

CORRESPONDENCE

Mischaracterizing wildlife trade and its impacts may mislead policy processes: Response to Challenger et al. (2021)

Challender et al. (2021) recently drew attention to 32 scientific articles (including four that we coauthored) citing “mischaracterizations” and “misinterpretations” of wildlife trade and its impacts that “may mislead policy processes.” We agree with Challender et al. in that “*accurately characterizing wildlife trade and understanding the impact it has on wildlife populations are critical to evaluating the potential threat trade poses to species and informing . . . policy responses.*” However, our wildlife trade articles (referred to therein) have been misrepresented by Challender et al. (2021), and we refute the intimation that any of these peer-reviewed scientific research papers may have misled policy processes.

Harrington et al. (2019) are cited as “*assuming that use/trade [in Asian otters as exotic pets] constitutes a threat to species or is detrimental to wild populations.*” In fact, we make no such assumption, and specifically state in Harrington et al. (2019), “*it is not currently possible to assess the actual impact of the pet trade on wild otter populations in the region.*” We go on to state that “*... the precarious nature of wild populations of all otter species in this region, means that any additional, or increasing, pressure on wild populations, is a serious cause for concern.*...” (citing the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species and a formal CITES document as sources), which we maintain provides crucial baseline information for any evidence-based policy process. Further, we argue that for this, and other vulnerable species subject to multiple potentially interacting pressures and lacking critical data, a precautionary approach (with respect to population status) is entirely appropriate.

Challender et al. (2021) also criticize D’Cruze and Macdonald (2016) for incorrectly assuming that source code “I” in the CITES trade database, used for confiscated or seized specimens, refers to illegal trade in our paper on the fate of confiscated live wild animals. This issue was responded to elsewhere (see D’Cruze & Macdonald, 2017) where we highlighted that in some cases, data assigned to

Code “I” have been and remain a mixture (of unknown proportions) of both illegal seizure and legal re(export) incidents. We agree that researchers should beware of this potential pitfall, but maintain that the application of code I is not always straightforward. Moreover, since not all confiscated/seized specimens are included under Code “I,” far from misleading policy, the “error” made by D’Cruze and Macdonald (2016) meant that we only underestimated confiscations and the enormity of the problem.

Finally, while Challender et al. (2021) point out that D’Cruze and Macdonald (2015), D’Cruze and Macdonald (2016), and Can et al. (2019) incorrectly estimated transaction frequency, Challender et al. failed to acknowledge that this was a minor aspect of these papers and inconsequential in relation to impacts and policy processes. Specifically, inaccuracies over terminology used to describe transaction records do not alter the validity of D’Cruze and Macdonald’s (2016) assertion that improved record keeping of seized CITES listed live wildlife would benefit animal welfare and conservation efforts for large numbers of animals, or Can et al.’s (2019), conclusion that the risks posed by pathogens (and of emerging zoonoses) associated with the wildlife trade should not be underestimated.

In summary, while we encourage scrutiny of the wildlife trade literature (our own and that of others) to ensure accuracy, we caution against misrepresenting published studies and conflating inconsequential inaccuracies with wrongful conclusions and inappropriate policy outcomes.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conception and writing of first draft: NDC. All authors contributed to the editing and reviewing of the manuscript.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

No primary data were collected for this manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

NDC currently holds the position of Head Research for World Animal Protection and is also an academic visitor at WildCRU, University of Oxford. ÖEC is an assistant professor at the Department of Biology, Ankara University. LAH currently holds the position of research associate at WildCRU, University of Oxford. All authors have previously received research grants from a number of national and international NGOs focused on wildlife protection-related issues.

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