

Interview: Branson says island may save lemurs

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FILE - In this June 8, 2008, file photo, billionaire entrepreneur Richard Branson prepares to go kite-boarding near his private resort and home, on Necker Island, British Virgin Islands. Branson told The Associated Press during an interview on Monday, April 18, 2011, he plans to create a colony of lemurs on Moskito Island, part of the British Virgin Islands, an undeveloped island he owns in the Caribbean. It's a "radical idea" to save an endangered primate that is disappearing from its native African habitat. (AP Photo/Todd VanSickle, file)

(AP) -- Billionaire entrepreneur Richard Branson plans to create a colony of lemurs on an undeveloped island he owns in the Caribbean, saying Monday it's a "radical idea" to save an endangered primate that is disappearing from its native African habitat.

Branson, who has long been involved in efforts to save threatened animals around the world, said he plans to bring the first group of about 30 lemurs from zoos in coming weeks to Moskito Island, part of the

British Virgin Islands, where they would be the only wild population outside of Africa.

Experts determined that lemurs would find a suitable habitat on Moskito Island, about 85 miles from Puerto Rico, with its plentiful tamarind trees for food and lack of humans to encroach on their territory, he said.

"I was really trying to come up with a radical idea to save them," Branson told The Associated Press in a phone interview from nearby Necker Island, which he also owns.

The businessman and adventurer has secured permission from the government of the British territory to import the lemurs and said he hopes to find a way to address concerns of critics who fear the non-native [primates](#) will harm local birds and lizards. He said he plans to start with the relatively common ring-tailed lemurs, which he is acquiring from zoos in Africa, Sweden and Canada, but hopes to eventually have more than a dozen species on Moskito.

Lemurs are found only on Madagascar and the Comoro Islands and are considered the most threatened of all primates, according to the World Wildlife Fund.

"Maybe in time we could find one or two other islands in the world, preferably bigger islands, so that if Madagascar continues to destroy their habitat the lemurs will at least survive somewhere on the planet," Branson said.

The founder of the Virgin Group, which includes an airline and media properties, has said he seeks to serve a higher purpose in the sparsely populated British Virgin Islands than simply catering to wealthy visitors. He has developed an exclusive ecoresort on Necker Island that showcases renewable energy technology and reintroduced flamingos.

Local school children tour the island, a practice he says he will expand once the lemurs get established over on Moskito.

His plans to introduce lemurs on 170-acre (69-hectare) Moskito Island have come under strong criticism on environmental grounds from some quarters.

James "Skip" Lazell, a biologist who has been doing research in the British Virgin Islands for 31 years and has worked with Branson in the past, says "it's a horrible idea" to introduce non-native species. Lemurs can be omnivorous and could end up eating the eggs of birds or a type of small lizard that exists only in the British Virgin Islands, he said.

"I am in principle opposed to the introduction of any exotic species into any environment," Lazell said by phone from Jamestown, Rhode Island. "It just never works. It violates basic principals of nature."

Some critics also feel that Minister of Natural Resources Omar Hodge approved the project too quickly and without adequately studying the potential consequences, said Lianna Jarecki, a biology professor at a community college on the island of Tortola. Still, she doesn't expect any local effort to block the plan because Moskito Island is relatively removed from the rest of the British Virgin Islands.

Hodge didn't respond to a request for an interview. A spokesman for the ministry, Colene Penn, said he was advised of the potential problems and "took them all into consideration when making his decision."

Branson said he hopes to meet with Lazell and other scientists and find ways to resolve their concerns. He said the lemurs' diet could include "maybe the odd gecko," but there are hundreds of thousands of lizards on Moskito Island and he doubts the lemurs will affect them in any significant way. A San Diego Zoo fact sheet on the animals says ring-

tailed lemurs principally eat fruit, leaves and flowers.

"The gecko population is certainly not going to be in danger whereas the lemurs are," he said. "Sometimes one has to balance what's right for the greater good. I think that if we can get a few islands in the world for the [lemurs](#) I personally think that would be a positive thing to do."

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