

'Cute' chimps in ads may harm the species' survival

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Television ads featuring cute chimpanzees wearing human clothes are likely to distort the public's perception of the endangered animals and hinder conservation efforts, according to a team of primatologists and a marketing professor at Duke University.

The researchers showed 165 study participants three different collections of [television ads](#) for products like toothpaste and soft drinks and then surveyed them to see whether attitudes toward conservation changed. One group saw a serious conservation message from Jane Goodall in the collection of ads. A second saw footage of chimps in the wild. And a third group saw chimps dressed as humans in ads for Career Builder, E*trade and Spirit Bank that were intended to be humorous.

"We were testing the argument that the entertainment industry has made that exposure to [chimpanzees](#) in human settings makes people more sympathetic to their plight," said Brian Hare, an assistant professor of [evolutionary anthropology](#) at Duke. "In fact, the opposite is true. We found people became less concerned about the risks chimpanzees face after they'd seen the entertainment clips."

Part of the issue also is that entertainment chimps tend to be younger, smaller animals, not adult animals who become dangerous pets, Hare said. "We can't say it enough: chimpanzees are not pets."

The perception that chimpanzees can be pets, and possibly the appearance of these ads in African media, may help create a market for

young animals destined for the [pet trade](#), Hare said.

In addition to the survey of their attitudes, participants were also given the opportunity to purchase one of the products they had seen or to contribute a part of their compensation for the experiment to a conservation charity. Those who watched the entertainment chimpanzees were least likely to donate.

"Nobody has measured this sort of thing before, but it clearly shows that the portrayal of endangered species on television can alter viewers' behaviors and decrease one's willingness to donate," said graduate student Kara Schroepfer. "This is a clear indication that we need to reevaluate media practices and conservation priorities."

More information: "Use of 'entertainment' chimpanzees in commercials distorts public perception regarding their conservation status," Kara K. Schroepfer, Alexandra G. Rosati, Tanya Chartrand & Brian Hare. *PLoS ONE*, Oct. 12, 2011.

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Provided by Duke University

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