



**Beastly
Business**

Wildlife we love to harm:

How charisma impacts conservation responses to the illegal wildlife trade in Europe



Conservation action for the protection of wildlife must move from a focus on highly popular species to those who are at greatest risk of exploitation.

Over one million species are approaching extinction due to human activities, including over-exploitation and trade. To address this rising crisis, conservation action needs to be rapid and transformative.

Halting biodiversity loss is a key element of the [European Commission's Biodiversity Strategy for 2030](#). However, the European conservation agenda has often been [biased toward popularised and charismatic species](#) to the detriment of high-risk species and wildlife whose exploitation is localised, large scale, and considered normal.

Addressing this oversight will require the re-framing of conservation priorities and funding to direct efforts to highly exploited and overlooked species.

It is essential to recognise that:

- Exploitation of less charismatic and popularised wildlife (for food, as pets, and for recreation) is a major driver of wildlife harm.
- Expanding perceptions of value beyond market-based mindsets will help exploited wildlife to be recognised as victims.

Perceptions of charisma and value underpin the conservation and exploitation of wildlife. These judgements can vary considerably depending on time, space, culture, and species. Charismatic species typically encompass large, iconic, and popularised wildlife (e.g., brown bears). The high 'donor appeal' of popularised species means that they often receive more [funding support](#) than endangered, low-charisma, or non-threatened species, but exploitation and demand for charismatic species is also often high.

Popularity also impacts the perceived value of wildlife. Wildlife can be both instrumentally valuable (as a resource for trade and tourism), relationally valuable (culturally and spiritually), and intrinsically valuable (valuable in their own right and for themselves).






THE MULTIPLE VALUES OF WILDLIFE

- It's food   
- It's medicine 
- It's beautiful  
- It's dangerous  
- It's an investment   
- It's a trophy   
- It's my culture   

Market-based values (where wildlife are viewed as tradable commodities) dominate social norms, policy responses, and [conservation action](#). The European eel is an example of a species considered primarily for their market value. Policies focus on maximising economic value by maintaining sustainable trade, meaning wider relational or intrinsic values have little weight in public, conservation, or policy spheres.

European wildlife trade (bears, songbirds, and eels) and the diverging pathways of charisma, value, and harm.

	<div>BROWN BEAR</div> <div></div>	<div>SONGBIRDS</div> <div></div>	<div>EUROPEAN EEL</div> <div></div>
APPEAL & CHARISMA	High charisma. High public interest. This feeds into conservation and exploitation appeal.	Medium charisma. Highly specific market desirability with low public awareness of threats.	Low charisma. Minimal public engagement with conservation and normalised exploitation.
RECOGNISED VALUE	Social conflict between instrumental (economic) and intrinsic value.	Instrumental value tied to aesthetic preferences and cultural practices.	Economic value tied to cultural practices for food.
SPECIES AND INDIVIDUAL HARMS	Low risk to species overall, although public attention to individual harms can be high.	Medium risk to species. Exploitation is normalised and viewed as unthreatening with minimal recognition of individual harms.	High risk to species, with numerous pressures beyond exploitation and trade. The recognition of individual harms is absent.

Commodifying wildlife and valuing them on a hierarchy of [charisma and appeal](#) ignores alternate [diverse, culturally embedded, and traditional values](#) for wildlife. Under this narrow view, wildlife must ‘pay their way’, proving their economic value as tradeable or exploitable commodities to receive meaningful conservation support. This is a problem for [less-charismatic and \(non-\)threatened wildlife](#) (e.g., birds, amphibians, invertebrates) and species whose exploitation is normalised (e.g., fish, plants, fungi). Species that are not threatened with extinction also experience significant harms through legal and illegal wildlife trade and are frequently [overlooked in conservation funding](#) and policymaking.

Recommendations

- 1. Proactive and precautionary conservation responses are essential for under-prioritised, less appealing, and non-threatened species to alleviate pressures of the mounting biodiversity crisis and to move towards socially and environmentally just responses to wildlife crime and harm.**
- 2. Diverse values of nature must be embedded into conservation action and policy making, transitioning from an instrumental value mindset to one that encompasses multiple values and traditional knowledge to ensure sustainable and just futures for wildlife and people.**



Further reading:

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Mammola, S., Riccardi, N., Prié, V., Correia, R., Cardoso, P., Lopes-Lima, M. and Sousa, R., 2020. [Towards a taxonomically unbiased European Union biodiversity strategy for 2030](#). *Proceedings of the Royal Society*

About the Author

Dr Alison Hutchinson is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Sheffield, UK. She leads on the project entitled *Exploring the drivers and sustainers of European eel trafficking*. Her research expands on a green criminological foundation to examine wildlife crimes and harms in the context of global wildlife governance and species justice.

About the Beastly Business Project

The Project is funded by the UKRI Economic and Social Research Council, grant number ES/V00929X/1, and focuses on the political ecologies of green collar crime. Our research examines the trade in European species, especially brown bear, European eel and songbirds.

For more information on our outputs, team and research:

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