

The troubling truth about selfies with sloths

Level 2 • Upper intermediate

1 Warmer

Answer the questions. Then scan the article to check your answers.

1. A sloth is a ...
 - a. reptile.
 - b. bird.
 - c. mammal.
2. Wild sloths are found in ...
 - a. Asia.
 - b. Central and South America.
 - c. Africa.
3. Sloths spend most of their lives ...
 - a. in trees.
 - b. on the forest floor.
 - c. in caves.

Have you ever seen a sloth or a picture of a sloth? What do they look like?

2 Key words

Match the key words with the definitions. Then find them in the article to read them in context. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

adoring
elegance

urge
handle

cruel
obsessed

rehabilitate
abuse

doze
props

1. always thinking about something, in a way that seems extreme to other people _____ (para 2)
2. attractive and graceful in appearance and behaviour _____ (para 2)
3. things that are used in photos to make the photos more interesting _____ (para 3)
4. touch or hold someone or something _____ (para 4)
5. help someone or something return to a healthy, independent and useful life _____ (para 5)
6. a strong feeling of wanting or needing to do something _____ (para 6)
7. sleep, but not particularly deeply, especially during the day _____ (para 6)
8. showing great love and admiration _____ (para 6)
9. used to describe someone who causes pain or unhappiness to other people or animals _____ (para 8)
10. cruel, violent or unfair treatment, especially of a person or animal that cannot prevent it _____ (para 10)

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Why can't we leave them alone? The troubling truth about selfies with sloths

Patrick Greenfield

2 June, 2020

- 1 Nobody really knows how the sloth became the rock star of the animal kingdom. From high in the Latin American rainforest, the strange mammal is the focus of an obsession that does not seem to be stopping. Sloths are on bank notes, adverts, T-shirts, internet memes and Instagram fan pages.
- 2 "People are obsessed," says Costa Rica's President, Carlos Alvarado Quesada, when asked why people have fallen in love with the animal. "The sloth is quite a unique animal. It's closely connected with the forest. And I think people like the elegance of its movements."
- 3 But its popularity has started to cause problems for the sloth. People take more selfies with sloths than almost any other animal on the planet, according to wildlife charity World Animal Protection. An analysis of Instagram images by the organization found that 70% of selfies with sloths – from the Brazilian Amazon to Central America – involve hugging, holding or using them as props.
- 4 Sloths are animals that spend most of the day asleep in the wild. The stress of constant handling and noise can have negative consequences.
- 5 "If people are just seeing their images but not really thinking of them as wild animals, then it could do more harm than good," says Sam Trull, who runs the Sloth Institute, an organization that rehabilitates the animals and reintroduces them into the wild in Manuel Antonio, on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica.
- 6 The brown-throated three-toed sloths and Hoffmann's two-toed sloths that hang from the rainforest in Manuel Antonio are a reassuring part of life in the national park area. The sight of a sloth holding onto a tree can improve anyone's mood. Yet the urge to climb to the top of a tree and give the dozing mammal a cuddle has gone too far. Adoring tourists have become a threat.
- 7 "The photo-prop trade is a really big problem, where people take sloths out of the forest and ask people for money to hold them and take pictures with them. That's the negative side of them being popular," Trull says during a virtual tour of the sanctuary, where sloths are recovering from car accidents, dog attacks and exhaustion from the heat of the dry season.
- 8 In response to the problem, the Costa Rican government has launched the #stopanimalselfies campaign to crack down on the practice. Human and wildlife interaction has been illegal in the country for more than a decade, but the 2017 World Animal Protection report said Costa Rica was seventh in the world for "cruel" animal selfies.
- 9 "These selfies don't just put wild animals at risk; they put tourists at risk, too. Animals can give humans illnesses through biting and scratching," says Shirley Ramírez Carvajal, a wildlife biologist who works on the campaign.
- 10 The problem with wildlife selfies is not limited to sloths. Instagram is aware of the issue and has introduced warnings about the abuse of wild animals on popular hashtags such as #koalaselvie, #elephantride and #monkeyselfie, which are often filled with images of smiling tourists with wildlife.
- 11 "We have a law that bans direct contact with wild animals and feeding them. In this way, animals keep their wild behaviour. Almost always, when animals get used to being fed or become comfortable around humans, there are accidents that can be quite serious," Ramírez Carvajal adds.
- 12 In some national parks, monkeys and racoons eating human food has caused teeth, bone and weight problems. The Costa Rican government is asking tourists to report illegal behaviour to try to raise awareness and reduce the number of such interactions.
- 13 When Covid-19 travel restrictions are lifted, thousands of tourists will once again travel to Costa Rica, and many of them will hope to catch sight of a sloth clinging to a tree in the rainforest.
- 14 "I think that sloths are a really good example of balance. Maybe this is one of the reasons why they are popular. A lot of people don't have a lot of balance in their lives," says Trull.
- 15 "Sloths are a really good example of how everyone should live. I honestly think if more people were like sloths, we'd have world peace. They are excellent role models for all of us."

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3 Comprehension check

Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. Why is the sloth called the 'rock star of the animal kingdom'?
2. Why are people so obsessed with sloths?
3. What causes sloths stress?
4. Why are people taking sloths out of the forest?
5. What is the Costa Rican government doing to protect sloths?
6. What is Instagram doing about animal selfies?

4 Phrases

a. Find and underline these phrases in the article.

1. make a situation worse, not better (five words, para 5)
2. start dealing with someone or something much more strictly (three words, para 8)
3. help people gain more knowledge or understanding of a subject, issue or situation (two words, para 12)
4. see something only for a moment (three words, para 13)

b. Check your answers. Then use the phrases to complete these sentences about the article.

1. We are trying to _____ about the importance of safety at work.
2. The school is trying to _____ smoking.
3. If you're very quiet, we might _____ the rare bird of paradise.
4. Too much exercise can sometimes _____.

c. Use the phrases in sentences of your own.

5 Quote

Sam Trull, the
Sloth Institute

A lot of people don't have a lot of balance in their lives. Sloths are a really good example of how everyone should live. I honestly think if more people were like sloths, we'd have world peace. They are excellent role models for all of us.

Discuss this quote from the article. Do you agree with Sam Trull? Why? Why not? What can we learn from animals?

6 Discussion

Discuss the statements.

- Tourists should not be allowed into national parks.
- Tourists should only be allowed to enter a national park with a local guide.
- Tourists can help local people by paying for photos with animals.