



# Are your internet habits harming wildlife?

By Ella Davies

It's been a long day so why not sit back, relax and browse the internet for cute creatures.

It's a familiar impulse for animal lovers, but is our appreciation of the adorable helping or harming wildlife?

Red pandas are extremely popular online, they even share their nickname with an internet browser – Firefox. Search for the animals there and you'll rapidly disappear into a rabbit hole of images and videos of the fluffy creatures cavorting in the snow, overreacting to stones and generally being cute (though mostly in captivity). The location conspicuously missing from these videos is the forests from Nepal to China where the animals live in the wild. Following a 50 per cent decline in their populations over the last three generations, they are considered an [endangered species according to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature](#) (IUCN) with possibly fewer than 2,500 left in the wild.



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though there are fewer than 2,500 left in the wild.  
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The Red Panda Network is a charity dedicated to raising awareness of the animals' plight and funding essential conservation programmes. Since 2010, they've organised the annual [International Red Panda Day](#) to get the message across that these animals are more than just cute YouTube fodder. Sadly, despite efforts to protect the animals, half a dozen were rescued from smugglers in Laos in January 2018 who intended to sell the animals as pets on the black market. Whether this attempted supply was a direct result of internet popularity driving demand is very difficult to prove. There's evidence however that the wrong kind of coverage of a species can reinforce alarming attitudes.

Take the case of Sonya the slow loris. An early darling of the digital age, this nocturnal primate native to South East Asia racked up the clicks with a viral video of her apparently raising her arms in the air with joy. Sadly, animal behaviour experts revealed that what we thought was Sonya enjoying a tickle, was in fact evidence of an animal in distress. An overweight pet, kept in a flat in Russia, Sonya was displaying defensive behaviour in reaction to her owner's touch.



*A viral slow loris video seemed to show the nocturnal primate enjoying a tickle, but she was in fact in distress.*

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In 2013, Professor Anna Nekaris and her colleagues published a study looking at how internet users reacted to the video. In the initial months after it was posted, they found that a quarter of commenters expressed an interest in keeping one of these animals as a pet, despite wild populations being described as vulnerable by the IUCN.

Prof Nekaris has continued her research into this troubling trend and says that things have not improved for the species. While trade has decreased in some areas, this is only because the animals have gone extinct locally. "Slow lorises are suffering more than ever because of illegal wildlife trade," she explains. As well as being poached for the pet trade, they are also hunted for so-called traditional medicine.



*Even though many species are declared vulnerable,  
it is common for internet users to express interest in keeping them as pets.*

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TRAFFIC (the wildlife trade monitoring network) reported [that advertisements for illegal wildlife products were steadily declining in China](#) – falling by as much as 50 per cent from 2012 to 2016. This seemingly positive statistic however comes with a warning: illegal wildlife trade has moved from e-commerce websites to private online communities and social networks. It has effectively been driven underground, to platforms authorities struggle to police. The impulse to type “I want one” below a shared video or photo is now just a few clicks away from direct involvement in wildlife trafficking.

But the tide is hopefully turning. In 2018, 20 of the biggest technology companies in the world joined forces with the conservation organisation WWF to crack down on illegal wildlife trade. [The Global Coalition to End Wildlife Trafficking Online](#) set itself the goal of an 80 per cent reduction by 2020.

In an effort to raise awareness of wildlife exploitation, [Instagram has also launched an initiative](#) whereby users poised to post or search for a picture with a concerning hashtag – for example #tigerselfie or #slowloris – are met with a pop-up underlining the need to protect wildlife and the environment. In April 2018, BBC Earth worked with Instagram to add warnings to two further hashtags #orangutan and #pangolin. The image sharing network has not yet released data to show whether the use of these hashtags has fallen.

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Prof Nekaris advises that we should be vigilant on social media: "Instagram has also launched an initiative whereby users poised to post or search for a picture with a concerning hashtag are met with a pop-up underlining the need to protect wildlife and the environment.."

Like a global game of whispers, the context of images and videos can be lost as they are shared, so it's important to give some thought to what you see. If it rings alarm bells, report the image to the platform. You can also make a positive impact by sharing and discussing photos and videos with strong conservation messages. Many of the charities striving to improve the prospects of endangered species can only operate thanks to the attention and funding of a global online audience. Together we can turn "awws" into awareness, and give our on-screen sweethearts a fighting chance at survival in their rightful environment.

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