

Flying the Flag of Extinction: Even Revered Animals Aren't Safe

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A century ago, [California's state flag](#) — emblazoned with the image of a California grizzly — was officially adopted. The bear depicted on the flag (the design is modeled after an 1846 battle flag) is "Monarch," a captive animal who'd died of old age in 1911 after he'd become a symbol of "strength and rejuvenation" for Californians after he survived the devastating 1906 earthquake. Ironically, the last remaining California grizzly was killed in 1922, so when the bear was officially adopted as the state animal in 1953, the animal was already extinct in the golden state.

Monarch, whose taxidermied body is on display at San Francisco's [California Academy of Sciences](#), underscores the sad fact that being an icon isn't enough to save an animal from extinction. In a more recent example of this effect, this year's celebrity-studded [tiger summit](#) in St. Petersburg helped publicize the fact that there are only 3,200 tigers left in the wild — a number that doesn't seem possible considering that the animal is a mascot for everything from [sports teams](#) to [breakfast cereals](#).

Nevertheless, charismatic animals do stand a better chance of receiving support than creatures that people deem unattractive or evil, like Madagascar's spooky-looking [aye-aye](#), which locals believe to be "harbingers of doom." The bottom line? Whether or not an animal is popular, it likely plays a crucial role in its ecosystem, and that's reason enough to support conservation efforts before [endangered wildlife](#) becomes nothing more than an image on a flag.

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