



Using cute animals in pop culture makes public think they're not endangered - study

Proliferation of giraffes, lions, tigers and elephants in toy shops and films creates 'virtual population' and skews our perception

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Animals such as elephants, tigers, lions and panda bears are everywhere in movies, books and toy stores. But their wide pop culture presence skews public perception of how endangered these animals really are, researchers say.

Online surveys, zoo websites, animated films and school questionnaires were scoured by US and French researchers for the study, published in journal PLOS Biology.

Scientists made a list of the top 10 most charismatic animals: tigers, lions, elephants, giraffes, leopards, pandas, cheetahs, polar bears, gray wolves and gorillas.

They found almost 49% of all the non-teddy bear stuffed animals sold in the US on Amazon were one of these 10 charismatic animals.



There are a lot more Sophie the giraffe toys in the world than actual giraffes. Photograph: Alamy

In France, 800,000 Sophie the giraffe baby toys were sold in 2010, more than eight times the numbers of giraffes living in Africa.

Lead author Franck Courchamp of the University of Paris said these animals are so common in pop culture and marketing materials that they create a “virtual population” in people’s minds, one that is doing far better in perception than reality.

“Unknowingly, companies using giraffes, cheetahs or polar bears for marketing purposes may be actively contributing to the false perception that these animals are not at risk of extinction, and therefore not in need of conservation,” Courchamp said.

The average French citizen “will see more virtual lions through photos, cartoons, logos and brands in one month than there are wild lions left in west Africa,” said the report.

Researchers urged companies that use these animals in marketing to donate a portion of the proceeds to conservation groups.

“The appearance of these beloved animals in stores, in movies, on television, and on a variety of products seems to be deluding the public into believing they are doing OK,” said co-author William Ripple of Oregon State

University.

“If we don’t act in a concerted effort to save these species, that may soon be the only way anyone will see them.”

Ripple added that “a major threat faced by nearly all of them is direct killing by humans, especially from hunting and snaring,” a reality he described as “sadly ironic.”

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