



ICONFILMS

Natural World

Jungle Gremlins of Java with Dr Anna Nekaris

Tx BBC2 8.00pm 25th January 2012

n.b. This film is the start of the new run of Natural World

Press Notes

Type 'slow loris' into YouTube and you'll find them. The clip of one being tickled is an internet phenomenon with many millions of hits. It's not surprising. They are the cutest animal in the world.

But don't be deceived - under their armpits they secrete a deadly poison!

Combining big beautiful eyes with sharp little fangs, the Slow Loris is nature's real-life 'Gremlin': part cuddly pet, part miniature monster. But being nocturnal and highly secretive, very little is actually known about them.

According to Dr Anna Nekaris - a primatologist based at Oxford Brookes University who has studied the Loris for nearly twenty years - they possess a poison that causes wounds to fester. In some cases, their bites have triggered anaphylactic shock and even death in humans.

The Slow Loris exudes the dark fluid from a gland above its elbow. When mixed with its saliva it becomes toxic. It is the only primate in the world that is poisonous - but why?

This film follows Anna as she travels to Java, an island in Indonesia, to try and discover the true purpose of the animal's mysterious toxin.

She is based at the International Animal Rescue in Ciapus near Jakarta where lorises are cared for after being saved from pet owners.

Her first test shows that the poison can quickly stop a leech in its tracks. So perhaps the toxin is a home-made pesticide to keep them clean of parasites.

Anna believes the toxin also has a role in warding off potential predators. The sun bear hunts with its nose and like all bears has a very general diet. Anna rigs up an ersatz Loris - and as soon as the bear comes into contact with the toxin it shies away.

Her final theory is that the males use it to attack other Loris. Certainly when they fight their venom leads to horrific scars, and even “slow, flesh-rotting death.” It’s hardly cute and cuddly.

She travels into the jungle to find them in the wild- but the rainforests are empty. A few years ago she could find them easily - but now they have disappeared.

As Anna investigates, a far darker story begins to unfold. Despite laws to protect the Slow Loris, many are still being sold as pets - openly, and in conditions of unspeakable cruelty. To make them “safe” the traders first cut out their teeth, leaving the animals vulnerable to infection.

In desperation she heads to the animal markets of Jakarta. This is a place which would turn the stomach of any animal lover with thousands of creatures on sale, often in terrible conditions.

Anna needs to film undercover for her own safety. There she finds cages upon cages of Slow Loris, captured from the wild and bound to be pets in Indonesia and abroad, if they survive.

It is Anna’s contention that their internet celebrity status has fuelled their disappearance. The film ends with the YouTube clip of the Slow Loris being tickled.

About the Slow Loris:

- A Loris doesn’t store its toxin in its mouth like a snake, but secretes it as a brown, oily fluid from a gland near its elbow. This oil only becomes fully toxic when licked and mixed with the animal’s saliva.
- Babies as young as six weeks old can produce this so-called ‘brachial oil’, which has a strong and unpleasant smell.
- Loris venom seems to be a cocktail of many different toxins that act in different ways. Some of the poisons are acquired from eating noxious bugs and other creepy crawlies.
- The Loris is steeped in superstition. According to one folktale, a wife can control her husband better if she keeps the skull of this animal in the water jug. And the warriors of one Javanese tribe once dipped their weapons in Loris blood to stop the wounds of their enemies from healing.
- The Slow Loris is not slow or lazy at all. It can move as fast as a squirrel, and cover well over five miles a night!
- Long thought to be mainly vegetarian, Slow Lorises turn out to be accomplished predators. Stalking silently, they grab prey as big as bats and even roosting birds.
- In contrast, and though they’re only the size of a squirrel, Slow Lorises are given a wide berth by most predators.
- A Slow Loris has only four fingers, which gives it a better grip. But it has two tongues, and several additional vertebrae which help it twist like a snake.
- Lorises are nocturnal creatures that have been around for at least 50 million years. They are distantly related to monkeys, apes, and us.
- Lorises freeze under white light, but act more naturally under red light - which they can’t see.

About Anna:

- Dr Anna Nekaris works in the Nocturnal Primate Research Group at Oxford Brookes University, UK.
- Her fieldwork has taken me to Trinidad, Senegal, Utah, India, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Indonesia, Uganda and Kenya. In the last year her work has taken her to Java, Sumatra, Thailand, Cambodia, Singapore and Vietnam,
- She was once bitten by a Loris, and has a friend who nearly died from a Loris bite.
- Describing herself as a 'nictophile', she has a passion for the night and its undiscovered creatures.

The Pet Trade:

- Slow Lorises are popular pets among middle-class Indonesians.
- In Jakarta's animal markets you can buy Lorises from Java, Sumatra, and Borneo.
- They sell for about £25 each in Jakarta, but fetch up to a hundred times more in places like Japan and Russia, where they are fashionable pets.

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