

Why haven't Madagascar's famed lemurs been saved yet?

By [Julia P G Jones](#)

1 Jul 2015

Lemurs are cute - there is no denying it. Their big eyes and fluffy faces mean they really are the poster animals of Madagascar, an island known internationally for its unique flora and fauna. But the plight of Madagascar's lemurs has made international headlines once again after experts warned the animals may be entirely extinct in the wild within 25 years.



[Maurits Vermeulen, CC BY-SA](#)

The [BBC](#) showed gorgeous images of lemurs juxtaposed with the sad fact that nearly all of the 106 identified species of lemur are threatened.

These stories appear in the international media with depressing frequency. Those not closely involved might wonder why, if lemurs are so special, they have not been properly protected yet. Surely Madagascar can't afford to lose its lemurs and the world can't just stand by and watch it happen?

Unfortunately, conservation is far from easy to achieve. The problems facing lemurs in Madagascar are a microcosm of the challenges of tropical forest conservation throughout the world.

Farming still wins out

Madagascar's forests and their lemurs are primarily threatened by agriculture. We are often told that Madagascar has [lost 90% of its forest](#), and that rural people clearing land for agriculture are the problem.

Unfortunately, like many things, the truth is rather more complex. This narrative underplays the role of colonial era and commercial land conversion, and overplays the destructive nature of the traditional land use system.

Malagasy farmers traditionally cut then burn patches of forest and farm them for a few years, before leaving the land fallow to [regain fertility](#). This isn't a story of terrible people destroying their lovely pristine forest - such "shifting agriculture" (known locally as *tavy*) can be perfectly sustainable at low population densities.

Pressure comes from Madagascar's booming population. As the numbers living in rural areas increase, people clear the same land more frequently, soil fertility drops and the land becomes degraded and of little use for either agriculture or lemurs.

Shifting agricultural is the mainstay of the rural Malagasy economy. Julia Jones, Author provided

Deforestation also releases carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, contributing to climate change (in fact many would be surprised to know that land use change is the source of [between 7% and 14%](#) of the world's emissions of greenhouse gases). With this in mind, it seems that forest conservation really should be a no brainer: it is good for the planet, good for biodiversity (remember those lovely lemurs) and, since shifting cultivation can be unsustainable anyway, people would be better off doing something else.

Paint Madagascar REDD

This is the thinking that underpins the proposed international climate mechanism [REDD+](#) (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation), in which poor tropical countries such as Madagascar get financial incentives to reduce their deforestation and so contribute to global efforts to slow climate change.

So would REDD+ finally solve the problems of tropical forest conservation (and save those lemurs)? Unfortunately many challenges remain. A significant one is how the funds will be used to actually slow deforestation? In Madagascar the funds from REDD+ pilot projects have been used in part to fund community forest management: where legal management responsibility for forests is transferred to communities. [Recent research](#) from Madagascar provides some evidence that this can indeed slow deforestation but it is far from a panacea. [A review](#) of community forest management interventions around the world found there is limited evidence that the approach can deliver the hoped-for environmental, or local welfare, benefits.



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To be successful, any project aiming to reduce deforestation will need to ensure that farmers at the edge of the forest do not lose out. This is vital both from a pragmatic perspective (if people don't have alternatives they will have no option but to continue with existing land-use practices, however damaging) and from the perspective of environmental justice and human rights.

Key questions remain about how benefits from REDD+ payments will be distributed locally - the question of whether resources will be sufficient to compensate for lost livelihoods - and how the rights of those affected will be protected. There has been [recent criticism](#) that international commitments to these social safeguards in the REDD+ mechanism are too weak.

Bruno Ramamonjisoa, a professor of forestry at the University of Antananarivo in Madagascar told me that: "Madagascar's lemurs, and their forests, are a vital part of our natural heritage. However, forest conservation in Madagascar will only be successful if the people dependent on forests, and their needs, are fully incorporated into conservation plans. Those developing the REDD+ policies must understand the real challenges facing forest-edge communities in Madagascar".

It is expected that REDD+ will be approved at the major climate summit in [Paris](#) later this year and this may well unlock funds for forest conservation in Madagascar in future. However the threats to lemurs will not be easily solved - and the real threats to people sharing habitat with lemurs, must not be ignored.

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