

Stance that tourism harms wildlife refuted

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Two Texas A&M University scientists highlighted the conservation benefits of ecotourism worldwide and said a recent research review citing the dangers of ecotourism to wildlife is premature and problematic.

Dr. Lee Fitzgerald, a conservation biologist, and Dr. Amanda Stronza, an anthropologist, published a critique of a recent review in the scientific journal *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* that proposed tourism may increase the vulnerability of [wildlife](#) to predators.

"There have been some claims that have drawn media attention, saying that nature tourism and ecotourism can hurt wildlife and can even make wildlife more vulnerable to predators and poaching," Fitzgerald said.

"Dr. Stronza and I think it's important to qualify those statements," Fitzgerald said. "The idea picked up by the media that nature tourism is bad for animals sends a very mixed message to the public and to all sorts of conservation stakeholders that doesn't help conservation.

"We do research that advances theories in conservation science and our understanding of management practices that work for the benefit of biodiversity conservation. We felt if the idea is being promoted that tourism is bad for animals and can make animals more vulnerable to predators, then that idea should be researched before making sweeping statements that tourism is able to drive negative changes in entire populations.

"We wrote to clarify that the opposite is well-known and supported with much research; that tourism can and often does protect large landscapes and the wildlife within those landscapes."

They pointed out the world's very first national parks in the U.S. were created with tourism in mind and thousands of protected areas around the planet are at least partially justified by tourism.

They added it's difficult to imagine wild animals becoming so tame from their interaction with people they lose their fear of being eaten.

"The risk of predation is like a big sledgehammer in nature that drives the persistence of antipredator behaviors in species," Fitzgerald said.

"Tourists tend to interact with a small portion of the wildlife population, so it's practically impossible that the characteristics of tameness or boldness would become prevalent throughout an entire population. It's hard to imagine natural selection in that instance would overcome the ever present pressures of predators in nature."

Fitzgerald cited examples of tame domestic species such as cattle, dogs, goats, pigs and even guppies, that when released into the wild, quickly become feral and regain their wild antipredator behaviors.

There are instances of poorly managed interactions between people and wildlife, Fitzgerald noted, but a basic management policy worldwide is to ensure bad interactions and habituation are avoided as much as possible.

Fitzgerald and Stronza said in many parts of the world tourism protects wildlife from poaching, which is arguably the much greater threat to wildlife.

Stronza said in Botswana, tour operators are bringing rhinos from South Africa for release into the wild to restore populations. She said many of the animals may never see a tourist. And on the Mara Conservancy along the border of Kenya and Tanzania, ecotourism dollars directly fund anti-poaching measures.

Fitzgerald and Stronza explained that strong ecotourism programs keep poachers at bay. If the shield of ecotourism goes away, animals are not poached because they are tame, it's because large areas can then be infiltrated by poachers.

"We wanted to clarify this crucial point because there is no evidence to support the claim that ecotourism and nature tourism make animals vulnerable to poachers. Implying that they do sends a message that could undermine the benefits of ecotourism.

"In other words, it may be more helpful to appreciate the conservation benefits of nature tourism and ecotourism for wildlife, landscapes, people and communities than to pose untested scenarios that tourism hurts wildlife," Fitzgerald said.

Provided by Texas A&M University

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