

New research demonstrates damaging influence of media on public perceptions of chimpanzees

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How influential are mass media portrayals of chimpanzees in television, movies, advertisements and greeting cards on public perceptions of this endangered species? That is what researchers based at Chicago's Lincoln Park Zoo sought to uncover in a new nationwide study published today in *PLoS ONE*, an open-access scientific journal. Their findings reveal the potential role that media plays in creating widespread misunderstandings about the conservation status and nature of this great ape.

Study respondents were more likely to believe that [chimpanzees](#) are not endangered after seeing them portrayed with humans. They were also more likely to falsely believe that the apes would make an appropriate pet even though in reality their massive strength and aggressive nature makes them highly dangerous. The researchers used composite [digital images](#) to experimentally test survey respondents' reactions to chimpanzees in different circumstances. For instance, survey respondents shown a photograph of a young chimpanzee standing next to a person were significantly less likely to think that chimpanzees were endangered in the wild, compared to respondents that viewed the exact same picture with the human digitally removed.

According to lead scientist, Steve Ross, PhD, founder of Project ChimpCARE and assistant director of the Lester Fisher Center for the Study and Conservation of Apes at Lincoln Park Zoo, "the findings are particularly relevant considering the public popularity of advertisements,

movies and [television programs](#) featuring chimpanzee actors," he said. "These practices have received broad criticism based on [animal welfare](#) concerns."

Ross explained that the active "acting" careers of these animals are typically only a few short years, after which they become too large, strong and unmanageable. "Because chimpanzees can live 50 to 60 years, those deemed no longer useful to the media may end up in suboptimal housing for the next several decades," he explained.

The research findings demonstrate that the negative outcomes of media use of chimpanzees likely extends beyond individual animal welfare issues and potentially undermines important conservation efforts for this endangered species. According the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, wild chimpanzees are severely endangered and could become extinct within 10 – 50 years if current trends continue.

"Displaying chimpanzees with humans isn't the only way in which public viewers were affected. Those seeing images of chimpanzees in human-like settings, such as a typical office space, were also less likely to think that chimpanzees are endangered," said Ross.

Purchasing and owning chimpanzees as pets is legal in most of the United States, but is a practice with considerable animal welfare and public safety risk. In 2009, a pet chimpanzee named Travis in Connecticut attacked and seriously injured a friend of its owner and was subsequently killed by police officers. Project ChimpCARE, an initiative based at Lincoln Park Zoo, estimates that up to 100 privately-owned chimpanzees live across the country in basements, garages and backyards, often living in unsafe and unsuitable environments.

"The inaccurate and frivolous portrayal of these complex and endangered primates should be of serious concern to anyone interested

in animal care and safety," said Ross. "Whether intentional or not, these images are resulting in significant effects on perceptions of chimpanzees that may hinder critical conservation and welfare initiatives that much of the general public supports."

More information: Ross SR, Vreeman VM, Lonsdorf EV (2011) Specific Image Characteristics Influence Attitudes about Chimpanzee Conservation and Use as Pets. PLoS ONE 6(7): e22050.

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