

New species of lemur discovered in Madagascar

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What is thought to be a new species of fork-marked lemur has been discovered in the forests of Madagascar. First spotted by the president of Conservation International, Russ Mittermeier, in 1995, the discovery was finally revealed on a BBC documentary, *Decade of Discovery*, this year.

The forked-marked lemur is part of the genus *Phaner*, specifically identifiable by their markings, size and long tongues. Like all species of lemur, they are indigenous to Madagascar's forests.

The first sighting happened while Dr. Mittermeier was searching for another species of lemur. "I was surprised to see a fork-marked lemur there, since this animal had not yet been recorded from the region," he recalled. He predicted that the primate he saw that day was probably a new species, but was unable to pursue the finding until now.

The expedition team consisted of a geneticist, Ed Louis, from the Omaha Zoo, a film crew from the BBC's Natural History Unit and Dr. Mittermeier himself. Their starting point was the area in which the first sighting had occurred.

The team set out at night to find the lemur by following its calls. Lemurs are well adapted to nocturnal activity, and this is when most of their movements and their sounds happen. Once the team located the lemurs in a tree, one of the animals was tranquilized and brought down from the tree to be examined and have its blood drawn.

During the observations they noticed that this lemur had slightly different colorations and performed an unusual head bobbing behavior not seen with other lemurs. Most interesting was a distinguishing white and feathery structure the scientists found beneath the lemur's tongue. The hypothesis is that the structure is used to obtain nectar more efficiently.

The deciding factor on whether or not this represents a new species of lemur is the genetic structure. Tests on the genetic make-up of the DNA are done to find out exactly where it fits into the taxonomy of primates.

Unfortunately, this animal might already be at the brink of extinction because of deforestation through logging and burning. The habitat for many animals is shrinking and at some point will not be able to sustain them at all.

"This is yet another remarkable discovery from the island of Madagascar, the world's highest priority biodiversity hot spot and one of the most extraordinary places in our planet," Dr. Mittermeier said.

"It is particularly remarkable that we continue to find new species of lemurs and many other plants and animals in this heavily impacted country, which has already lost 90 percent or more of its original vegetation."

Madagascar houses 101 species of lemur, not counting the recent observations. The island hosts 363 reptiles, 244 amphibians and 260 birds that are found nowhere else on the planet. Other recent discoveries that will be shown in the documentary are the pygmy three-toed sloth, the sengi; Chan's megastick, the world's longest insect, and the bamboo shark, which walks along the sea bed on fins.

Given these recent discoveries, there are surely many more animals and plants yet to be discovered—but the shrinking habitat, devastated by logging and burning of the forest, means species may never even be found before going extinct. With the increased logging has come about an increase in hunting of endangered animals, like lemurs.

The government is worsening habitat destruction. After the military coup in March 2009, which brought to power Andry Rajoelina, a free-for-all was

implemented for the logging of hardwoods, such as rosewood trees, that make up the rain forests. There are 47 species of redwood and over 100 ebony species that are indigenous to Madagascar and are at the brink of extinction. Some of the few places they still stand are in the national parks, which, established by the now exiled president Marc Ravalomanana, comprise only 10 percent of the original forest.

Because of the enormous biodiversity unique to Madagascar, ecotourism brings in \$390 million a year, but this has dropped off since the political turmoil. In the absence this major profit incentive for conservation, the government is planning new and more violent attacks on the rain forest.

Ironically, even though the EU, France, the US, the World Bank and IMF all suspended some level of financial support to Madagascar, they have not ceased to fund the illegal logging of hardwoods. This is not done directly, but through the support of banks, such as the Bank of Africa Madagascar, which is subsidized by the Agence Française du Développement, as well as the World Bank's International Finance Corporation, the Dutch development bank FMO, and the Banque Marocaine du Commerce Extérieur. Société Générale and Crédit Lyonnais, both part-owned by the French government, are also funding illegal timber cutting and transactions. The down-payments on stockpiles of wood are rarely 50 percent of the total price, forcing the traders to rely on the financial aid of banks to export and continue their operations.

The most prominent transporter of the timber is Delmas, a shipping company based in France. Historically, France was the colonial power in Madagascar and it still plays a very influential economic and political role.

The Malagasy people are desperate for work even if it means destruction of the forests. The economic crisis was a main component in the downfall of previous president Ravalomanana. Since the coup, all foreign governments have refused to recognize Rajoelina's administration and, in the name of restoring order, have blocked aid to the people of Madagascar. The masses are suffering from this isolation, while the elite still live comfortably.

Families are unable to send their children to school and many cannot even keep decent housing or pay for hospital care. Reports show that adults are so desperate

that they abandon their small children because they just cannot take care of them anymore. Many go into working for the illegal timber-cutting companies and selling bush-meat to support themselves.

Before the coup, the US had an agreement with Madagascar called the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), which let the Malagasy government use its people as cheap labor to produce and have duty-free export of textiles to America. Factories operating under this act employed 50,000 people directly and another 100,000 indirectly. The textile industry accounted for 60 percent of exports and about \$600 million annually, more than half of Madagascar's income. Since the suspension of the AGOA, most textile factories have closed, throwing many people out onto the street.

To offset this huge blow, Rajoelina has proposed a transitional program for the mining of nickel and copper. The hope is to regain the 7.1 percent economic growth Madagascar posted in 2008. The budget proposal expects the extraction industry to rise 228.2 percent in 2011 after 121.3 percent in expansion in 2010 from the mining done in Ambatovy. This project has been a joint venture between Canada's Sherritt International, Sumitomo Corp, Korea Resources and SNC-Lavalin.

Other companies have been searching for gold, coal, chromium, platinum and uranium. Total and Exxon Mobil have invested in Madagascar's offshore oil potential. UK-based multinational Rio Tinto Plc has invested in the production and exporting of high-quality ilmenite, used as a whitener in toothpaste and paint and to make titanium dioxide. This project will cause even more of the island to be completely uninhabitable and force people out of their homes.



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