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Drawing In  Reaching Out

# Who Are You Calling UGLY?

Scientists say it's important to protect even the most unusual-looking and odd creatures.

**GO ONLINE!**

Meet more odd-looking animals.

**AS YOU READ**

How does an animal's appearance affect how people feel about it?

**H**ow would you describe the polar bear on the cover of the magazine? Cute? Cuddly? You likely wouldn't say the same about the animal above it, a type of lemur called an aye-aye. With its oversized ears and bony fingers, this creature is often described as odd—or even ugly.

Though the two animals look different, they have something important in common. They're both in trouble in the wild. But, experts say, most people are more eager to help animals that make us go *awww*.

“Unattractive animals get a lot less attention,” says scientist Charlie Debenham. “We overlook them or are even **repulsed** by them.”

Debenham works with the EDGE of Existence program at the Zoological Society of London, in England. Its goal is to celebrate and protect the creepiest and weirdest creatures.

## Endangered Oddballs

### Vultures

**Range:** every continent except Australia and Antarctica

Vultures are nature's cleanup crew. They eat the bodies of dead animals. The rotting meat can carry bacteria that would make other animals sick.





## Who Gets Protected?

Nearly 14,000 animal species are known to be endangered. Conservation groups spread the word about the dangers many animals face and raise money to help them survive.

But not all animals get the same treatment. A 2012 study found that conservation groups usually focus on the most attractive ones. It's easier to convince people to help them.

That's why you probably know that tigers and giant pandas are endangered. But you don't hear much about the importance of saving vultures.

## Why Looks Matter

The things we may find unattractive in animals are often **adaptations** that help them survive. For example, the aye-aye uses its huge ears to listen for insects moving inside tree branches. It then scoops them out with its extra-long middle finger and eats them.

But the aye-aye's appearance is also a big reason that it's in trouble. In the past, local

## Why the Aye-aye Matters



The aye-aye plays a key role in its ecosystem. For example, it's one of the only animals that can reach the larvae of beetles that bore, or dig, into dead trees. If there were no aye-ayes . . .

There would be more beetles.

The beetles might eat through the wood faster.

Small animals that live in the wood, such as hedgehogs and frogs, might lose their shelter.

people viewed it as a sign of bad luck and killed it on sight.

"The aye-aye is an animal that truly suffers for its ugliness," says Debenham.

## Ugly but Important

Every animal serves a purpose, says Debenham, no matter how odd or scary it might seem. For example, the aye-aye's island home of Madagascar would be different without it (see "*Why the Aye-aye Matters*").

Debenham hopes people will learn to appreciate the world's not-so-cuddly animals.

"Weird and wonderful species deserve to be protected," she says. "If they disappear, there will be nothing else like them on Earth."

—by Jennifer Li Shotz

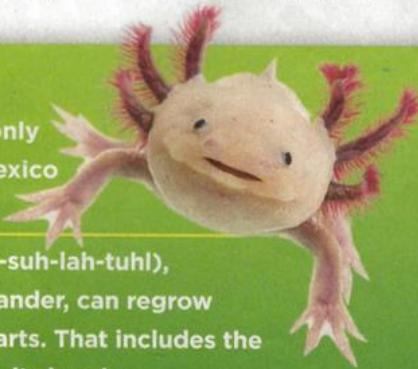
## WORDS TO KNOW

**repulsed** *verb, past tense.* felt dislike or disgust for something  
**adaptations** *noun, plural.* characteristics that help an animal or a plant survive in its environment

## Axolotls

**Range:** found only in lakes near Mexico City, Mexico

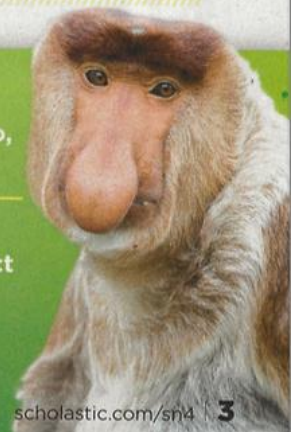
The axolotl (AK-suh-lah-tuhl), a type of salamander, can regrow missing body parts. That includes the feathery gills on its head.



## Proboscis Monkeys

**Range:** found only on Borneo, an island in Southeast Asia

The male's oversized nose helps it make calls that attract mates. The monkeys also replant forests by spreading seeds in their poop.



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Thank you for helping save these wonderful animals!

More information about each species can be found at:

- <https://www.britannica.com/animal/axolotl>
- <https://www.britannica.com/animal/proboscis-monkey>
- <https://www.britannica.com/animal/aye-aye>
- [www.peregrinefund.org/explore-raptors-species/vultures/red-headed-vulture-0](http://www.peregrinefund.org/explore-raptors-species/vultures/red-headed-vulture-0)