

Animal Instinct

Hours before giant waves pounded coastlines in South Asia, many animals started behaving strangely. In Sri Lanka, elephants trumpeted frantically and fled to higher ground. Bats and flamingos deserted low-lying areas. Many other animals escaped unharmed.

Wildlife experts are amazed that many animals survived the **tsunami**.¹ The series of huge waves killed thousands of people in South Asia and East Africa in 2004. Experts say animals might have sensed the approaching waves and moved to higher ground.

"I think animals can sense disaster. They know when things are happening in nature," said an official at the national wildlife department in Sri Lanka.



Philippe Desmazes/AFP/Getty Images

Elephants' sharp senses may have warned them about the tsunami.

¹ **tsunami**: a very large ocean wave that is produced by an under-the-sea earthquake or volcano eruption

More Wild Stories

Other stories of odd animal behavior before the tsunami have also surfaced. Giant waves flooded low-lying parts of Yala National Park in Sri Lanka, **uprooting**² trees and killing hundreds of people. Wildlife officials reported, however, that few animals died. The park is home to hundreds of animals, including elephants, monkeys, leopards, tigers, deer and water buffalo.

In Thailand, elephants carrying tourists from Japan bolted for the hills, and other elephants broke free of their chains. In one fishing village, nearly 1,000 locals escaped safely after birds squawked madly.

Making 'Sense' of It

Why might animals have known trouble was on the way? Forget special powers. Instead, experts say that animals have better senses of hearing, smell and sight than humans do. Those sharp senses help warn animals when natural disasters, such as volcanic eruptions or earthquakes, are about to happen.

"It doesn't surprise me that animals had an early warning of the tsunami," animal expert Michael Dee of the Los Angeles Zoo told *Weekly Reader*. "The senses of certain species are far stronger than what any human has." Dee points out that dogs, for example, have a stronger sense of smell than humans and that cats can see better in the dark than people.

Scientists say that animals might have felt the **vibrations**³ from the earthquake that set off the tsunami. In addition, many animals, including elephants, pigeons, and dogs, can also pick up **infrasound**. That is a sound that is too low in pitch for humans to hear.

"Elephants can hear or feel other elephants grumble up to 2 miles away, so they probably felt the earthquake," said Dee. "Their first **instinct** would be to move away from the direction of the sound." An instinct is a natural, untaught behavior or reaction.

² **uprooting:** pulling up so that even the roots come out of the ground

³ **vibration:** trembling motion


Before the tsunami struck, animals may have started to flee because they saw other creatures running. "Animals take their cues from other animals," said Dee.

The Mystery Continues

How animals sense danger has fascinated people for centuries. Most scientists are quick to point out, however, that nothing has ever been proven.

Will animal instincts be used to create a warning system about natural disasters anytime soon? "I wouldn't count on [it]," said Dee.

In the meantime, animals are helping out in other ways. For example, elephants are assisting in the cleanup of areas hit by the tsunami.

Hearing With Their Feet	
	<p>Scientists say that elephants can pick up vibrations from earthquakes through their broad feet.</p> <p>Elephants' toenails are in the skin and not attached to the toes.</p> <p>Elephants' soles have sensitive foot pads that detect vibrations, such as those from an earthquake. That signals elephants to move to more stable ground.</p>
<p>Leigh Haeger</p>	

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Yala National Park is home to hundreds of animals. Where is it located?
 - A Japan
 - B Thailand
 - C Sri Lanka
 - D the United States

2. Scientists say that elephants could have felt vibrations from the earthquake. Which of the following best describes the *effect* of feeling those vibrations?
 - A Elephants might have picked up infrasound.
 - B Elephants helped with cleanup efforts.
 - C Elephants may have sensed danger.
 - D Elephants made friends with other animals.

3. Which of the following conclusions does this passage support?
 - A Natural disasters can occur without warning.
 - B Most animals in East Asia and South Africa dislike water.
 - C Animals' sharp senses helped many escape the deadly waves.
 - D Dogs and cats make good pets because of their strong senses.

4. Read the following sentence from the passage: "Before the tsunami struck, animals may have started to flee because they saw other creatures running."

In this sentence, the word **flee** means

 - A remain quiet
 - B stay put
 - C run away
 - D make noise

5. Which statement best describes the central idea of this passage?
 - A In 2004, a tsunami killed thousands of people in South Asia and East Africa.
 - B Animals started to behave strangely before the tsunami struck.
 - C Many animals survived the tsunami because they sensed it coming.
 - D Animals have better senses of hearing, smell, and sight than humans do.

6. What did elephants do to help after the tsunami?

7. What is the author's reason for including the "Hearing With Their Feet" diagram with the story?

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

_____ humans can't pick up infrasound, some animals can.

- A Instead
- B Although
- C But
- D However

9. Answer the following questions based on the sentence below.

In 2004, tourists in Thailand were saved from a terrible tsunami because the elephants they were traveling on ran to higher ground.

Who? _____

(were) What? _____

Where? _____

When? in 2004

Why? _____

10. **Vocabulary Word:** assist: to help.

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: _____
