Assessing the efficacy of the Tiger Stamp: a policy tool approach

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Abstract

International conservation presents a unique challenge for American conservation agencies, demanding unique policy tools. To encourage American citizens to support overseas conservation, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the United States Postal Service, and environmental non-governmental organizations collaborated to create the Save Vanishing Species Stamp, a semipostal stamp featuring a tiger. In doing this, these actors relied on the flagship species approach, wherein a charismatic species attracts attention and support for ecological protection. The “Tiger Stamp” has been on sale since 2011, but its effectiveness as a policy tool is uncertain. In this paper, we discuss the Tiger Stamp and analyze its effectiveness from several angles. The stamp’s impact on species conservation is uncertain and its sales have been lower than those of past semipostal stamps, but this should be understood in the context of nationwide decline in traditional postal activities and the hortatory effect of the stamp beyond its economic effects. We conclude that the stamp is, on balance, a valuable policy tool, and should be continued.

Keywords Charismatic megafauna · Flagship species · Policy tools · Stamp · Tiger

Introduction

Many wild animal species are in danger of extinction (International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources 2020). Species decline has gained enormous public salience in the USA (Bruskotter et al. 2018; Kolbert 2014; Tulchin Research 2015). This concern extends to overseas species, as well as those native to the United States. International species are protected under US law by the Endangered Species Act as well as by five Multinational Species Conservation Funds (MSCFs) and donations from private organizations.

International endangered species present an immense policy challenge for American stakeholders. Because their

habitats are beyond US jurisdiction, the government cannot compel conservation using punitive incentives, and American citizens cannot elect conservation-minded local lawmakers. Public concern about charismatic species suggests another potential source of support for MSCF’s—individual donations. But monetizing that concern demands creative policy tools (sensu Schneider and Ingram 1990). Here, we analyze one such tool: the Save Vanishing Species semipostal stamp.

Flagship species

Some animals are particularly charismatic, making them more likely to gain media, scientific, and conservation attention (Ducarme et al. 2013; Jarić et al. 2020; Lorimer 2007). Large body size, fluffy fur, and anthropomorphic features like forward-facing eyes—what Lorimer (2007) calls aesthetic charisma—increase public relatability (Ducarme et al. 2013; Jepson and Barua 2015; Smith et al. 2012) and make these “charismatic megafauna” into a policy image (Baumgartner and Jones 2010). Public agencies and environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS) use charismatic animals as “flagship species” (Home et al. 2009; Lorimer 2007; Thompson and Rog 2019; Verissimo 2019) to “perpetuate

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particular interpretations of nature” (Barua 2011) and act as boundary objects or bridges (Jepson and Barua 2015; Lorimer 2007) that connect the public to conservation—and inspire financial support (Verissimo et al. 2011; Walpole and Leader-Williams 2002). In ecological terms, flagship species are often considered umbrella species, which large ranges include the habitats of many other species (Roberge and Angelstam 2004). Such species can act as proxies for ecosystem health and express aspects of ecosystems to the public (Ducarme et al. 2013). However, flagship species’ value as hortatory or social marketing tools is inconsistent (Lundberg et al. 2019; Verissimo et al. 2011). In some cases, they can distort or counteract conservation (Douglas and Winkel 2014; Smith et al. 2020; Verissimo 2019; Verissimo et al. 2011).

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF), a prominent ENGO, further delineates flagship and umbrella species into priority species, whose conservation would mitigate larger threats to their landscapes (WWF 2020a). WWF consciously uses flagship species to “bring substantial financial support to the conservation movement on a worldwide scale” (WWF 2017a, 2020b). Its “Save the ‘Wow’” campaigns emphasized these species’ charisma (WWF 2017a, 2019a).

Flagship species are a hortatory/symbolic policy tool, intended to change human behavior by inspiring action (Schneider and Ingram 1990). ENGOs, which cannot compel anyone to do anything, must rely largely on hortatory tools, but less-coercive tools are also useful for public agencies. They can be more publicly palatable than a stricter approach, and can be used in situations where incentive-based policies would be ineffective, such as ocean fishing (Davis and Moretti 2005). Protecting international endangered species is one such situation.

Tigers (*Panthera tigris*) have been rated the most charismatic animal on earth (Albert et al. 2018). As well as projecting power and menace, tigers are seen as beautiful and even cuddly. Their colorful fur and rounded features make them easy to portray as gentle and friendly. This is particularly true of the Amur tiger (*P. tigris altaica*), which has thicker fur and a mane. They are also an umbrella species; a male Amur tiger’s range can be up to 2000 km² (Wildlife Conservation Society 2020a). Tigers are the second-most common mascot for American athletic teams (All SportsCaster 2020), and products from gasoline to cereals represent themselves as tigers (Campaign 2012; Kellogs Co. 2005). Both despite and because of their charisma, tiger populations have declined precipitously over the past century, from an estimated 100,000 animals to 3500 (Panthera 2020a; FWS 2020a). This decline has been driven largely by the trade in tiger products, as well as by habitat transformation (FWS 2020a). Big cats are one of WWF’s priority species clusters (WWF 2020a). In the USA, tigers were federally listed as endangered in 1970 (FWS 2020b).

The Tiger Stamp

In 2000, WWF proposed a novel conservation campaign—an American postage stamp (WWF 2014). While ENGOs often sell images of endangered species on clothing or posters, stamps carry the weight and authority of the American government, and reach people who might not actively support conservation groups. To WWF senior vice president Ginette Hemley, the stamp would provide “an easy way for individuals to use their purchasing power to help save vanishing species every time they mail a letter. By purchasing these stamps, anyone can play a direct role in protecting some of our most iconic and endangered wildlife” (WWF 2014). The stamp would feature an Amur tiger cub, allowing stamp buyers and indeed USPS to associate themselves with the charismatic tiger. WWF had partnered with several Asian countries on their own tiger stamps (Kenmore Stamp Company 2020; Thailand Post Company and World Wildlife Fund 2011; WWF 2010). After some years of preparation, in 2010, WWF partnered with FWS and the United States Postal Service (USPS), as well as other conservation groups, to create the Save Vanishing Species Semipostal Stamp, known as the Tiger Stamp. The Multinational Species Conservation Funds Semipostal Stamp Act of 2010 authorized the stamps; they went on sale in 2011 (Fig. 1). The Act enjoyed broad bipartisan support, with 154 cosponsors (80 Democrats, 74 Republicans) in the House representing 48 states and territories (Brown 2010), and passed the Senate with unanimous assent (111th Congress 2010).

Postage stamps have always been symbolic tools. Since their invention in 1840, nations have represented themselves and honored their priorities through stamps. In the USA, stamps legally represent “positive contributions to American life, history, culture and environment” (USPS Citizens’ Stamp Advisory Committee 2019). Anyone can propose a stamp and have their suggestion screened by the USPS’ Citizens’ Stamp Advisory Committee (CSAC). The CSAC then recommends new stamps to the Postmaster General. If the stamp is deemed acceptable, USPS commissions artists and designers to submit design ideas, a design is chosen, and the stamp is printed for release (Scott Tiffney, American Philatelic Research Library, personal communication). The effectiveness of stamps as tools to engage the public is demonstrated by the enduring popularity of stamp collecting, which began the year after the stamp’s invention (American Philatelic Society 2018).

Governments capitalize on stamps’ symbolic power through semipostal stamps, stamps sold for above the first-class price; the difference goes to a government-approved cause. The first semipostal stamps were released in the British Empire in the 1890s, with the proceeds going to support postal employees, tuberculosis victims, and war veterans (Miller and Terrell 1991). Most countries released semipostals in the following century, but they are relatively new to the

Fig. 1 Tiger Stamp timeline

USA (Miller and Terrell 1991). USPS printed its first semi-postal, the congressionally mandated Breast Cancer Research Stamp, in 1998. In 2000, the Semipostal Authorization Act gave USPS discretionary authority to create fundraising stamps to promote causes that are “in the national public interest and appropriate” (106th Congress 2000) but USPS, seeing fundraising as separate from its mission, asked Congress to tell it what to issue (Sheikh et al. 2017).

To create the Save Vanishing Species Stamp, USPS contracted with designer Nancy Stahl. She drew what USPS requested, based on her style and experience producing wildlife stamp images (Stahl, personal communication). In designing the Tiger Stamp, Stahl worked from photographs provided by USPS and had the stamp’s green background chosen by USPS art director Derry Noyes, using flat colors to create a cartoon-like “graphic illustration” of the Amur cub (Stahl, personal communication). This design approach allowed USPS to reproduce it clearly at a small size. The stamp

downplays menace in favor of cuddliness. The cub on the stamp has large eyes and a fluffy coat, resembling a stuffed toy tiger (WWF 2020c). Stahl expected that this design would effectively inspire consumers (Stahl, personal communication). USPS did as well, printing 100 million Tiger Stamps; a typical first run is 10–20 million stamps (Tiffney, personal communication).

The life of the Tiger Stamp

In 2011, the Save Vanishing Species Stamp was announced as a partnership between FWS, USPS, the Multinational Species Fund Coalition, a group of ENGOs including WWF, and the Smithsonian National Zoo, which hosted the initial announcement of the stamp. USPS sold 7.3 million Tiger Stamps in its first quarter on sale (Portman 2014). It has been sold at about a 10 cent premium (USPS Historian 2019). Through mid-2020, 52.7 million Tiger Stamps have been sold, raising \$5.9 million for international endangered species (USPS 2020a) (though availability has fluctuated with congressional authorization). Funds are divided equally among the five MSCF support programs to help protect charismatic international species. Stamp sales have supported 99 field projects in 35 countries, along with \$18,870,331 in additional leveraged funds contributed by ENGOs (FWS 2019).

The stamp itself became something of a conservation badge for companies and nonprofits. BBDO, an advertising agency, donated its resources to promote the stamp, and Busch Gardens/SeaWorld made it their official stamp (FWS 2011). In 2013, the Detroit Tigers baseball team announced a partnership program wherein the team donated \$26,000 to FWS’ Wildlife Without Borders program, as well as promoting conservation donations and selling the stamp at their stadium (FWS 2015). The Tiger Stamp also appeared on commemorative envelopes celebrating the national champion Clemson University Tigers football team (USPS 2017). This sort of promotion is key in ensuring the success of semipostals (GAO 2005).

Partisan polarization is stark on environmental issues (Dunlap 2019; Hejny 2018), but the stamp has bipartisan support. While this may partly be due to species’ charisma, it may also reflect a political calculation. Domestic conservation is likely to conflict with industrial interests and private-property advocates. The Tiger Stamp lets American politicians establish environmental bona fides with less resistance from their constituents. In addition, an attractive feature of the stamp, according to WWF, the Department of the Interior, and Senator Portman, was that it allows consumers to support wildlife conservation “at no cost to the US taxpayer,” differing from more expensive conservation efforts (Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs 2019; Portman 2019b; WWF 2019b). The cost of creating and distributing

semipostal stamps is similar to that of standard stamps (Government Accountability Office [GAO] 2005).

The Tiger Stamp left circulation as authorization lapsed in 2013 and 2018, but supporters successfully lobbied to revive it (FWS 2020c). ENGOs offered petitions on their websites, encouraging concerned constituents to lobby their representatives (Wildlife Conservation Society 2020b; WWF 2019b), and Interior supported the effort as well (Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs 2019). In Congress, bills to reauthorize the Tiger Stamp attracted bipartisan sponsorship (Clay 2019; Portman 2019a). Senator Portman emphasized that the existing stock of nearly 50 million Tiger Stamps would be wasted if the stamps went unsold, and cosponsored a reauthorization bill ordering USPS to sell all remaining stamps (Portman 2019b; Portman et al. 2018). Ultimately, reauthorization was folded into the FY 2020 spending bill, returning the stamp to sale but without requiring that it be sold out (116th Congress 2019). The Tiger Stamp's status after 2020 is uncertain.

Evaluation

As a unique policy tool, semipostal stamps have been the focus of ongoing scrutiny and analysis (Owens 2000; Sheikh et al. 2017; GAO 2003, 2005, 2007). The Tiger Stamp, with its appealing design, charismatic flagship species, and ongoing popular cause, has the qualities to be successful (GAO 2005). But while actors' statements have been positive (Dayanand 2013; Portman 2019b; Portman et al. 2018; USPS 2020b; WWF 2017b), the stamp has neither been a clear success nor a clear failure (Caroline Baumann, USPS CSAC, personal communication).

Funds raised

The Tiger Stamp's conservation impact cannot be established in ecological terms. Stamp funds have been widely dispersed and mixed with other funding. While even the stamp's smallest contributions to conservation projects—\$299 for anti-poaching efforts in Kenya (FWS 2019), for instance—may be large enough to advance conservation in a country where GDP per capita is \$1816 (World Bank 2020), we cannot assess whether such funds advanced policy goals.

In terms of public money, the Tiger Stamp offers a relatively large supplement to Congressional appropriations for MSCFs. FWS received \$11.6 million in MSCF appropriations in FY 2019 and requested \$6 million in FY 2020 (Crafton 2019). Stamp sales 2017–2018 raised about \$2 million (Sheikh et al. 2017; FWS 2020c). If 2020 sales are similar, they will equate to 16.7% of FWS's requested appropriation. Tiger Stamp funds have been nearly tripled by leveraged funds from ENGOs; these contributed about \$3.8 million

annually from FY2012–2017. The Multinational Species Conservation Funds also receive matching funds; these averaged \$3.68 million/year/fund in FY 2013–17 (Sheikh 2019), so Tiger Stamp matching funds equate to an additional MSCF's worth of matching funds. However, the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act, a similar program, received \$14.2 million in leveraged funds in FY 2018 alone. Overall, while contributions tied specifically to the stamp might have been lost in its absence, these resources would likely have continued to fund conservation, given ENGOs' missions.

Tiger Stamp funds are tiny compared to other ENGO activity. WWF, for instance, raised \$119.7 million from individuals in FY 2019 (WWF 2020d), and the International Fund for Animal Welfare, a lesser-known member of the Multinational Species Coalition, raised \$51.8 m from supporters (International Fund for Animal Welfare 2019). Panthera, an organization that focuses on wild cat conservation, raised \$4.9 million, though this total includes grants as well as donations (Panthera 2020b).

Sales

If stamps printed reflect sales expectations, the Tiger Stamp has not been as effective as anticipated, with almost half of stamps unsold. Tiger Stamp sales, averaging 7.5 million per year, have been lower than sales of other US semipostals (Sheikh et al. 2017; USPS 2020a). Over a billion Breast Cancer Research Stamps have been sold (USPS 2020a). The Stop Family Violence stamp averaged 15 million stamps per year, and the Heroes of 2001 averaged 53 million stamps per year.

However, all of this must be viewed in the context of stamp sales overall. First class mail, which we use as a proxy for stamp use, is declining. When the Breast Cancer stamp was created in 1998, Americans sent more than 100 billion pieces of first-class mail. In 2019, Americans sent 54.9 billion pieces of first class mail (USPS Historian 2020). In 2008, USPS printed about 37 billion stamps, on the order of 120 stamps per American citizen (USPS 2009). In 2019, USPS printed 16.5 billion postage stamps, or 50 stamps per person (USPS 2020c). A stamp sold between 2011 and 2018 would be likely to sell substantially fewer copies than a stamp sold a decade earlier. And indeed, between 2002 and 2006, Heroes of 2001 and Stop Family Violence sold far more stamps annually than Alzheimer's (2017–19) or the Tiger Stamp. The Breast Cancer stamp sold 606.8 million copies from 1998 to 2005 and 453.2 million copies between 2005 and 2020 (GAO 2005; USPS 2020a). The Tiger Stamp sold 26 million stamps in its first 2 years, 2011–13; since then, it has sold 26.7 million stamps (Portman 2014; USPS 2020a).

The factors that have led to the decline in first-class mail are likely to continue. There is some hope in the Postal Service that semipostal stamps will motivate people to buy stamps

(Betts, USPS, personal communication). The USPS now issues semipostals itself, selling several at once (USPS 2020a). However, declining sales of all semipostals indicate that it may be impossible for stamps in the 2020s to match sales from 20 years before, limiting their effectiveness as public policy tools.

Hortatory influence

Stamps' effects extend beyond the money raised through sales (Mack 2015). The Tiger Stamp's visual elements—bold printing, appealing coloration, and a charismatic tiger cub—would tend to inspire positive responses, even in people who see it without buying it. Assuming that Tiger Stamps were used, they were seen some 50 million times by letter and card recipients, in addition to people seeing them in passing in post offices and other venues. Advertising viewers absorb images with varying degrees of passivity and consciousness, which affect attitudes and behaviors even if people do not remember seeing them (Hill 2018; On Device Research 2018). Tiger Stamps, backed by the authority of the national government and carrying with them, for many recipients, the spark of excitement brought by the increasingly-rare experience of receiving letters or cards by mail, may have boosted their hortatory power beyond their sales (FWS 2018; Sheikh et al. 2017; GAO 2005). As the Postal Service itself notes, the stamp is a “conversation starter” (FWS 2018). Pictures matter, even for people who do not buy stamps themselves, and appealing images like the Amur cub may help mobilize public emotion (Luxon 2019; Smith et al. 2020), inspiring support for international conservation.

Recommendations

The Tiger Stamp has been less successful than might have been expected in 2000, but it can continue to support international conservation. We recommend the following:

- USPS should sell all existing stamps, issuing the stamp on its own authority if necessary. Despite the Postal Service's past discomfort with this, stamps have always been policy tools. Semipostals serve the same hortatory purposes as other stamps and support public goals.
- USPS and FWS should capitalize on tigers' pre-existing charisma and build partnerships with places and organizations that identify themselves with tigers. Promotion by partnering organizations has been key to semipostals' success (GAO 2005).
- Semipostal stamps having been challenged by public uncertainty about how funds are spent (GAO 2005), FWS, USPS, and ENGO's should promote the stamp's

conservation impact in concrete terms, inspiring consumers by showing them what donations accomplish.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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