

## TECH & SCIENCE

# ALMOST ALL OF MADAGASCAR'S LEMURS ARE THREATENED BY HUNTING, HABITAT LOSS AND CLIMATE CHANGE, CONSERVATIONISTS WARN

BY **SCOTTIE ANDREW** ON 8/1/18 AT 4:58 PM

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**M**ore than 95 percent of the world's lemurs face imminent extinction, making them the most threatened vertebrate on Earth, conservationists said Wednesday.

In a statement, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) said that 105 of 111 lemur species are under threat from loggers who raze the forest floors they roam, poachers who hunt and sell their meat and climate change, which could dry out their habitats. Researchers called the lemur populations' deterioration "unlike anything we have seen before in Madagascar," which houses every lemur species, and announced they would develop a "major" conservation plan to curtail population loss.

The ring-tailed lemur, one of Madagascar's identifying species, has decreased and fragmented in population size more than 95 percent since 2000, when lemur counts exceeded 750,000. As few as 2,000 ring-tailed lemurs remain in the island nation's forests, a 2016 study claimed. There, the species is increasingly hunted for the illegal bushmeat trade, in which African mammals are hunted to the point of endangerment, a process simplified for poachers when loggers clear forest space accessible by newly paved roads. Others are captured and sold as exotic pets.

Another lemur species, the greater bamboo lemur, could go hungry if climate change continues to scorch its food source. The lemur chews on bamboo's nutritious tender shoots except during dry spells, which usually occur between August and November stunt the plant's growth, forcing them to eat the wooden trunk of the bamboo, which contains no nutritional value. As conditions grow drier and dry spells run longer, lemurs rely on the bamboo bark, called culm, which can wear down their teeth and weaken their health, researchers found in October.



A ring-tailed lemur chews on leaves in March 2016 at a zoo in Rome. It's one of 105 endangered lemur species under threat of habitat destruction, illegal hunting and climate change in Madagascar, the only country where lemurs are found, the IUCN warned.

(PHOTO BY TIZIANA FABI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES)

The species' rapid decline is locals' economic gain. Many communities rely on the illegal hunting or pet trades to earn a living, another reason local governments are slow to regulate lemurs' capture and sale, which is still illegal in the country, conservationist Kim Reuter told *Scientific American* in 2017. Others suffering from Madagascar's crushing poverty are driven to hunt the lemurs to feed their families, most of whom were malnourished in a 2016 study.

But if conservationists implement a plan to fend off threats to lemurs, the resilient species could quickly rebound. Their "ecological flexibility" allows them to adapt to nearly every corner of Madagascar's ecosystems, from bushes to brush and scrubs to forests, and they consume a varied diet of foraged fruit, leaves, tree bark and sap. Ecologists consider lemurs a "barometer of forest health": If they decline, then so will the forest's ability to repair itself and continue to grow.

In 2015, the IUCN announced nine initiatives under the SOS (Save Our Species) Lemurs project to protect existing lemur reserves, create new ones and engage local communities to "advocate for lemur conservation" as an economic stimulant through ecotourism.

Although lemurs will likely benefit from restrictions on farming and deforestation, researchers in July found local, small-scale farmers' new pursuits, like beekeeping and chicken farming, didn't compensate for the amount they'd lost when they were prohibited from farming.

“They know that conservation is important, and they want their kids to see lemurs,” study co-author Sarobidy Rakotonarivo told [NPR](#). “But they’re very frustrated when they realize that lemurs are more important than they are.”