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KIDS NOT AUTOMATICALLY ANIMAL-LOVERS; STUDY UNCOVERS WIDELY VARYING ATTITUDES

If you think kids and wild creatures naturally go together, think again.

A recent study among schoolchildren in Connecticut suggests that, like many a love affair, the one between children and animals is bittersweet, at best. The pioneering study, sponsored by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Yale University, did not attempt to analyze the attitudes of children nationally, but provides a provocative glimpse into how our perceptions of wildlife may evolve through the childhood years.

"The fascinating results of this exploratory study suggest a major challenge for today's wildlife professionals," says Fish and Wildlife Service Director Robert Jantzen. "If we expect young people to deal rationally with complex wildlife and environmental issues, we must start channeling emotional attachments to animals toward a more balanced, realistic, and knowledgeable appreciation for the needs of wildlife and the natural system."

The study of "Children's Attitudes, Knowledge, and Behaviors Toward Animals" was conducted by Dr. Stephen R. Kellert of Yale's School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and Miriam O. Westervelt of the Fish and Wildlife Service. It included nearly 300 second, fifth, eighth, and eleventh grade students who represented all major demographic and geographic divisions within Connecticut. The survey was the final phase of a larger, five-part study of Americans' knowledge and attitudes toward wildlife commissioned by the Interior Department agency.

The survey found:

- Like adults, the most common attitude among children was a "humanistic" one -- that is, a strong affection for individual animals, mainly pets;
- The "naturalistic" appreciation for wildlife and the outdoors was much more common in children, especially eleventh graders, than in adults. For example, 59 percent of eleventh graders indicated a preference for being near wild animals while camping, against only 36 percent of adults surveyed by Kellert in an earlier study;
- Children were just as likely to express a general dislike or fear of animals as that "naturalistic" appreciation, however. Younger children feared wild animals to a much greater degree than did older classmates. For example, 64 percent of second graders, 41 percent of fifth graders, 11 percent of eighth graders, and 16 percent of eleventh graders felt that most wild animals are dangerous to people;

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- Children, particularly those in the upper grade levels, disapproved of sport hunting. Like adults, they approved of hunting for meat, however. Fully 81 percent of eleventh graders (and 62 percent of adults) opposed sport hunting, while 60 percent of all children (and 85 percent of adults) approved of hunting for meat;
- Although children's knowledge of animals was relatively limited, in certain specialized areas, like insects, children knew more than adults. Seventy-eight percent of children knew that spiders are not 10-legged creatures, as against 50 percent of adults, for example.
- There are distinct stages through which children's attitudes toward animals evolve, the authors suggest. Between second and fifth grades, children showed a dramatic increase in their concern, sympathy, and affection for animals. Interests in animals became less narrow and early childhood fears began to disappear. Between fifth and eighth grades, factual knowledge about animals showed its greatest increase. From eighth to eleventh grades, children gained a deepening concern for wildlife protection, a greater understanding of ecological concepts, and a relatively high moral concern for animal rights and cruelty issues.
- Girls expressed a greater emotional affection for animals than did boys, and whites had a greater general interest in animals, particularly wildlife, than did nonwhites. Boys, whites, and rural residents possessed far greater factual knowledge about animals than did other groups of children.
- Most children said they go to the zoo (93 percent), own a pet (87 percent), go fishing (87 percent), learn about animals in school (83 percent), feed birds (82 percent), and read about animals (76 percent). Whites were more likely than nonwhites to participate in activities involving animals, in general. Rural children engaged in more domestic animal activities, as well as hunting, fishing, and trapping. Girls exceeded boys in their participation in only one activity -- birdwatching.

The authors emphasize that the small sample size of this survey, and the fact that it was confined to Connecticut, limits the generalizations that can be based on these data. However, the vast differences uncovered between children and adults and among various demographic groups may stimulate further research to validate the results, based on a larger national sample.

The full report, "Children's Attitudes, Knowledge, and Behaviors Toward Animals," is available for \$6.00 from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402 (telephone: 202/783-3238). (Orders should specify title and stock number 024-010-00641-2.)

Other reports in the five-part series on public attitudes toward wildlife are also available from the Superintendent of Documents at the same address. They are:

- Phase I -- "Public Attitudes Toward Critical Wildlife and Natural Habitat Issues"; \$6.50; stock number 024-010-00623-4;
- Phase II -- "Activities of the American Public Relating to Animals"; \$7.00; stock number 024-010-00624-2;
- Phase III -- "Knowledge, Affection, and Basic Attitudes Toward Animals in American Society"; \$6.50; stock number 024-010-00625-1;
- Phase IV -- "Trends in Animal Use and Perception in 20th Century America"; \$7.00; stock number 024-010-00621-8.