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Response to “The imaginary ‘Asian Super Consumer’: A critique of demand reduction campaigns for the illegal wildlife trade”

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ABSTRACT

In a recent paper in Geoforum, Margulies et al. (2019) outline what they perceive as a bias toward an “Asian super consumer”. They argue that wildlife trade demand reduction campaigns are unfocused, untargeted, and therefore have a tendency to place blame on people of colour and communities in the Global South as key actors in driving illegal wildlife trade. As researchers and practitioners, we have been studying the demand for wildlife and wildlife products for many years. While we agree that it is vitally important to consider the cultural nuances of illegal and unsustainable wildlife trade and to operate in a manner that is respectful toward different cultures, we believe that the authors have overlooked the fact that modern wildlife trade demand reduction campaigns are already conducting in-depth research and using it to target their campaigns to specific groups.

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In a recent paper in Geoforum, Margulies et al. (2019) outline what they perceive as a bias toward an “Asian super consumer” and argue that wildlife trade demand reduction campaigns have a tendency to place blame on people of colour and communities in the Global South as key actors in driving illegal wildlife trade. They stress that although these demand reduction strategies are not intentionally furthering racist stereotypes, a lack of attention to the detail of consumer profiles reproduces and reinforces problematic historical stereotypes. To illustrate this lack of attention to detail, the authors refer to fieldwork conducted by one of the authors in China that highlights the differences in wildlife products consumed by men and women, the importance of understanding the purpose and motivations for purchasing wildlife products, and the need to consider the perceived value of wildlife products in designing wildlife demand reduction campaigns. They also analyse two campaigns that they believe fail to recognise cultural, gendered, and classed differences in the people who use illegal wildlife products and why they use them, though they acknowledge that a thorough review of demand reduction campaigns is beyond the scope of their short intervention.

As researchers and practitioners, we have been studying the demand for wildlife and wildlife products for many years. We have been involved in the design of campaigns aimed at reducing consumer demand for wildlife products for various NGOs and we have reviewed dozens of campaign research reports. We fully agree with the authors that it is vitally important to consider the cultural nuances of illegal and unsustainable wildlife trade and to operate in manner that is respectful toward different cultures. The importance of this has been particularly highlighted in the cultural insensitivity surrounding the recent outbreak of COVID-19 (coronavirus), which was first reported in Wuhan, China. Cultural insensitivity and problematic stereotyping of Chinese and Asian people has been evident among the public and in media outlets since the outbreak (Peel and Mallet, 2020, Yeung, 2020). Within these fora, wildlife trade has assumed a central point of discussion because of fears that the virus was transferred from bats, pangolins, snakes, or other wild animals.

Although these stereotypes undoubtedly exist and must be acknowledged and carefully monitored in wildlife trade demand reduction strategies, we believe that the authors miss a key point in their paper. In our experience, we have observed that many organisations are already using advanced techniques to target specific groups with their demand reduction campaigns and that targeting a generic “Asian super consumer” is an outdated and little-used technique for campaigns that are conducted on a large scale. Margulies et al. (2019) provide evidence from an unspecified number of respondents for the differences between genders in the purchase of dried fish maw. They also cite studies on eating endangered fish, gifting tiger products and buying ivory that highlight “purpose and motivation” as factors that must be carefully distinguished. Finally, the authors note that the perceived value of wildlife products is crucial for designing successful campaigns. We believe that these insights, while likely correct for the specific situations...
on which the authors are reporting, are overly-simplistic themselves and that modern demand reduction campaigns take into account a far broader range of inputs when determining the specific audience for campaigns as well as understanding the drivers and deterrents for wildlife purchase among this audience.

When conducting education and conservation campaigns, targeted messages are more effective than general messages (Jacobson et al., 2015). For large-scale campaigns conducted with limited resources, this increased effectiveness is vital in the efforts to induce behaviour change among wildlife consumers. The authors correctly identify this importance but overlook the fact that campaigns that target, for example, wealth, status or people who are uninformed may be basing this on research conducted on thousands of nationally representative respondents (e.g., WildAid, 2014a,b; USAID, 2018a,b; Meijer et al., 2019; TRAFFIC, 2019). These non-exhaustive examples combined represent interviews with over 7700 respondents from three countries about the trade in four species. They identify, among other attributes, gender, purpose, motivation, and perceived value as factors that influence wildlife purchase and use these to segment the population into consumer types for targeted messaging. Some of these examples are reports prepared by GlobeScan, with which the authors are affiliated, but others are conducted by different organisations. Many NGOs put this research into the public domain but they are not required to publish the information, and other campaigns are based on consumer research studies that are unpublished.

We had no involvement in research that may have fed into the particular campaigns mentioned by Margulies et al. (2019) and do not comment directly on the concerns raised in their critique of these particular campaigns. However, we feel that by omitting the wealth of research that has been, and continues to be, conducted on this topic, the authors provide a picture of demand reduction campaigns as unfocused, untargeted, and therefore as perpetuating racist narratives. We believe that this perspective does not account for campaigns that do use scientific methods to develop culturally nuanced approaches to wildlife trade demand reduction, as is called for by Margulies et al. (2019).

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors work for GlobeScan, an independent research consultancy. We have conducted a substantial number of projects to provide inputs for wildlife trade reduction campaigns. Some of the examples we draw upon are publicly-available reports prepared by GlobeScan relating to demand reduction for wildlife trade. While we acknowledge that these close links may influence our perceptions, we also believe that they make us well-placed to provide insights that may not be apparent to researchers who have not worked as practitioners in this field.

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