

Lemur play is on solid ground

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A Silky sifaka, which appears to be losing face pigmentation. Credit: Jeff Gibbs.

Unless it leads to sex, adult male primates usually aren't very playful. Except if they're Silky sifakas.

Lemur researcher Erik Patel, who was at Duke on Oct. 14, showed some of his new videos, in which the silky white, long-furred, tree-living lemurs can be seen in “terrestrial play bouts,” of up to 45 minutes. Patel, who has been leading lemur research and conservation efforts in northeastern Madagascar, is finishing up his doctorate at Cornell, and will become the Duke Lemur Center's first post-doctoral fellow.

The footage shown during Patel's talk was of two adult, male Silky sifakas romping and wrestling on terra firma. Patel said that the playful behavior is uncommon for adult male [primates](#) and happens in an

uncommon environment for the particular type of lemur he studies.

Patel has watched between two and nine individuals engaging in this type of play. He's also observed the lemurs eating dirt. And, he's noticed that the [Silky sifakas](#) experience extensive pigmentation loss in their facial skin as they age. So far, they are the only lemurs that appear to show such signs of age.

The observations elicit questions about the primate's behavior, what makes them lose their color, and what makes them consume the specific reddish earth Patel has recorded the creatures eating. "They could be using it to detoxify or for parasites or to correct their gut chemistry," he hypothesized during his talk. The pigmentation loss is not due to albinism, because the lemurs have the enzyme tyrosinase, which is lacking in true albinos. Instead, the Silky sifakas likely have a form of leucism, where the entire surface or patches of body surface lack cells capable of making pigment. These are hypotheses only, more research needs to be done, Patel said.

Conservation efforts are key to continued lemur research, he added. In 2007, eight of Madagascar's national parks were named as a single World Heritage Site. Patel said that if the areas losing habitat could be considered hot spots, then Madagascar is the "hottest hot spot" in the world, under threats from logging, accelerated nickel mining, and, for the Silky sifakas, bush meat hunting.

The outlook is not irreversibly bleak, though, due to Patel's multi-year conservation and conservation education efforts, done with Malagasy Rabary Desire, the country's most experienced lemur guide. Desire recently won the Seacology Prize to fund his own nature reserve called Antanetiambo. Collaborating with the Duke Lemur Center, Patel and Desire hope to expand the lemur's home country conservation effort.

Patel even hinted at the possibility of cultural tourism. It's an easy sell, he said, that, if done properly, in combination with research, will help more than his [lemur](#) research.

Provided by Duke University

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