

## Russ Mittermeier discovers 18 new species and travels to more than 170 countries

Sarah Bowman, IndyStar Published 6:00 a.m. ET June 8, 2018 | Updated 12:53 p.m. ET June 9, 2018



(Photo: The Indianapolis Zoo)

Russ Mittermeier doesn't monkey around when it comes to his line of work. But in a way, that's exactly what the conservationist does.

Trained as both a primatologist and herpetologist, Mittermeier has traveled to more than 160 countries across all seven continents. Despite his profusely stamped passport, he feels most at home in Madagascar among the lemurs and frogs and numerous other primates and reptiles that are his passion.

"Everyone who lives on this planet should appreciate that we are living in such a diverse earth," he told IndyStar. "We should do everything we can to make sure we don't see that erode."

Mittermeier is one of six finalists for the Indianapolis Prize, a \$250,000 award given every two years by the Indianapolis Zoo. The zoo will announce the winner June 12. The Star is featuring a Q&A with one finalist each day in the week leading up to the prize announcement.

This year is Mittermeier's third time being nominated for the Prize. A few other numbers for the Chief Conservation Officer at Global Wildlife Conservation: 18 new species that he has described and eight species named after him — including an ant.

His work focuses on saving biodiversity hot spots around the world and working with local communities to make that happen.

"If you start losing species from any ecosystem, it starts having problems and if you remove too many it starts collapsing and can't provide ecosystem services we depend on for our own survival," he said. "We can't let that happen."

### **Question: What is it like to be named a finalist for the Prize?**

Answer: I feel great because this is the prize that since it was first created I have always admired the folks who have been selected. What many of these people have done and what they have contributed to conservation will never ever be met. So to be in the same category with some of these folks is just amazing.

I know all of the other finalists, many as friends and some as colleagues. All of my fellow candidates are terrific and are so deserving and could be incredibly appropriate as winners.

**Q: What did you want to be when you grew up?**

A: I'd have to go very, very far back. I'm one of those people who knew what he wanted to do from early on; when we got asked that question in the first grade, I remember I said I wanted to be a jungle explorer.



**Russ Mittermeier, one of six finalists for the Indianapolis Prize, works in the Galapagos.** (Photo: Photo provided by Cristina Mittermeier)

**Q: What is an animal or experience that made you want to go into conservation?**

A: Almost 50 years ago I started working on reptiles because where I grew up in New York there wasn't much of wild primates. But then when I was 18 years old, after a few trips and seeing lots of zoos, I made the decision that I really liked primates and decided to focus on them.

That led me into tropical forest conservation, because you can't study these animals and species in a vacuum without getting out there and engaged in these issues. I'm a species guy and always have been; they are the underpinning in everything we do. I'm interested in everything, but I have been particularly interested in primates and reptiles and turtles since I've gotten into this field.



**Q: What's it like to see and interact with these animals in the wild?**

A: You never know what you will see in the tropical forest. Almost every time you go out in the forest, you see something you haven't seen before. Even if you've been there 100 times, there is always something you've never seen and something new. Sometimes it can be scary, but mostly it's exciting.

There's a lemur that looks like a cross between a teddy bear and red panda and hops between trees like a kangaroo. I always look at its eyes and think it must have come off a space ship. Or there's the massive mountain gorilla, which I've seen many times but can't help but be thrilled by them every time. Once I saw a tiger and a jaguar on foot from about 10 feet away and that definitely makes your adrenaline pump.



Russell Mittermeier is one of six finalists for the 2018 Indianapolis Prize, the world's top animal conservation award with a \$250,000 cash prize. (Photo: Indianapolis Zoological Society, Inc.)

**Q: What's an extinct animal you wish were still alive?**

A: There are so many extinct species that I wish were still alive. Without going back to dinosaurs, there was a species of lemur that was like koala and could get up to 80 pounds and another that was about the size of a gorilla. All of these incredibly cool lemurs existed until just 100 years ago.

In Madagascar there also were these elephant birds that were 9 feet tall and just so many other wonderful animals that I would love to see come back.

**Q: What do you think is the key to conservation? How do you go about it?**

A: Ecotourism is one of my favorite topics. I think that we have to recognize that we are working in all of these tropical regions and have to work closely with those local communities. If they don't see the benefit from these ecosystems and species, they will continue to chop the trees down or hunt them.

So we need to show them the benefit of keeping these animals around. There is no faster or more efficient way of doing this than developing ecotourism of the places and species that people want to see.



Russell Mittermeier, Ph.D. is one of six finalists for the 2018 Indianapolis Prize, the world's top animal conservation award with a \$250,000 cash prize. (Photo: Indianapolis Zoological Society, Inc.)

**Q: What can people do to help with conservation?**

A: The obvious thing is to donate to whatever organization you would like. But rather than just writing a check, which is nice, get out there and see something for yourself. Don't just sit there and despair; that won't accomplish much or have an impact on the environment. Even if you can't afford to go far, just go into your backyard or just do something.

Get out there and see some of this stuff first hand, because if you do that then you are much more likely to become a convert than if you just see it on TV or read it in a book. And then come back and encourage others. Most of us have the means to do something small, and that's still something.

**Q: What plans do you have for the future?**

A: Next is doing the things I haven't done yet and trying to get to every tropical rain forest country in the world. I also am trying to be the first person to see all primate genera in the world and I'm only missing less than a handful.

But then I really just want to expand the conservation horizons and do more to make sure the countries I've worked in are real successes and make sure the habitat and these species are maintained in perpetuity. We definitely need more resources and more people excited about conservation issues.



**Russell A. Mittermeier Institution: Conservation International Animals studied: Primates, turtles.** (Photo: Becca Field Indianapolis Prize)

*Call IndyStar reporter Sarah Bowman at (317) 444-6129. Follow her on Twitter and Facebook: @IndyStarSarah. Connect with IndyStar's environmental reporters, join The Scrub on Facebook. IndyStar's environmental reporting project is made possible through the generous support of the nonprofit Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust.*