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Weekly Article

The animated film *Madagascar* brought some well deserved attention to the island nation of the same name. Madagascar is home to a host of endemic species – animals that are found nowhere else in the world. When visiting Madagascar, one probably won't encounter giant lemur parties or packs of wild fossa (as seen in the movie), but a foray into the jungle is almost guaranteed to offer some sort of strange encounter. The isolation of Madagascar has allowed for the development of a completely unique ecosystem. Species that would not survive in other areas (due to increased competition or predation) have thrived on this island.

Among the most well known of the Madagascan animals are the lemurs. Lemurs are prosimians, meaning they are a primitive type of primate separate from both apes and monkeys. There are dozens of species of lemurs ranging from the indri weighing 15 pounds to the pygmy mouse lemur weighing just an ounce. Habits and characteristics vary among species, but most lemurs are nocturnal, inhabit trees and live in family groups. The long tails of many lemurs are not prehensile so they cannot be used for swinging or gripping. Instead, in some species the primary purpose of the tail is thought to be a territorial one. Ring-tailed lemurs can often be seen stroking their tails repeatedly. This seems to be a method of spreading scent secretions along its length. These lemurs will then wave their tails high in the air as they move around, presumably scenting the air and effectively notifying other animals of their territory.

A much lesser known Madagascan animal is the fossa. This top predator has the teeth and retractable claws of a cat and the long tail of a monkey. Despite its appearance, however, fossa are most closely related to the mongoose. Until recently it was thought that these animals were nocturnal, but they actually sleep and hunt both day and night. Fossa are solitary animals,

only coming together to mate. They will eat anything from mice to wild pigs and lemurs. Until recently, fossa enjoyed a protected position at the top of the food chain, but the introduction of dogs and wild cats has brought new challenges to the fossa, including competition and rabies.

Yet another notable endemic species seen in *Madagascar* the movie is a plant rather than an animal and it may be the one that is disappearing the fastest. Eight species of baobab trees are found in Madagascar. These impressive trees can be 90 feet tall, 30 feet in diameter, and live for more than 1000 years. They are a vital part of the Madagascan rainforest and provide food and shelter for a wide variety of animals.

Unfortunately, the lush forests and blue rivers seen in the movie are increasingly difficult to find in Madagascar. The native Malagasy people have turned to farming, ranching and lumber to make a living. Currently these endeavors involve clear cutting large sections of the local rainforest, and as a result, many of the endemic plant and animal species are endangered and nearing extinction. There is hope that education efforts will increase local interest in, and awareness of, these conservation issues. Each of us can help preserve rainforests around the world by purchasing products that support the rainforest and avoiding those that are the result of clear cutting. You can also donate money to various conservation organizations or even take a vacation to Madagascar. Your tourism dollars will emphasize the value of the rainforest, and you can return home with an exciting Madagascan tale of your own.

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