INTERNATIONAL WILDLIFE
REHABILITATION COUNCIL

Responsible use of animal images Position Statement

Background

Photographs and videos are powerful media tools that can stir emotions, create empathy and spur viewers into action. This is, in part, because our brains are designed to accept visual imagery rather than the written word. Ninety percent of information transmitted to the brain is visual, and the brain processes visual information 60,000 times faster than it processes text (McCoy, 2019). This makes visual media a powerful tool when used correctly, but when used incorrectly can drive home the wrong and often unintentional message.

How we depict human and wildlife interactions may create aspirational goals for viewers, influence their perception of the status of wild animals, and negatively affect the care the public provides injured, ill or orphaned animals they find. Images that do not center on the care being given to the animal are easily misinterpreted and normalize behavior that can be harmful to wild animals and people (World Animal Protection, 2017). Accompanying text explaining the context of the photos does little to reduce the risk, as the majority of social media users do not read the captions accompanying photographs (Pillai, 2019; Alexandra, 2019), and even when they do, consumers often create conclusions based on the image alone even when those conclusions are not supported by accompanying text or captions (DiGiorgio 2024; Brown & Tiggeman 2020). Images of humans cuddling wild animals or posing with wild animals drive the desire for wild pets (Buckanoff & Williams, 2024; Nekaris et al., 2013; Ross et al., 2011), reduce public perception of the threats to threatened and endangered species (Ross et al., 2011), and may affect the quality of care finders provide to wildlife in need of professional rehabilitation, causing welfare and conservation concerns (Harrington et al., 2019; World Animal Protection, 2017).

Policy

- The IWRC promotes the use of imagery that supports conservation efforts and promotes good animal welfare.
- The IWRC recommends that in images where rehabilitators or others are handling animals, it should be clear from the photo alone, without relying on captions to provide context, that the handling is being done solely for the benefit of the animal. A casual viewer should be able to tell that the image was not taken for entertainment or self-promotion.

- The IWRC encourages the use of recognized best practices in all aspects of care, including proper use of personal protective equipment (PPE), and appropriate professional attire (preferably with uniforms readily apparent). This should be reflected in all shared images.

- The IWRC recommends that wild animals should not be handled solely for the purpose of obtaining a photograph. Photographs of rehabilitators or others handling animals should be taken only during planned or opportunistic events and activities that are conducted for the benefit of the animal.

- The IWRC recommends avoiding images that show wild animals in close proximity or interacting with domestic animals or other wildlife in contexts that would not occur naturally in the wild.

- The IWRC strongly discourages depicting people in unduly hazardous positions in relation to wild animals. For example, sharing an enclosed space with adult large carnivores (e.g., big cats, bears, wolves) or coming into close contact with them in the field, unless they are sedated for a legitimate medical purpose.

- The IWRC encourages thoughtfulness around images that disclose the location of release sites to avoid unintended consequences like alerting poachers to the location of commonly trafficked species or hunters to the location of species frequently involved in human-wildlife conflict.

Context

It is now accepted among animal welfare advocates and conservationists alike that the images that animal professionals share matter to how the general public perceive and treat wildlife. Non-profits (World Animal Protection, 2017; Born Free, 2024), scientists (Ward-Paige, 2016; DiGiorgio, 2024), technical advisory groups like the IUCN (Alex, 2021), as well as media giants such as Instagram (Winter, 2017), are all pushing for an end to wildlife 'selfies'.

Images of human contact with wild animals are only appropriate in the context of providing a service to the animal – rescue and release, veterinary care, feeding, cleaning, transportation, etc. Photos of rehabilitators, veterinarians, or volunteers posing while handling patients outside of these contexts lead to unintended public perceptions of wildlife as pets and undermine public understanding of the conservation status of the species and the role of rehabilitators (Buckanoff & Williams, 2024; Schroepfer et al., 2011).

Close interaction between pets and wildlife pose a risk of injury to pets and to wildlife, and may promote the spread of zoonotic disease between wildlife, pets and humans   This is especially true when the wild animals are sick or injured. Proximity to domesticated animals may increase stress in wild patients, and habituation to domestic animals can result in maladaptive behaviors that compromise post-release success. Additionally, representations of these animals together lead the public to conclude that wild animals are suitable pets.

Wildlife rehabilitation is a developing professional field and imagery that shows rehabilitators behaving in a non-professional manner can undermine the perception of the field. Best practices for animal handling, safety (including appropriate use of PPE), and welfare should be portrayed in imagery that is shared with the public (Buckanoff & Williams 2024).

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