

A CONSPIRACY OF LEMURS

TURNING A CONSERVATION DREAM INTO REALITY

by Penelope Bodry-Sanders

with Fiona Brady

A DREAM AWAKENED

January 1993. I was sick as a dog from yet another bout of Gondwanaland disease, my invented term for the array of symptoms that reliably accompany one who travels extensively in Sub-Saharan Africa. Staring dully out the window as my plane made its descent, I was juddered from my stupor. The scarred topography below came into sudden focus, looking as if some evil deity—in search of fun one misspent afternoon—had gouged out the landscape with a monstrous spoon. Glistening rivulets rushed red into the sea; an island, bleeding. My own tears caught me by surprise. I'd never seen the Earth so raw. I began to dread this detour to Madagascar.

Next morning, I awoke to a pair of orange eyes watching me. A ring-tailed lemur sat perched on the windowsill just a few feet away. Having been thoroughly terrified when baboons invaded my safari tent in

Uganda two years earlier, I froze. But this little primate—lithe as a small housecat and endowed with a magnificent black-and-white-striped tail—merely sat staring, curious to study the new human who had arrived with the sun. I, too, marveled; privileged to so closely observe such a stunning creature.

I was 49 years old and didn't yet know that this small interaction would change everything.



It's been nearly thirty years since that singular encounter, on my very first trip to Madagascar. Ever since, lemurs have permeated my thoughts and actions and dominated my dreams. And they inspired my proudest achievement: creating the Lemur Conservation Foundation (LCF) in 1996 with a small band of likeminded individuals, all of us intent on protecting the most threatened group of mammals on Earth.

Lemurs had not been a precise detail in my early plans for an adventurous, peripatetic life. Certainly not as I entered the convent in the mid 1960s, an eager missionary-nun-in-the-making, nor during my post-convent years on the Broadway stage. Marriage, motherhood, and a second (for keeps) marriage proved to be enthralling pilgrimages of their own. And two decades working at the American Museum of Natural History enriched me in ways I could scarcely have imagined in my youth.

So, it was surprising indeed when, at age 51—and with a most peculiar *curriculum vitae*—I found myself heading a newly formed organization that would become a model for captive-breeding of endangered primates, with outposts on two continents.

Why lemurs? Two reasons. Nearly every species of lemur (98 percent) is classified by IUCN as *threatened* and a third bear the *critically endangered* label. Also, lemurs are an “umbrella species.” Protecting them shields countless other species within their forested habitats. While every plant and animal (also fungi, bacteria, and archaeans) has intrinsic worth and a crucial role within the complex web of life, there are those charismatic ambassadors that speak volumes for the less visible or compelling.

As I learned early on, lemurs are captivating and soulful creatures. Given to gymnastic feats of derring-do, certainly, they are also brave, prideful, capable of inspired acts of devotion, and occasionally tempted into retaliation for slights large, small, or imagined. In other words, a lot like *us*.

And why wouldn't they be? We're all of us primates—humans, lemurs, monkeys, and apes. More precisely, lemurs are prosimians (meaning, literally, pre-monkey), the group with the deepest roots on the primate evolutionary tree. Fossil evidence suggests that lemurs and humans shared their last common ancestors around 60 million years ago. Lemurs differ from all other lower primates—nocturnal galagos (bushbabies), tarsiers, and lorises—in one critical way: they evolved in isolation on the vast island continent of Madagascar.

Located in the Indian Ocean several-hundred miles off the east coast of mainland Africa, Madagascar parallels the curving coastline of Mozambique (roughly two thirds of the way down the right side of the continent). The island's landmass is nearly the size of France or, for a US comparison, slightly smaller than Texas. Its geography flows from steep montane forests to coral reefs and supports cloud forests,

scrublands, savannas, mangrove swamps, rainforests, and a multiplicity of lifeforms found nowhere else on the planet.

It's not known for certain *how* lemurs' ancient ancestors arrived in Madagascar from the African mainland some 55 million years ago—possibly on a raft of vegetation that floated and bumped its way across the Mozambique Channel. For whatever reason, monkeys and apes did not make it across that same 350-mile expanse. If they had, lemurs probably would have had great difficulty competing for the same food resources with animals boasting larger brains and more precisely functional hands. The prosimians in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia that faced such competition were outmatched and driven to a nocturnal lifestyle to survive.

The descendants of those early lemurs not only thrived in isolation, they evolved to fill myriad environmental niches through what's known as *adaptive radiation*. They spread across diverse habitats and elevations, ranging from hot desiccated regions to soaring montane woodlands, temperate forests, bamboo stands, and papyrus and reed beds surrounding lakes. Some are as small as mice and the largest grew to the size of gorillas (the latter went extinct about 2,300 years ago).

When most people here the word “lemurs,” it is the distinctive ring-tailed variety that appears in their mind’s eye; but scientists have described over 100 species of lemur alive today. Some live in large troops, others in tight-knit family groups, and one sort prefers blissful solitude. Certain species are active by day, others by night; some are both, earning them their own term: *cathemeral*. Even their dining preferences vary widely, from generalist nosherers to those specializing in certain fruits or leaves. Some are hyper-focused, with one species feeding solely on bamboo (and habitually consuming enough cyanide daily to kill a grown human).

The Malagasy landscape is a veritable magical mystery tour of evolutionary and biological diversity. Over ninety percent of the thousands of plant and animal species found naturally there exist nowhere else on the planet. Such ubiquitous radiation of life is utterly amazing. And yet that very uniqueness exposes Madagascar to devastating vulnerabilities when ecological pressures encroach. And encroach they do.

The nation’s economy is built on agriculture—especially vanilla—mining, fishing, and textiles. Particularly since the middle of the 20th century, much of Madagascar’s unique flora and fauna have fallen

victim to human activity: unchecked development, poor resource management, political corruption and instability, and the resultant desperation of impoverished communities eking out a subsistence living.

Most of the country's 28-million people live outside of densely packed urban areas and rely heavily on natural resources for both livelihood and sustenance. Roughly 21 million of them live below the international poverty line of \$1.90 a day, and a mere thirteen percent have access to electricity. To eat, one needs fuel and a food source. Forested lands and the animals that live there (bushmeat) are most often the best and only option. In less than three generations, more than ninety percent of Madagascar's original forests have been raised—cut down for fuel, harvested for export, or burned to clear land for agriculture. The result: most indigenous living things on the island (including its people) are imperiled.

In the face of such dire, all-encompassing circumstances, what does one do? *What one can*. People must necessarily be the lemurs' lifeline, but the effort can serve both and protect *all*. Madagascar's unique biodiversity *is* its vital, invaluable resource. Strengthening the

symbiotic relationship between humans and nature benefits *every* living thing.



We've all heard of a murder of crows and a pride of lions. (One of my favorite collective nouns is a *smack* of jellyfish.) How is it that, until now, I'd never thought to look up the term that describes the engaging, gorgeous, and endangered primates I've spent so many years working to protect? They constitute a *conspiracy* of lemurs. While many a lemur has stolen my heart, the conspiring in this case has been mostly of my own doing—in league with a most extraordinary group of collaborators and accomplices, mainly of the species *Homo sapiens*.

I am so very proud of and humbled by what we've achieved since our founding. From an idea first articulated on a Manhattan sidewalk, and those tenuous—yet determined—early years, the Lemur Conservation Foundation has grown into a living, breathing, flourishing reality. Lemurs were already endangered when they entered my

consciousness, but now they teeter on the very brink of extinction. Our work over this last quarter century has bought them a little time, increased their numbers (at least in captivity), and drawn public awareness to their predicament.

This volume encompasses my episodic recollections of three decades amongst lemurs, and of those people, inspirations, triumphs, tragedies, tenets, and tangents that shaped the circuitous path forward. With it, I encourage others to do as I did: dream big, take risks, acknowledge the pitfalls, and keep going anyway. One needn't go by the same route, but it is my hope that, together, we who care passionately about the natural world may save at least souvenirs of Earth's unique lifeforms until a better future can be realized.