

MY WEIRD PROMPTS

Podcast Transcript

EPISODE #179

Beyond the Smile: The Truth About Ethical Sloth Tourism

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EPISODE SYNOPSIS

In this episode of My Weird Prompts, Herman and Corn Poppleberry explore the fascinating world of sloths, debunking the myth of their "laziness" and revealing them as evolutionary masterpieces of energy conservation. Prompted by a listener's curiosity about digital imagery and real-world encounters, the brothers discuss the critical importance of ethical wildlife tourism, explaining why that viral sloth selfie might be more harmful than it looks. They break down the "Sloth Selfie Code" and the biological reality behind the sloth's famous smile, which is often a mask for extreme stress. Beyond ethics, the duo dives into the incredible trivia of sloth biology—from their multi-week digestive cycles and surprising swimming abilities to the entire ecosystem of moths and algae living in their fur. They also look back at the prehistoric Megatherium to show how these creatures transitioned from giant ground-dwellers to specialized canopy specialists. Join the brothers for an insightful discussion on how to navigate the world of eco-tourism responsibly while marveling at one of nature's most misunderstood mammals.

TRANSCRIPT

Corn

Welcome back everyone to another episode of My Weird Prompts. We are coming to you as always from our home here in Jerusalem. It is January sixth, twenty twenty-six, and I am here with my brother.

Herman

Herman Poppleberry, at your service. And Corn, I have to say, this prompt from Daniel really made me smile. Our housemate has been doing some deep dives into digital imagery lately, but it is nice to see him pivoting back to the biological world.

Corn

Right, he mentioned how he was using generative models to create images of sloths in supermarkets, which is a hilarious mental image, but it sparked a real-world question for him. He wants to know how to actually have an ethical encounter with a sloth and what the broader parameters are for responsible wildlife tourism. Plus, he is looking for some trivia to round out his education.

Herman

It is a perfect topic for us. You know, sloths are often misunderstood as just being lazy or slow, but they are actually evolutionary masterpieces of energy conservation. But before we get into the biology, we should probably address the elephant, or the sloth, in the room: the desire to touch them.

Corn

That is exactly where Daniel's head was at. He found the Sloth Conservation Foundation and realized that the very things we find cute about them can actually lead to some pretty harmful behaviors from tourists. So, Herman, when we talk about an ethical encounter, what is the starting point? What is the golden rule?

Herman

The golden rule is simple to state but often hard for people to follow: look, but never touch. In the world of wildlife conservation, especially for arboreal mammals like sloths, human contact is almost always a net negative. The Sloth Conservation Foundation, or Slo-Co, is very clear about this. They have been leading the charge with the Sloth Selfie Code and supporting the Costa Rican government's Stop Animal Selfies campaign.

Corn

I have seen those hashtags. You are in Costa Rica or Panama, and someone offers you the chance to hold a sloth for a photo. It seems harmless because the sloth looks like it is smiling, right?

Herman

That is the big misconception! That smile is not an expression of joy or relaxation. It is actually just the natural shape of their facial structure. A sloth can be absolutely terrified, with its heart rate skyrocketing and its stress hormones peaking, and it will still look like it is having a pleasant afternoon. When humans hold them, it triggers a fight or flight response, but because their entire biology is built for slow movement, they cannot exactly run away. They just freeze. It is a state of tonic immobility.

Corn

So we are essentially misinterpreting their biological stillness as consent or enjoyment. That is a heavy thought. It reminds me of what we discussed back in episode two hundred seventy-seven when we were talking about A-I weights. We often project human-like meaning onto systems or creatures that are operating on a completely different set of internal logic.

Herman

That is a great connection. We anthropomorphize them. We see a slow-moving, smiling creature and think, oh, he wants a hug. But in reality, a human picking up a sloth is roughly equivalent to a giant alien picking us up while we are trying to sleep. It is disorienting and physically taxing. Sloths are heterothermic, meaning they have very poor control over their body temperature. Dealing with the stress of a human encounter can actually cause their internal systems to haywire, potentially leading to digestive failure.

Corn

Okay, so if holding them is out, what does a responsible encounter look like? If Daniel goes to Costa Rica tomorrow, how does he do this the right way?

Herman

The best way is to see them in the wild, from a distance, with a certified guide. You want to look for the Sloth Friendly Network label. This is a certification for businesses and tour operators that follow strict ethical guidelines. This means no baiting the animals with food, no touching, and maintaining a respectful distance of at least two to three meters.

Corn

Two to three meters seems like a good rule of thumb for most wildlife, actually. It gives them enough space to feel like they have an exit route.

Herman

Exactly. And it is not just about the physical distance. It is about the environment. An ethical encounter happens in the animal's natural habitat, not in a cage or a roadside attraction. If someone is walking around a town with a sloth on a leash or in a basket, that is a massive red flag. Those animals are often taken from the wild illegally, and they usually do not survive long in captivity because their diet is so specialized.

Corn

You mentioned their diet and their metabolism. I think this is a good spot to dive into some of that trivia Daniel was asking for. I have always been fascinated by how they actually process food. It is not like our digestive system at all, is it?

Herman

Not even close. Sloths are folivores, meaning they eat mostly leaves. But leaves are incredibly difficult to digest and provide very little energy. To compensate, sloths have a multi-chambered stomach, similar to a cow, but even slower. It can take anywhere from eleven to thirty days for a sloth to digest a single meal, with the average being about sixteen days.

Corn

Sixteen days? That is incredible. So they are essentially walking, or hanging, compost bins.

Herman

Pretty much! Their stomach makes up about thirty percent of their total body weight. And because the process is so slow, they have to be very careful about their body temperature. If they get too cold, the bacteria in their gut that helps digest the leaves will stop working, and the sloth can actually starve to death even with a full stomach. They actually have to bask in the sun just to get their digestion moving.

Corn

That is a terrifying thought. It really highlights how delicate their balance is. It also explains why they move so slowly. They literally do not have the calories to spare for a sprint.

Herman

Right. They move at an average speed of about zero point twenty-four kilometers per hour. But here is a piece of trivia that surprises people: they are actually excellent swimmers. When they are in the water, they can move three times faster than they do on land. They use a kind of breaststroke and can hold their breath for up to forty minutes underwater by slowing their heart rate to one third of its normal pace.

Corn

Wait, forty minutes? Most humans can barely manage two. Why do they need to hold their breath for that long?

Herman

It is partly an escape mechanism and partly just a way to travel between patches of forest in flooded areas. It is another example of their extreme efficiency. And speaking of efficiency, they have another secret power: their necks. While most mammals, including us and even giraffes, have seven neck vertebrae, some species of sloths have up to ten. This allows them to swivel their heads two hundred seventy degrees, giving them a massive field of vision without having to move their bodies and waste energy.

Corn

I want to go back to the parameters for responsible wildlife encounters more broadly, because Daniel asked about the general rules too. We talked about sloths specifically, but what are the universal signs that a wildlife tour is ethical versus exploitative?

Herman

That is a vital question, especially in twenty twenty-six, where eco-tourism is a huge industry. First, look at the focus of the tour. Is the focus on the animal's well-being and education, or is it on the tourist's entertainment and photo opportunities? If a tour promises a guaranteed interaction or a photo with the animal, that is a bad sign. True wildlife encounters are unpredictable.

Corn

Right, because wild animals do not follow a schedule. If they are always there and ready for a photo, they are probably being coerced or fed.

Herman

Exactly. Second, check their conservation credentials. Do they partner with local non-profits? Do they contribute a portion of their profits to habitat restoration? Ethical operators are usually very transparent about where their money goes. Third, look at the group size. Large, noisy groups are incredibly stressful for most wild animals. An ethical tour will usually limit the number of people to a small, manageable group that can move quietly through the forest.

Corn

And what about the behavior of the guides? I imagine that is a huge factor.

Herman

It is the most important factor. A good guide should be an educator, not just a spotter. They should be explaining the biology and the threats the animals face, like habitat fragmentation or power lines. Speaking of power lines, that is a huge issue for sloths in urbanizing areas. They see a wire and think it is a vine, and the results are often fatal. Ethical operators will often be involved in projects to insulate those lines or build Sloth Crossings.

Corn

Sloth Crossings! That is what Daniel mentioned too. These are essentially ropes or structures that allow them to cross roads or gaps in the canopy without coming down to the ground.

Herman

Yes! And coming down to the ground is the most dangerous thing a sloth can do. This leads to my favorite piece of sloth trivia, and it is a bit gross, but it is fascinating. Sloths only poop once a week, and they come down to the forest floor to do it.

Corn

I have heard about this. It seems so counter-intuitive. Why would an animal that is so vulnerable on the ground take the risk of climbing down just to use the bathroom? They could just... let it go from the branches, like every other arboreal animal.

Herman

It is one of the great mysteries of biology, but the leading theory involves a symbiotic relationship with moths. There is a specific species called the sloth moth that lives in their fur. When the sloth goes down to the ground to defecate, the moths lay their eggs in the waste. When the larvae hatch, they feed on the waste, turn into moths, and fly up to find a sloth to live on.

Corn

Okay, but what does the sloth get out of that? It sounds like the moths are getting a free ride and a nursery.

Herman

The theory is that the moths help fertilize the growth of algae in the sloth's fur by increasing nitrogen levels. If you look at a sloth in the wild, they often have a greenish tint. That is actual algae growing on them. The algae provides camouflage, but recent research shows the sloths actually eat the algae! It is a lipid-rich, highly digestible supplement to their poor diet. So, the sloth risks its life once a week to maintain this tiny, portable garden on its back.

Corn

That is mind-blowing. It is a whole world living on their backs. It really puts the "weird" in My Weird Prompts. It also makes the idea of a human touching them even worse. We have oils on our skin, perfumes, sunscreens... we are basically dumping chemicals into a delicate ecosystem when we pet them.

Herman

Precisely. You are disrupting a biological balance that has evolved over millions of years. And speaking of millions of years, did you know that sloths used to be giants?

Corn

Oh, the Megatherium! I remember seeing a skeleton of one in a museum once. They were the size of elephants, right?

Herman

Yes! They could reach six meters in length and weigh several tons. They lived in the Americas until about twelve thousand years ago. They were ground-dwellers because, obviously, no tree could hold a multi-ton sloth. The modern tree sloths we see today are actually quite distant relatives of those giants. They evolved to be small and arboreal as a way to occupy a different ecological niche.

Corn

It is amazing to think about how they transitioned from these massive ground-shakers to these quiet, slow-moving canopy dwellers. It shows how successful the "slow and steady" strategy really is. It is not about laziness; it is about extreme specialization.

Herman

Exactly. They are basically living on the absolute edge of what is metabolically possible for a mammal. They are even twice as strong as a human relative to their size when it comes to their grip strength.

Corn

So, when Daniel is looking for these "parameters for responsible encounters," he is really looking for ways to respect that edge. I think we should talk a bit more about the "greenwashing" aspect you mentioned. In twenty twenty-six, every company claims to be eco-friendly. How do you spot the fakes?

Herman

One big indicator is the use of animals in marketing. If the website is covered in photos of tourists holding or being very close to the animals, that is a red flag. Another thing to look for is the "sanctuary" label. The word sanctuary is not regulated in many countries. Anyone can put up a sign that says "Sloth Sanctuary" and then charge people to hold the animals.

Corn

That is deceptive. So a real sanctuary would probably not allow you to touch the animals at all.

Herman

Correct. A legitimate rescue or rehabilitation center will keep human contact to an absolute minimum. Their goal is to release the animal back into the wild. If an animal gets used to humans, it can never be released because it loses its natural fear. If you visit a real sanctuary, you will likely see the animals through a fence or from a distance, and the staff will be very strict about noise. You can also check the Slowly Planet guide, which is the gold standard for sloth-friendly tourism.

Corn

That makes total sense. It is the difference between a zoo and a hospital. You do not go into a hospital to pet the patients.

Herman

That is a perfect analogy. And for the animals that cannot be released due to permanent injuries, a good sanctuary will provide them with a habitat that mimics the wild as much as possible, with plenty of space and minimal human interference.

Corn

You know, we have talked a lot about the physical aspects, but I am curious about the psychological side of this. Why do you think humans have such a strong urge to touch wild animals? Especially something like a sloth?

Herman

I think it comes from a place of genuine wonder, but it is filtered through a consumerist mindset. We live in an age where we feel like we can "possess" an experience if we can capture it and touch it. A photo of a sloth in a tree is beautiful, but a photo of us holding a sloth feels like a trophy. It is a way of saying, "I was here, and I had this unique connection."

Corn

But it is a false connection. It is a one-way street where the human gets a thrill and the animal gets a cortisol spike.

Herman

Right. True connection with nature comes from observation and understanding, not from physical possession. When you sit quietly and watch a sloth move through the canopy, you start to notice the way it tests each branch, the way it blends into the shadows. That is a much deeper experience than a five-second photo op.

Corn

I agree. It requires patience, which is something we are often short on these days. It is fitting that to truly appreciate a sloth, you have to slow down to their pace.

Herman

Exactly! It is a lesson in mindfulness. If you are rushing through the forest, you will never see a sloth. They are the masters of being invisible. You have to stop, be still, and let your eyes adjust to the subtle movements of the forest.

Corn

Let's talk about the specific types of sloths. Daniel mentioned three-toed versus two-toed. Is there a big difference between them?

Herman

There is! And here is a bit of trivia that even some experts get wrong: all sloths actually have three toes on their back feet. The names "two-toed" and "three-toed" actually refer to the number of fingers on their front limbs. So, technically, we should call them two-fingered and three-fingered sloths.

Corn

Wait, really? That is a great distinction.

Herman

Yes. The two-fingered sloths are generally larger, more aggressive, and more nocturnal. They have a slightly more varied diet and can sometimes eat small insects or lizards. The three-fingered sloths are smaller, have that iconic dark "mask" around their eyes, and are strictly folivores. They are also the ones that are more commonly seen during the day.

Corn

I did not know two-fingered sloths could be aggressive. I cannot imagine a sloth being "aggressive" in the traditional sense.

Herman

Well, it is all relative. But a two-fingered sloth can move surprisingly fast if it feels threatened, and they have very sharp teeth and long claws. They will hiss and swipe at you. It is a good reminder that they are wild animals, not teddy bears.

Corn

Those claws are no joke. They are basically built-in hooks.

Herman

They are. And their grip is incredibly strong. A sloth's muscles are designed for hanging, not for pushing. Their tendons are arranged so that their default state is closed. They actually have to exert effort to open their claws. This means that a sloth can stay hanging from a branch even after it has died.

Corn

That is morbid but fascinating. It is like they are locked into the trees. It really emphasizes how much they belong there. When we bring them down for our own amusement, we are literally pulling them out of their biological safe zone.

Herman

Exactly. And that safe zone is shrinking. Habitat loss is the biggest threat they face. As forests are cleared for agriculture or development, sloths are forced into smaller and smaller patches of trees. This makes them more vulnerable to predators like jaguars and harpy eagles.

Corn

This is where the work Daniel was looking at becomes so important. The reforestation projects and the Sloth Crossings are trying to reconnect those fragments.

Herman

Yes. And as travelers, we can support that by choosing operators that invest in those specific projects. In twenty twenty-six, we have more tools than ever to verify these things. We can use A-I tools to help us parse through the "greenwashing" language in brochures.

Corn

It is funny you mention A-I tools. Remember back in episode two hundred seventy-three when we talked about the "twenty twenty-six problem" of A-I tool sprawl? Using A-I to audit the ethical claims of travel companies is actually a great use case.

Herman

It really is. You can feed a company's sustainability report into a model and ask it to look for inconsistencies. It is a way of holding these companies accountable.

Corn

So, if we were to summarize the "Daniel's Guide to Ethical Sloth-ing," what would the bullet points be?

Herman

Number one: Never touch or hold a sloth. If a tour offers this, walk away. Number two: Maintain a distance of at least three meters. Number three: Look for the Sloth Friendly Network certification or evidence of partnership with reputable groups like Slo-Co. Number four: Keep noise to a minimum and never use flash photography. And number five: Support habitat protection. The best way to save sloths is to save the trees they live in.

Corn

That is a solid list. And for the trivia fans, we have: the sixteen-day average digestion, the swimming speed, the symbiotic moths and algae they actually eat, the ten neck vertebrae, and the secret of their "two versus three" fingers.

Herman

And don't forget the giant ground sloths! It is always good to remember that the little guys we see today come from a very long and impressive lineage.

Corn

I think Daniel will be happy with that. It is a lot to chew on, much like a sloth with a tough leaf.

Herman

Ha! Hopefully it doesn't take him thirty days to digest all of this information. But honestly, the fact that he is asking these questions is such a good sign. It shows that the awareness is growing. People are moving away from the "animal as a prop" phase and into the "animal as a neighbor" phase.

Corn

"Animal as a neighbor." I like that. Especially here in Jerusalem, where we have our own unique urban wildlife. It is all about co-existing and respecting boundaries.

Herman

Exactly. Whether it is a sloth in Costa Rica or a gazelle on the outskirts of Jerusalem, the principles are the same. Respect the distance, protect the habitat, and appreciate the weirdness from afar.

Corn

Well, I think we have covered a lot of ground today, or a lot of canopy, I should say. This has been a great deep dive.

Herman

It really has. And I hope our listeners find this useful for their own travels. Wildlife tourism can be a force for good, but only if we are intentional about it.

Corn

Absolutely. If you enjoy the show and want to help us reach more people, please consider leaving a review on your favorite podcast app or on Spotify. It really does make a massive difference for independent shows like ours.

Herman

It really does. We love hearing from you all. And if you have your own weird prompts, you can always head over to myweirdprompts.com and use the contact form there.

Corn

Well, this has been episode two hundred seventy-eight of My Weird Prompts. I am Herman Popleberry.

Corn

And I am Corn. Thank you for joining us in our corner of Jerusalem. We will be back next week with more questions, more trivia, and probably more deep dives into things you never knew you needed to know.

Herman

Until then, keep it weird and keep it ethical.

Corn

Thanks for listening, everyone. See you next time.