# Conservation funding skewed towards prettier species threatens biodiversity



The preservation of biodiversity is facing a profound challenge rooted in what many are calling "pretty privilege." A recent study highlights that conservation funding and research disproportionately favour visually appealing and charismatic species, leaving less glamorous plants and animals at risk of neglect. While species like elephants and tigers attract the lion's share of financial support and public attention, many equally crucial, though less photogenic, organisms suffer due to their unattractive appearances and lower perceived value.

Data indicates that a staggering 80 percent of conservation funding goes to vertebrates, predominantly birds and mammals, with amphibians and invertebrates receiving a mere fraction of this support. For instance, from a total of around $1.9 billion in conservation projects assessed over 25 years, amphibians garnered less than 3 percent of total funding. This disparity in resource allocation poses a significant threat to biodiversity, particularly as many less charismatic species are facing critical endangerment.

In a groundbreaking study of over 27,000 North American songbird research publications spanning decades, researchers found that birds deemed aesthetically pleasing received three times more scholarly attention than their drab counterparts. This bias in avian research reflects a broader trend across the conservation landscape. "It's birds that are fancy, familiar and accessible that get most of the attention in research," said Annie Lindsay, co-author of the study and researcher at the Powdermill Nature Reserve. The analysis graded birds based on their colour, lightness, and other aesthetic traits. The Bohemian waxwing topped the charts, while less visually engaging species such as the chimney swift languished in obscurity.

Compounding this issue is the tendency for researchers to gravitate towards species that are easily accessible, often located near universities or within popular tourist areas. This "convenience bias" not only constricts the scope of avian research but also curtails our understanding of vital ecological dynamics that govern less popular species. If researchers do not study these organisms, their ecological roles and status remain largely unknown, further jeopardising their survival.

Conservation funding often mirrors these biases. A closer look at European conservation efforts under the EU's Habitats Directive shows that charismatic vertebrates, such as wolves and bears, receive funding comparable to what all invertebrates combined receive. This skewed allocation diverts attention and resources from critical ecosystems where underappreciated species perform essential functions, such as pollination or nutrient cycling.

The consequences of neglecting less charismatic species go beyond mere funding disparities. Evidence suggests that public donations for conservation are similarly affected by perceptions of attractiveness. A controlled study demonstrated this, showing that when presented with edited images that made uncharismatic animals appear cuter, participants were willing to donate significantly more than for unedited, less appealing images. This trend can inhibit fundraising efforts geared towards non-charismatic species, leaving many invertebrates, fungi, and plants in desperate need of resources.

Emerging movements across the globe are working to combat this bias. In the UK, for instance, comedian and science communicator Simon Watt founded the Ugly Animal Preservation Society, aimed at raising awareness and funds for species that do not fit the traditional mould of beauty, such as the blobfish and proboscis monkey. Campaigns like “the cuteness is coming” launched by the Oregon Zoo also attempt to redefine what is considered appealing, featuring the toothy Pacific lamprey alongside more conventional favourites.

Experts urge an urgent shift in public perception and funding priorities. Alice Hughes, a researcher at the University of Hong Kong, emphasised the need to realign conservation efforts with ecological reality, stating that the focus on aesthetically pleasing species often fails to match the actual conservation needs in the global ecosystem. "We urgently need to reframe this perspective and better allocate funding across taxa if we want any hope of redressing widespread population declines and the continued loss of biodiversity," she said.

As the balance of funding leans heavily towards the visually appealing, the quest for a more equitable conservation approach is gathering momentum. By shedding light on the often-overlooked, uncharismatic species that play a vital role in maintaining the health of our ecosystems, we can aspire to create a more inclusive model of conservation that recognises the intrinsic value of all forms of life.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1-2: [[1]](https://insideclimatenews.org/news/16052025/todays-climate-beauty-bias-wildlife-conservation/)
2. Paragraph 3: [[2]](https://apnews.com/article/1ad806de0db9d09a38b7e82f6286c1b5)
3. Paragraph 4: [[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/dec/09/sexy-beasts-animals-with-charisma-get-lions-share-of-eu-conservation-funds-aoe)
4. Paragraph 5: [[4]](https://wawa.org.uk/the-charisma-bias-problem/)
5. Paragraph 6: [[5]](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/oryx/article/implications-of-taxonomic-bias-for-humancarnivore-conflictmitigation/47388314EEDE98C90E0C1DDB16523952)
6. Paragraphs 7-8: [[6]](https://www.ecowatch.com/conservation-funding-species.html)
7. Paragraph 9: [[7]](https://www.purdue.edu/fnr/extension/uninteresting-strange-or-ugly-protecting-non-charismatic-species/)
8. Paragraph 10: [[1]](https://insideclimatenews.org/news/16052025/todays-climate-beauty-bias-wildlife-conservation/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/16052025/todays-climate-beauty-bias-wildlife-conservation/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://apnews.com/article/1ad806de0db9d09a38b7e82f6286c1b5> - An Associated Press article discusses the disproportionate allocation of conservation funds, with approximately $1.2 billion spent annually on endangered species in the U.S. However, a significant portion is directed toward a few well-known species like salmon and steelhead trout, leaving many others, including insects and plants, with minimal or no funding. This imbalance poses a threat to biodiversity and underscores the need for more equitable distribution of conservation resources.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/dec/09/sexy-beasts-animals-with-charisma-get-lions-share-of-eu-conservation-funds-aoe> - A report by The Guardian highlights how conservation funding under the EU's Habitats Directive is heavily skewed toward charismatic vertebrates such as brown bears, wolves, and lynxes, which receive nearly the same amount as all invertebrates combined. This bias leaves less visually appealing species, like spiders and crustaceans, with minimal support, despite their crucial role in ecosystems and higher risk of extinction.
4. <https://wawa.org.uk/the-charisma-bias-problem/> - WAWA Conservation's article delves into the 'charisma bias' in wildlife conservation, where species with economic value or appealing appearances receive more attention and funding. While flagship species like the giant panda have benefited from this bias, many less charismatic species, such as the white-backed vulture, remain neglected, leading to significant population declines and potential extinction.
5. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/oryx/article/implications-of-taxonomic-bias-for-humancarnivore-conflictmitigation/47388314EEDE98C90E0C1DDB16523952> - A study published in Oryx examines the taxonomic bias in conservation funding, noting that large felids like lions receive more attention and resources than other species. This bias is evident in Africa, where lions are prioritized over other carnivores, potentially overlooking the needs of less charismatic species that also require conservation efforts.
6. <https://www.ecowatch.com/conservation-funding-species.html> - EcoWatch reports on a study revealing that 82.9% of global conservation funding is allocated to vertebrates, with mammals and birds receiving 85% of this amount. In contrast, amphibians, plants, and invertebrates receive significantly less funding, despite being among the most threatened groups, highlighting a need for more balanced conservation efforts.
7. <https://www.purdue.edu/fnr/extension/uninteresting-strange-or-ugly-protecting-non-charismatic-species/> - Purdue Extension discusses the societal bias toward charismatic species in conservation, noting that public donations often favor animals perceived as cute or majestic, like bears or sharks. This preference leads to less funding and research for less charismatic species, which can result in higher extinction rates for these organisms.