



Conservation Action Network (CAN)

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Call-to-Action on The Primate Platform: Protecting Social Primates from Social Media



Anthropomorphic representations of primates damage conservation efforts when they become popularized

New Media and Primates

Media content will always act as a double-edged sword when it comes to conservation action.

Images of primates in their natural habitat serve to educate people about the animals and their critical roles in nature, such as ecosystem services. However, some images of primates displayed on the internet, that do not show primates in their natural habitat, can deceptively sway people into supporting harmful activities including owning primates as pets (Aragón et al. 2015; Clarke et al. 2019; Edevane 2019). How primates are presented on social media platforms, and how algorithms are chosen to encourage their presentation, are influenced by passive audience consumption. **This passive consumption of new media is not a signal that people fail to care about primate conservation, but rather, they lack access to knowledge about it.** Deceptive images that circulate across social media regularly include “up-close” tourist interactions, primates in human settings, and primate pets being held by humans.

The images that latch onto internet culture and become mainstream memes tend to be primates in anthropomorphized situations. While these images could be used to educate people about primates and their conservation needs (Mkono and Holder 2019), overwhelmingly these images depict primates as cute (wearing infant clothing) or loveable (riding a bicycle), therefore deceptively making primate ownership seem desirable (Lenzi, Speiran, and Grasso 2019).

Media consumption is not just about entertainment but is also about revenue. Everything “liked,” shared or purchased on social media platforms, feeds information on what is popular into an algorithm, and encourages new ad space, sponsorship of content creators, and data mining that keeps these sites afloat (Beer 2017). **Seeing primates that act like people, or interact positively with us, sells even when we are not looking to buy.** By following an account that posts pictures of a pet monkey, the content creator may gain in popularity. That popularity gives the creator a chance to be paid by sponsor companies, sell merchandise with their pet’s image, and encourage others to post similar content for their popularity and income.

The image of a pet macaque, Darwin, who was found wandering in a Toronto IKEA in 2012 became a mainstream meme dubbed the “IKEA” monkey. The term “IKEA monkey” peaked in popularity on Google in December of 2012 ([See Google Trends](#)).

Primates as Pets

The international trade in primates includes many thousands of live individuals and more than a million dead primates annually and continues to be a serious threat to primate conservation (Nijman et al. 2011). Worldwide, the live animal trade is a multi-billion-dollar industry (Hall 2019), with primates generating \$138M in 2015 ([Observatory of Economic Complexity](#) cited in Norconk et al. 2020).

The U.S. currently lacks federal laws prohibiting the movement of primates across state lines even though [20 states ban the keeping of primates as pets](#). We need to become more active in states that permit primates as pets, support the creation of state and federal legislation and ultimately reduce the incidence of primate pet ownership.



An example of the types of photographs that should not be shared: a picture of a tourist feeding lotus pods to a juvenile macaque. The person who sold the pods to the tourist is taking a picture for her. Moments after this image, a group of macaques jumped onto the tourist for more lotus pods, demonstrating the dangers, to both humans and macaques of such close contact, with wildlife. *(Image Courtesy of Herbert Covert)*

Take Action! The Time to Act is Now!

Protecting Primates in the World of Social Media and Beyond

Since social media platforms are unlikely to have policies or sensitivities to this issue (Carlson 2020), it is up to us to raise awareness and help regulate the dissemination of primate images.

- Evaluate images for their potential to convey the wrong message about human-primate interactions, i.e., owning a primate as a pet.
- Create your own posts that will raise awareness about the inherent cruelty of the primate pet trade.
- Because images on social media remain the dominant feature of the post and cannot be altered, users have two options. Ignore the post and it will curtail circulation. Alternatively, users may attempt to educate by re-circulating the post with comments

pointing out why these images are problematical and may encourage the primate pet trade.

- [Rippling posts can be interconnected through a hashtag campaign.](#) This not only builds a community for protecting nonhuman primates, but hashtags also make it easier for outsiders to follow and join (Carlson 2020, 73-87).
- Initiate or circulate petitions to tighten regulations that restrict international and domestic trade in primates for pets.
- [Support artists by commissioning visuals that can effectively educate people about primates.](#)



An example of a responsible wildlife photograph. The proboscis monkey is in the distance eating food fit for its folivorous diet. *(Image Courtesy of Herbert Covert)*

Resources for Online Primate Protection

For further information on how to detect dangerous images, we suggest three short documents that outline the issues and additional ways to help.

An essay in the journal *Science* by Bridget Alex (2021), “No more cuddly selfies with our ape cousins, top conservation body warns scientists.”

The IUCN Primate Specialist Group Section for Human Primate Interactions recently released guidelines outlining responsible practices that should be taken when posting or publishing images of primates (Waters et al. 2020). <https://human-primate-interactions.org/resources/>

Ashley Edes' essay (2019), "[How Social Media Supports Animal Cruelty and the Illegal Pet Trade](#)" includes a great list of additional actions that can be taken to protect primates.

Many organizations are beginning to incorporate similar information on their **websites and social media accounts**. Some of these groups include: the American Society of Primatologists, Primate People on Twitter, the Duke Lemur Center, the Lemur Conservation Network, IUCN Red List, the World Wildlife Fund, the United Nations, Project Simia, CITES, and TRAFFIC. National Geographic magazine also has published many articles on the subject.

Some online resources have an archive of legal information including [FindLaw](#) and the [Michigan State University Animal Legal and Historical Center](#). It is important to educate the public and provide accurate information on the legalities and conservation implications of posts on the primate pet trade and how primates are depicted and cared for at tourist attractions.

To learn more about trafficking from a holistic standpoint, journalist Mariana van Zeller has begun a podcast – "[The Trafficked Podcast](#)" – focusing on stories from all of the major illegal trades including the wildlife trade. These podcasts can be accessed through audio apps including: [Spotify](#), [Audible](#), and [Apple Podcasts](#).

An immediate goal should be to create [additional resources](#) that are accessible to a wide audience including the public, educators, politicians, legislators, scientists and the media. Educational accessibility can start with our online accounts and is key to dismantling the promotion of the primate pet trade.

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