

Abstract

Recently, it was reported that humans treat animals that they perceive as aesthetically attractive unequally to the “ugly” ones, turning more attention to them and setting more conservation programs for their protection. The aim of this thesis was to investigate the issue focusing around animal beauty in more detail by examining human preferences towards one of the most popular animal taxon, the birds.

In three subsequent studies, we assessed human preferences towards selected bird species: all members of the order of parrots, randomly selected representatives of all non-passerine bird families, and all members of the vividly colored passerine family Pittidae. The first study revealed that the preferred parrots were kept in zoos in higher numbers, regardless of their conservation priority (IUCN status). We discussed possible consequences of this finding and the benefits that may arise in the light of animal conservation if this bias in species preferences was to be considered by conservation specialists. We also found that people preferred long-tailed parrots possessing blue and yellow colors over green ones, which were probably perceived as dull and uninteresting as the majority of the parrots are fully or partially green.

In the next two studies, we found that shape, pattern, and overall lightness are the main determinants of the respondents' choice. The respondents liked birds with long tails, short necks and legs, and large eyes, as well as birds with more complex patterns with wavelet-decorated bellies. The effect of colors was weaker, but still significant, and revealed that people liked blue, yellow, and green birds. The results suggest that the processes according to which human aesthetic preferences are formed originated far in the history of nocturnal mammals when achromatic properties of environment presented the only utilizable visual clues. We found no significant role of the color red, the perception of which was acquired relatively recently in evolution, in human preferences of birds. We propose that its role is rather in communication and attention grabbing than in the evaluation of bird beauty.