

Study offers insights for communicating about wildlife, zoonotic disease amid COVID-19

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Researchers studied how different communications strategies impacted how people perceived the validity of information on the role of wildlife management in preventing the spread of zoonotic disease. Credit: Nils Peterson

A new study from North Carolina State University found that certain types of messages could influence how people perceive information

about the spread of diseases from wildlife to humans.

The researchers say the findings, published in the journal *Frontiers in Communication*, could help scientists, policymakers and others more effectively communicate with diverse audiences about [zoonotic diseases](#) and the role of [wildlife](#) management in preventing them from spreading to people. Zoonotic diseases are diseases that originate in wildlife and become infectious to people.

"If we want to prevent and mitigate the next giant zoonotic [disease](#), we need people to recognize these diseases can emerge from their interactions with wildlife," said study co-author Nils Peterson, professor of forestry and environmental resources at NC State. "We have to do better with how we interact with wildlife. We also have to do better in terms of our communication, so people recognize the root of the problem. We need to learn how to communicate with people about zoonotic diseases and [wildlife trade](#) across partisan divides."

In the study, researchers surveyed 1,554 people across the United States to understand whether they would see greater acceptance of scientific information about zoonotic diseases—specifically in regard to the potential role of wildlife trade in the origin and spread of the virus that causes COVID-19—depending on how they structured their messaging. Scientists from the World Health Organization concluded in a report earlier this year that evidence points to a likely animal origin. One group of scientists has recently called for more clarity.

In the experiment, study participants were asked to read one of three articles. One article used a "technocratic" frame that emphasized the use of technology and human ingenuity to address diseases from wildlife, such as using monitoring and culling of animals with diseases. This frame was designed to appeal to people with an "individualistic" worldview. A second article had a "regulatory frame" that emphasized

using land conservation to create wildlife refuges as a solution. This frame was designed to appeal to people with a "communitarian" view. The third article was designed as a control, and was intended to be neutral.

Researchers then asked all of the participants to read part of an article that researchers wrote about COVID-19 and the potential role of wildlife trade in its origin and spread, and asked them about their perceived validity of the information. Researchers also surveyed participants about their trust in science overall, and belief in COVID-19's wildlife origin.

"Past research suggests people process and filter information through their cultural lens, or based on how they think the society should function," said the study's lead author Justin Beall, a graduate student in parks, recreation and tourism management at NC State. "We wanted to know, in the domain of zoonotic disease management, what are the solutions for managing diseases that might align with different cultural values in the United States? Would using those perspectives impact how people accepted scientific information about the wildlife origin of COVID-19?"

Researchers found that people who identified as liberal reported higher perceived risk on average from COVID-19. They were also more likely to accept evidence for the wildlife origin of COVID-19 and support restrictions on wildlife trade.

When researchers considered the link between message frames and participants' acceptance of the information about COVID-19 and the potential role of wildlife trade in its origin and spread, they found liberals who received the technocratic framing were significantly less likely to find the information valid, while conservatives were slightly more likely to find it valid. They didn't see any statistically significant relationship between the "regulatory" framing and participants'

acceptance of the information.

"The findings show us that cultural views are relevant for communicating about wildlife disease," Beall said. "We found that the technocratic viewpoint might be more polarizing."

That suggests that for communicating to a diverse public audience about zoonotic disease and wildlife trade, communicators should avoid using the technocratic frame. However, when communicators are speaking to a conservative audience, they could consider using the technocratic frame to increase acceptance.

Researchers underscored the importance of the findings for conveying the idea that the health of humans, wildlife and the environment are connected.

"We all exist in this giant ecosystem, and disease is part of it," said study co-author Lincoln Larson, associate professor of parks, recreation and tourism management at NC State. "If we're talking about the health of humans, we're talking about the health of wildlife and ecosystems simultaneously. It's critical to develop effective communication strategies that resonate with ideologically diverse audiences and lead to bipartisan support and action."

"Improving communication and framing around zoonotic disease could help to prevent the next global pandemic, and that's a message everyone can get behind," he added.

More information: Justin M. Beall et al, Cultural Cognition and Ideological Framing Influence Communication About Zoonotic Disease in the Era of COVID-19, *Frontiers in Communication* (2021). [DOI: 10.3389/fcomm.2021.645692](https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2021.645692)

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