

CONSERVATION AND PUBLIC OPINION

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Introduction

In recent decades there has been an increase in public awareness not only about environmental problems (Brown, 2000; Kaiser, 2000; Padilla & Gibson, 2000), but also about the conservation of endangered species (Simpfendorfer et al., 2011). However, this situation is not widespread. There is a part of the population that considers these issues of little or no importance, and would even welcome the disappearance of some species that are dangerous, harmful or a nuisance to humans.

Since public opinion has an important role in conservation (Czech & Krausman, 1999), our target is to focus on a first survey about it in Spain.

Methods

Designing and distributing a survey was needed for reaching our goal. The questionnaire asked about the importance of conservation programs and ways to fund them, as well as the value of the species or the opinion about animal extinction. A total of 232 people of different ages, professions and educational levels, from urban environments of all the provinces of Spain were contacted directly on the streets or by social media. The answers to the questions have been supplemented with information about age, sex, academic area and level, active profession or province of residence. SPSS 15.0 was used to evaluate the possible influence of those social factors on the individual opinion.

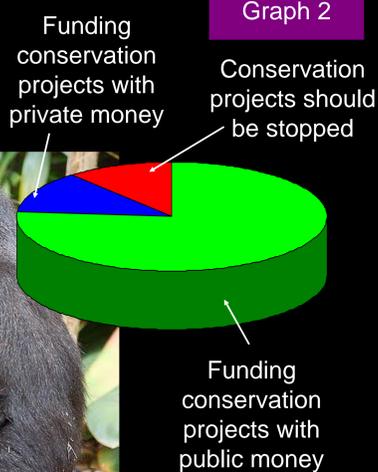
Results

79.74% of the surveyed consider that all the species have the same value. Within the 20.26% of the people that do not think all the species are equally valuable, we found different justifications. 29.79% consider more valuable those species that are beneficial to humans; 63.83% believe that some species are expendable; and, 6.38% believe that dangerous or harmful species should become extinct (Graph 1). In general terms, 12.93%, 6.03% and 1.29% respectively of the total people surveyed hold the opinions explained above.

Regarding the funding system for conservation programs, only 76.3% of the surveyed agree with using public funds while 11.2% believe that conservation programs should not be planned, letting the species recover by themselves or become extinct (Graph 2). The last 12.5% agree with developing conservation programs but only if they are privately funded. Only 1.7% of those surveyed consider that they would benefit if some species become extinct.

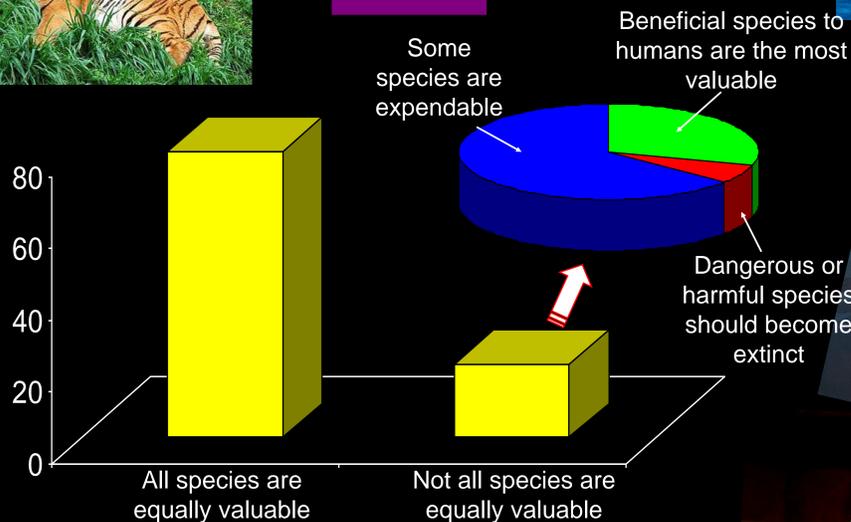
Correlating these opinions with some sociocultural factors shows that the academic level is significantly associated to the opinion (table). Furthermore, people who consider that the extinction of some species would improve their lives, also agree that conservation measures should not be carried out, and do not view species as equally valuable. This correlates with low education levels.

Similarly, a significant correlation between age and the opinion that life would be better with the loss of certain species ($r=0.14$ and $p=0.033$) and the opinion that conservation programs should not be developed ($r=0.14$ and $p=0.029$) has been found.



Graph 2

Graph 1



Variables	Study level	
	Pearson's r	p
Opinion of the convenience of the extinction of some species	-0.163	0.013
Opinion of the value of the species	-0.150	0.022
Opinion of funding conservation projects	-0.236	<0.001

Conclusions

On the one hand, although there are still people in the Spanish society that believe extinction of some species is desirable and are against conservation programs, their incidence is relatively low, not reaching 2% of the total surveyed in any case. The fact that these opinions are related to age supports the hypothesis of change of mind and the increased environmental awareness that is occurring in the new generations. However, on the other hand, our results suggest that people with higher education levels, independent of their professional area, have more marked environmental and conservation awareness than those who only completed the basic education. This highlights the importance of education in the development of values related to the conservation of our species and ecosystems.

References

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