

Essay

Eighteen reasons animal behaviourists avoid involvement in conservation

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We summarize 18 common misgivings that animal behaviourists raise about becoming involved in conservation. We argue that many of the supposed institutional and interdisciplinary differences break down under scrutiny; that the supposed basic-applied dichotomy is often imaginary or insufficient to prevent interchange of ideas between behaviour and conservation; and that arguments about professional lifestyle, scientific inflexibility and despair are not adequate justifications for remaining on the sidelines. We suggest that many studies of animal behaviour are relevant to solving conservation problems, and we therefore encourage behaviourists to contribute more strongly to finding practical solutions to the contemporary conservation crisis.

Highlights

► We collate 18 common misgivings that animal behaviourists raise about becoming involved in conservation. ► Many misgivings are specious or half-truths; many studies of animal behaviour are relevant to solving conservation problems. ► We encourage animal behaviourists to be bolder in addressing the current conservation crisis.

Keywords

animal behaviour; behavioural ecology; conservation biology; management

Despite almost two decades of discussions of the role that animal behaviour might play in conservation biology (Clemmons & Buchholz 1997; Caro 1998; Gosling & Sutherland 2000; Festa-Bianchet & Apollonio 2003), and recent syntheses of its potential contributions to conservation solutions (Buchholz 2007; Blumstein & Fernández-Juricic 2010; Candolin & Wong 2012), there is still reticence about applying concepts and methods of animal behaviour to solving conservation problems. Although attempts to relate the behaviour of animals to conservation are increasing in the academic literature (e.g. Slabbekoom & den Boer-Visser 2006; Husby et al. 2009; Dolenec et al. 2011), and have reached the stage of literature reviews (e.g. Brown 2012; Møller 2012; Rosenthal & Stuart-Fox 2012), animal behaviour studies have generally failed to penetrate conservation biology or wildlife management practice and vice versa (Caro 2007; Angeloni et al. 2008). Lack of the anticipated cross-fertilization between animal behaviour and conservation biology surprises and concerns us.

Recently, we challenged behavioural ecologists to help stem human-imposed losses of species and habitats (Caro & Sherman 2011a). We argued that such losses adversely affect not only researchers' own study organisms but also their academic discipline itself, obfuscating, for example, such fundamental approaches as quantifying fitness, use of comparative methods and interpretation of adaptations. The field of animal behaviour will also suffer if unique behaviours of populations of extant species continue to disappear due to anthropogenic changes (Caro & Sherman 2012).