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## Mate choice in a polluted world: consequences for individuals, populations and communities

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1 Pollution (e.g. by chemicals, noise, light, heat) is an insidious consequence of anthropogenic activity  
2 that affects environments worldwide. Exposure of wildlife to pollutants has the capacity to adversely  
3 affect animal communication and behaviour across a wide range of sensory modalities – by not only  
4 impacting the signalling environment, but also the way in which animals produce, perceive and  
5 interpret signals and cues. Such disturbances, particularly when it comes to sex, can drastically alter  
6 fitness. Here, we consider how pollutants disrupt communication and behaviour during mate choice,  
7 and the ecological and evolutionary changes such disturbances can engender. We explain how the  
8 different stages of mate choice can be affected by pollution, from encountering mates to the final  
9 choice, and how changes to these stages can influence individual fitness, population dynamics, and  
10 community structure. We end with discussing how an understanding of these disturbances can help  
11 inform better conservation and management practices and highlight important considerations and  
12 avenues for future research.

1

### 1 **1. Pollution and Mate choice**

1 Environmental pollution is a serious and growing problem. In a human-dominated world, habitats  
2 everywhere are increasingly being drenched by chemicals, disturbed by anthropogenic noise,  
3 illuminated by artificial light, or thermally altered by human activities. Such pervasive pollutants not  
4 only have the capacity to drastically change the environment, but can also interfere with key sensory  
5 and physiological processes of exposed organisms [1-3]. In so doing, pollutants can influence the  
6 ability of animals to receive and perceive information about their environment and potentially

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7 impinge on their ability to mount an adaptive response [4-6]. In this regard, altered communication,  
8 especially when it comes to sex, can have important fitness consequences [7, 8].

9 For many species, mate choice plays a fundamental role in determining which individuals are able to  
10 successfully reproduce [9]. Typically, males compete vigorously for fertilisation opportunities, while  
11 females make careful choices among potential mates (although large variation in this pattern is found  
12 among species). Indeed, the elaborate male ornaments and conspicuous courtship displays that evolve  
13 in response to female mate preferences can reflect a whole suite of direct and indirect fitness benefits  
14 for choosy individuals, from access to mates that deliver superior parental care to the inheritance of  
15 superior genes that increase offspring viability [10]. Display traits can also be non-informative, or  
16 even deceptive, and evolve because signallers take advantage of pre-existing sensory biases in mate  
17 choosers [10].

18 As an important fitness determinant that can influence both the quantity and quality of offspring  
19 produced, mate choice relies on the capacity of individuals to exercise their reproductive decisions  
20 prudently among the pool of suitors available to mate. For this to occur, choosy individuals must  
21 accurately perceive and obtain reliable information about the quality of potential mates, as well as  
22 process this information to make adaptive mating decisions [9]. In this regard, pollution-induced  
23 changes to the environment – by altering these fundamental processes – can have a direct bearing on  
24 individual mating decisions and mate choice.

25 Altered mate choice can have repercussions not only for individuals, but for the viability of  
26 populations and the survival of species [11]. Changes in the number and quality of offspring can  
27 affect population dynamics by influencing key demographic parameters resulting in population  
28 declines [12]. Such changes, in turn, can affect species interactions and impact the structure and  
29 function of the ecological communities they inhabit [13]. Disturbance to mate choice can also  
30 influence vital evolutionary processes and the strength and direction of selection [14]. It can affect  
31 premating reproductive isolation, which may promote population differentiation and speciation on  
32 the one hand [15], or lead to interspecific matings and the loss of biodiversity, on the other [16].

33 Here, we discuss the effects that pollution has on communication and behaviours in a mate choice  
34 context, and how these changes influence the dynamics of populations and, hence, the structure and  
35 function of communities (figure 1). We begin by explaining how pollution affects the different stages  
36 of the mate choice process. We then discuss how changes in mate choice can impact individual  
37 fitness and, in so doing, population dynamics and species characteristics. We continue by reflecting  
38 on the effect that changes in population characteristics can have on species interactions and  
39 community structure. Finally, we consider how an improved understanding of the effects of pollution  
40 on animal communication and mate choice can inform more effective conservation and management  
41 outcomes.

42

## 43 **2. How does pollution influence mate choice?**

44 Mate choice is a multi-staged process that requires individuals to encounter potential suitors, acquire  
45 accurate information about the quality of these individuals, process the information gathered and  
46 make an informed choice. At each step, pollution has the potential to impinge on the mate choice  
47 process, and it can do so in three key ways: (1) by altering environmental conditions, (2) by affecting  
48 the intrinsic properties of potential mates and the individuals performing the mate choice, and (3) by  
49 impacting key population parameters (figure 1). Pollution may influence one or several stages of the  
50 mate choice process, and the changes it causes at one stage can alter its effects at other stages.

51

### 52 *Mate encounter rate*

#### 53 Environmental conditions

54 Pollution can influence the ability of individuals to detect, attract and search for mates. For instance,  
55 in glow-worms (*Lampyris noctiluca*), light pollution (artificial light at night) hinders the ability of  
56 males to detect the bioluminescent glow of signalling females [17]. Similarly, in Lusitanian toadfish  
57 (*Halobatrachus didactylus*), exposure to noise pollution from shipping activity affects the ability of  
58 individuals to detect the courtship sounds of conspecifics [18]. Apart from these direct effects,  
59 pollution can also affect mate encounter rates indirectly by altering species interactions (e.g. risk of  
60 actual predation) that influence the cost of attracting and searching for mates.

#### 61 Individual characteristics

62 Pollution that influences behavioural, morphological and physiological traits of individuals can alter  
63 mate encounter rates. For instance, several herbicides influence the synthesis of pheromones in moths  
64 and, hence, their ability to attract mates [19]. Stress-inducing pollutants, such as noise, can disturb  
65 behaviours essential for maximising mate encounters, such as general activity and responsiveness to  
66 cues of mates [20], or cause neurobiological changes that affect the perception or production of cues  
67 [21]. Pollution can also influence investment into mate searching through effects on food intake,  
68 metabolism, body condition, and the motivation to search for mates [22].

#### 69 Population characteristics

70 Pollution that alters the size, structure, or distribution of populations can have a direct bearing on  
71 mate encounter rates. For instance, toxic compounds that increase mortality and reduce population  
72 density, or those that inhibit reproductive maturation, can reduce the number of individuals available  
73 to mate, as well as the probability of encountering mates. Similarly, avoidance of pollutants, such as

74 urban noise or light, can severely reduce the mate encounter rate of those that remain in polluted  
75 areas [23].  
76 Pollution that alters sex ratio can affect the intensity of competition for mates and, in so doing, the  
77 benefit of investing in mate attraction and mate searching [24]. This can arise, for example, if  
78 pollution-induced mortality is sex-dependent, or if sex determination is disrupted. In regard to the  
79 latter, species with environmental sex determination may be particularly sensitive to pollutants that  
80 can alter key environmental parameters, such as temperature [25]. Pollution-mediated changes in sex  
81 ratio can also occur in species with primarily genetic sex determination, especially in the context of  
82 so called endocrine-disrupting chemicals that disturb the normal hormone function of exposed  
83 organisms [26]. For instance, the synthetic hormone estrogen, EE2, skews sex ratios towards females.  
84 Such changes can relax competition among males for females, while increasing investment of  
85 females into mate searching [27].  
86 Pollution can also influence the expression of alternative reproductive strategies and, hence, the  
87 mates that are encountered. For instance, light pollution that affects sleeping patterns of songbirds  
88 can influence the possibility of cuckoldry, as individuals that delay the onset of daily activity are  
89 more easily cuckolded [28].  
90 Changes in the variation among individuals in mate quality can similarly alter the benefit of mate  
91 attraction and mate search. In this respect, an increase in variation among individuals raises the  
92 benefit of mate choice and, hence, may increase investment into mate searching, while reduced  
93 variation may have the opposite effect [29].

94

### 95 *Information reliability*

#### 96 Environmental conditions

97 Sexual signals are often finely attuned to the environment in which they have evolved. Pollution that  
98 alters the physical characteristics of the landscape, including its visual, acoustic, and olfactory  
99 properties, can therefore affect both the quantity and quality of the information being emitted and  
100 transmitted through the signalling environment. This, in turn, can influence the information these  
101 signals are purported to encode and, hence, their reliability. The low frequency din of urban noise, for  
102 instance, can mask the low frequency components of the songs of birds, which alters their  
103 information content [30]. Similarly, chemical compounds are known to interfere with the  
104 transmission of olfactory signals by destroying or degrading them [31]. Global warming lowers in  
105 turn the detectability and persistence of olfactory signals, as in the scent markings of mountain lizard  
106 (*Iberolacerta cyreni*) [32].

107 Pollution can also impact the amount of resources available to individuals for investing into signals  
108 used for advertising quality. If competition for limited resources intensifies, the reliability of signals  
109 as indicators of resource-holding potential may improve [33]. However, pollution can also reduce  
110 signal reliability by creating ecological traps [34]. Such a possibility can arise through the emergence  
111 of novel cues that mimic those that individuals traditionally rely upon to guide their behavioural  
112 decisions. Artificial light, for instance, attracts night-active insects, such as glow-worms and fireflies  
113 that locate mates based on light emission [35].

#### 114 Individual characteristics

115 It is well documented that exposure to certain pollutants can have a direct bearing on the expression  
116 of sexual signals. Exposure of fish to municipal wastewater treatment effluent, in particular the  
117 various pharmaceutical pollutants in the wastewater, is known to reduce male courtship behaviours  
118 [36]. Exposures of tree frogs (*Hyla arborea*) to noise pollution elevates their stress hormone levels,  
119 which reduces the colour of their vocal sacs used to attract females [21].

120 Changes in either the assessed trait, or in the quality of the assessed individuals, can disrupt the  
121 relationship between the trait and the honesty of the information it is purported to convey. However,  
122 while evidence exists of pollution altering signal and cue expression, much less is known about the  
123 impact of altered signals on their reliability in guiding adaptive mating decisions. For example, in the  
124 context of noise pollution, there is ample evidence documenting how animals, such as frogs, birds,  
125 and insects, are able to adjust their acoustic signals to avoid vocal masking by, for example, calling  
126 louder [37] or at higher frequencies [38, 39]. Yet, despite such changes, it remains unclear how signal  
127 modification might affect the content of the signal and, hence, its reliability as an indicator of mate  
128 quality. For instance, in frogs, females often prefer males that produce lower-pitched calls as these  
129 advertise body size [40]. Hence, if males are forced to produce higher pitched calls in noisy  
130 environments, such adjustments could potentially result in a conflict between signal audibility on the  
131 one hand, and signal reliability, on the other [30]. In this regard, the utility of the signal will depend  
132 on whether all signalling individuals are similarly affected by the pollutant, and whether signal  
133 expression changes concomitantly with the quality of these individuals so that the signal continues to  
134 function as an honest indicator of mate quality.

135 When pollution influences only one component of a multicomponent signal (e.g. ornament colour,  
136 but not size), or only one sensory modality of a multimodal signal (e.g. colour, but not the intensity  
137 of courtship), the different components may convey contradictory information that reduces signal  
138 reliability [41]. Similarly when different components change in different directions, the resultant  
139 signal may yield contradictory information.

## 140 Population characteristics

141 Investment into signals depends on the intensity of competition for mates [10]. If pollution relaxes  
142 mate competition by altering the density or structure of populations, investment into signals may  
143 decrease [42]. This, in turn, can reduce the reliability of signals as indicators of mate quality. For  
144 instance, a reduced density of males can relax the social control over the expression of sexual signals  
145 and allow subdominant males in poor physical condition to signal dishonestly [43, 44]. An example  
146 of this seen in the electric signals produced by the fish *Brachyhypopomus gauderio*, where a lower  
147 population density reduces social interactions and, hence, decreases the honesty of electric discharges  
148 as indicators of body size [45]. Pollution that influences the perceived intensity of competition for  
149 mates can similarly influence signal reliability without altering population size or structure. For  
150 instance, increased water turbidity in eutrophied environments reduces visibility and the detection of  
151 rival males in three-spined sticklebacks (*Gasterosteus aculeatus*). This relaxes the social control of  
152 signals and, hence, their reliability as indicators of male condition and offspring viability [46, 47].

153

## 154 *Information processing and choice*

### 155 Environmental conditions

156 Pollution that alters food availability or predation risk can influence the costs and benefits of  
157 engaging in mate choice. For instance, a reduced ability to find food may force individuals to spend  
158 more time and energy on foraging and less on mate choice [48]. Similarly, a hampered ability to  
159 detect predators can increase the perception of risk, resulting in individuals becoming less choosy to  
160 mitigate the chances of being eaten [49]. An impaired ability to detect mates can, in turn, reduce the  
161 opportunity for choice [50]. Grim future reproductive opportunities may cause individuals to  
162 prioritize mating and become less choosy in order to maximise their chances of securing a mate [51].  
163 Such changes can also induce individuals to switch from the use of signals in one sensory modality to  
164 another, such as paying less attention to acoustic signals in favour of visual signals in noisy  
165 environments.

### 166 Individual characteristics

167 The ability of choosy individuals to receive and process the information that reaches them depends  
168 on a range of intrinsic factors, including sensory and cognitive function, decision rules (e.g. mate  
169 acceptance thresholds), hormonal levels, and body condition – all of which can potentially be  
170 disturbed by pollution [52]. This is especially true of pollutants that interfere with the endocrine  
171 system and alter sexual motivation and behaviour, as well as impinge on sensory systems and the  
172 reception of information [31]. For instance, the insecticide endosulfan resulted in male red-spotted  
173 newts (*Notophthalmus viridescens*) taking longer to detect female pheromones, which in turn reduced

174 mate encounter rates [53]. This illustrates how the impact of pollutants may influence several mate  
175 choice stages, including the processing of signals as well as encounters with mates.  
176 Pollution can also alter the body condition of choosy individuals and, hence, the amount of resources  
177 they can invest into mate choice [54]. For instance, female wolf spiders (*Schizocosa stridulans*) are  
178 less selective for males in good condition when food is limited [55]. Considering the profound effects  
179 that pollutants often have on body functions, changes to the intrinsic properties of choosers is  
180 probably a common pathway through which various pollutants can influence mate choice.

### 181 Population characteristics

182 Changes in the density and structure of populations can alter investment into mate assessment and  
183 choice in a manner similar to the effects described earlier for other components of the mate choice  
184 process. For instance, pollution that decimates a population increases the cost of choosiness by  
185 increasing the prospects of remaining unmated [56].

186 Pollution that alters aggression and negative interactions among individuals can also impact the costs  
187 of choice. For example, decreased population density may lower the frequency and intensity of male  
188 sexual harassment and, hence, reduce the cost to females from having to fend off undesirable mates  
189 [4]. It is becoming increasingly apparent that males, in attempting to maximise their own  
190 reproductive payoffs, can also behave in ways that override or impinge on female mate choice [57].  
191 An example of this is seen in guppies (*Poecilia reticulata*), with exposure to the agricultural pollutant  
192 17 $\beta$ -trenbolone, a powerful synthetic steroid, increasing male coercive matings and, in so doing,  
193 circumventing female choice [58, 59].

194

### 195 **3. Adaptive or maladaptive mate choice?**

196 Whether the response of an individual to pollution is adaptive or not depends on its genetically  
197 determined reaction norm, and how the response can be altered through environmental effects,  
198 learning and evolutionary (genetic) changes. Reaction norms have evolved under past conditions and,  
199 hence, their adaptive value largely depends on the resemblance of the polluted conditions to earlier  
200 encountered conditions [5, 60]. When the difference is large, the reaction norms are likely to be  
201 maladaptive. For instance, individuals may lack the sensory and neuroendocrine functions required to  
202 perceive changes in mate quality in a polluted environment, or they may not be able to overcome the  
203 challenges that the pollutant imposes on mate detection and evaluation.

204 When polluted conditions resemble earlier encountered conditions, animals may be more adept at  
205 plastically adjusting to pollution. For instance, individuals from environments with fluctuating noise  
206 levels may have evolved the flexibility to pay more attention to visual cues when noise levels are  
207 high. In general, species that can switch among cues may be better predisposed to deal with human-

208 induced pollution when the pollution reduces the efficiency of signals and cues in certain sensory  
209 modalities, but not others [41]. However, when pollution alters the information content of different  
210 signals, and animals continue to pay attention to them, this could lead to contradictory information  
211 being acquired, which can render mate choice more difficult.

212 Learning may also improve the ability of individuals to assess signals and cues and make favourable  
213 choices. For instance, white-crowned sparrows (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*) learn to adjust their song to  
214 noise from tutor songs through cultural selection [61]. Individuals may also learn to pay less attention  
215 to cues that are unreliable indicators of mate quality, or to adjust the timing of their reproductive  
216 activities. For instance, birds living near airports advance the timing of their chorus to avoid overlap  
217 with periods of intense aircraft noise [62]. It is important to point out, however, that plastic  
218 adjustments are not always possible [63] or may simply not be enough to counter the effects of  
219 pollution [64]. Under such circumstances, evolutionary changes may be required.

220

## 221 **4. Consequences of altered mate choice**

### 222 *Individual level*

223 Maladaptive mate choice may reduce the number of offspring that individuals produce if the chooser  
224 selects a mate that has a low fertilisation success or fecundity, has less resources to provide, or is a  
225 poor parent. Maladaptive mate choice can also influence the quality of the offspring produced,  
226 particularly if the selected mate is of low genetic quality. For instance, three-spined stickleback  
227 females are more likely to choose a mate that sires offspring of low viability when visibility is  
228 reduced due to algal blooms [46].

229 When individuals increase their investment into mate choice in polluted habitats to compensate for a  
230 compromised ability to evaluate mates, this may reduce the amount of resources available to invest in  
231 other reproductive components, such as fecundity, parental care, and future reproductive  
232 opportunities [65]. Similarly, elevated costs of searching for, and evaluating, mates can reduce  
233 survival and fecundity and, hence, lifetime reproductive success.

234 When individuals reduce their investment into mate choice, maladaptive choices may follow that  
235 lower the number and quality of offspring they produce. For instance, canaries (*Serinus canaria*)  
236 produce smaller clutch sizes when choosing a mate in a noisy environment, probably because  
237 hampered male-female vocal communication reduces female motivation to reproduce [66]. Such  
238 reduced investment can be adaptive under natural, fluctuating conditions if conditions improve with  
239 time. However, in human-modified habitats, conditions may not improve and the reduction in  
240 investment may, instead, reduce fitness.



241 Pollution can, in some instances, facilitate mate choice, or reduce the cost of choosing a mate, and  
242 improve reproductive success. For instance, the disappearance of predators from polluted  
243 environments can allow prey species to spend more time searching for and evaluating mates [2].  
244 Pollution that increases the randomness in mate choice may, in turn, improve the reproductive  
245 success of individuals that may otherwise have low mating prospects [46]. In this regard, altered  
246 distribution of mating success among individuals could have important population-level  
247 consequences.

248

### 249 *Population level*

250 Altered reproductive success of individuals can influence population dynamics and demographics. If  
251 a large proportion of the population makes maladaptive mate choices and produces fewer offspring or  
252 offspring of lower viability, the population may decline [67].

253 Altered mate choice can also influence the evolution of traits. Maladaptive preferences and signals  
254 may be lost, while new traits may evolve [68]. However, the evolution of signals and preferences is  
255 generally a slow process, as it depends on generation time and the presence of suitable genetic  
256 variation [69]. Thus, evolution may frequently not be fast enough to rescue mate choice systems in  
257 rapidly changing environments.

258 Altered mate choice that influences selection on traits can, in turn, influence selection on correlated  
259 traits. It can also influence selection later in life. For instance, relaxed selection at the mate choice  
260 stage can strengthen selection at other life-history stages, such as among juveniles if more offspring  
261 of low viability are born into the population when mate choice becomes more random [70]. There is  
262 also evidence suggesting that mate choice and sexual selection may promote the evolution of  
263 mechanisms that can allow animals to better cope with pollutants. An example of this is seen in flour  
264 beetles (*Tribolium castaneum*), which evolved resistance to a pyrethroid pesticide faster under sexual  
265 selection [71].

266

### 267 *Community level*

268 Changes in population dynamics can influence community composition. Species able to adapt their  
269 mate choice system to pollution may thrive, while those that cannot may flounder. For instance, the  
270 composition of a community of nesting birds in New Mexico changed with increasing noise levels.  
271 Species that adjusted their vocalisations during reproduction to the noise flourished, while those that  
272 did not declined [13]. Such changes may in turn influence species interactions. For instance, a  
273 declining predator population may release its prey population from predation, or its competitors from

274 competition and, hence, influence the population dynamics of these species [72]. However, little is  
275 currently known about such community-wide consequences of altered mate choice.  
276 Pollution that impairs species recognition can increase the frequency of interspecific matings. This  
277 can result in unviable offspring, or in hybrids that have a lower viability than their parental species.  
278 Such maladaptive matings may use up valuable time and energy and, hence, decrease offspring  
279 production. On the other hand, pollution that increases interspecific matings also have the potential to  
280 select for traits that contribute to population divergence. This may promote species differentiation  
281 and possible speciation [73]. Alternatively, interspecific matings because of pollution may result in  
282 hybrids that are more adept at succeeding under altered conditions. This can lead to the loss of  
283 biodiversity through the breakdown of species isolation mechanisms, as demonstrated, for example,  
284 in African cichlids [16].

285

## 286 **5. How can the knowledge be of use in conservation** 287 **management?**

288 Studies of wildlife behavioural responses to human-altered conditions, including altered reproductive  
289 responses, such as mate choice, are crucial in understanding the harmful effects of pollution on  
290 species. Behavioural responses can be used as first indicators of changes to ecosystems, as well as  
291 reveal mechanisms and pathways through which pollution influences population dynamics and,  
292 further, how the effects spread through the species community [74].

293 Because behaviour is the manifestation of numerous complex developmental and physiological  
294 processes, it is an exceptionally powerful and biologically relevant indicator of environmental  
295 impacts. Hence, in the context of environmental monitoring, behaviour can be a much more  
296 comprehensive and sensitive biomarker than standard laboratory assays used to test for pollutants in  
297 the environment (e.g. chemicals), which typically target only one or a few biochemical or  
298 physiological parameters [75]. Given the central role of mate choice in determining fitness and  
299 population dynamics, it is a particularly important indicator of impacts of environmental pollution on  
300 species.

301 Indeed, from a practical management and conservation perspective, there are many lessons that can  
302 be gleaned from knowledge of how pollution affects mate choice. For instance, the finding that birds  
303 and anurans differ in their capacity to shift vocal frequencies [76] suggests that different approaches  
304 may be required to effectively manage anthropogenic noise pollution in different kinds of habitats. In  
305 the context of noise pollution, mitigation strategies that are already widely used to limit the impact of  
306 anthropogenic noise on humans, such as sound barriers and noise curfews, may also be effective in  
307 managing the impact of noise disturbance on wildlife [77].

308 Measuring mate choice in nature, however, can often be difficult, and what is measured in the  
309 laboratory may not reflect processes in nature. Thus, care needs to be taken when planning how to  
310 investigate the impact of pollutants on mate choice.

311

## 312 **6. Future research directions**

313 Much information exists on the effects of pollutants on mate choice behaviour, while less is known  
314 about the consequences of altered mate choice for individual fitness, population dynamics, species  
315 interactions and community structure [11]. Because mate choice is an important fitness determinant,  
316 disruptions to the behaviour can have far reaching consequences for both ecological and evolutionary  
317 processes, and need to be considered in studies on the effects of pollution on ecosystems.

318 The response of wildlife to pollutants often depend on the enormity of the disturbance. Thus,  
319 researchers should be cognisant of employing exposure levels that are ecologically relevant [75].  
320 Here, it is important to realise that the relationship between the magnitude of the response and the  
321 extent of the disturbance may not necessarily be linear. For instance, several studies examining the  
322 behavioural responses of wildlife to chemical pollutants have reported non-monotonic dose  
323 responses, whereby exposure to lower concentrations can induce effects not seen at higher exposure  
324 levels [78]. Such findings underscore the importance of testing responses across multiple levels of  
325 disturbance.

326 A better understanding of the longer term impacts of pollutants is also needed. Many pollutants are  
327 highly pervasive in the environment. Yet, there has been a tendency for experimental studies to  
328 employ extremely short exposure times (in some cases, only a matter of hours) [2]. This is true even  
329 though the impacts of pollutants, such as chemical contaminants, can take time to manifest.

330 Moreover, there is now good evidence to suggest that exposure to pollutants can induce effects that  
331 transcend generations by causing developmental changes that are epigenetic [79]. For example, in  
332 laboratory mice, exposure to an endocrine disruptor affects female mating preferences three  
333 generations removed from the actual exposure [80]. Such studies underscore the fact that exposure to  
334 pollutants need not even be permanent to exert long-lasting effects on the mate choice process.

335 In addition, greater emphasis needs to be given to understanding the impact of pollutants in  
336 interaction with other environmental stressors. In the wild, animals are typically confronted with a  
337 myriad of environmental challenges simultaneously (from both natural and anthropogenic sources).  
338 Yet, despite this, there has been a tendency for researchers to examine the wildlife impacts of  
339 pollution in a vacuum, isolated from the influence of other environmental factors. Predicting the  
340 response of wildlife to pollutants in the presence of other kinds of environmental stressors cannot be  
341 achieved by studying these different disturbances in isolation, as multiple stressors can interact to

342 induce effects that can be either greater (synergistic) or less (antagonistic) than the sum of their  
343 independent effects [81]. Multifactorial studies, in this regard, could be useful in disentangling the  
344 underlying mechanisms behind wildlife responses to pollutants under more realistic, multi-stressor  
345 environments.

346 Both within and between species differences are also important. Within species, responses can vary  
347 among individuals, depending on a range of factors, such as life history stage, sex, age, and body  
348 size. For instance, Bertram et al. [58] reported sex specific differences in the response of guppies to a  
349 widespread agricultural contaminant, 17 $\beta$ -trenbolone, with altered reproductive behaviour in males,  
350 but not females. Among species, the bulk of research effort focussing on the impacts of pollution on  
351 mate choice have tended to focus on only a handful of taxa, even though the response of wildlife to  
352 pollutants can vary. The effects of noise pollution provide a good case in point. Here, most studies  
353 exploring the impacts of anthropogenic noise on acoustic signals have centred on terrestrial  
354 environments, with a heavy emphasis on the mating calls of birds and frogs, while impacts of noise in  
355 aquatic habitats have largely focussed on marine mammals (mostly in a non-reproductive context).  
356 By contrast, far less attention has been given to understanding impacts of noise pollution on other  
357 acoustically communicating taxa, such as fish, where the use of sound as a form of communication,  
358 including in mate choice, appears to be underappreciated [3, 82]. Here, taxonomic differences in the  
359 mechanisms of sound production and detection, as well as differences in the transmission properties  
360 of sound in water and air, underscore the necessity for more direct testing of anthropogenic impacts  
361 in taxa that have, to date, been largely neglected.

362 In advancing the field, an important challenge will be to overcome our own sensory biases. To date,  
363 understanding of how pollution disrupts animal communication and mate choice has tended to focus  
364 almost exclusively on visual, acoustic and olfactory communication [7]. Yet, non-human animals can  
365 employ an extraordinarily diverse range of sensory channels for conspecific communication, many of  
366 which are very different from our own. Moreover, even in cases where the same sensory modalities  
367 are employed, perceptual abilities are often strikingly different. For example, some species, in  
368 contrast to humans, are able to see ultraviolet signals or hear infrasound. Yet, despite this, our current  
369 understanding of how pollutants affect these systems remains rudimentary. A related issue is the  
370 multimodality of animal communication systems. In this regard, impairment of any one (or  
371 combination) of different sensory modalities can have implications that are likely to depend on a  
372 range of factors, including environmental context, the relative importance of the different sensory  
373 modalities, and the information being conveyed [7, 11]. Important insights will no doubt come from  
374 research that is less encumbered by our own sensory tendencies and better informed by sensory  
375 ecology [83].

376 Finally, more information is needed on the relative importance of plastic responses and genetic  
377 changes in coping with polluted environments. In particular, more attention needs to be paid to the  
378 possibility of mate choice behaviour evolving to be better suited to polluted conditions: when is  
379 evolutionary rescue likely and when is it not, and which factors determine whether a species will be  
380 able to adapt to pollution [60]? Insights into these questions will be pivotal in understanding the  
381 longer term consequences of altered mate choice in an increasingly human-dominated world.

382

383

## 384 Additional Information

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Figure caption

Figure 1. Impact of altered mate choice on individuals, populations and communities.

Figure

