



Biodiversity Exploitation for Online Entertainment

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Anthropogenic wildlife exploitation threatens biodiversity worldwide. With the emergence of online trading which facilitates the physical movement of wildlife across countries and continents, wildlife conservation is more challenging than ever. One form of wildlife exploitation involves no physical movement of organisms, presenting new challenges. It consists of hunting and fishing “experiments” for monetized online entertainment. Here we analyze >200 online videos of these so-called experiments in the world's largest video platform (YouTube). These videos generated about half a billion views between 2019 and 2020. The number of target species (including threatened animals), videos, and views increased rapidly during this period. The material used in these experiments raises serious ethical questions about animal welfare and the normalization of violence to animals on the Internet. The emergence of this phenomenon highlights the need for online restriction of this type of content to limit the spread of animal cruelty and the damage to global biodiversity. It also sheds light on some conservation gaps in the virtual sphere of the Internet which offers biodiversity-related business models that has the potential to spread globally.

Keywords: animal cruelty, animal ethics, animal welfare, hunting, internet, wildlife, YouTube

INTRODUCTION

Biodiversity is threatened by anthropogenic factors worldwide (Johnson et al., 2017; Arneth et al., 2020; Tickner et al., 2020). Excessive wildlife hunting has important consequences on population dynamics and may lead to extinction (Khelifa et al., 2017; Xiao et al., 2021) and disruption of ecosystem functioning (Peres et al., 2016; Bogoni et al., 2020). Wildlife has been hunted and traded for centuries locally and internationally for consumption, ornamentation, clothing, and medicine. Despite substantial investment in wildlife conservation, illegal trading maintains substantial pressure on natural populations (Zhang and Yin, 2014; Van Roon et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2020). More recently, the Internet has created a new landscape of online illegal trading which amplifies the outreach, facilitates the trading process, and increases transactions nationally and internationally (Sung and Fong, 2018; Wong et al., 2020). Due to the rapid evolution of the Internet, wildlife conservation needs to be in a constant arms race to combat new emerging online-based threats.

Online platforms and social media have unprecedented potential in sharing information and connecting people. They have shown outstanding efficiency in public mobilization and fundraising