

The IUCN Best Practice Guidelines one year on: Addressing some misunderstandings and encouraging primatologists to be responsible messengers

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As primatologists we take photographs and videos of our study animals, both in the wild and in captivity (zoos and rescue/rehabilitation centres). We use these images across social media (personal and public accounts), on websites, and give them to TV and film crews. We use these images to promote our work and share our findings with colleagues and the general public. We also participate in films where we are often close to primates and some of us work in countries where primates are routinely kept and traded as pets.

In January 2021, after extensive feedback and review from all IUCN SSC Primate Specialist Group members, we as members of the IUCN Primate Specialist Group Section for Human-Primate Interactions published the Best Practice Guidelines for Responsible Images of Non-Human Primates online <https://human-primate-interactions.org/resources/>. Here, we remind readers of the purpose of the guidelines, and reiterate our call to primatologists to play a key role in delivering suitable messages about primates.

The purpose of the new IUCN guidelines is to use our evolving understanding of the implications of the portrayal of primates in modern media contexts to serve primate conservation more effectively. Sharing images of humans close to primates, interacting with them physically, or even cuddling them, may increase donations to welfare or conservation efforts, because they inspire empathy for primates in some viewers. However, images reach a global audience, so we must consider their broader implications. For example, white expatriates are perceived as the main consumers of chimpanzees as pets in Sierra Leone (Kabasawa 2009) and Guinea Bissau (Ferreira da Silva et al. 2022) and probably in other habitat countries. This is dangerous, because these expatriates are also often perceived as wealthy and of high status, meaning that viewers might want to emulate their actions. Similar perceptions and negative outcomes have been found when celebrities are pictured with wild animals (Seaboch & Cahoon 2021). Therefore, such images promote the idea that keeping a pet primate, especially a rare species, is a marker of wealth and high status. Sadly, the same

idea extends throughout Asia, Europe, the Americas and, increasingly, in the Middle East (Bush et al. 2014; Harrington 2015, Reuter et al., 2018).

Primates rescued from the pet trade, surrendered by or confiscated from 'owners' are often so physically and psychologically damaged that they require specialist supportive care and extensive rehabilitation to recover (Cheyne 2009; Guy et al. 2015; Lopresti-Goodman et al. 2013; Moore, & Nekaris 2014; Robins et al. 2014). This often includes close contact with humans, at least initially, and expert veterinary care. However, photographs of that care can send the wrong message, especially when circulated without appropriate context (Clarke et al. 2019; Leighty et al. 2015), perpetuating rather than alleviating the inappropriate demand for primates as pets (Clarke et al. 2019; Freund et al. 2021; Muehlenbein 2017).

When many iconic primatologists started out there was no social media and the reach of photographs was more controlled and limited, as was the ability of others to access and reshare these images. There was very little in the way of primate tourism, and no online illegal wildlife trade. Today, there is increasing evidence that clearly links how we as professionals portray ourselves with wild animals (not only primates) to public misperceptions of wild animals as desirable pets. For example, viewing an image of a human holding a primate increases the likelihood of people wanting a primate as a pet, and detracts from conservation efforts for that species (Ross et al. 2011; Leighty et al. 2015).

On publication, the Guidelines were very well-received, and they have been supported by further quantitative research (e.g., Freund et al., 2021). We received many requests from volunteer translators who wished to have the Guidelines available in their native language to disseminate among those working with wild and captive primates. These actions illustrate the need for these Guidelines in primate habitat countries where primates are threatened by the pet trade. The Guidelines are now available in 23 different languages and have been adopted by the IUCN PSG Section for Small Apes, Durham University, various primate conservation NGOs, and the North American Primate Sanctuary Alliance. The Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries incorporated the Guidelines into the terms of participation for Giving Day for Apes, emphasising the need to use responsible imagery in their fundraising campaigns.

We hope every primatologist will carefully read the Guidelines on the use of primate imagery. As a minimum, we encourage primatologists to adhere to Guideline N°6 that advises clearly wearing personal protective equipment when photographed close to or holding primates, the use of which was considered best practice even before Covid-19. Even better, we applaud those who have taken the lead and now choose only to be photographed alone, using binoculars, or holding a soft toy instead.

We call on everyone to take a personal and organisational commitment to adhere to the guidelines and contribute proactively to address the problem together.



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