

Kids' wildlife preferences differ from island to mainland

March 29 2017



North Carolina State University research comparing mainland and island children's wildlife preferences found that kids in the Bahamas chose a wider variety of species as their favorites, including birds, fish, insects and lizards such as this iguana. North Carolina kids preferred mammals. Credit: Brian Langerhans, North Carolina State University

Growing up on an island or mainland location can shape the way children think about wildlife, including which species they prefer,

according to North Carolina State University research. Comparison surveys of children living in the Bahamas and in North Carolina reveal significant differences and potential challenges for wildlife-conservation efforts on islands.

It's important to understand the next generation's priorities for [wildlife](#) conservation, says lead author Hannah Shapiro, an undergraduate student who surveyed students from Andros, an island in the Bahamas, and compared the results with those of children in North Carolina for a study published in *Environmental Conservation*.

"Children on Andros showed a preference for feral cats, dogs and pigs, which are invasive [species](#) that can be more damaging in an island environment," Shapiro says. "That's a concern for future wildlife-conservation efforts."

However, island children chose a wider variety of wildlife species as their favorites - including birds, lizards, fish and insects - than their continental counterparts from North Carolina, who strongly preferred mammals, including deer, bears, rabbits, wolves and squirrels.

Island children may have a greater preference for species like rock iguanas, conchs and flamingos (the national bird of the Bahamas) not only for reasons of familiarity and national pride but also because they're surrounded by fewer big furry species, known as "charismatic megafauna" to [wildlife biologists](#).

About a third of the children from Andros who were surveyed take part in Discovery Club, a Bahamian environmental education program. Discovery Club participants showed a greater concern for native species with declining populations than nonmembers.

"The Discovery Club curriculum deals specifically with declining

species but it doesn't focus heavily on invasive species," says co-author Kathryn Stevenson, an NC State assistant professor and former public school science teacher who studies environmental literacy. "Discovery Club offers an ongoing way to build awareness of wildlife issues. Based on the findings, a recommendation would be to add a specific module on [invasive species](#) to help [children](#) learn about the impact on native wildlife."

Wildlife biologists need to understand the human factors that drive conservation decisions, says co-author Nils Peterson, an associate professor in NC State's College of Natural Resources who studies the intersections of human and natural systems.

"Faced with a constant loss of species and limited resources, conservation biologists are always in triage mode, identifying the species most at risk and targeting our efforts to save them," Peterson says. "The better understanding the public has, the more likely we are to base our priorities on sound science."

The article, which is part of an *Environmental Conservation* themed edition about human and island environments, is based on undergraduate research done in a conservation biology study-abroad course. Brian Langerhans, an NC State faculty member in biological sciences, and Kristin Frew, a former graduate student, contributed to the study.

More information: HANNAH G. SHAPIRO et al, Wildlife species preferences differ among children in continental and island locations, *Environmental Conservation* (2017). [DOI: 10.1017/S0376892917000133](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0376892917000133)

Provided by North Carolina State University

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