

Selfie-taking and marine wildlife - More harm than good?

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Abstract

Since the introduction of the smartphone more than a decade ago, the way we take photos has changed. The rise of taking selfies — photos of oneself with the purpose to post them on social media — has brought with it concerns about significant risks, including the harm and even death of the photographers and/or wildlife. Exemplified by marine wildlife photos, risks to both the photographers and the wildlife species photographed are being discussed. Positive outcomes for marine conservation are also introduced. Lastly, some possible management approaches will be provided.

Keywords

Selfie
Marine wildlife
Conservation
Risk taking

Introduction

It has now been for over than a decade that smart phones conquered the world, and the quality of on-board cameras has improved drastically. Subsequently, the way we take photos has changed from the well selected shot on a 36 frames film to numerous digital pictures in any situation. One phenomenon that emerged from this new freedom of photography is the *selfie*, and Twitter even declared 2014 the ‘Year of the Selfie’ (Jain & Mavani, 2017). Bansal and colleagues (2018, p. 829) define a selfie as “a photograph that a person takes of himself (or group) typically using a smartphone likely for the purpose of sharing in social media.” According to Zetlin (2019), close to 100 Million selfies are being taken each day, and the vast majority of selfie-takers are young people, normally under the age of 30. There has been a lot of research to investigate the motivations and the potential negative implications of this trend (e.g., Chen et al., 2019; Graff, 2018; Weiler et al., 2021).

Graff (2018), for example, listed six types of motivation, including attention seeking, mood modification, self-confidence, social competition, subjective conformity, and environmental enhancement. After having interviewed 400 students, he concluded that there is indeed a new construct, which he termed ‘*selfitis*’, in which there are three groups: 1. *Borderline* — those who take selfies up to three times a day, but *do not* post them on social media; 2. *Acute* — those who take selfies up to three times a day, but *do* post them on social media; and 3. *Chronic* — those who possess the urge to take selfies all the time, and post them on social media at least six times a day. Interestingly, Griffith agrees that while we have generally seen the obsession with selfie taking as narcissistic or dysfunctional (e.g., Chen et al., 2019; Christou et al., 2020), these activities have become part of our daily lives, and thus represent a normal recreational activity and just a way of how we use social media. This is supported by a study of Weilenmann and Hillmann (2020), who argue that selfies manifest a form of conversation and socialising during the production of these images, which are interweaved with our daily activities.

In addition to social and mental implications, arguably the most worrying outcome of the ‘selfie-mania’ is the rapidly rising number of deaths related to this activity. Bansal et al. (2018) reported a total of 259 selfie related deaths in the period from

2011 to 2017 (Table 1). The cause of death varies, but at the top of the list are falls, transport related, and drowning. Interestingly, they do not report on any incidents involving wildlife encounters, while Fitzner (2020) reports on a variety of terrestrial and marine wildlife incidents related to selfie-taking.

Table 1. Selfie-related deaths (2011-2017)

Year	Number of selfie-related deaths
2011	3
2012	–
2013	2
2014	13
2015	50
2016	98
2017	93

Source: After Bansal et al. (2018)

Selfies and Ocean Conservation

So, what does this all have to do with our oceans? The conservation of the coastal and marine environments has long been secondary to many terrestrial conservation efforts. For example, New Zealand managed to forge a clean and green image internationally, and about 31% of its land is protected. In contrast, the country’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is 15 times larger than its landmass, making it the fourth largest maritime nation in the world. However, only about 3% of New Zealand’s territorial sea (1% of its EEZ) are protected, and the vast majority of these marine protected areas lie in extremely remote off-shore island groups (Lück, 2008). The example of New Zealand underpins that there is a dire need to increase the efforts of ocean conservation.

When interacting with marine wildlife, many people endeavor to take photos, including selfies. This *selfitis* has resulted in many incidents that pose a risk to the photographer

(imagine a diver taking a selfie with a great white shark, turning their back to the animal), and most research focused on the risks of being bitten, stung, hit or charged by marine wildlife (Pagel et al., 2020a, 2020b; Pagel & Lück, 2021). On the other hand, there is an increased concern for the wildlife photographed. While many reports show terrestrial examples (e.g., Bale, 2017; Feddema & Nekaris, 2020), marine wildlife is not exempt. The pictures of a juvenile dolphin being dragged from the water for the purpose of selfie taking were reported in the news around the world (Bale, 2017). In their work on in-water interactions with seals in New Zealand, whales in Niue, and sharks in Fiji, Pagel et al. (2020a) identified four categories of photographers: 1. *The Professional Photographer* — seeks images/videos as a business activity; 2. *The Influencer* — seeks loyalty through blogs and social media posts; 3. *The Serious Photographer* — sees photography as a serious leisure activity; and 4. *The Recreational Photographer* — takes photos as a memory and to share with family and friends. Astoundingly, the professional photographers and influencers were found to be the types that take the most risk, and that breach rules most often (both laws, such as marine mammal protection acts, and rules of the tour operators), putting both their fellow divers/swimmers and the wildlife at risk (Pagel et al., 2020b). Even worse, their photographs, shared in social media around the world, also perpetuate the notion that it is alright to pose with wildlife, and ignoring any potential danger or harm to the animals. As Bale (2017) notes, “making — and sharing — these images and videos puts the animals at risk by heightening their appeal as pets and giving the impression that it’s fun (and safe) to get close to them.” And the demonstration effect means that more people aim to do the same.

In contrast, it is argued that wildlife tourism can have positive conservation outcomes, and that education about the marine environment is expected by tourists, helping to raise awareness, and subsequently conservation (e.g., Lück, 2003; Orams, 1997; Forestell & Kaufman, 1990). Many wildlife tour operators have indeed implemented excellent interpretive programmes, however, they also often promote marine wildlife encounters by posting and re-posting selfies of their customers on social media. This in turn raises wrong expectations, and influences decision-making processes (Pagel & Lück, 2021).

In the above discussed study, Pagel and colleagues (2020a) found that some participants decided to leave their cameras on board the vessel, so that they were not distracted by the handling of gear, and were able to fully enjoy the wildlife encounter they were to experience. Such behaviour can help enhance the actual experience, and at the same time reduce the risk of harm to both wildlife and tourist. In a study on participants of an overnight stay at a zoological park, Walsh et al. (2019) also found that those participants who refrained from posting their experiences on social media experienced heightened connections with their experiences and increased interactions with other participants. Lastly, in a more unusual form of marine recreation, Porter and Lück (2018) found that professional and recreational merfolk (mermaids and mermen) pose for photos and selfies, and are immersed in this activity, identify as a “waterperson” and a “marine other”. While this activity may appear outlandish for many, it became clear that these merfolk are strong marine conservationists. Through the posting of their photographs on social media, they advocate for a clean marine environment, in which they move and act, and which they share with many other marine creatures.

Conclusion

It was discussed that the relatively new phenomenon of selfie taking morphed into an extremely popular activity, resulting in a variety of effects, from mental and social connections and constraints, to risk taking while taking such selfies. In particular, selfies with marine wildlife pose a significant risk, due to often unpredictable animal behaviour and a lack of in-water-experience of the tourists and recreationists. These people often contrast conservation efforts by posting selfies that have been perfectly staged, show behaviour such as touching and “riding” marine wildlife, and that are in direct conflict with conservation messages and regimes. These pictures encourage their viewers and followers to seek similar experiences, and by doing so perpetuating this behaviour.

There is little hope that such selfies will be banned from social media channels, so in order to mitigate the negative effects, other measures need to be devised and implemented. Such measures may include hard measures, such as dedicated “no selfie zones”, as suggested by Chen and colleagues (2019), as well as rules for commercial operators (for example, to mandate that no cameras are allowed during in-water interactions). Another important tool is to provide more public information and education, highlighting why it is important to enjoy wildlife encounters, but to leave the camera behind.

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