



Hanging With the Sloth Guidebook



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Introduction—Naming the Sloth

When early Spanish explorers descended upon the New World they encountered many strange animals, and described these exotic beasts upon their return to Europe. One such explorer was Oviedo y Valdés, who published a natural history of the Indies in 1526. A Spanish knight and historian, he made several visits to the Americas, where he traveled extensively. He described the sloth as the stupidest animal that can be seen in the world—one whose belly nearly dragged the ground when it walked. He exaggerated that the animal was so slow in its movements that to walk the distance of fifty paces would require an entire day.

According to Oviedo, some of the first Christians who saw the sloth gave it the antithetical name “perico ligero,” or “nimble peter.” Many natives today still use this term, or shorten it to “perico.”

Edward Topsell, an English writer, described the animal in his illustrated work, *Historie of Foure-footed Beastes, Describing the True and Lively Figure of Every Beast*. “When it is tame,” he wrote, “it is very loving to a man, and desireth to climbe upe to his shoulders, which those naked Amerycans cannot endure, by reason of the sharpnesse of his Clawes.”

The first reference to this animal as a sloth was in 1613. Samuel Purchase wrote that the Portuguese had begun to refer to it as “preguiça,” which means sloth. However the natives referred to it as “ai,” an onomatopoeia derived from a sighing sound that sloths sometimes make when in distress. Purchase wrote, “The Preguiça of Brasill, is worth the seeing; it is like a shag-haire Dog, or a Landspaniell, they are very ougly and the face is like a woman’s evill drest, his fore and hinder feet are long, hee hath great clawes and cruell, they goe with the breast on the earth, and their young fast to the bellie. Though yee strike it never so fast it goeth so leisurely that it hath need of a long time to get up a tree, and so they are easily taken.”

By this time the church had developed the seven deadly sins—a centuries-old list of transgressions that were said to be spiritually fatal. Authors of this

list designed it to cover myriad human shortcomings, yet be simple enough for the illiterate peasant to comprehend. The process of identifying the sins required several hundred years, beginning in the fourth century.

The Greek monastic theologian Evagrius of Pontus identified eight evil offenses that were, in increasing order of seriousness: gluttony, lust, avarice, sadness, anger, acedia, vainglory and pride. As severity increases with focus on self, he considered pride the worst of transgressions. Sloth had not yet found its way onto the list. The closest, acedia, is derived from the Greek “akedia,” or “not to care.” It has also been defined as “spiritual lethargy.”

In the early fifth century St. John Cassian proposed that excesses of each sin would lead to the one that follows. For example, gluttony would lead to anger. Then once one had succumbed to anger, avarice became inevitable.

Pope St. Gregory (Gregory the Great) was a big fan of Cassian. In the late 500s he re-worked the categories, folding vainglory into pride and acedia into sadness. He also added envy. He inverted the order, believing that pride was not only the most serious, but also the root of all sin. His categories served for centuries as the Seven Deadly Sins. These were pride, envy, anger, sadness, avarice, gluttony and lust. His ranking of the sins’ seriousness was based on the degree from which they offended against love.

Although it wasn’t yet considered one of the worst of sins, sloth was seriously disapproved of within the church. Thomas Aquinas, a thirteenth-century Catholic philosopher and theologian, defined sloth as “sluggishness of the mind which neglects to begin good... [it] is evil in its effect, if it so oppresses man as to draw him away entirely from good deeds.” Aquinas considered a sin to be “capital” if it leads to commission of other sins. Thus greed leads to stealing, cheating and lying; sloth ignores the dictates of charity “out of our apathy to spiritual matters.”

Pieter Bruegel’s 1558 depictions of the Seven Deadly Sins included “desidia” which is Latin for “laziness” rather than acedia.

In 1606 Thomas Decker, in *The Seven Deadly Sins of London*, described daily life in London that he believed reflected temporary victory of the Seven Deadly Sins. He referred to “This nastie, and loathsome sin of Sloth” He continued, “Sloth, by reason that he is troubled with the gout, busies himselfe little with State matters.”

In the seventeenth century the church formally replaced the vague sin of sadness with pigrity, or sloth—the avoidance of physical or spiritual work.

In his book, *The Seven Deadly Sins*, Solomon Schimmel defines sloth as “indifference to the pain and suffering of others.” According to Schimmel, the contemporary definition of sloth focuses on physical laziness. But in the past it included acedia, an “aimless indifference to one’s responsibilities to God and Man,” as well as tristitia, meaning “sadness or sorrow.”

Once European visitors to the New World began referring to the poor creatures as sloths, then, they were destined to be maligned and abused. Oviedo wrote, “He goes around at his own gait; and neither by threat, blow, nor prodding does he move any faster than he is accustomed to do without tiring.”

As was the case with many of the animals they discovered and described, sloths were poorly understood. Because neither he nor his men had ever seen a sloth eat, but they noticed it turning its head into the wind, Oviedo concluded, “I could never perceive but that they live only of air.”

The early explorers also believed that the sloth’s lethargy was due to heart trouble, which the animals attempted to remedy by scratching over their hearts with their long claws.

Buccaneer Exquemelin in 1678 wrote that a Captain Sharp captured a sloth on a small island, noting that it was an animal “well-deserving that name.”

The sloth moves so slowly that exaggeration seems neither sporting nor necessary. Nevertheless they couldn’t help themselves. Nehemiah Grew in 1681 wrote, “The Sloth... an animal of so slow a motion,

that he will be three or four days, at least, in climbing up and coming down a tree.”

Abuse continued upon this defenseless animal. Captain William Dampier in *Voyages*, wrote in 1697, “It takes them eight or nine minutes to move one of their feet three inches forward; and they move all their four feet one after another, at the same slow rate; neither will stripes make them mend their pace; which I have tried to do, by whipping them; but they seem insensible, and can neither be frightened, or provoked to move faster.”

Edward Bancroft in his *Essay on the Natural History of Guiana*, published in 1769, wrote that “When by beating they are forced to move, they make the most melancholy pitiful noise and grimaces.”

In 1749 the great French naturalist George-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon provided the first detailed description of the sloth. It was included in his 44-volume encyclopedia in which he tried to include everything that was known about the natural world. He described the sloth’s anatomy, including stomach, intestines, teeth and bones. However, Buffon never saw a live sloth. His descriptions were based on, at best, second-hand information. So naturally he maligned them.

“From a defect in their conformation, the misery of these animals is not more conspicuous than their slowness. They have no cutting teeth; the eyes are obscured with hair; the crows are heavy and thick; the hair is flat, and resembles withered herbs; the thighs are ill jointed to the haunches; the legs are too short, ill turned, and terminated still worse: their feet have no soles, and no toes which to move separately, but only two or three claws, disproportionately long, and bended downward, which move together, and are more hurtful to their walking, than advantageous in assisting them to climb.”

His lengthy slur of the animal is quoted in nearly every subsequent description, including this one. It’s just too good to pass up.

“Slowness, habitual pain, and stupidity, are the results of this strange and bungled conformation. The sloths have no weapons either offensive or de-

fensive. They are furnished with no means of safety; for they can neither fly nor dig the earth. Confined to a small space, or to the tree under which they are brought forth, they are prisoners in the midst of space, and cannot move the length of one fathom in an hour. They drag themselves up a tree with much labour and pain. Their cry and interrupted accents they dare only utter during the night. All these circumstances announce the misery of the sloths, and recal to our minds those defective monsters, those imperfect sketches of Nature, which, being hardly endowed with the faculty of existence, could not subsist for any length of time, and have accordingly been struck out of the list of beings... One other defect added to the number would have totally prevented their existence..."

Buffon supposed that "The degraded species of sloths are perhaps the only creatures to whom Nature has been unkind, and who exhibit to us the picture of innate misery." He was confounded that the animal managed to survive. "When on the ground, they are at the mercy of all their enemies. As their flesh is not absolutely bad, both men and rapacious animals go in quest of these animals. It appears that they do not multiply fast, or, at least, if they produce frequently, it must be in small numbers at a time; for they have only two pups. Every circumstance, therefore, concurs to destroy them; and it is extremely difficult for the species to support itself."

He proposed that the tenacity of the animal provided some explanation for the species' continued survival. "But, though slow, awkward, and almost incapable of motion, they are obstinate, strong, and tenacious of life. They can live very long without victuals of any kind... Moreover, if the misery resulting from a defect of sentiment be not the worst of all, the pain endured by the sloths, though very apparent, seems not to be real; for their sensations appear to be blunt. Their calamitous air, their dull aspect, and their reception of blows without emotion, announce their extreme insensibility. This bluntness of sensation is farther demonstrated by their not dying instantly when their hearts and bowels are entirely cut out. Piso, who made this cruel experiment, tells us that the heart, after being separated from the body, beat in a lively manner for half an hour..."

Buffon was highly respected, and therefore so was his lengthy diatribe regarding the unfitness of the poor sloth. His conclusions were questioned little for the next several centuries. In 1825 Oliver Goldsmith considered that it represented an unfinished production of nature—"the meanest and most ill-formed of creatures that chew the cud."

Baron Cuvier's *The Animal Kingdom* in 1837 proposed that "Nature seems to have amused herself by producing something imperfect and grotesque."

Sloths were scientifically named in 1831. They belong to the *Xenarthra* order of mammals along with armadillos and anteaters. The order *Xenarthra* was once extensive and included the now extinct giant ground sloths. Contemporary sloths are classified in the family *Bradypodidae*. While all sloths have three long claws on their rear feet, the two genus are distinguished by the number of claws on their forefeet. The *Choloepus*, or two-toed sloth, is an omnivore, eating leaves, fruits, small slow-moving creatures and bird eggs. The *Bradypus*, or three-toed sloth, is an herbivore, subsisting on a variety of leaves and fruits. Both types tend to occupy the same forests. The genus are as different as cats and dogs, and scientists believe they evolved separately from very different origins, beginning about 35 million years ago.

They are found in the rainforest canopies of Central and South America, as far north as Honduras and Nicaragua and as far south as northern Brazil and Bolivia on both sides of the Andes.

William Swainson, Esq., wrote in 1836, "Their arms and fore-arms are much longer than their thighs, so that when they walk they are obliged to draw themselves along on their elbows. Their thighs are so wide apart, that they cannot bring their knees together. Were we to draw our own conclusions from what all authors have written about this animal, we should suppose that nature had departed from her usual course in the formation of this extraordinary creature, which appears to us so forlorn and miserable, so ill put together, and so totally unfit to enjoy the blessings which have been so bountifully given to all other quadrupeds: for he has no soles to his feet, and he is evidently ill at ease when

he tries to move on the ground; it is then that he looks up in your face with a countenance that says, 'Have pity on me, for I am in pain and sorrow.'

By this time some of these animals had been brought back to Europe, but none survived the voyage. Swainson wrote, "...they have never been brought to Europe alive. Living, indeed, only in the hottest parts of South America, and feeding upon the foliage of certain trees peculiar to those regions, their transportation to this country is naturally attended with difficulties almost insurmountable."

"We not only discovered the *Bradypus melanotus*," claimed Swainson, "but we actually ate him..."

Artists drawings based on the corpses as well as the written accounts resulted in some hilariously inaccurate sketches.

Although their strange conformation was still poorly understood and insulted, a few naturalists began to perceive them differently. Swainson was the first to point out that the sloth had not been observed in his "proper haunts." When viewed on the ground, the sloth is so ill-suited and awkward, "as to acquire for him the name of sloth." He proposed, "See him, however, upon a branch, and his aspect is altogether different." This writer was first to recognize the "life for which it is so admirably and beautifully adapted... while its extraordinary formation and singular habits are but further proofs of the wondrous works of Omnipotence."

"We cannot, indeed, agree with Buffon, that species of animals have been created or organized for misery," continued Swainson. "We suspect, on the contrary, that there is little or no misery in the animal world, or at least among animals in a state of nature."

Eventually others began to agree. "Although by older naturalists sloths were regarded as ill-formed creatures destined to lead a miserable life on account of their misshapen limbs, no animals are in reality better adapted to their peculiar mode of existence..."

English writer Charles Waterton moved to British Guyana in 1804 and resided there for many years. His book, *Wanderings in South America*, reflected a better understanding of the sloth and offered an explanation for the common misunderstanding. "It mostly happens that Indians and negroes are the people who catch the sloth and bring it to the white man... these errors have naturally arisen by examining the sloth in those places where Nature never intended that he should be exhibited. Though all other quadrupeds may be described while resting upon the ground, the sloth is an exception to this rule, and that his history must be written while he is in the tree." Waterton argued, "The sloth is as much at a loss to proceed on his journey upon a smooth and level floor, as a man would be who had to walk a mile on stilts upon a line of featherbeds."

Waterton also discouraged the abuse of sloths. "His looks, his gestures and his cries all conspire to entreat you to take pity on him. These are the only



Bradypus as drawn by 18th Century French naturalist Alcide D'Orbigny (1802–1857)

weapons of defense which Nature hath given him. While other animals assemble in herds, or in pairs range through these boundless wilds, the sloth is solitary and almost stationary. He cannot escape from you. It is said his piteous moans make the tiger relent and turn out of the way. Do not then level your gun at him or pierce him with a poisoned arrow—he has never hurt one living creature.”

Some have pointed out that a sloth could better be described as a four-armed, rather than a four-legged animal. While legs are dominated by extensor muscles designed to bear weight, arms are dominated by retractor muscles designed to pull. A sloth’s survival is therefore predicated upon drawing in rather than pushing away, and is clearly well designed for living in the trees. On the ground it is relatively helpless, barely able to support its own weight. On a flat surface its claws scratch around in a futile effort to gain purchase.



A sloth in the road is a helpless animal
Photograph by Jeri Ledbetter

In an undisturbed rainforest a sloth would have little reason to crawl upon the ground, as it would be able to move from tree to tree across the canopy. But when humans clear the forest, sloths are invariably forced to the ground. Out of their element, defenseless and painfully obvious, this is how humans typically see a sloth.

In the early 1900s William Beebe conducted the first true research of the *Bradypus*, studying them at Kartabo, British Guyana, for several years. In a lengthy article appearing in *Zoologica* in 1926 Beebe offered a description that, while sometimes hilarious, was unfettered with blatant anthropomorphic bias. Noting Buffon’s claim that one more defect would have prevented the sloth’s existence, he pointed out that “A sloth in Paris would doubtless fulfill the prophecy of the French scientist, but on the other hand, Buffon clinging upside-down to a branch of a tree in the jungle would expire even sooner.”

“When... a sloth lifts itself from branch to branch, drawing its whole weight upward with three fingers and no effort,” he said, “one is forced to admiration, as in the supremely graceful, effortless feats of superlative acrobats...”

Although less judgmental of the *Bradypus*, Beebe was unable to refrain from sarcasm. On the capturing of sloths Beebe wrote, “At first they show the resignation to fate characteristic of the free animal when approached on their native branch. They roll up, hide their heads, and wait for the blow to descend, or to pass. After a few days when there comes to their dull comprehension the fact that my presence does not mean physical harm, they begin to move about freely and to feed, and with this phase is correlated a pacifistic resentment of my approach, and instead of cringing, they make futile attacks with their fore claws, and then climb slowly away.”

Following Beebe’s work a new view emerged of an animal that had been so long reviled. As the theory of evolution became more widely accepted, naturalists began to recognize the remarkable adaptations of the sloth for life in the rainforest canopy.

So What Is a Sloth?

Sloths are remarkably well adapted to an arboreal browsing lifestyle. Their fur grows in the opposite direction of most animals, effectively shedding water away from their bodies when they hang upside-down. Several types of algae grow in their fur, providing camouflage. Their specialized hands and feet have long, curved claws that allow them to hang upside-down from branches with very little effort.



Three-toed sloth
Photograph by Jeri Ledbetter

Leaves, their main food source, provide little energy or nutrition and do not digest easily. To adjust for this sloths have very large, specialized, slow-acting stomachs with multiple compartments in which symbiotic bacteria break down the tough leaves.

As much as two-thirds of a well-fed sloth's body weight consists of digestive organs and their contents. The digestive process can take as long as a month to complete. Sloths utilize their low-energy food source with a range of economy measures. They have very low metabolic rates (less than half of that expected for a creature of their size), and maintain very low body temperatures.

Sloths move only when necessary and then very slowly: they have about half as much muscle tissue as other animals of similar weight. They can move

at a marginally higher speed if they are in immediate danger from a predator, but they burn large amounts of energy doing so.

They also sleep a lot—as much as 18 hours a day. They sometimes hang upside-down from a branch to snooze, but more often curl up into a little furry ball in the fork of tree limbs.

Their skeletons are quite unusual as well. While most mammals have seven cervical vertebrae (including the giraffe), the *Choloepus* has only six. However, the *Bradypus* is graced with nine. This adaptation allows them to crane their heads around 360 degrees horizontally, and another 270 degrees vertically. This leads to some bizarre and alarming contortions.

Sloths spend most of their time in the trees, where they move gracefully upside-down using their powerful, hook-like claws. They rarely venture to the ground, where they are awkward and quite vulnerable to attack. However, they are strong and graceful swimmers, floating effortlessly on their bellies or using all four limbs to move. They re-

main remarkably high, even when their fur is well soaked. Most of the propulsion is generated by the front legs, which swing wide on each side nearly to the tail. “The hind legs and posterior half of the body wobble feebly from side to side,” wrote Beebe, “to meet first one, then the other backward-coming front leg.” They have been observed swimming across lakes and rivers to new feeding grounds. A male *Bradypus* can swim at a rate of more than twenty-five feet per minute.

They are solitary animals, pairing only long enough to mate. The mother bears one infant at a time, and carries it clinging to her belly for up to a year as it learns the ways of the sloth.

Sloths are known for their tenacity to life, clinging to survival well beyond what any other animal could



Sloths are good swimmers
Photograph by Jeri Ledbetter

endure. They have remarkable freedom from infection following injury. Beebe reported the recovery of a sloth, with no apparent ill effects, after forty minutes of immersion in water. One was said to have survived for thirty hours after decerebration, and many have witnessed a sloth falling up to 90 feet to the forest floor without injury.

“Of all animals, not even the toad or tortoise excepted, this poor ill-formed creature is the most tenacious of life,” wrote Charles Waterton. “It exists long after it has received wounds which would have destroyed any other animal; and it may be said, on seeing a mortally wounded sloth, that life disputes with death every inch of flesh in its body.”

Besides their main defenses of camouflage, stealth and tenacious grips, their hides are tough, with a heavy coat of hair and dense underfur. Their organs are protected by 23 pair of ribs.

Their primary predators are anacondas, jaguars and harpy eagles. In an effort to warm themselves, sloths tend to sleep high in the trees between six and ten in the morning when the harpy eagle usually hunts. This makes them susceptible to attack; sloths constitute about $\frac{1}{3}$ of the diet of this large endangered raptor.

The two species of *Choloepus* are faster moving, yet they still doze up to 18 hours a day. They are larger as well than the *Bradypus*, weighing up to twice as much. In addition to leaves, they eat slow-moving creatures and bird eggs.

The *Bradypus*

The *Bradypus* are by far the most lethargic of the species. The scientific name is derived from the Latin “brady,” meaning “slow,” and “pus” meaning “foot.”

Noted for their slowness of movement and fondness of sleep, three-toed sloths are physically incapable of rapid movement. They are often found in the *Cecropia* tree, the leaves and fruits of which are a favored food. The design of this palm-like tree is reminiscent of Dr. Seuss—with only a few leaves at the very top of tall, thin trunks.

Their bodies are covered with thick hair about two inches long that varies in color with indistinct patches of white, black, brown and auburn. It looks quite coarse, but is surprisingly soft. The long outer hairs are oval shaped with shallow air pockets and deep transverse cracks that encourage colonization of algae.

During the rainy season this algae becomes noticeably green, which helps camouflage them against the rainforest backdrop. In the dry season the algae appears dirty brown, and the sloth almost disappears among dead leaves and bark.

Several specialized moths and beetles live in the sloth’s fur. When the sloth descends to the ground to urinate and defecate, only about once a week, the sloths lay eggs in the dung. Unlike nearly everything else in the jungle, sloth dung decomposes very slowly, which allows the eggs time to hatch as well as provides a feast for the larvae.

Beneath all the fur is very little mass—they weigh only about eight pounds. On most species, males are distinguished by a bright orange patch on their backs.

A sloth can inflict severe wounds by using its claws in a swinging scythe-like sweep of the forearm, but even an angered three-toed sloth is rarely compelled to do so. And although its jaws have powerful muscles, the bite is easy enough to avoid. William Beebe wrote, “When fully enraged, having mentally attained the emotional level of annoyance of other wild animals, male sloths will, at this stage, slowly reach forward with the head, open the mouth and attempt a languid bite.”

A Bradypus won't reach sexual maturity for up to six years. They are rarely seen together except when mating. The female Bradypus produces a shrill scream, almost painful to the human ear. It lasts several seconds; she will repeat it every hour or so for several days to solicit a mate. Beebe experimented with reproducing the tone, which he claimed was upper D-sharp. Surrounding notes as C or E had

no effect upon male sloths, he said, but “D-sharp aroused all the interest which their poor, dull minds could bring to bear.” Gestation lasts between four and six months, with about one year between births.

William Beebe claimed that all of a sloth's senses are on a very low order of development. Compared with those of most mammals, man's acuity is extremely low, yet it is higher than a Bradypus in every area except the sense of smell.

Bradypus sloths have very poor eyesight. Their eyes are round, convex and set wide apart. They are primarily adapted for low light and have low acuity. Adult sloths can't move their eyes, but rather turn their heads, although infants have better acuity and will follow with their eyes and move their heads in the appropriate direction.

Their noses are small, black, hairless, soft and quite moist. Sloths rely largely on their sense of smell to find food, as well as to sniff for rotten branches which might crack under their weight.



Three-toed sloth on the ground
Photograph by Jeri Ledbetter

Their ears are small and inconspicuous, barely visible within the fur. Beebe didn't think they were particularly useful. “I have fired a gun close to a slumbering sloth, and to one feeding, and aroused but little attention,” he claimed. However he allowed that “This is perhaps due, not so much to deafness, as to total lack of interest in such a noise.” This is a key distinction. Certainly it would not be in a sloth's interest to react to noise by movement since they can't run away; their best hope for survival is *not* to react.

Their sense of touch is fairly dull. “Two or three nudges will awaken the animal and make it look sleepily in every direction but the right one. When wide awake and fencing

laboriously, if a sloth is touched on the back, it will look up and down before it occurs to it to twist its wonderfully mobile neck and look behind.” Beebe observed the sensory capacity of a *Bradypus* by separating a mother from its baby. A baby sloth will produce a loud bleating noise when separated from its mother. The mother will sometimes respond, but more often will simply search quietly.

In Beebe’s experiment, the infant cried mightily, but the mother couldn’t locate it. “Many times she looked straight in the direction of her offspring climbing awkwardly along five feet away. But neither sight, hearing nor smell availed anything.”

As soon as a sloth is born, the infant’s job is to cling to its mother’s fur. Occasionally a baby sloth will lose its grip. As they are sturdily built, it will likely survive the fall, yet may die anyway if the mother is

unable to locate it or unwilling to leave the safety of the trees to retrieve it.

Scientists have pondered for decades why the *Bradypus* is so slow. It is certainly not due to a choice of being lazy, or due to the cruelty of a supreme being as early accounts theorized. They are physically incapable of rapid movement, largely due to the type of muscle they have. Leaves, their primary food source, have a low energy content; strict foliivores tend to move slowly. Also the leaves they eat may contain toxins that require a low rate of absorption. Researchers have injected various stimulants, such as epinephrine, which resulted in an increased heart rate but not a quickening of the sloth.

The Future of the Sloth

Although unable to survive outside the tropical rainforests of South and Central America, within that environment sloths have been outstandingly successful creatures: they can account for as much as half the total energy consumption and two-thirds of the total terrestrial mammalian biomass in some areas.

Yet as man encroaches ever farther into New World jungles, their numbers are in rapid decline.

Some human cultures are known to eat sloths, and in some areas it is considered a delicacy. A member of the Guayami tribe on Isla Bastimientos in Panama said that sloth bone is good for pain. They dry the bones and grind them up to brew into a tea. Another Guayami said he won’t eat sloths “because they are so poor; they have nothing.” Natives from British Guyana believe that if you shoot a sloth it will ruin your gun. Spanish friars warned, “He who eats of the flesh of the perico ligero dies of it; because it is so phlegmatic.”

The sloth’s greatest danger from humans is not from being hunted, but from the ever-increasing encroachment into their habitat. According to a researcher, Dr. Des Gilmore, “human activity is the major threat to the continued existence of sloths.”

The two-fingered *Choloepus hoffmanis* is listed as a threatened species. Of the five species of *Bradypus*, the Maned Sloth, the *Bradypus torquatus*, is listed



Orphaned baby three-toed sloth
Photograph by Jeri Ledbetter



**The Pygmy sloth, recently discovered on a tiny island off the coast of Panama, is threatened
Photograph by Jeri Ledbetter**

as endangered and the newly-discovered Pygmy Sloth, *Bradypus pygmaeus*, was recently added to the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

Although the *Choloepus* adapts well to zoos, it is nearly impossible to maintain a *Bradypus* in captivity outside its normal habitat. With few exceptions, three-toed sloths have lived no longer than a few weeks or months in captivity. Their only hope of survival is through protection of their habitat.

Try This Fun Exercise for All Ages

Three-toed sloths are physically incapable of anything but slow movement. They even blink slowly. Pretend to be a sloth, not allowing any muscle to move fast—not a finger, your head, or your eyes. It's harder than you might think, and very relaxing.

Related Websites

www.Slothmovie.com

www.Slothrescue.com

www.fundacionunau.org (Spanish)

www.Slothclub.org

www.ARKive

Further Reading

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Britton, S.W. "Form and Function in the Sloth." *Quarterly Review of Biology* 15:13-34 (1940): 190-207.

