



Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemakingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

www.uct.ac.za

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Power of aesthetic species on social media boosts wildlife conservation efforts – UCT experts



A shy caracal looks out from behind some bushes near Miller's Point in the southern section of the Cape Peninsula. Photo: John Hishin

Facebook and Instagram can boost wildlife conservation efforts through public awareness and engagement, according to a study by the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Drs Gabriella Leighton and Laurel Serieys from the [Institute for Communities and Wildlife in Africa](#) in the [Department of Biological Sciences](#).

The study has been published in the peer-reviewed journal [*Environmental Communication*](#) that is due to be part of a special issue titled "Affective Encounters: Storying in South African Ecological Communication".

The findings based on the caracal – a wild cat native to Africa with distinctive tufted ears – demonstrate how social media can harness support for the predators, which some farmers shoot and poison.

Results show that the mammal's similarity to a domestic feline has attracted thousands of followers to internet feeds about caracal conservation. The researchers suggest this online appeal is linked to the phenomenon where cat images, videos, and memes go viral.

They highlight how 'charismatic' smaller mammals such as the caracal can be used as a 'flagship species' to communicate the aims of scientific research in rapidly urbanising areas.

"Using an aesthetic species such as the caracal is an effective way to capture public attention to communicate the importance of conserving urban wildlife," said Dr Gabriella Leighton.

"These findings highlight the use of smaller carnivores as flagship conservation species for rapidly urbanising areas.

Dr Laurel Serieys added: "This paper contributes to our understanding of the various ways in which the public can participate in science. It shows how charismatic species can contribute to conservation and public awareness of biodiversity in urban areas.

"The research demonstrates how a public interest in urban ecology and the global phenomenon of 'cats on the internet' can be harnessed to leverage conservation action."

Better public engagement is key to achieving conservation goals, especially in biodiversity hotspots. A range of species are both unique to these regions and endangered, and these threatened areas are increasingly urbanised and understudied.

Cape Town is located within a biodiversity hotspot and home to the caracal, an elusive mammal regarded as vermin by livestock farmers elsewhere in South Africa.

The [Urban Caracal Project \(UCP\)](#) was set up in December 2014 to explore caracal ecology and social media was used to influence awareness and perceptions towards caracal conservation in an urban setting. The UCP is run by a research team hosted by the [Institute for Communities and Wildlife in Africa](#) at UCT.

The project communicates its work in several ways including via a website, but most interactions are via social media.

The study authors used Google Trends to assess the global popularity of caracals from 2004 to the present day, before and after UCP was set up. They compared the interest with that in a similar African wildcat – the serval.

They also used recent Facebook and Instagram data to analyse all material UCP had posted online and looked at direct public engagement such as reported caracal sightings, rescues, and finds of the wildcats dead.

Results showed a doubling in search interest in the term 'caracal' since UCP was launched. This represents a 91% increase compared to that for 'servals' which rose by 76% in the same period. The authors say this suggests the project has helped raise awareness of the caracal as a species worldwide.

Other findings include the fact the project now has more than 16 800 [Facebook](#) followers and more than 7 300 on [Instagram](#), figures that represent 'micro-influencer' status. Most are from people in South Africa but also include those in the UK, India, and the US.

The UCP has received traffic and interactions from accounts linked to the 'Big Floppa' meme inspired by an overweight caracal born in a cattery in Kyiv, Ukraine. Again, this links to the popularity of 'cats on the internet' according to the authors.

The authors also say caracal deaths reported by the public – often via WhatsApp and social media – allow them to perform post-mortems. They can then assess threats to the caracal population and roadkill patterns.

Tissue analysis has revealed the animals are exposed to pollutants and pesticides, such as rat poison. Samples have even been collected from otherwise unreachable areas thanks to this citizen network.

The sightings and Facebook comments provide conservationists with useful information on how caracals respond to humans. Most encounters occur on roads or paths with caracals described as 'chilled' or 'calm' before quickly moving away.

The most common positive adjective used in Facebook comments is 'beautiful', and 'sad' for negative posts usually in response to a death or population threat. This demonstrates the extent to which social media engagement has led to people caring about caracal welfare, add the authors.

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Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Ridovhona Mbulaheni

Media Liaison and Monitoring Officer
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: (021) 650 2333
Cell: (064) 905 3807
Email: ridovhona.mbulaheni@uct.ac.za
Website: www.uct.ac.za