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Perceptions of animal welfare and exotic pet ownership in China

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Abstract

China plays a critical role in global biodiversity conservation, as both a biodiversity hotspot and for its role in international and domestic animal trade. Efforts to promote wildlife conservation have sparked interest in the attitudes held by Chinese citizens towards animals. Using a questionnaire, we sought to investigate the attitudes of 317 Chinese nationals across 22 provincial-level administrative units regarding their uses of animals, their perceived emotional capacities and views on exotic pets. We reduced the variables related to perceived uses of animals via Principal Component Analysis and ran Generalised Linear Models and Structural Equation Modelling to test relationships between questionnaire-derived variables. Perceptions of animals were divided into two Kellert categories — Utilitarian and Humanistic uses — and 97% of participants believed in animals' capacities to have and express emotions. We found few interactions, with exotic pets, ie playing with or taking photographs, but the acceptability of owning an exotic pet influenced the likelihood of purchasing one. A belief that animals express emotions encouraged people to look for them as pets but thinking that pets make people happy made exotic pet ownership less acceptable. The shift in attitudes to include humanistic perceptions of animals, a belief in animals as emotive beings and understanding of terminology changed from the previous utilitarian views of pre-reform China, suggesting a readiness to embrace further conservation efforts in China. This deeper understanding of Chinese attitudes toward animals and drivers of the exotic pet trade within China may enable conservation efforts to better target future campaigns.

Keywords: animal welfare, China, conservation, exotic pets, perceptions, public attitudes