Modern societies attribute moral worth to a wide range of entities. However, there are individual differences in tendencies to assign moral worth beyond kin and ingroup members (Crimston et al., 2016). Moral worth is generally thought to proceed along a single dimension stretching from humans to the natural world (Singer, 1981). In contrast, we hypothesized that some people would assign greater moral worth to the natural world than to outgroup members. We predicted that a range of cognitive and emotional tendencies, such as mind perception (Wegner & Gray, 2017), would underlie this greater value of environmentalism.

Methods

Participants were 168 U.S. residents, recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk ($M_{age} = 37, SD_{age} = 19.06, 86$ female). The following measures were administered:

- Empathy Index (Jordan, Amir & Bloom, 2016)
- Interpersonal Reactivity Index: Concern sub-scale (Jordan, Amir & Bloom, 2016)
- Guilt And Shame Proneness Scale (GASP) (Cohen et al., 2011)
- Dispositional Positive Emotions Scale (DPES): Awe sub-scale (Shiota, Keltner & John, 2006)
- Disgust Scale-Revised (Olatunji et al., 2007)
- Individual Differences in Anthropomorphism Questionnaire (IDAQ) (Waytz, Cacioppo & Epley, 2010)
- Ascent of Man measure of Blatant Dehumanization (Keith et al., 2015)
- Ecocentrism, Anthropocentrism, Apathy (Gagnon Thompson & Barton, 1994)

Charity: Participants were asked to choose 5 charities from a total of 10. These were either focusing on environmental aid or humanitarian aid (i.e. Feed the Children, Doctors Without Borders, Nature Conservancy, World Wildlife Fund).

Results

Emotional measures and cognitive measures were separately regressed onto a variable reflecting the difference between moral expansiveness scores for tree-huggers and human-lovers.

Discussion

Confirming our hypothesis, a substantial number of adult participants ($N = 79/168$) attributed more moral value to nature (e.g., dolphins, rainforests) than outgroups (e.g., Arabs, homosexuals).

This was predicted by higher disgust and awe, as well as greater tendencies to dehumanize marginalized ethnic groups and greater tendencies to value nature for its own sake. Valuing nature over outgroups was also marginally predicted by greater tendencies to anthropomorphize non-humans, but was not predicted by caring about nature for the sake of the hampelves, apathy toward nature, dispositions to feel guilt and shame, trait compassion, trait empathy or demographic variables such as gender, religiosity, or conservatism. Valuing nature over outgroups predicted donating funds to environmental charities instead of humanitarian charities.

These results show that moral concern is not extended unidimensionally. Instead, particular cognitive and emotional tendencies lead some people to prioritize environmentalism over humanitarianism.

References

