

Research shows preference for non-lethal protection of species

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Americans believe endangered species are best protected when their habitats are protected and not when animal predators are killed, according to new Indiana University research.

With the exception of one case involving spiders and frogs, a scientific survey with more than 1,000 participants found overwhelming support for policies that protect habitats and little acceptance of either lethal control or no government action at all.

Professor Shahzeen Attari of the Indiana University School of Public and Environmental Affairs said the study sought to understand evolving public preferences for conservation by answering these questions: "How do we want to intervene to protect endangered species when faced with biological invasions or declining populations? Should we protect habitats, or lethally control predatory species that threaten the [endangered species](#)? Should we just step aside and let nature take its course?"

To measure support for various strategies, the researchers pitted one species against another in simplified but realistic scenarios. The cases, drawn from real debates about conservation policy, pit a rare or economically valued species against its more common competitor or predator species:

- Spotted owls versus barred owls
- Salmon versus California sea lions

- Caribou versus gray wolves
- Kirtland's warblers versus brown-headed cowbirds
- Happy-face spiders versus coqui frogs

Overwhelmingly, survey participants preferred [habitat protection](#) over lethal control, both lethal control and habitat protection, or no action. Of all the demographic groups, only older, conservative men were more likely to endorse no action.

"The results suggest broad support for holistic nature conservation that benefits both people and nature and highlights areas where current lethal management practices conflict with public preferences," said researcher Michelle Lute of the Montana-based WildEarth Guardians organization. Lute is a former SPEA postdoctoral fellow.

The survey section that pitted frogs versus spiders was the notable exception to the pattern of respondents favoring habitat protection. An unusually high number of survey-takers supported no action to protect the spiders. Lute and Attari note that this was the only case involving amphibian and invertebrate species. Of all the species studied, those are the most genetically distant from humans.

"People may care less about spiders or consider it a lost cause to try eradicating the non-native but prevalent frogs," Lute said. "We can't say whether we're less motivated to protect animals that are very different from us but that's certainly a possibility."

Lute and Attari authored an article about their research, "Public preferences for [species](#) conservation: Choosing between lethal control, habitat protection, and no action." It was published in the journal *Environmental Conservation*.

More information: MICHELLE L. LUTE et al, Public preferences

for species conservation: choosing between lethal control, habitat protection and no action, *Environmental Conservation* (2016). [DOI: 10.1017/S037689291600045X](https://doi.org/10.1017/S037689291600045X)

Provided by Indiana University

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