Perceptions of animal welfare and exotic pet ownership in China

AV Weldon*, M Campera‡, X Zhang‡, Q Ni‡§, WW Zhu‡#, V Nijman‡ and KAI Nekaris‡

† Headington Hill Hall, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford OX3 0BP, UK
‡ Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK
§ College of Animal Science and Technology, Sichuan Agricultural University, China
# Henan University of Science and Technology, College of Animal Science and Technology, China
* Contact for correspondence: a.weldon@brookes.ac.uk

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

Introduction

Human perceptions of wild animals can aid in the preservation as well as in the decline of species (Alexander et al 2015). Understanding what influences these attitudes is key to improving the lives of animals and facilitating conservation approaches that attract stakeholders and the public (Davey 2006; Jenks et al 2010; Ebua et al 2011; van der Ploeg et al 2011). Where attitudes towards wildlife are unfavourable due to misconceptions, lack of information, or perceived human dominance over animals, public support for species conservation can be considerably limited (Wilson & Tisdell 2007). Conversely, where residents hold positive perceptions towards particular species and appreciate their presence as part of the environment, there can be support and acceptance for the conservation and restoration of species’ populations (Clergeau et al 2001; Jenks et al 2010).

China plays a critical role in global biodiversity conservation, including management of threatened wildlife, protection of large wilderness areas, maintaining some of the world’s largest river systems, and regulating the international trade in wildlife. China has been named one of the top 25 biodiverse hotspot countries in the world (Myers et al 2000). Despite China’s global biodiversity importance, no general animal welfare laws protecting wildlife exist in the country. Instead, regulations regarding animal protection are strewn throughout various laws and policies (Li & Davey 2013), containing ambiguous phrasing such as ‘rational use’ or ‘sustainable exploitation’ (Carpenter & Song 2016). Strides have been made towards demonstrating a willingness to work with international trade regulations to protect China’s and global wildlife, such as the signing of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES; Li & Wang 1999), along with efforts to enact a near complete ban on ivory import and export (Yu et al 2017). China has also seen a growth in the presence of local and national animal protection and welfare groups (Lu et al 2013), as well as international non-government organisations (NGOs; Li 2006). Acceptance of the presence of NGOs and activists does not necessarily translate to a change in attitudes towards animals; it may only reflect a changing attitude to human societal behaviours.