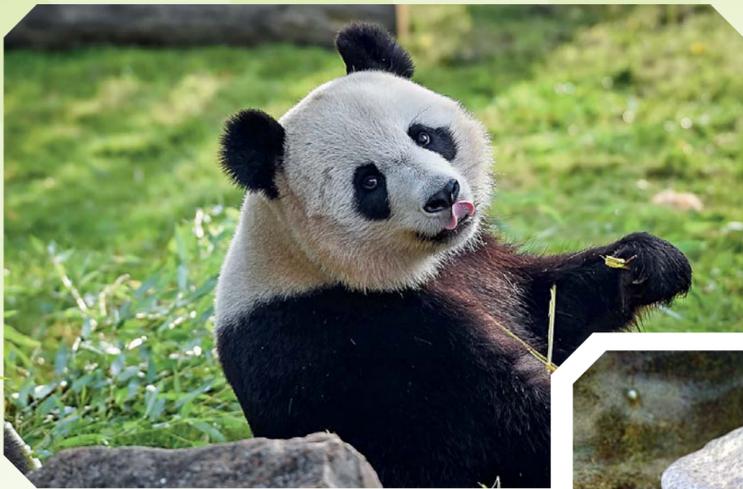


► Why is it that we humans love only some species and are indifferent towards others? Does this affinity ensure the survival of only those species? Find out



Is a PANDA worth more than a SALAMANDER?

The Chinese giant salamander, the largest amphibian in the world, is not cute. Weighing as much as an adult human, it has slimy brown skin, a giant mouth curled up a gormless grin, and puny, mistrustful eyes. It is also one of the world's most endangered species. And yet, unlike its compatriot the gi-

ant panda, the giant salamander rarely makes news. Why do some animals strike a chord with humans, prompting them to donate millions towards their conservation, while others draw little more than disgust? And is a sad-eyed panda really worth saving more than a slimy salamander?

Size, intelligence, behaviour, rarity, how closely an animal resembles the human form—all play a part in our reaction to various endangered creatures. "One of the biggest factors is 'cuteness': physical characteristics such as big eyes and soft features that elicit our parental instincts because they remind us of human infants," said Hal Herzog, emeritus professor at West Carolina University's Department of Psycholo-

gy. An expert in human-animal relationships, Herzog said the dark rings around pandas' eyes triggered humans nurturing instincts. "Compare that to the Chinese giant salamander," he said. "Google it. It looks like a six-ft-long, 150-pound bag of brown slime with beady little eyes."

Poor salamander

The salamanders are a vital part of their ecosystem, just as worms are essential to soil health around the steams and lakes they live in—which is just about everywhere. Yet, like maggots, rats and snakes, the main instinct they inspire in



Photo: GETTY IMAGES

to their resemblance to "primary disgusting things" such as mucus or faeces, Davey said, while others are perceived—rightly or wrongly—to pose a direct danger to the beholder. "In terms of threat to humankind, disease and illness are bigger than being attacked by an animal," he said.

This might explain why most of us don't find lions and bears repelling—they are covered with the same type of soft fur that coats cuddly toys for children, even if it might be better to avoid one in real life. As with most things, popular culture has a huge effect on how society perceives animals. Whereas the movie 'Free Willy' prompted a wave of sympathy for the protection of endangered orcas, 'Arachnophobia' hardly helped spiders' cause. So also, 'Jaws' for sharks.

Are we guilty of discrimination?

Even the depiction of fictional creatures can have a knock-on effect on public perception towards certain animals. Take the main being in 'Alien', for example. "Seeing the one from the first film that had that mucus-y drawl dripping from the alien's mouth... sensitises people to disgusting things," Davey said. Nor is it just the public at large who are liable to 'speciesism', or discrimination against other species in favour of our own. A study in 2017 found a strong correlation between society's preferred animals and those most studied in scientific research. "Maybe that's because it's easier to get money" to study well-known animals, said Frederic Legendre, a researcher at France's National History Museum.

And popular species make money in return, according to Christo Fabricius from WWF, a conservation group indelibly linked to its panda logo. "Reptiles, for example, are not very marketable," he said.

YOU DECIDE!

Which is cuter?



A win for conservation, not really!

Not that favouring certain cute or charismatic species is necessarily a bad thing for conservation. "When we protect an iconic species, we protect their habitat and therefore all the organisms within it also benefit," said Legendre.

But such species can become a victim of their own popularity. One recent study suggested that a "virtual" presence of wild animals such as elephants and tigers—be that on computer screens, T-shirts or in children's books—can fool people into thinking they are more common in the wild than they really are.

The population of most megafauna—from hippos to giraffes and gorillas—remains in peril. Then there's the risk of poaching. The rarer the species "the more value they provide for traditional medicine, for trophy hunting, and therefore they are poached more often," said Franck Courchamp, an ecologist at France's National Centre for Scientific Research.

The lesson

So the next time you see a picture of a Giant Chinese Salamander, remember that there's more to saving Earth's wild species than looks. AFP

FACT

Toxins in sea plastics 'fuel early deaths'

Plastic pollution in oceans is shortening lives, scientists warn. Tiny bits are ending up in fish we eat - fuelling cardiovascular disease as they contain hormone-disrupting chemicals. Older people with large amounts of these chemicals in their blood were 50% more likely to die over the next decade, a study found. The findings were based on almost 1,000 70-year-olds in Sweden whose blood was tested for polychlorinated biphenyls. These plastics have now been widely banned.

Oldest animals ever, ranked by age

FATOU 61 YEARS

The oldest female gorilla living today is thought to be 61. Western lowland gorillas are a subspecies native to the Congo Basin, and they are the most widespread of all subspecies of gorillas. Fatou at the Berlin Zoo in Germany and Trudy at the Little Rock, Arkansas Zoo, are both estimated to be 61. Ozzy, a male gorilla, at Atlanta, Georgia Zoo is thought to be the oldest male at about 58.



AMBIKA 71 YEARS

Ambika at the National Zoo in Washington, DC is thought to be 71 years old, possibly making her the oldest living elephant. Asian elephants can typically live into their mid-50s. However, a few have made it to their 80s. Lin Wang, an Asian elephant at Taipei Zoo in Taiwan, lived to be 86. At the time of his death in 2003, he held the Guinness World Record for being the oldest elephant in captivity.



WISDOM 68 YEARS

The longest living albatross is at least 68 years old. Albatrosses, whose wings can stretch 11 ft, can live 50 years or more. The longest-living albatross in the US—and one of the world's oldest known wild birds overall—is a Laysan albatross named Wisdom. Believed to be at least 68 years old, Wisdom has surpassed her species' typical lifespan of 12-40 years. She has made the news several times for continuing to lay eggs well into her old age.



FRED 104 YEARS

Cockatoos are any of 20 bird species that belong to the parrot subfamily Cacatuidae. They generally have a lifespan of 60 years, but some have lived for over a century in captivity. Fred, a sulfur-crested cockatoo at Bonorong Wildlife Sanctuary in Tasmania, Australia, is now 104. Another Australian sulfur-crested cockatoo known as "Cocky Bennett" reportedly lived until the age of 120 before he died in 1916.



JONATHAN 187 YEARS

Giant tortoises are known for their longevity. Like Lonesome George, who was the last surviving member of the Pinta Island species who was over 100 years old when he died in 2012. Jonathan, a giant tortoise born in the Seychelles islands, is still going strong. At 187 years, he's been designated the world's oldest living land animal by Guinness World Records.

Pop Quiz

IDENTIFY THESE SPECIES



ANSWERS

1. Flamingos
2. Greater kudus
3. Grey heron
4. Alpine goat
5. Royal turtles

Are cow farts bad for the climate?

Let's clear the air

In the climate change debate, bovine flatulence has become a hot topic of discussion. Experts say cows fart. That contributes to global warming. But cow burps are worse for the climate. "Cows are pretty disgusting eaters, with methane coming from both ends," said Christopher Field at the Stanford Woods Institute for the Environment. "But most of it comes from burping." Field cited 'technical literature' on the topic which said, "Of the CH₄ (methane) produced by enteric fermentation in



the forestomach 95% was excreted by eructation (burp), and from CH₄ produced in the hindgut, 89% was found to be excreted through the breath." In a nutshell, belches are bad news. At Tuscia University in Viterbo, Italy, environmental scholar Giampiero Grossi said methane emitted by ruminant livestock accounts for about 5.5% of the greenhouse gases that come from human activity. More than 70% of livestock emissions are from cattle, he said. "Ruminants are a significant source of methane," which traps

more heat than carbon dioxide but doesn't last as long in the air, said Kristie Ebi, director of the Center for Health and the Global Environment at the University of Washington in Seattle. "The belches have to do with digesting their food in the stomach compartments, not intestines, and the fermentation that produces methane. Warming from the burning of fossil fuels is roughly 10 to 17 times greater than warming caused by livestock burping and farting," Field said. AFP

ECO TIPS

REUSE YOUR OLD SMARTPHONES



1. TURN IT INTO AN MP3 PLAYER: Store all your favourite music on your old phone and turn it into an MP3 player. Use a headphone to listen in or connect to a bluetooth speaker and get the party going.

2. TURN IT INTO A VIDEO STREAMING HUB: Your old phone can be a lot more useful than you think; it can transform into a dedicated video streaming hub for Youtube, Netflix and more. [BI](#)

WATCH OUT!



Diplomats and scientists from 132 nations wrapped up six days of negotiations in Paris over the wording of a landmark report on the dire state of Nature and its impact on humanity, a UN official said. The bombshell executive summary of a 1,800-page tome crafted by more than 400 experts, the first UN global assessment of the natural world in 15 years, is most likely to be unveiled on May 6. Drafts of both documents leave no doubt that the final Summary for Policymakers will paint a picture of widespread destruction wrought by man, some of it irreparable. The report is likely to reveal that up to one million of Earth's estimated eight million species face extinction, many within decades. AFP

Got an idea to conserve the environment? Mail us at toinie175@gmail.com