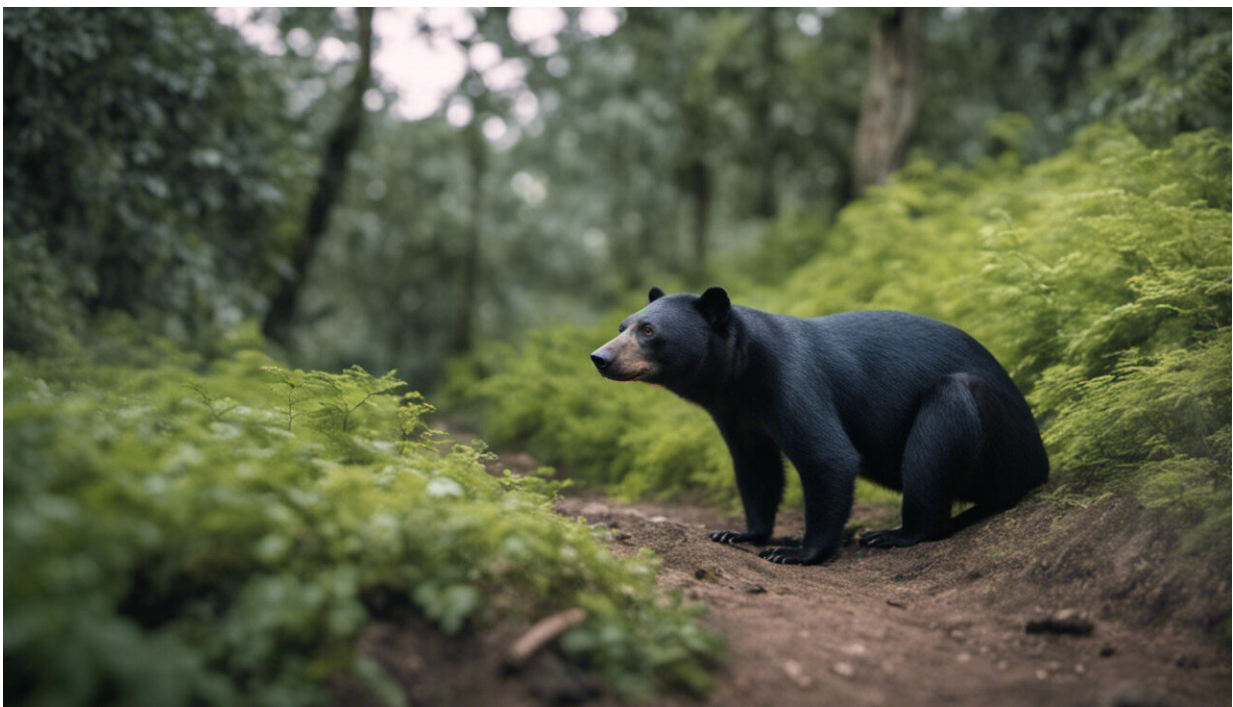


Sun bears appear so human-like they are mistaken for people in suits—experts explain

August 17 2023, by Chris Newman, Christina Buesching and Dingzhen Liu



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

When Angela, a Malayan sun bear, stood up and waved to visitors to her enclosure at the Huangzhou Zoo in China on July 27, she became a social media sensation. Her build, posture and seemingly friendly gesture seemed so human that [people speculated](#) that she was actually a

costumed performer. The talk gathered so much momentum, the zoo had to deny the claims. But that just goes to show how little people know about these fascinating animals.

Angela is an authentic bear, well known for [her antics at the zoo](#).

Grizzlies and [polar bears](#) are huge, standing 2.5 meters tall and weighing 400-700kg. But not all bear species are so big. Angela's dainty 1.3m, 50kg stature is typical for a sun bear. Sun bears often stand upright and mothers will even walk around [cradling their babies](#) in their arms. The Paradise Wildlife Park in Hertfordshire, UK, recently posted a video of one of its [sun bears, Kyra](#), standing upright.

Bears generally carry some extra fat and tropical sun bears don't have the thick fur of their cold climate cousins. So poor Angela's skin folds are there for all to see as she suffers some "pants sag".

What about the waving?

Only animals that evolved climbing ability, like bears, raccoons, primates and some of the cat family, can turn their palms upwards and [move their forearms side-to-side](#). This allows them to grab hold of trees. Animals that evolved to run long distances, like deer, wolves and horses, can't do this.

Think about your pet dog giving its paw. The motion is quite different to a wave. Sun bears are the strongest climbers in the bear family, and so, in some sense, Angela is waving [because she can](#).

As for her motivation, if she was frightened, she'd probably run away from the crowds and hide in her indoor space. Although sun bears do stand up and display their creamy orange chest patches when they feel threatened, she sees humans every day. We think that most probably she

simply wants to stand up and clearly occupy her territory when faced with visitors, a bit like we might stand on our front step when strangers call on us.

Standing up also allows sun bears to smell over longer distances. Although solitary in the wild, [sun bears are good communicators](#) when housed in groups and are the only animals other than humans and gorillas that can mimic each other's facial expressions for social appeasement. It is possible Angela was mimicking the visitors waving at her.

Nevertheless, we probably shouldn't credit Angela with human-like motivations for waving. Sun bears use their paws a lot for [finding food in the wild](#), such as fruits, ants, beetles, termites and even honey. Standing on their back legs frees up their front legs to rip, poke and prod until they've got their dinner. They also have a 30cm long tongue that helps them lick up their food. Most likely then, Angela was just making a gesture of displaced curiosity, like a cat pawing at an image on a TV screen, while defending her enclosure.

A teaching moment

Since Angela appeared on the Chinese blogging site Weibo, [visitor numbers are up](#) by 30% at the Huangzhou zoo and millions have taken an interest internationally. While this story is cute, there's a serious side. Sun bears, properly known as *Helarctos malayanus*, are listed as "vulnerable" on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) [red list of threatened species](#). This means sun bears urgently need protection.

Six out of the world's eight bear species are [threatened with extinction](#). South China is part of the natural range of sun bears but very few are left in the wild in China. The majority of the remaining wild sun bear population lives in Malaysia, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, India,

Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Sun bears can live over 20 years but are slow to mature. Mothers [invest a lot of care](#) into raising their one or two cubs and don't get pregnant again until their cubs become independent, at around three years old. It's why [males of most bear species](#) often try to kill a female's cub, to cause her to become receptive to mating. She won't engage if she has cubs.

Like all Asian bear species, sun bears are [poached for bile](#) from their gall bladders, which is used in traditional medicine. They are also killed for their paws, which are eaten as an expensive delicacy. International trade in these bear parts is banned under the [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species](#) (Cites) but enforcement is inadequate.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

China is working to improve wildlife protection with [stricter laws](#) and by designating more [national parks](#).

Zoos worldwide are also playing an important role in educating the public about conservation. For many years, China has focused its efforts on protecting the giant panda. Panda conservation is driven by the iconic status of pandas both in China and abroad. But thanks to Angela, another bear species is now sharing the attention.

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