Viewing Distressed Marine Life and its Impact on Perceptions of Environmental Conscientiousness

Past research has done an excellent job examining if internal traits such as empathy, social dominance orientation, and personal decisions such as dietary choices are correlated with people’s thoughts on animal welfare (Grace, Cahiers, Oliveria, & Milton, 2018 ; Rothgerber & Mican, 2014) . Research also provides support for the notion that, by and large, people view animals as sentient beings, meaning that people think animals can perceive and feel pain (Reconquer, Souza, MO lento, 2017). Additionally, past research shows that the majority of people want to mitigate pain in animals if they know they are in distress (Ison & Rutherford, 2014). Very few studies examine if presenting people with a direct external stimulus such as a photograph of an animal in distress influences a person’s environmental conscientiousness. In the present study environmental conscientiousness is operationally defined as any behavior that would be beneficial to the environment such as recycling or reusing items, giving up a personal convenience to benefit the environment such as ceasing to use plastic straws and utensils, and/or buying items that were made from sustainable or previously recycled materials. Performing these behaviors could potentially help with long term animal welfare by reducing the amount of plastic in the marine environment. Plastic in the marine environment is extremely dangerous to marine life because it often mistaken for food (Sigler, 2014). Marine life also is frequently injured by plastic because they often become tangled in it leading to strangulation. That is why it is important to know what encourages or influences these behaviors. The findings of the present study could help determine how people direct public service announcements to encourage these behaviors. It also could be used to help direct donation campaigns because it could determine if the use of these images produce a strong emotional response. Lastly, it will add to the current body of research on animal welfare and perceptions of environmental issues.

This online experimental study was an experimental 5 x 2 x 2 mixed design with both within-subject and between-subject components. The between-subjects independent variable were visuals of different types of animals in distress due to plastic in the environment from human behavior/consumption. The five levels of this independent variable: marine reptile (Chelonioidea), marine mammal (Pinniped), marine bird (Larus), the ocean serving as a different level control, and the everyday items relating to water as an empty control. Each animal group viewed a series of images that include the animal it is natural state as well as in a distressed state. All the participants viewed the above animals in different distressing situations such as plastic strangulation or ingestion. Additionally, the participants in the animal groups will be viewing live animals in distress and animals that have died due to plastic strangulation or ingestion. The different level control condition, ocean, will serve as the control group and will view a series of images of the ocean with plastic debris and without plastic debris. Moreover, the empty control group only viewed images of regular household items in a non-distressed state. The within-subject variable was time, as assessed via a pre-/post- measure. A third, additional independent variable was perceived control of the plastic crisis which will be manipulated through a vignette. The dependent variable is environmental conscientiousness which was measured using a self-report survey of intended future behaviors and two behavioral choice measures.