



Helping hand

THIS is an indri, the largest of Madagascar's endemic lemurs - and it really does need all the help it can get.

Almost all members of this iconic group of primates, which range from mouse-sized animals up to the indri, which is as big as a small child, are on the brink of extinction. This month, an assessment for the International Union for Conservation of Nature said that 95 per cent of lemur species are at risk, making this the most threatened mammal group anywhere on the planet.

The indri is known for its stunningly loud call. Like other lemurs, it is a victim of hunting and habitat loss to slash-and-burn agriculture. Its larger size - it weighs 9 kilograms - makes it a prime target for hunters and means it requires a bigger territory to survive.

Conserving it will be a challenge. Because it has never bred in captivity, preserving it in its wild habitat is its best hope. Well-managed protected areas offer the greatest chance of success, and ecotourism provides vital incomes in an impoverished nation.

Christoph Schwitzer, a lemur expert at Bristol Zoological Society in the UK, says there is still time to save these animals. "I am an unfaltering optimist and remain hopeful that all 107 lemur species will survive the current extinction crisis in Madagascar," he says. "We haven't yet lost a single lemur species in modern times and even though the rarest one - the northern sportive lemur - is now down to just 60 individuals in the wild, these populations can bounce back to larger numbers if the conditions are right for them." Jon White

Photographer

Nick Garbutt
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