

Public interest in individual study animals can bolster wildlife conservation



Scientists have long debated the potential benefits and detriments of assigning names to individual study animals¹. Motivated by the goal of maintaining scientific objectivity, some researchers shy away from labelling study subjects with proper names or from publicizing such names¹. On the other hand, naming animal study subjects can boost researcher empathy², and assigning identities to individual study animals is both necessary and customary in behavioural, population and conservation-related studies^{3,4}. Beyond the practical value of naming individual study animals, narratives around animal names have the power to engage the public with conservation initiatives.

A powerful example of how human connections to individual animals can change the course of conservation lies in the case of ‘P-22’, a mountain lion who was monitored for a decade in the Los Angeles area in the USA before recently being euthanized due to health problems⁵. P-22 was named by the researchers who were tracking him; as utilitarian as his name was, it allowed the public to connect his identity with the famous story of him being the only mountain lion in Griffith Park, to learn about the severe lack of connectivity for mountain lions in the region and to better tolerate his presence in the area. Most importantly, the public affinity for P-22 (Fig. 1) – along with the science documenting the lack of connectivity in his home range – fuelled a social media campaign (#SaveLACougars) and the multiagency funding initiatives needed to obtain approval to build one of the largest urban wildlife crossings in the USA. The Wallis Annenberg Wildlife Crossing, due to be completed in 2025, will help countless species to navigate over a ten-lane freeway that has historically claimed the lives of countless wildlife⁶. Without P-22 as a named ‘poster puma’, this project may not have gained enough traction for success.

There is an increasing body of evidence that demonstrates the power of narrative in shifting people’s attitudes and behaviours around critical environmental topics such as climate



Fig. 1 | Memorial flowers placed in front of a mural of P-22 in the Silver Lake neighbourhood of Los Angeles. Mural artist C. Mattie created the piece in October 2022 as part of the #SaveLACougars campaign.

change⁷. This aligns with decades of research that connects people’s emotions with their desired and implemented actions towards environmental management⁸. Anthropomorphism, meanwhile, has been associated with holding mutualist values towards wildlife – such as an aversion to lethal removal⁹. Naming individual study animals and creating public-facing narratives around them is one potential method of harnessing relevant positive attitudinal correlates of anthropomorphism and associated human emotional connections.

Educational programmes in wildlife rehabilitation facilities have long ascribed to this, through the naming of their animal ambassadors; in fact, research has suggested that using named (rather than unnamed) animal ambassadors yields better educational outcomes and increases connectedness to nature for participants¹⁰. Zoos and other conservation organizations sometimes hold naming contests, which can generate substantial amounts of money for conservation efforts – such as in the case of a US \$50,000 donation to name a baby giraffe, Kopano, at the Dallas Zoo in

2014¹¹. Naming can even connect people to species that are widely reviled – such as at a research site at which I work, the Nakuru Hyenas and Communities Project in Kenya, where many people know and are now fond of seeing a particular spotted hyena named ‘Smiley’.

With improvements in technology, the increasing public accessibility of data from individually named research animals offers an enormous opportunity to deeply connect people with the life stories of wildlife, and thus foster conservation change. For example, a conservation project in Scotland was bolstered when the public excitedly tracked a red kite named Merida, after the Disney heroine¹². A community fan base centred around a raccoon named Barry on the global photograph identification platform ‘Instant Wild’ encouraged a better connection between researchers and community members¹². A number of **wildlife conservation** projects also allow members of the public to follow the lives of individually named study animals through animal ‘adoptions’, in which the associated donation is also given directly or indirectly to landscape-level

conservation efforts. Named wildlife may even benefit conservation after their deaths, as exhibited by the controversial case of Cecil the African lion, whose death in 2015 sparked a publicity and social media tidal wave that led to \$1.06 million in conservation donations being given to the Wildlife Conservation Research Unit based at Oxford University¹³.

The power of stories should not be underestimated. Narratives and human values – and not only science – are what dictate most conservation attitudes, actions and policies¹⁴. Wildlife researchers and conservation practitioners have a duty to seriously consider the advantages and disadvantages of naming and publicizing individual study animals in efforts to advance both the science and the story. In an era of endless information and story proliferation via social media, making these conscious decisions around naming has

the potential to both improve our research and substantially bolster wildlife conservation.

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Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.