Hunted predators: Charisma confounds

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In their perspective “When the hunter becomes the hunted” (19 June, p. 1312), R. Woodroffe and S. M. Redpath rightly pointed out that a social consensus, in addition to scientific evidence, is critical to effectively control species deemed overabundant, such as some predators, because social conflicts over the need for control undermine management decisions. We stress here that social acceptability is not a sufficient criterion to prevent misguided lethal management of wildlife pests, as acceptability subjectively depends on the target species’ charisma. Large predators exert fascination on the general public; hence, their control is usually unpopular, irrespective of the ecological desirability of management. By contrast, rodents and lagomorphs do not enjoy the same public appeal as predators. They are widely controlled on vast spatial scales, often with public funds, where they are perceived as creating damage to crops or forage used by livestock. Yet most of these persecuted herbivores play key ecological roles and are vital prey for emblematic and threatened predators. Here, the broad social acceptability of their control, due to their lack of charisma or low public visibility, may hinder evidence-based management decisions. For example, the European hamster was driven from pest to red-listed critically endangered species by poisoning; the ruthless control of prairie dogs contributed to the critically endangered status of the blackfooted ferret; and plateau pikas and voles have been poisoned over thousands of kilometers in China and Europe, respectively, with widespread unintended secondary poisoning of their birds of prey and mammalian predators. A focus on large predator control as a reference for wildlife management conflicts may overlook wider issues involving fauna that have keystone ecosystem roles but no public appeal, and where social consensus leads to misguided management. In the case of noncharismatic small herbivores, as long as public society awareness about their ecological benefits is not increased, their population control will continue to be widely accepted and possibly used without rigorous scientific evidence, thus jeopardizing biodiversity conservation.