

THE ROLE OF PERCEIVED ATTRACTIVENESS OF ANIMALS IN PEOPLE'S SUPPORT FOR CONSERVATION

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INTRODUCTION

Prior research suggests that animals in need of conservation receive unequal attention and support (e.g., Czech et al., 1998; Knight, 2008; Martín-López et al., 2009). This project explores some of the key determinants of people's perception about animal conservation needs and evaluates the role of the animals' perceived attractiveness among these factors. Study 1 investigates the relative importance of the perceived attractiveness when inferring the animals' endangerment and need for conservation and the effect of individual factors on those inferences. Study 2 focuses on the effect of the perceived attractiveness and other factors on the animals' chances to get conservation support.

STUDY 1

Forty-nine study participants were shown images of 14 animals supported by The World Wide Fund (WWF) and presented on that organization's "Adopt an animal" webpage. Using a 10-point Likert scale, the participants rated each image based on the animal's perceived need for conservation, perceived endangerment status, attractiveness/beauty, the participants' own knowledge about the animal's endangerment status and the level of empathy toward the animal. To measure people's experience with animals, the participants were asked to indicate how often they visited zoos, conservation centres, petting zoos, nature centres, and farms in the past 3 years, and the types of pets they have ever owned.

How does animals' perceived attractiveness compare to other determinants of the perceived need for conservation?

People's perception of the animals' need for conservation is positively correlated with the knowledge about the animals' endangerment, perceived beauty, and empathy (all p-values < .0001), however, the knowledge about endangerment is a stronger predictor (of the animals' perceived need for conservation) than the perceived attractiveness of the animals.

Does people's reliance on animals' attractiveness, as a cue for inferring the animals' need for conservation, depend on individual characteristics?

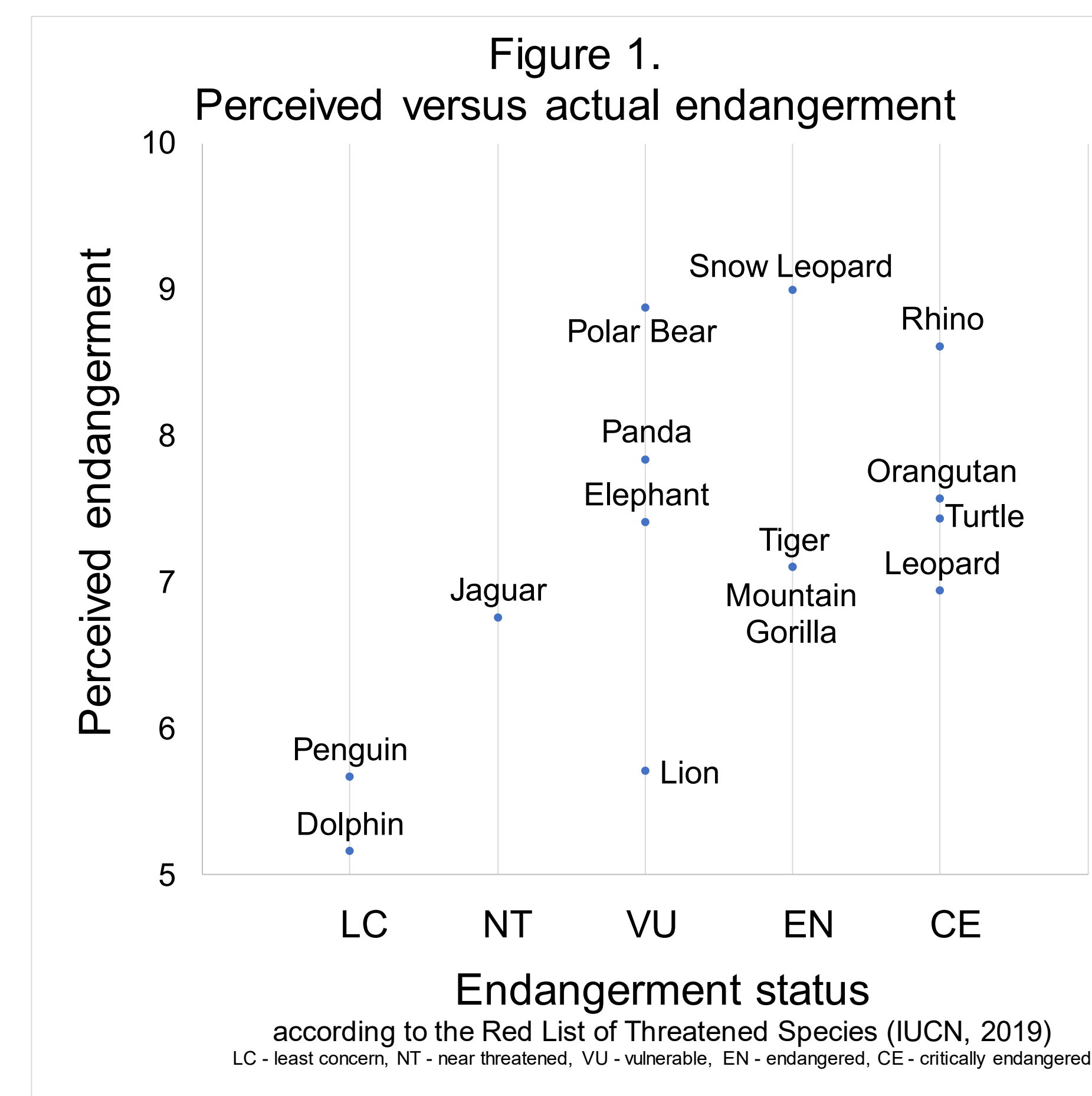
While the knowledge ratings were more accurate than the attractiveness ratings ($t = 6.36$, $p < .0001$), the respondents

who visited zoos or other similar places in the last 3 years were more likely to rely on the animals' attractiveness when inferring their conservation needs ($t = 2.53$, $p < .05$) than other respondents. Other measures of the experience with animals, such as the number of pets owned, did not have a statistically significant effect.

Consistent with the prior research (Kellert & Berry, 1987), females' ratings for the need for conservation, endangerment, attractiveness, and empathy were higher than the males' ratings (all p-values < 0.05). In contrast with the previous research, there was no difference in the self-reported conservation knowledge ratings of males and females.

Can animals' perceived attractiveness explain the difference between perceived and actual endangerment?

On average, the perceived endangerment ratings are aligned with the animals' actual endangerment status (Figure 1).



But the perceived endangerment does not necessarily translate into the need for conservation. When the difference between the perceived animal endangerment and conservation need is modelled as a function of the animals' perceived attractiveness, people's self-reported knowledge about their endangerment and their sympathy towards the animals, only the perceived attractiveness can explain the variance in

these differences ($t = 3.86$, $p < .001$). The animals that are perceived as less charismatic are also seen as less in need for conservation than more charismatic animals with the same level of perceived endangerment.

STUDY 2

Three hundred one regular survey panel participants were informed about a real charitable event supporting animal conservation and were asked to indicate which animal they would choose, if they had an opportunity to donate. Eleven animals (from the "Adopt our Animals" webpage of the involved conservation center) were also rated based on the following criteria: animal's perceived attractiveness, aggressiveness, endangerment, awareness about the animal's conservation status, familiarity with the animal, and sympathy toward it.

What factors affect people's choice of an animal to support?

The animals' attractiveness ratings were the strongest predictors of the participants' choices ($t = 3.03$, $p < .01$). These ratings remained a robust predictor even when the participants were presented with the information about the animals' actual conservation status, in which case, the conservation status was the strongest predictor ($t = 3.54$, $p < .001$).

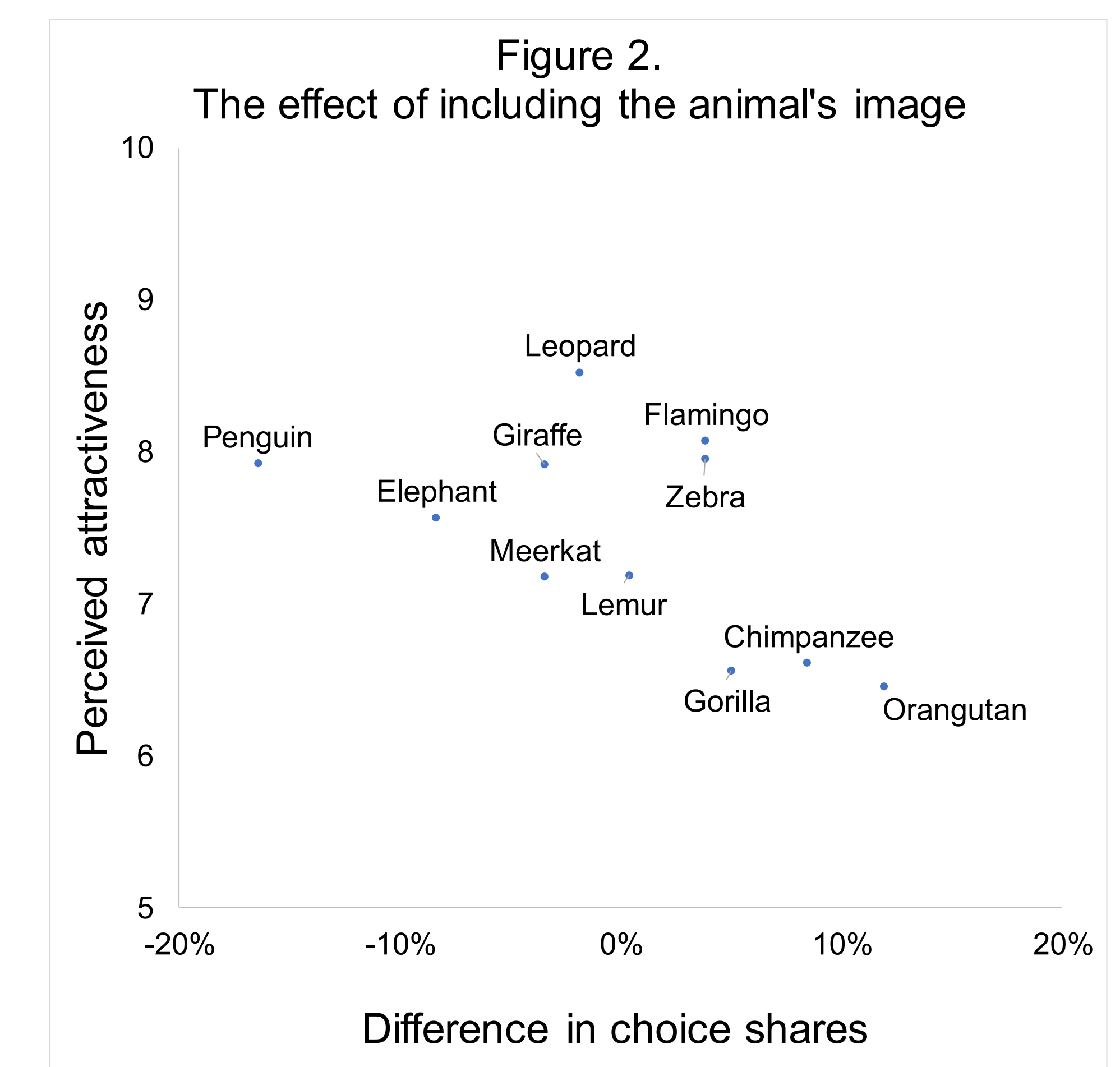
While sympathy ratings were positively correlated with the ratings of attractiveness, endangerment, awareness about conservation status, and familiarity (all p-values < .0001), the correlations with the attractiveness and familiarity ratings were the strongest.

Do less charismatic animals ever get a chance to receive conservation support?

Informing the participants about the endangerment status of the animals improved the chances of the most endangered species in the set to receive conservation support ($t = 2.18$, $p < .05$), but that information did not help the other, less endangered, animals.

Including a picture of the animals improved the chances to receive conservation support for the species that are not normally considered charismatic (Figure 2). For example, the three primates that, on average, were rated as the least at-

tractive species, collectively, received twice as many donations ($X^2 = 2.96$, $p = .085$), if the participants saw their images when deciding which animal should receive their donation.



CONCLUSION

While the perceived attractiveness of animals is a key predictor of the animals' success in attracting conservation support, (1) the effect of attractiveness is stronger among people who are exposed to endangered animals more frequently, and (2) the species that are normally considered less charismatic receive more support when potential donors see their images.

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