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**Lemur Conservationists Launch First Ever Illegal Pet Trade Education Campaign in Madagascar**

On July 12, 2016, lemur conservationists from around the world will gather at the U.S. Cultural Center in Antananarivo, Madagascar to kickoff the first ever national education campaign targeting the growing illegal pet trade of lemurs within Madagascar. The *“Madagascar’s Treasure: Keeping Lemurs Wild”* campaign is being organized by [**Lemur Love**](http://www.lemurlove.org/)(aUS-registered NGO) and the [**Pet Lemur Survey**](http://www.petlemur.com/)(a collaborative research effort between the University of Utah, Conservation International, and the Groupe d’étude et de recherche sur les primates).

To date, there have been no outreach efforts in Madagascar regarding the illegal ownership of lemurs, the world’s most endangered group of mammals. As recently as 2010, the illegal ownership of lemurs was described as not being a threat to these endemic primates. Over 28,000 lemurs, however, were kept as illegal pets in Madagascar between 2010 and mid-2013. The combination of the pet trade not being recognized as a legitimate conservation threat, and inadequate funding for on-the-ground conservation initiatives, have impeded conservation education and outreach efforts.

Therefore, this Campaign will help increase understanding of the illegal lemur pet trade by launching a nationwide outreach effort in dozens of towns across the country, collecting new data on the species and places most affected across the island, and making that data available for free download on the Pet Lemur Survey site.

“This national education campaign is critical if we want to save lemurs from the growing threat of the illegal pet lemur trade,” said Jonah Ratsimbazafy, Secretary General of Groupe d'Etude et de Recherche sur les Primates de Madagascar (GERP) and Co-Vice Chair of the IUCN/SSC Primate Specialist Group, Madagascar section. This collaborative effort aims to reach thousands of people across the country with the hopes of counteracting the effects of this burgeoning conservation threat.

Collaborators in Madagascar include GERP (Groupe d’étude et de recherche sur les primates de Madagascar), the University of Toliara, Association FILANA (Sainte Luce Reserve), Association Mitsinjo, WWF Madagascar, the Lemur Rescue Center (LRC), and researchers at the University of Utah and Conservation International.

The researchers have a goal of collecting information of about 1,000 lemurs kept as illegal pets. “It’s imperative that we join forces with local Malagasy NGOs to create a greater impact,” said Tara Clarke of Duke University and co-director of Lemur Love. “If we hope to draw global attention to this issue and prevent lemur extinctions, we must work together”.

The campaign comes at a much needed time, especially considering the ‘Cute lemur demands more scratches’ video reached viral status during April, 2016 with over 100 million views. The video, posted from southwestern Madagascar, shows two Malagasy children in a village interacting with a ring-tailed lemur named “Sefo”. The children are gentle with Sefo, and through his actions, the lemur repeatedly gestures for more attention. “The Sefo video could be detrimental to lemur conservation, as it gives the false impression that lemurs are happy and healthy in a village setting, which we know is not true. Moreover, this video generated significant ad revenue, which could further incentivize the unsustainable wild-capture of lemurs”, said Marni LaFleur, Founder and co-director of Lemur Love.

The campaign, in addition to undertaking outreach efforts, also aims to help the scientific community overcome data availability issues on this topic. “A lack of data and public information sharing has decreased the ability for organizations to combat the illegal ownership of pet lemurs in Madagascar,” said Kim Reuter, of the Pet Lemur Survey. “That’s why we’re also going to start allowing the public to download aggregated data on the pet lemur trade in English, French, or Malagasy.” The campaign will also be launching an interactive website where the public can visualize the pet lemur trade using interactive maps as well as a smartphone application in which people can provide anonymous information about pet lemurs that they’ve seen.

This outreach initiative is funded in part by the National Geographic Conservation Trust and the Margot Marsh Biodiversity Foundation’s Primate Action Fund.

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