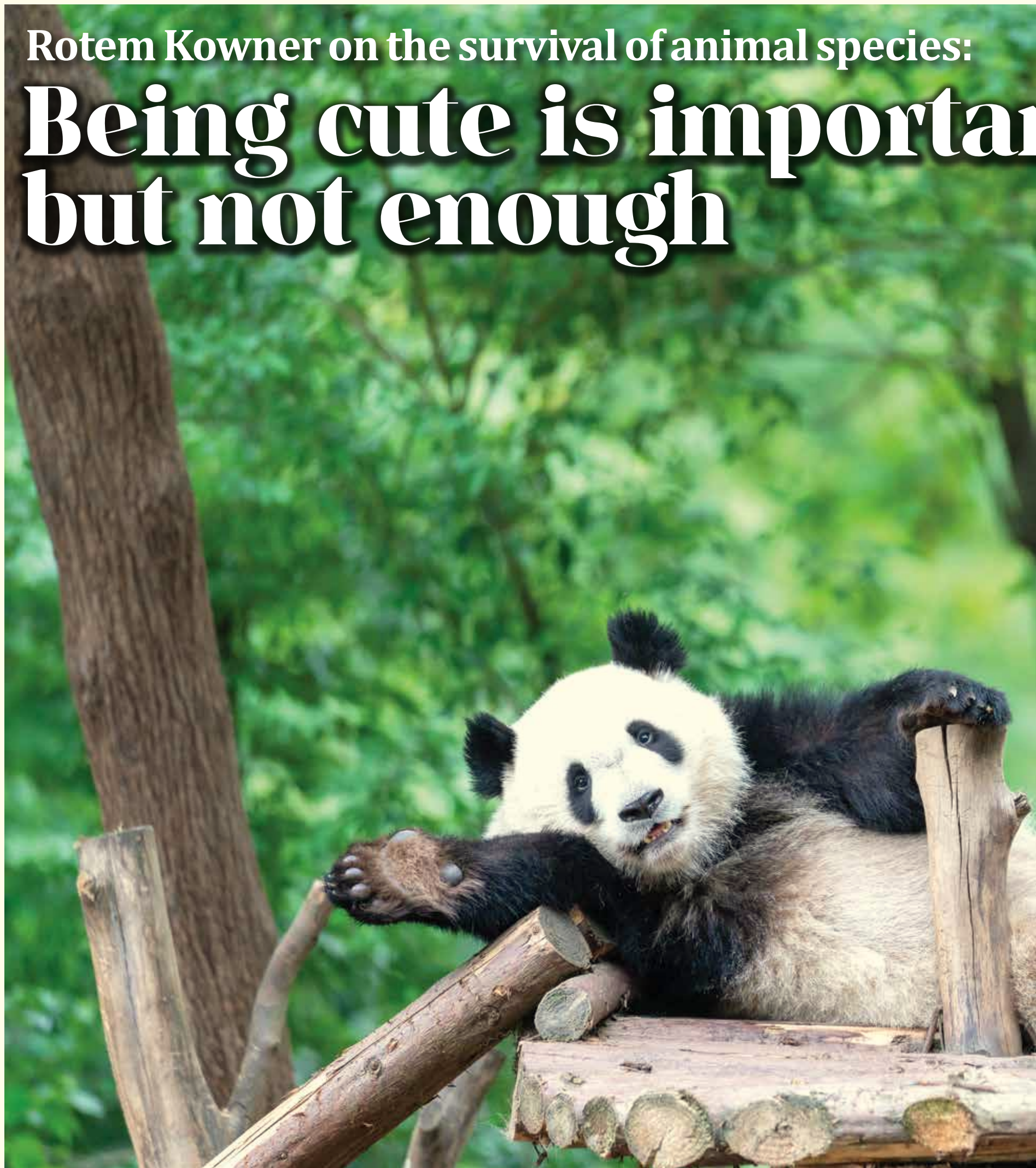


Rotem Kowner on the survival of animal species: Being cute is important but not enough



Rotem Kowner is a professor of Japanese history and lead editor of *Animals and Human Society in Asia: Historical, Cultural and Ethical Perspectives*, published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2019.

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EXCLUSIVE

In a few short decades, as you've pointed out, much attention has been focused on animals and their relationships with humans. There are ever-increasing concerns expressed about various aspects of their well-being, there is a "pet hype," and we are much more worried about extinction of certain species. What do you think has been the driving force behind our "sudden" (in historical scales) spike of interest in animals?

Indeed, we find today far greater attention and public interest in animals and especially in their relations with humans, than in the

past. This has to do with several reasons, of which the most important, in my view, is the growing awareness that humans are responsible for the lives and destiny of animals. During the last few decades, the scale of human control and exploitation of the earth has become so substantial that the fate of many species depends now on human behavior. Some argue that we are on the verge, or even in the midst, of a modern, man-made, sixth extinction. But, regardless if we agree with this provocative assertion, many of us have witnessed in our lifetime the disappearance of certain wild animals, often mammals, but also birds, fish, and reptiles,

from our nearby surroundings.

Moreover, we are now raising and consuming far more domestic animals than ever. We also keep far more than pets, or companion animals, than ever, and for many of us, these assume cardinal importance in our life. It is widely believed, even among many scientists, that pets bring certain mental and physical health benefits to their owners. Altogether, it is no wonder then that in the last two decades, we have popularized the term Anthropocene ("the human period") when describing the most recent geological epoch. This period dates from the commencement of significant human im-

pact on Earth's geology and ecosystems some 12,000 to 15,000 years ago. This impact has been particularly dramatic on the life of animals and, fortunately, we have begun recently to recognize it.

You have noted that "Asia has been a major site for the emergence of moral teachings and ethical guidance on the treatment of animals and on attitudes toward them," whose legacy "still affects the lives of billions of humans to this very day." But one might argue that in more contemporary times, the West has been the primary source of more "progressive" contemplative themes about

animals. Would you agree with that argument? And if so, I wonder if, from your vantage point, it has something to do with civilizational preponderance?

I partly agree with this argument. The West is the one that leads today the moral attitude toward animals, both domestic and in the wild. At the same time, the West has also been leading in the destruction of animals. Europe is a case in point as many of the wild animals that used to live on this continent are long extinct. The West is also leading in breeding animals for various purpose and exploiting them systematically for their flesh, hides, or even reactions to scientific

experiments. This dualism is not surprising as it can be found in anything the scientific revolution has brought about. Science is a blessing as well as a curse for humankind, and I think that in the West, as the main source of the scientific revolution in the past, there is greater awareness of this.

At the same time, the current position of the West should not let us forget Asia. I still believe that without the participation of this continent, and to a lesser extent also Africa, we cannot achieve a truly global change in the treatment of animals. With about 60 percent of the world population and with already predominant political and

economic power, Asians are the ones to determine the future of human-animal relations. When it comes to animals, hereon, it is the turn of Asia to make a difference.

As the inhabitants of the continent with the largest and fastest growing total consumption of animal products, with the fastest growing market of pets, and with the largest area of still unexploited wilderness and a large number of species of wild animals, Asians should reconsider their attitudes to animals. In this case, traditional moral teachings and ethical guidelines may be at least as valuable as recent trends imported from the West.