The Back Page

Wildlife as pets: reshaping public perceptions through targeted communication

Rosanna M. Vail, Jack H. Berryman Institute, Department of Wildland Resources, Utah State University, 5230 Old Main Hill, Logan, UT 84322-5230, USA *rosanna.vail@usu.edu*

Keeping wildlife as pets has become an increasingly normalized idea in domestic settings. Whether compelled to rescue or adopt wildlife, humans continue to seek interactions with wild animals as pets. Often, this forced coexistence can lead to unforeseen and unfortunate consequences for both humans and wildlife.

These consequences can range from mild annoyances such as excessive noise to more severe risks to human health and safety, including attacks on people, altercations with other pets, or the transmission of zoonotic diseases (Conover and Vail 2014). Additionally, concerns about animal welfare increase if wild pets fall short of humans' expectations or ability as caretakers, which can lead to rehoming or neglect (Grant et al. 2017).

Wildlife managers, policy makers, and other professionals develop best management practices (BMPs) to promulgate policies and laws based on the best science available, intended to protect both the public and wildlife from negative interactions and potentially dire outcomes (Messmer 2000). However, manager communications about the risks associated with wildlife interactions—whether generally or as domestic pets—are often ignored by the public until conflicts arise. Managers are keenly aware of this situation; thus, they are constantly searching for more effective communication strategies to deliver timely and appropriate information to the public about the consequences of keeping wildlife as pets. One approach for conveying this information to those who are uninformed, misinformed, or reluctant to comply is to develop communication strategies based on what we already know about this segment of the public. Studies that have explored pet owner perceptions as well as motives for keeping or avoiding wild or exotic pets provide valuable insights that serve as the first step toward effective communication: understanding the audience (Trigg et al. 2015, Moorhouse et al. 2016). By taking this step, wildlife professionals may better connect with wild pet owner personas, perceptions, knowledge gaps, and needs through targeted messaging that both clarifies information and convinces the public toward safer actions.

Who is the audience?

The key strategies in targeted communication are to understand the audience and prepare communications that lead them toward the desired knowledge and action. Knowing the reasons behind the audience desires to keep wildlife as pets is as important as knowing the need itself. Studies that have analyzed public perceptions of wild pets in connection with respondent personality traits (e.g., Vonk et al. 2016), as well as current news and trends (Shuttlewood et al. 2016) endorse this approach. Several notable target audience personas have emerged because of this research.

Persona #1: The Follower – emulating wild pet owners in popular culture

Demand for wildlife as pets has increased both in the United States and abroad thanks to viral, story-based narratives that pique public interest through the power of social media (Fidino et al. 2018). For example, Pumpkin the Raccoon, of Instagram fame, has a following of 1.5 million people. After surviving a fall from a tree, the recuperated raccoon (*Procyon lotor*) made international headlines as the endearing new member of her adopted family of humans and dogs in the Bahamas (CBS News 2015). Although raccoons are not the pictures of sanitary houseguests, the sensationalized social

media personality—heavily influenced by her human owner's personality—depicted life with wildlife through a lighthearted lens. Social media followers are only exposed to selected content, which normalizes wildlife as a participatory member of the family. Thus, a wild pet becomes a welcomed form of entertainment that people desire to follow and emulate. Fictional characters such as Ranger Rick, another beloved raccoon, also contribute to the wild animals in popular culture phenomenon (https://rangerrick.org).

In the world of cinema, captivated audiences have exhibited what is termed the Harry Potter effect—a desire to keep wild-caught owls as domestic pets—after the release of movies and books of the same name (Nijman and Nekaris 2017). Demand for the trade of owls as pets in Indonesia has increased to the point that conservation efforts are needed to protect less abundant species if the trend continues (Nijman and Nekaris 2017). While audiences may be excited to have a pet well-known in stories of wizardry, there is an emerging disconnect between public following of popular culture and its unintended consequences to wildlife.

Persona #2: The Hero – rescuing and adopting helpless, injured wildlife

Among the most compelling reasons to keep wildlife as pets is to rescue an injured animal and provide it with an improved quality of life and a good home—the human's home. In the early 2000s, a woman rescued a baby feral hog (*Sus scrofa*) whose mother had been killed. The new household pet, aptly named Babe, lived the life of a domestic dog in an outdoor kennel. When she grew larger, Babe attempted an escape by charging past the woman's teenage daughter during feeding. Fortunately, the feral hog only escaped into the enclosed backyard, and no humans or wildlife were injured (A. Sambueno, resident, personal communication). This is not always the case with so-called rescued wildlife in domestic settings, and many pet owners are not prepared for the possibility and likelihood of wild pet-induced danger (Trigg et al. 2015).

Situations of humans helping wildlife-turned-pets that end without incident can create a false sense of security for humans. Often, the goal of saving injured or helpless wildlife overshadows the reality that the wild animal may, at a certain point, no longer be helpless. On the other hand, this audience may not be cognizant that their rescue attempts, while safe enough for humans, may be harmful to wildlife. Upon finding wildlife that appears to be abandoned and helpless, especially baby animals, humans will touch or move them to a perceived safer location or go in search of its mother (http://www.wildawareutah.org). For this public demographic, rescuing wildlife—whether in idea or actuality—often overrides potential dangers to personal health and safety or to the animal. This demonstrates the knowledge gap between wanting to help wildlife and being aware of appropriate practices, methods, or resources to achieve the goal.

Persona #3: The Individual – reinforcing image or status with wild pets

People who seek wild or exotic pets may be motivated by the need to express their individuality or uniqueness to stand out from the crowd, as the pet often becomes symbolic of its owner's self-image or perceived social status (Veevers 2016). This audience may utilize pets as facilitators for increased social interaction; pets also can serve as the individual's preferred companions in place of interaction with other humans (Veevers 2016).

Many people identify with certain attributes of exotic species but remain unaware of how the species will behave in captivity or the ethical responsibilities built into meeting the animal's physical or other needs. Often, this audience holds misguided expectations of the experience of owning an exotic pet, unprepared with the information, ability, or willingness to carry through with proper care on a permanent basis (Grant et al. 2017). This can lead to neglect or abuse of the exotic animal or increased abandonment in animal shelters that struggle to care for or place the pet in another home.

Part of the exotic pet owner knowledge gap may stem from lack of information or receiving misinformation or false advertising from exotic pet retailers (Warwick et al. 2018). State laws often specify which species are allowed as pets and require owners to obtain exotic pet permits, but pet owner perceptions and preparedness remain difficult if not impossible to fully assess. This demographic of pet owner may
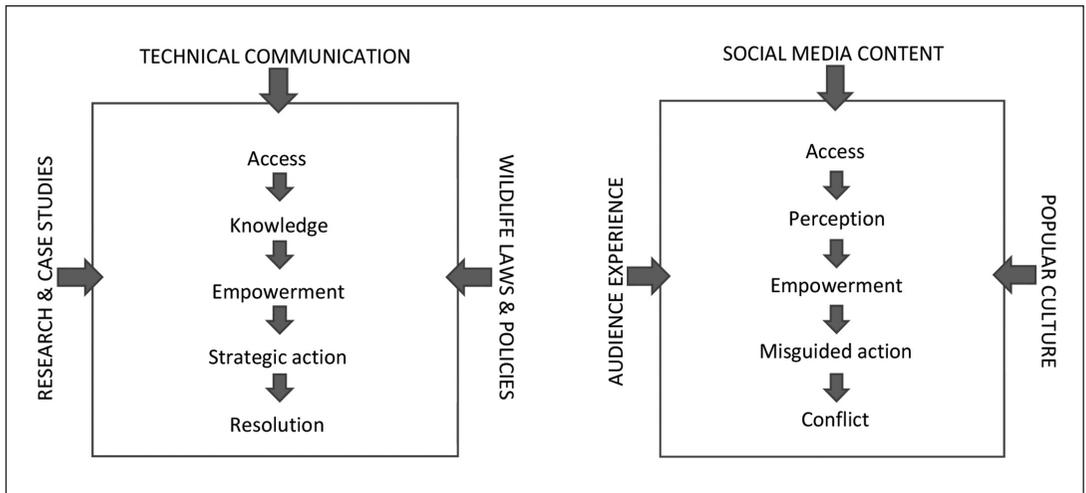
Figure 1. Comparison of the factors influencing audience actions and outcomes relating to wildlife as pets. Strategic technical communication along with research and wildlife laws work to develop a process of information to action (left) that is more beneficial than an alternative process heavily influenced by perception and unreliable content (right).

not understand the commitment or gravity of keeping their chosen wild pet, or they may renege on their commitment when the going gets tough or they begin to lose interest.

Targeted communication strategies

Wildlife managers, particularly those with communication expertise, need to continue bridging the gap between the public's desires for wild pets and the necessary awareness and buy-in of appropriate (i.e., safe, ethical, and legal) practices that protect both wildlife and humans. These professionals can shape communication strategies that appeal to target demographics, and in doing so, they play a key role to recognize, promote, and reward public action that can reduce conflicts between humans and wild pets. These strategies can work in tandem with scientific research and wildlife policy efforts to develop a healthy process leading to audience awareness and preferred action, as opposed to societal influences leading to perceptions or misguided actions (Figure 1).

Strategy #1: Increase access to information

Using technology as a primary mode of communication means that information can and should be easy to search, easy to find, and easy to understand. One strategy that may be underused is keyword research to understand the words and phrases people enter into search engines and what information they are finding or hoping to find. If people cannot effectively and quickly locate the expert information they seek online about any given wildlife-related topic, they may abandon their search—thereby not acquiring information—or become misinformed through less reliable sources that feed into their perceptions of wildlife. Keeping the right information in the wrong place in the online environment results in a disconnect between the public and the information.

One example of the right information in the right place is the Wild Aware Utah project, a collaboration between the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources and Utah's Hogle Zoo (http://www.wildawareutah.org). With >6,000 visitors to the zoo per day and >10,000 hits per month to the website, including a link to the Wild Aware Utah website from the zoo's homepage, visitors can become more aware of best practices for interacting with wildlife. Wild Aware Utah informs the public about how to avoid human–wildlife conflicts and what to do if conflicts do arise. Collaboration with the zoo greatly increases the public's exposure to reliable information from wildlife management professionals.

Strategy #2: Make data digestible for public consumption

Part of making information more accessible also means writing in a way that can be understood at a glance and by those who are not in the scientific community. Statistical data or dense and lengthy content that are presented in a more digestible manner suitable for the general public can convey critical information in a more approachable way. Using headings and subheadings, especially on a lengthy web page, helps readers scan for information. Placing the most critical information above the fold of a website also increases the chances that people will acquire the facts even if they do not scroll through the entire page.

Strategy #3: Compel and convince, carefully

Although wildlife professionals—particularly those in government roles—have the ethical responsibility to present accurate and unbiased information, they also have the opportunity to use language to encourage positive human–wildlife interactions and viewpoints. Decker et al. (2012) stress the importance of word choice in risk communications to convey messages of risk to the public (in their case, relating to zoonoses) without evoking negative feelings about wildlife or causing misguided snap judgments.

When presenting technical information, communicators can appeal to target audiences by using modes of persuasion: ethos (ethical appeal), pathos (emotional appeal), and logos (logical appeal). To convince public audiences toward safer, legal practices relating to wild pet ownership and interactions, wildlife professionals can: 1) demonstrate ethos by establishing themselves as a longstanding and reliable source of information grounded in research and facts; 2) demonstrate pathos through compelling stories that get to the heart of audience needs, evoke emotions, and incite action; and 3) demonstrate logos by emphasizing the "why," "so what," or explanation behind necessary but potentially unpopular policies and practices.

Collaborations with professional communicators who are equipped to generate strategic, audience-centric messaging can greatly

influence public views and actions, but often project budgets do not allow for external expertise or services. In such cases, wildlife professionals should consider continuing education options to expand expertise in technical communication strategies that can be generally applied to their own field.

Strategy #4: Empower people to participate

Encouraging the public to become active participants in wildlife-related issues and conversations within their communities greatly increases their awareness of and investment in wild pet laws and safe practices. Public forums or online spaces for the public to ask questions of wildlife experts (e.g., Q&A with wildlife managers, exotic pet veterinarians, animal behavior experts) serve to disseminate information as well as provide insight about what the general public wants and needs to know. This could, in turn, inform the messaging of future communications and encourage more accurate word-of-mouth information as the public goes on to tell others what they learn.

Strategy #5: Provide an enticing call to action

All communications to the public must include a clear and distinct call to action, which directs them toward the desired outcome—whether the completion of a particular action or a shift in their perspective about a wildlife issue. Wildlife professionals must consider not only what they want the public to know, but also what they want the public to do with the information. They must present a clear and functional pathway (especially online) to achieve the goal as well as wording that entices the reader to want to take the next step.

An example of an enticing call to action is a website about injured and orphaned wildlife through the Southwest Region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service ([USFWS] 2016). In addition to informing the public about the misconceptions and safest approach with seemingly abandoned wildlife (i.e., leaving them alone), the website provides the contact information of licensed wildlife rehabilitators by state to encourage the public to report wildlife that may need help. Going a step

further, the website invites the reader to become licensed wildlife rehabilitators, thus becoming part of the solution and providing a path toward fulfilling the public's need to be more directly involved in assisting injured or orphaned wildlife (e.g., see audience persona #2). The Wild Aware Utah website and many others offer a similar approach.

The path forward

The skill of making complex ideas accessible to non-experts—and thereby informing and influencing the public to action—fills a critical need for wildlife professionals. Adding more interpersonal and technical communication courses to wildlife science curriculums would build the capacity of future wildlife professionals to write or speak directly to the public or to specific stakeholder groups. These skills go beyond the ability of writing in the sciences, which tends to be more research and publication based, and rather provides expertise in understanding audiences and how to connect with them to arrive at the desired outcome. For those already in the workforce, continuing education or professional development courses relating to technical communication are practical options. Many educational courses or programs today are available online, meeting needs of professionals who may be constantly in the field for their wildlife management jobs or research.

In the specific case of wildlife as pets, the biggest challenge from a communication standpoint is to maintain the public's passion for wildlife while shifting their perspectives and actions into compliance with better practices that contradict the daily exposure to popular culture trends. Will people forego social media fame by contacting authorities instead of rescuing an injured animal themselves? Will they acknowledge they are not fit or willing to care for an exotic species, even when legally permitted in their state? Will they reason that the risks to human health and safety—whether for themselves or others—outweigh the perks of having a cute and ideally cuddly (but sometimes monstrous) wild animal? Any shifts in public perceptions and actions will depend on who can reach them and present the most compelling case.

Acknowledgments

Literature cited

CBS News. 2015. Pumpkin the raccoon is just your average dog. CBS News, October 7, 2015, CBS Corporation, New York, New York, USA, <https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/pumpkin-the-raccoon>. Accessed February 19, 2018.

Conover, M. R., and R. M. Vail. 2014. Human diseases from wildlife. CRC Press, Boca Raton, Florida, USA.

Decker, D. J., W. F. Siemer, D. T. N. Evenson, R. C. Stedman, K. A. McComas, M. A. Wild, K. T. Castle, and K. M. Leong. 2012. Public perceptions of wildlife-associated disease: risk communication matters. Human–Wildlife Interactions 6:112–122.

Fidino, M., S. W. Herr, and S. B. Magle. 2018. Assessing online opinions of wildlife through social media. Human Dimensions of Wildlife 23:1–9.

Grant, R. A., V. T. Montrose, and A. P. Wills. 2017. ExNOTic: should we be keeping exotic pets? Animals 7:47.

Messmer, T. A. 2000. The emergence of human–wildlife conflict management: turning challenges into opportunities. International Biodeterioration & Biodegradation 45:97–102.

Moorhouse, T. P., M. Balaskas, N. C. D'Cruze, and D. W. Macdonald. 2017. Information could reduce consumer demand for exotic pets. Conservation Letters 10:337–345.

Nijman, V., and K. A.-I. Nekaris. 2017. The Harry Potter effect: the rise in trade of owls as pets in Java and Bali, Indonesia. Global Ecology and Conservation 11:84–94.

Shuttlewood, C. Z., P. J. Greenwell, and V. Tamara Montrose. 2016. Pet ownership, attitude toward pets, and support for wildlife management strategies. Human Dimensions of Wildlife 21: 180–188.

Trigg, J., K. Thompson, B. Smith, and P. Bennett. 2015. Engaging pet owners in disaster risk and preparedness communications: simplifying complex human–animal relations with archetypes.

Environmental Hazards 14:236–251.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2016. Helping injured or orphaned wildlife. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C., USA, <https://www.fws.gov/southeast/wildlife-and-you/injured-or-orphaned-animals>. Accessed July 25, 2018.

Veevers, J. E. 2016. The social meanings of pets: alternative roles for companion animals. Pages 11–30 *in* M. B. Sussman, editor. Pets and the family. Routledge, New York, New York, USA.

Vonk, J., C. Patton, and M. Galvan. 2016. Not so cold-blooded: narcissistic and borderline personality traits predict attachment to traditional and non-traditional pets. Anthrozoös 29:627–637.

Warwick, C., C. Steedman, M. Jessop, P. Arena, A. Pilny, and E. Nicholas. 2018. Exotic pet suitability: understanding some problems and using a labeling system to aid animal welfare, environment, and consumer protection. Journal of Veterinary Behavior 26:17–26.

ROSANNA M. VAIL is the managing editor of *Human–Wildlife Interactions* journal, a publication of the Jack H. Berryman Institute for Wildlife Damage Management. She holds a B.A. degree in English from Southern Oregon University and an M.S. degree in technical communication from Utah State University. She co-authored the book *Human Diseases from Wildlife* (CRC Press), awarded by The Wildlife Society as Book Publication of the Year for 2015. Her professional background also includes >12 years in marketing communications.

Contribute to *The Back Page*

The Back Page is a feature of *HWI* that offers authors and readers the opportunity to present insights, experiences, thoughts, and concerns about contemporary and emerging wildlife management or human–wildlife topics. To inquire about a submission, contact Terry Messmer at terry.messmer@usu.edu.