

Letter from the Editor

How close is too close to wildlife?



AS HUMAN populations grow, urbanization and other anthropogenic land uses will continue to encroach into wildlife habitats. These dynamics create the perfect storm for increased human–wildlife interactions.

Depending on landscapes, humans, and wildlife species involved, these interactions can be either negative or positive.

In this issue of *Human–Wildlife Interactions*, our authors provide keen, powerful insights based on global research involving human interactions with amphibians, bears, birds, canids, amphibians, and ungulates. All of the research presented focuses on the role of human knowledge, perceptions, and actions in creating the encounters as well as mitigating the potential for conflicts.

The dangers and consequences of human and wildlife close encounters are well documented and reported, but humans seem unable to resist the compulsion to interact with and even touch wildlife. In recent weeks, several curious but misguided wildlife watchers in national and state parks in the United States have had unfortunate close encounters with American bison (*Bison bison*). Adult bison can weigh >900 kg and run >50 kph. Thus, the U.S. National Park Service has recommended that visitors stay at least 20–25 m away from wild animals like bison and elk (*Cervus canadensis*) and 90 m away from bears (*Ursus* spp.) and other carnivores.

Although most of us read rules and regulations as applying to everyone, for some reason we tend to consider ourselves exceptions to the rule, failing to see how our individual action fits into a larger impact. This seems to be the case whether we are debating wearing masks to prevent the spread of COVID-19, or how close we can get to wildlife.

Despite warnings, wildlife watchers in U.S. national and state parks continue to get too close to bison. The wildlife watchers who were trampled and gored by bison this year were using their smartphones to video and photograph the animals so they no doubt could share with family and friends on social media.

In the case of watching wildlife, the rise of smartphone use, capturing those moments of “connection” has never been easier. Many are anxious to snap a shot of themselves up close and personal with the kinds of animals they have only seen on television or in a zoo. Unfortunately, it seems that selfies with wild animals are often used to boost our online social status. For posting these selfies, we are being rewarded and reinforced for our misbehavior on social media. Although the intent may not be malicious, the action places us and wildlife at the risk of harm. Not understanding wild animal behavior, coupled with an inability to judge what constitutes a safe distance when using our smartphone to capture our wildlife encounter, can be a recipe for disaster.

Freeman et al. (2020) provided new insights on the relationship between distance-related human–bison interactions and smartphones. They reported that people who always used a smartphone camera felt it was more acceptable to stand closer to bison than people who never used a smartphone camera. Our experiences with wildlife in zoos, preserves, or safaris, which may include opportunities to feed and handle wildlife, have also possibly contributed to inappropriate behaviors with wildlife outdoors. Additionally, too many of us are guilty of buying into the fallacy of “this can’t happen to me.” These attitudes and behaviors further complicate the already and increasingly complex world of human–wildlife interactions.

I leave you with a couple words of advice—social distancing! Unless you are sure you can outrun an animal within 25 m—roughly the length of 2 school buses—in <1.5 seconds, it’s best to stay well beyond this distance from wild animals. Social distancing, whether from wildlife or in the case of COVID-19, is still the best medicine.

Terry A. Messmer, Editor-in-Chief

Literature cited

Freeman, S., Z. D. Miller, and B. D. Taff. 2020. Visual-based social norms, distance-related human–wildlife interactions, and viewing devices in parks and protected areas. *Human–Wildlife Interactions* 14:16–24.