



An analysis of zoo visitors' favourite and least favourite animals



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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an assessment of which animals visitors to zoos prefer and the reasons why this is the case. It expands on previous research that has tended to examine animal attractiveness indirectly and focused on attractiveness rather than also examining unattractiveness as a distinct issue. The paper is based on the results of a survey distributed to a convenience sample of 444 visitors to Durrell Wildlife Park, located on the island of Jersey, UK, immediately after their visit to the zoo. The study was undertaken during the summer of 2013. The results show that mammals are the favourite animals of visitors to zoos while reptiles and birds are the least favourite animals. Animals that are perceived to be entertaining and cute are clearly favoured by zoo visitors while those perceived to be boring and/or hard to see tend not to appeal. Other unappealing animal characteristics include scary and smelly.

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1. Introduction

This paper provides an assessment of which animals visitors to zoos prefer and the reasons why this is the case. Specifically, it provides an analysis of which animals zoos visitors identify as their favourite and least favourite and the reasons they provide for this. The importance of this paper is related to the point that zoos are almost exclusively dependent for their economic survival on paying visitors (Dibb, 1995; Frynta, Simková, Lisková, & Landová, 2013; Hallman & Benbow, 2006). At the same time, these visitors are primarily drawn to zoos by the animals they house (Taplin, 2012). Understanding which animals are most favoured by zoo visitors and the reasons why these people identify animals as their favourite or least favourite offers the potential to ensure visitor satisfaction. This is based on the recognition by Whitworth (2012: 1) that the presence of popular animal species within zoos “could potentially increase the number of people visiting zoos.” In addition, understanding why people identify animals as their least favourite may provide opportunities to alter the popularity of particular animals. The value of this paper relates not just to the importance of ensuring and increasing visitor satisfaction, but also to aiding the conservation objectives of zoos. This is related to the suggestion that the willingness of people to engage in learning about animal conservation is related to the attractiveness of an animal (Carr, 2016a).

Zoos that are open to the public began to develop in the late 18th Century (Jamieson, 1985; Tribe, 2004; Turley, 1998). These were created to provide entertainment for humans (Bekoff, 2007; Carr & Cohen, 2011; Rabb, 2004). In recent decades there has been a significant shift

in public opinion about the appropriateness of these institutions. At the same time, we have witnessed growing concern around the world about the plight of wild animals and their natural habitat and a consequent growth in interest in conservation. Reflecting these changes in social values and opinions, zoos have tended to move away from identifying themselves as only sites of human entertainment towards portraying their potential value as tools in the fight to conserve endangered species and to educate the general public about the value of conservation (Reade & Waran, 1996; Smith & Broad, 2008). Despite the rise of the role of zoos as sites of conservation¹ as Turley (1998: 341) notes they still “cannot perform their more socially acceptable functions without satisfying the needs and requirements of day visitors, who by definition are on a recreational excursion.” Within this context it must be recognised that most visitors to zoos still see these places as sites of leisure experiences that are, as a result, intimately associated with the idea of entertainment (Clayton, Fraser, & Saunders, 2009; Therkelsen & Lottrup, 2015). The source of this entertainment is the animals that zoos house (Ryan & Seward, 2004). This reinforces the point that in order to be able to survive and potentially aid animal conservation, zoos must listen to their customers about which animals they find attractive and unattractive and why.

Despite the importance of understanding which animals zoo visitors find attractive or unattractive and why this is the case little research has been published on this topic. This is part of a wider dearth of analysis of zoos within a leisure/tourism studies context (Cohen & Fennell, 2016).

¹ It is recognised that the ability of zoos to successfully aid conservation is a contentious issue. However, this is a discussion that lies outside the remit of the current paper. For an introduction to the debate readers are encouraged to look at the work of Carr and Cohen (2011).

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The research that has been undertaken on animal attractiveness to zoo visitors has tended to examine attractiveness indirectly via an analysis of the extent to which specific animals attract and retain the interest of zoo visitors (e.g., Balmford, Mace, & Leader-Williams, 1996; Moss & Esson, 2010; Ward, Mosberger, Kistler, & Fischer, 1998). Alternatively, research in this area has asked the general population about animal attractiveness rather than focusing specifically on zoo visitors (e.g., Carr, 2016b). The research that has been undertaken has focused almost exclusively on animal attractiveness rather than also examining why people may identify an animal as their least favourite. This is based on the idea that attractiveness can be positioned on a continuum from attractive to unattractive. It fails to appreciate that while this may be possible in some instances that in others there may be specific aspects of an animal that are only definable as attractive or unattractive. These aspects are distinct from each other rather than related to one another along a continuum. Consequently, focusing only on attractiveness may have limited the development of understanding of unattractiveness. Another problem with the extant research on animal attractiveness is that it has produced varied findings. This means that the popularity of different animals in zoos and the reasons behind this is currently unclear (Moss & Esson, 2010). Consequently, this paper seeks to fill these gaps in current knowledge pertaining to the attractiveness of animals located within zoos to visitors to these tourist attractions.

The value of the research on which this paper is based is linked to the number of zoos there are in the world and how many visitors they attract. It is difficult to be precise about the number of zoos, not least of all because they exist under a variety of titles (e.g., wildlife parks, safari parks, and menageries) and they are not required by law to be a member of a unifying organisation. Despite this, the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums consists of over 1200 zoos. It has been estimated that zoos around the world attract over 700 million people annually (Therkelsen & Lottrup, 2015).

2. Animal attractiveness

It is recognised that not all animals are seen as being equally attractive by people. Rather, it is argued that there are a select, small, number of animals that are widely favoured by the general population. These have been identified as “flagship, charismatic, iconic, emblematic, marquee and poster species” (Small, 2011: 232). Possibly the prime example of such an animal is the panda, which is of course utilised as the emblem of the World Wildlife Fund. Like the Panda, the existing research indicates the mammals are the favourite type of animal amongst both the general population (Small, 2012) and zoo visitors (Moss & Esson, 2010).

Work that has been conducted on what makes animals attractive to zoo visitors and the general population has suggested that size is an important indicator of attractiveness (Bitgood, Patterson, & Benefield, 1988; Moss & Esson, 2010; Sommer, 2008; Ward et al., 1998). Writing about wild animals, Small (2012: 37) has stated that “huge creatures elicit great respect, whereas the majority of species, which are small, tend to be ignored.” In contrast, Balmford et al. (1996) stated that the attractiveness of an animal is not related to its size.

Like Bitgood et al. (1988); Margulis, Hoyos, and Anderson (2003); Mitchell et al. (1992), and Puan and Zakaria (2007) have stated that zoo visitors find active animals more attractiveness than sedentary ones. The novelty, uncommonness, or exoticness of an animal has also been identified as an attractive characteristic of zoo animals (Bitgood et al., 1988; Sommer, 2008; Whitworth, 2012). This may be linked to the suggestion that tourists tend to have a strong desire for novel/exotic experiences (Awaritefe, 2004; Prebensen, Skallerud, & Chen, 2010). The tendency of an animal to interact with zoo visitors has also been identified as an attractive animal characteristic (Bitgood et al., 1988) as has the proximity of animals to visitors (Bitgood et al., 1988). Small (2012) has also suggested that the colour of an animal may influence its attractiveness to humans.

According to Sommer (2008), another characteristic of attractive animals is that they are strong. Rather than animal attractiveness being determined by one characteristic Carr (2016b) suggested that a complexity of characteristics combine to make an animal attractive. This complexity is exemplified by the suggestion by Bitgood et al. (1988) and Small (2012) that ‘cute and cuddly’ is another characteristic of animal attractiveness despite it seemingly sitting uncomfortably alongside the idea that strong animals are attractive. Within the context of ‘cute and cuddly’ Pekarik (2004) and Carr (2016a) have noted that baby animals are especially attractive to zoo visitors.

In contrast to the attractiveness of mammals, reptiles and invertebrates have been identified as being unattractive (Cushing & Markwell, 2011). In particular, snakes, spiders, fish, and frogs have been classified in this manner (Cushing & Markwell, 2011; Small, 2012). Moss and Esson (2010) and Small (2012) have suggested this is the case because they are unlike humans. Because of this characteristic birds have also been identified as being unattractive to humans (Moss & Esson, 2010). However, the complex interactions of animal characteristics which in totality determine attractiveness is again demonstrated by the claim that large animals that are unlike humans may be more attractive than their smaller counterparts (Small, 2012).

3. Methods

The data on which this paper is based was gathered at Durrell Wildlife Park, located on the island of Jersey in the English Channel. After almost 60 years since it opened, the Park now attracts approximately 180,000 visitors each year (Anonymous, 2015). It is open every day of the year from 9.30 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. and is situated centrally on Jersey, approximately 4 miles outside of St. Helier, the capital of the island. The Wildlife Park is home to an array of animals, the largest of which are the gorillas and orangutans. Table 1 provides details of the range of the animals that were housed at Durrell Wildlife Park at the time of the study on which this paper is based. More details about the Park can be found at <http://www.durrell.org/visit/>.

The data on which this paper is based was collected using a questionnaire that was distributed to participants at the end of their visit to Durrell Wildlife Park from late July to the end of August 2013. In order not to conflict with other research being undertaken by Durrell, surveys were only distributed on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. The collection of the data was also restricted to between 3 and 5 p.m. The decision to utilise this quantitative method of data collection was related to its potential to gain information from as large a sample size as possible in a standardised manner that enabled easy cross-comparison and generalisation. A series of Durrell volunteers² distributed the questionnaire to visitors at the exit point from the Wildlife Park and to those waiting for a bus at the bus stop immediately outside the exit from the zoo and collected the completed surveys. This method of distribution was utilised to maximise the response rate and also enable as large a number of surveys as possible to be distributed in a short period of time (i.e., while waiting for a bus). All respondents were required to be 18 years of age or older. Those who agreed to take part in the survey were asked to complete the questionnaire as an individual even if they had visited the Wildlife Park as part of a group though more than one member of each group could complete the survey.

A total of 444 surveys were completed. Of the respondents, 146 were male and 283 were female.³ The average age of the respondents⁴ was 46.7 years. The majority of respondents were from the British mainland (65.8%), while 21.6% were from Jersey and 2.3% were from the

² All volunteers were required to wear a Durrell top whilst undertaking the data collection exercise.

³ The rest did not identify their gender or gave the gender of multiple respondents (i.e., all people in their group).

⁴ For those who gave a precise age; 39 respondents did not give this information.

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