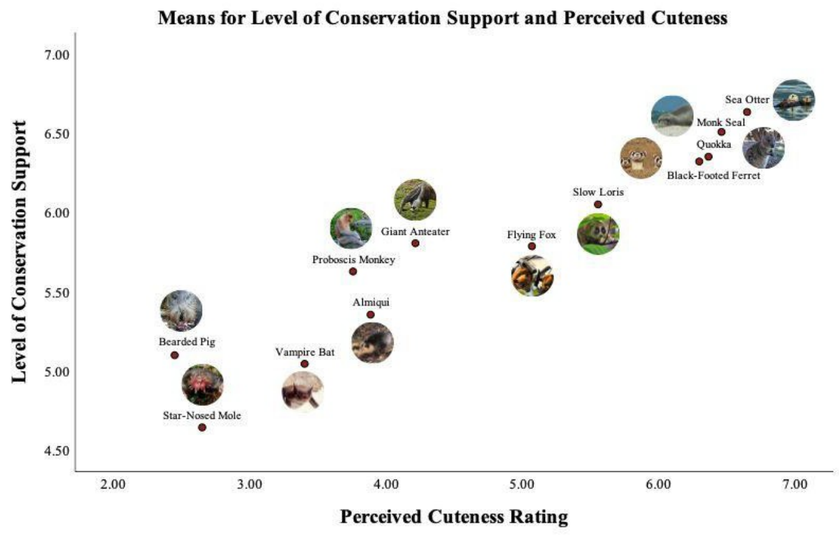
Mean Total Perceived Cuteness and Willingness to Conserve by Cuteness

	"Cute" Species	"Not Cute" Species
Perceived Cuteness Rating	**34.41a**	**17.78b**
Willingness to Conserve	**37.05a**	**33.81b**

Note. The maximum score for each measure is 42. Means with different subscripts significantly differ.

The correlations between perceived cuteness and the level of support for their conservation were significant for each species (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.



Note. Maximum score for level of conservation support and perceived cuteness rating is 7.00.

Public Consciousness, Pet ownership, and Country of Origin

Individuals from individualistic countries (M = 69.56) showed significantly higher willingness to conserve endangered species than individuals from collectivist countries (M = 63.61), t (91) = 2.12, p = .037, d = .44**.** A one-way ANOVA comparing the effect of public self-consciousness scores on conservation attitudes revealed no significant difference in conservation attitudes, F(2,93) = 2.60, p = 0.08, η^2 = 0.05. There was no significant difference between conservation attitude for pet owners and non-pet owners, t (93) = .93, p = .357.

Discussion

The results strongly supported our hypothesis that people exhibit more sympathy towards cute animals than those they consider less appealing. They are also more willing to have the cute species conserved. It is normal to prefer cute animals, but for professionals in the field, it is important to avoid personal biases favoring certain species based on their appearances rather than their ecosystem functions when deciding which species should be prioritized in conservation.

Limitations

It is important to note that the respondents in our study were all college students, mainly from Boston University, thereby limiting the generalizability of our results. This could be addressed by replicating the experiment with other population groups in the future. While we avoided using more famous endangered species like the giant panda, some species may have been better known to the public than others. This especially pertains to the cute species, which might have already had more media coverage due to their attractiveness.

Applications/Implications

Based on our study outcome, we suggest that animal conservation organizations use increased prosocial behaviors triggered by cuteness cues and continue using cute animals in public awareness and fundraising campaigns. It may be helpful to use artistic approaches like cartoon illustrations to increase the perceived cuteness of less attractive animals. Educational documentaries and campaigns for ugly species could also help compensate for their appearance disadvantages. At the same time, it is also important to note the potential dangers of cuteness when it comes to policymaking and implementation of conservation programs.