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MANY AMERICANS LACK BASIC KNOWLEDGE OF ANIMALS AND SEE MORE WILDLIFE ON TV THAN IN THE WILD, STUDY FINDS

Most Americans don't know very much about animals or wildlife conservation issues and are more likely to see wild animals on television or in zoos than in the wild, according to a study conducted for the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The study, which has important implications for wildlife conservation and management programs, was conducted by Dr. Stephen Kellert of Yale University in the fall of 1978 and involved interviews with 3,107 adult Americans. Kellert reported his initial findings in 1979, and has recently published two new reports on his data.

"Dr. Kellert's study demonstrates the critical need for better communication between wildlife managers and the public," notes Ray Arnett, Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks. "There appears to be a significant lack of understanding among large segments of our society about things that are of great importance to the future of wildlife conservation and management. This finding is disturbing to many wildlife professionals, including myself, because it indicates that the public is not prepared to make informed decisions about the complex wildlife problems and controversies that we will undoubtedly face in the remainder of this century."

Among Kellert's findings were the following:

-- Most Americans know relatively little about animals. Although coyotes are often killed in western States to protect livestock, 75 percent of those surveyed did not know that the coyote is not an endangered species. Half of the public did not know that the statement "spiders have 10 legs," is false, and only slightly more than half knew that insects do not have backbones and that veal does not come from lamb. Seventy-five percent said they know little about ecosystems or population dynamics of wild animals.

-- Fifty-eight percent of the public said they cared more about the suffering of individual animals than about species population levels. This is an important finding for wildlife managers, whose work is generally more concerned with conserving populations of animals than with the welfare of each individual member of a species.

-- Of all demographic variables, education was the most sensitive indicator affecting knowledge of animals. People with a graduate education knew more about animals than any other group and were more interested in wildlife and more concerned about the natural environment. People with less than a sixth grade education were almost the opposite of those with graduate education in basic perceptions and understanding of animals.

--Differences between urban and rural residents "may represent one of the most difficult and important problems confronting the wildlife management field in the 1980's," according to the study. Residents of rural areas generally know more about animals, participate in more wildlife activities, are more supportive of practical uses of animals, and are less concerned about "animal rights" issues than urban residents. Residents of cities with populations of more than 1 million had extremely low animal knowledge scores, and were more opposed to hunting and predator control and more concerned about humane or ethical treatment of animals than rural residents.

-- There are striking regional differences in knowledge and attitudes about animals. Alaskans were the most knowledgeable, followed by residents of the Rocky Mountain States. Residents of the Northeast were the least knowledgeable. Pacific Coast residents were more concerned about ethical treatment of animals and "animal rights" issues and were opposed to hunting more often than residents of other regions. Southerners tended to be more interested than others in practical or material values of animals.

-- Watching animal television shows, owning pets, and visiting zoos are Americans' most frequent animal-related activities. During the two years before they were interviewed, 78 percent had watched a wildlife television show, 67 percent had owned a pet, and 46 percent had visited a zoo.

-- Twenty-five percent of the sample had hunted at some time during their lives, and 14 percent had hunted in the two years before they were interviewed. Fifty-three percent of those who had hunted at some time no longer hunt, primarily because of lack of opportunity. Forty-three percent hunted primarily to obtain meat, 37 percent for sport or recreation, and 11 percent to be close to nature.

-- Twenty-five percent said they had birdwatched in the preceding two years. Of these, 3 percent were "committed" birdwatchers who could identify more than 40 species. Contrary to the popular stereotype of the little old lady in tennis shoes, the average committed birder was a 42-year-old male.

-- Forty-five percent had fished during the preceding two years. The most common reason for fishing was to eat fresh fish (28 percent). Twenty percent fished primarily for sport.

-- Eleven percent belonged to a sportsman or other conservation-related organization during the preceding two years; 19 percent had used an off-road vehicle; 13 percent had backpacked; and 2 percent had trapped.

The Kellert reports may be purchased from the National Technical Information Service, U.S. Department of Commerce, 5285 Port Royal Rd., Springfield, Virginia 22161. Their titles are "Phase II: Activities of the American Public Relating to Animals" and "Phase III: Knowledge, Affection, and Basic Attitudes Toward Animals in American Society." The first report, "Public Attitudes Toward Critical Wildlife and Natural Habitat Issues," is also available. Two additional reports will be available within the next year.

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