

## MY WAY OF THINKING

## MARK CARWARDINE

The conservationist discusses China's attitudes towards animal welfare and invites your thoughts on the subject.

A shocking new hotel has opened its doors in the north-eastern province of Heilongjiang, in China. Billed as the world's first 'polar bear hotel', it offers guests a round-the-clock view of two captive polar bears from the comfort of their rooms.

The bears live in an indoor 'dungeon' in the centre of the hotel, in what would normally be the foyer. Under harsh warm lights, they pace back and forth – showing clear signs of distress – amid fake rocks and icicles. It's nothing less than a 21st century bear pit.

But far from receiving a frosty reception – which would undoubtedly be the case in a more enlightened part of the world – it opened to full bookings from Chinese guests.

Keeping a couple of hapless polar bears in a hotel doesn't come close to the countless animal atrocities happening across China every day. But it is symptomatic. Chinese attitudes towards animals and their welfare are dreadful. In my experience, many Chinese people simply do not understand that animals feel pain, suffer from stress and experience fear.

As part of my work I've seen unimaginable animal cruelty in many parts of the world – from the slaughtering of pilot whales in the Faroe Islands to seal clubbing in Canada – but I've witnessed more intrinsic brutality towards animals in China than everywhere else put together.

Animal cruelty is abundant and widespread in everyday life in the world's most populous country. It's rife in traditional medicine, which uses bear bile, tiger bone, pangolin scales and a host of other wildlife products. It's rife

in food production – not least, some 14 million dogs and cats are slaughtered inhumanely for their meat every year. It's rife in zoos, circuses and theme parks, too.

China has no national law against the mistreatment of animals. Chinese conservationists and environmental lawyers have been working on the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act since 2007, but it remains a work in progress.

Even so, there are signs of change. First, China has a robust and rapidly growing animal welfare and conservation movement, with more than 200 registered wildlife NGOs (some state-sponsored) and countless new animal rescue centres. Second, recently affluent city-dwellers have a new-found love of pet dogs (Beijing now has five-star pet-friendly hotels and many restaurants provide bowls of water) and this seems to be stirring a

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more compassionate attitude towards animals. Third, young people in China have a better understanding of animal welfare; these 'little emperors' and 'little empresses', as they are known, are the epicentre of Chinese life and their parents and grandparents genuinely listen to their points of view.

Even the National People's Congress is beginning to view animal cruelty as a source of international shame. Indeed, China's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs recently declared that dogs should be considered companions rather than 'livestock'. Eating wildlife was banned last year (albeit in response to the coronavirus pandemic) and even the state broadcaster, China Central Television, has spoken out passionately against animal abuse.

Many years ago, I inspected a zoo that provided visitors with stones to throw at two malnourished and bleeding lions chained to the railings; another released a live donkey into a tiger enclosure as entertainment for the cheering crowd. Nowadays, that kind of abhorrence would trigger an uproar on Chinese social media.

China may be years behind the rest of the world and there is still huge resistance to appropriate animal welfare laws. A new polar bear hotel is still considered de rigueur, for goodness sake. But I feel more optimistic than ever before that there is light at the end of the tunnel. 🐾

**MARK CARWARDINE** is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK?** If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email [wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk](mailto:wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk)

