

Abstract

The dissertation thesis deals with human aesthetic preference to other species and its anthropological and conservation aspect. The aesthetic preference to animal species has rarely been systematically studied before and quantitative analyses, especially on a fine taxonomic scale did not exist. On the other hand, it was known that attractive species often receive more support for their conservation. From these simple facts rose the idea to test human aesthetic preference to snake species (and consequently to species across major vertebrate taxa) and use this quantified preference to explain the conservation effort devoted to captive breeding worldwide (measured as size of zoo populations). We confirmed that the perceived attractiveness (preference and/or species' body size) successfully predicts the size of zoo populations across mammal, bird and reptile taxa. On contrary, we found no effect of the IUCN listing of the species.

To find out whether we work with Czech students' preference only or we may generalize to other populations, we carried out the same experiment to determine human preference to boas and pythons in eight cultures of five continents. Despite profound differences of the studied ethnics, we revealed a considerable agreement. Moreover, we found an agreement between pre-school children and adults in their aesthetic preference to snakes species. These results support the theory that our aesthetic perception of (at least) animal species is part of human mind that evolved before cultural and geographic diversification of our kind.

Some authors tried to determine what it is in the animal that we like. The most discussed effects are juvenile body proportions, form close to average appearance and conspicuous colouration. We also attempted to identify the features of animals responsible for human preference, which was possible thanks to analyses on fine taxonomic scale, i.e. within taxa of a relatively uniform morphotype and codable appearance. In snakes, we found colours and also shape of the head to determine the preference. The aposematic pattern present in some of the tested milk snakes was recognised as warning, especially when the whole animal was viewed. Human preference to higher vertebrate taxa was also studied and is discussed in the thesis.

Interestingly, the perceived beauty and fear are two independent emotions that are not intercorrelated. Evaluation of both the attractiveness and fear of animal species is two-dimensional and accompanied by an unsupervised categorization. The categorization probably happens before the respondents decide about the beautiful-ugly axis.

Another interesting result is that the respondents rank photographs in the same order as live animals, therefore these are valid substitutes.