

# Erosion of traditional 'taboos' threatens Madagascar's lemurs

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Madagascar is world famous for its unique animals, many of which are protected by law, but recent research has demonstrated that illegal hunting of these protected species may be widespread and pose an urgent threat the country's globally important biodiversity.

Research by a team from Bangor University and the Malagasy organization Madagasikara Voakajy, reported in the Dec. 14 issue of *PLoS ONE*, suggests that hunting of protected species in eastern Madagascar is increasing due to rapid social change, as appetites for meat increase and traditional taboos protecting the species, especially [lemurs](#), become less powerful.

"Our observations suggest that young men have more available cash and [leisure time](#) due to the transition from [subsistence farming](#) to panning for gold, and they spend more time in local bars, eating fried meat snacks with their drinks," said Julie Razafimanahaka from Madagasikara Voakajy. "Lemur hunting appears to have increased to supply this new market. The power of the taboo is declining, under pressures of globalization and [human mobility](#)."

Study author Dr. Julia Jones of Bangor University goes on to explain: "Madagascar's amazing wildlife, especially its world famous lemurs, are so important for the future of the country. They are worth much more to the economy alive than as meat. I sincerely hope Madagascar is able to tackle this problem'.

Understanding the reasons for, as well as the extent of, the pressures is vital for developing appropriate measures to protect lemurs and other [native species](#). The researchers demonstrated that people prefer to eat domestic meats such as chicken and pork over bushmeat species such as lemur, but in some cases they resort to eating wildlife because of the high cost of domestic alternatives in many remote areas.

"Improving access to alternatives would help," said Richard Jenkins of Bangor University, one of the authors of the study. "If domestic meats could be farmed more reliably and were therefore cheaper, the pressure on wild [species](#) may be reduced. More effort is needed to improve domestic animal husbandry methods and disease control in rainforest areas."

Although Madagascar has a clear system of wildlife laws, understanding of these laws is poor and enforcement is weak in many areas. The project has worked with the government of Madagascar on an education campaign to help people know about the law and to ensure people understand just how vulnerable the rare lemurs are to hunting. Perhaps the campaign will result in new social norms to replace the rapidly eroding traditional taboos.

**More information:** Jenkins RKB, Keane A, Rakotoarivelo AR, Rakotomboavonjy V, Randrianandrianina FH, et al. (2011) Analysis of Patterns of Bushmeat Consumption Reveals Extensive Exploitation of Protected Species in Eastern Madagascar. PLoS ONE 6(12): e27570. [doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0027570](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0027570)

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