

Renowned wildlife conservationist Russell Mittermeier awarded 2018 Indianapolis Prize

by Mike Gaworecki on 13 June 2018



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It was announced yesterday that Dr. Russell Mittermeier has been awarded the 2018 Indianapolis Prize.

Mittermeier, a primatologist, herpetologist, and highly accomplished conservationist, is the seventh recipient of the prestigious prize, which has been awarded by the Indianapolis Zoological Society along with \$250,000 in prize money every two years since 2006 to “the most successful animal conservationist in the world,” according to the Indianapolis Prize website

“It’s a huge honor to get this prize,” Mittermeier told Mongabay. “I’ve gotten other recognition before, but this is by far and away the greatest award that I’ve ever received. And it’s not just because it’s a significant chunk of funding, but because of the other people who’ve gotten it before me. The other six people are really conservation heroes. I mean

someone like George Schaller, who's the greatest large mammal biologist ever — there will never be anybody like George Schaller again."

Speaking with Mongabay in Manhattan earlier this week, Mittermeier, who was born and raised in the Bronx, New York, said that he first became fascinated with turtles and primates while visiting the Bronx Zoo as a kid. Some of the monkeys at the zoo, in particular, reminded him of the fictional tribe of apes that adopted Tarzan, the character created by author Edgar Rice Burroughs in a series of books that a young Mittermeier read avidly. Those early experiences, Mittermeier said, put him on the path he's tread to this day. He spent 11 years at WWF—U.S. before becoming president of Conservation International (CI) in 1989. It was while he was at CI that Mittermeier first heard of the concept of "biodiversity hotspots" — a concept he would go on to popularize and utilize to achieve a number of conservation successes.

"I would have liked to have created the hotspot concept, but that was created by Norman Meyers in 1988," Mittermeier said. "I immediately jumped onto it." Initially there were 10 biodiversity hotspots identified by Meyers, who then revised his findings and raised that number to 18. "When I moved to Conservation International in 1989 we adopted it as our central brand, our central focus. And over the course of the next 20 years we revised it multiple times, so now we're up to 36."

Those 36 hotspots once occupied about 15 or 16 percent of the land surface of the planet, Mittermeier said, which is about the size of Russia and Australia put together. Today,

however, a little over 2 percent of those areas are left. "Basically 90 percent has been lost. That 2-plus percent is about the size of India, or the five largest American states, combined. And in that you have at least 50 percent of animal and plant diversity as endemic species found nowhere else. So incredibly important in terms of conservation, because if we fail there — and we could fail in a lot of those places — we lose half [of the world's species], at least. So it would be a major extinction spasm if we don't succeed in those places."

In championing the concept of biodiversity hotspots, Mittermeier is credited with helping to create a framework for directing conservation funds in a more targeted and strategic manner to support the crucial landscapes that sustain the majority of life on earth. Madagascar, where Mittermeier has done a lot of fieldwork, is an extremely high priority, he said. Earlier this year, Mittermeier helped describe a new species of lemur (one of more than 20 species he has helped describe throughout his career), and he says there are probably as many as 10 or 20 lemur species that have yet to be described to science.

"Madagascar is ridiculous, because it's about the size of Texas, and 90 percent of it has been deforested already," Mittermeier said.

"What remains is maybe the size of two or three New Jerseys, not very big. And yet in that small area you have packed this incredible number of unique, endemic species found nowhere else."

The Guinean forests of West Africa, the Philippines, both eastern and western Indonesia, and the tropical Andes are among

the many other “super high priority areas” Mittermeier mentioned.

Michael Crowther, chief executive officer of the Indianapolis Zoological Society, told Mongabay that it's not enough to have good intentions and try really hard to preserve wildlife — the winner of the Indianapolis Prize must have actually accomplished their conservation goals, as Mittermeier frequently has.

For instance, Mittermeier has been chairman of the IUCN Species Survival Commission Primate Specialist Group since 1977, and no primates have been lost on his watch. In his new role as Chief Conservation Officer for the NGO Global Wildlife Conservation (he left CI in 2014), a job Mittermeier has only had for about six months, he plans to continue doing what he's been doing all along.

“I'm focusing heavily on tropical rainforests in general, making sure that we come up with the mechanisms necessary to conserve them. But also on primates and to some extent on turtles, as a sideline, because I love turtles,” he said. Primates, of course, will always be a particular focus of his. “At a global level, there's like 700 different kinds of primates out there, they're our closest living relatives, they're incredibly important pieces of tropical forest systems. And 90 percent of them exist in tropical forests. So I'm really trying to come up with programs and mechanisms to ensure that we don't lose any primate species. We've had in place for a long time strategies to ensure that we don't lose any of these species. So far so good, we haven't lost any species or subspecies of primates in the 20th century, and so far in the 21st century. Although there's a few that are right at the edge.”



Grove's dwarf lemur (Cheirogaleus grovesi), a species Dr. Mittermeier helped describe to science earlier this year. Photo Credit: Dr. Edward Louis Jr.

"Russ Mittermeier is a consummate scientist, a visionary leader, a deft policy advocate and an inspiring mentor to many," Crowther said in a statement. "Perhaps most important, he is a consistent winner in the battles for species and ecosystem survival. Russ is considered the world's preeminent primate conservationist and has observed more primate species in the wild than anyone else ... ever. In part because of his efforts, primates remain the only larger group of mammals to have not lost a single species or subspecies to extinction in the last 100 years." Crowther hopes that awarding Mittermeier the Indianapolis Prize will help raise awareness of not only the conservationist's work but of the species he's dedicated his life to protecting, as well. "People need relevancies in their life before they can create value for things," he

he told Mongabay. "There's the old Baba Dioum saying that, in the end, we will only save that which we love, we will only love that which we know, we will only know that which we are taught. And so our challenge is, we've got to tell the stories. I think that the Indianapolis Prize functions as a bridge between the people, the systems, the complexities of the developed world, and the needs and the opportunities and the wonders of the natural world. The role of the Prize is to really help people see the things that maybe they're not paying attention to now."

For his part, Mittermeier hopes to convey two important messages. First: "There are success stories out there. That's the whole thing.

People tend to get a doom-and-gloom attitude towards conservation, but there's successes out there all the time."

He points to the mountain gorillas of East Africa, which he's followed closely since the 1970s, when it was feared the gorilla subspecies might disappear altogether. It was recently announced that the mountain gorilla population is on the rise and has now reached more than 1,000 individuals, however. "There are other stories out there where they're doing pretty well, like the monkeys of the Atlantic Forest region of Brazil. A number of those were really on the verge of extinction in the 1970s and 80s and they're now coming back and doing quite well: golden lion tamarins, the other lion tamarins, the muriquis, which are the largest South American monkeys. So we can do it, and we know how to do it.

Especially with primates we have a cadre of conservation professionals who know how to

do the work. We just need the resources to deploy them as effectively as possible around the world."

The other point Mittermeier wants to make is that "Everyone needs to pay more attention to the natural world surrounding us. We're all sitting on our computers all the time, especially a lot of the younger kids. But get out in nature whenever you can. I tell that to kids who often ask me, 'What can I do?' You see this stuff on television, you see it in books, but there's nothing like going out and experiencing it, and you can do it so easily now. The more people can really get out and connect with nature, the better. When you do that, more than likely you'll come back and you'll start converting your friends. I'm a little concerned about the increasing distance between the younger generation, in their cyber world, and what's really happening out there and what's really so important about the future of the planet."

Mittermeier will receive the Lilly Medal and be honored at the Indianapolis Prize Gala in Indianapolis, Indiana on September 29.

"There is no accurate method or metrics to quantify the more than 45 years of contributions and impact Russ Mittermeier has made in the name of biodiversity conservation," said wildlife conservationist Rick Barongi. "Russ' scope and depth of achievements would rival any conservationist, living or dead. Except for Dr. E.O. Wilson, no other person has done more to promote biodiversity conservation on a global level. The Indianapolis Prize is a fitting tribute to a man who makes everyone around him a better conservationist."



Dr. Russell Mittermeier, the 2018 recipient of the Indianapolis Prize, the world's leading award for animal conservation. The preeminent primate conservationist was selected for his major victories in protecting animal species and vital habitats around the world. He will receive the Lilly Medal and \$250,000, the largest international monetary award given exclusively for the successful conservation of endangered or threatened species. Photo Credit: PRNewsfoto/Indianapolis Prize.

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