Using science to combat illegal wildlife trade

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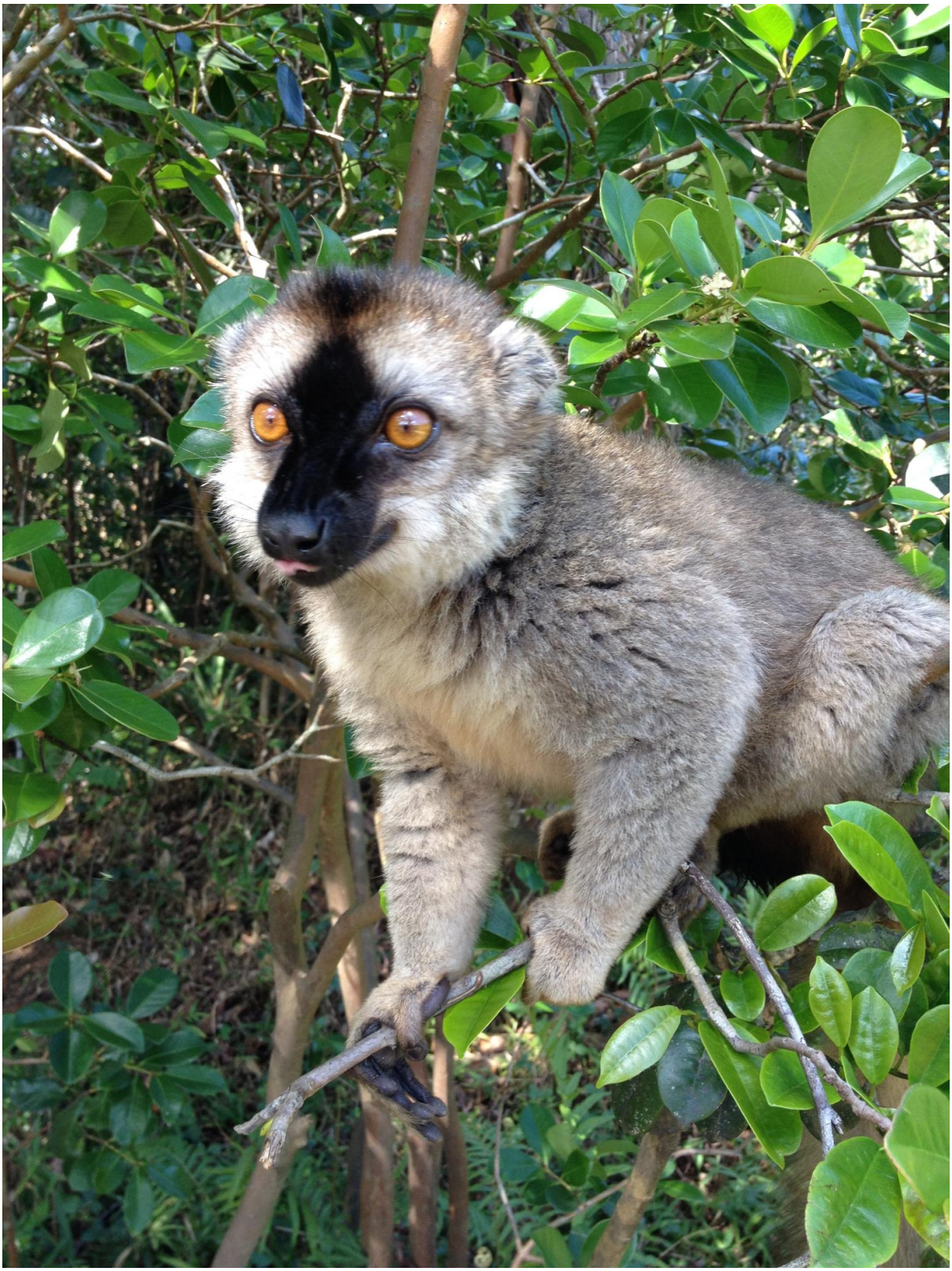

Using science to combat wildlife trafficking. Credit: MSU

Leading scientists from around the world convened this week at the International Congress for Conservation Biology in Cartagena, Colombia, to discuss how to better leverage science to combat illegal wildlife trade—both within countries and across international borders.

"The scope and scale of illegal wildlife trafficking today is unprecedented," said Meredith Gore, an associate professor of fisheries and wildlife at Michigan State University and Jefferson Science Fellow at the U.S. Department of State. "Illegal wildlife trafficking is a crime that can converge with other serious crimes, such as drug trafficking."

Gore joined other researchers from universities, conservation NGOs, international organizations and national governments to identify new opportunities to bring the full spectrum of scientific knowledge to bear on the problem.

Illegal exploitation and trade of wildlife is a globally recognized problem posing risks to plants, animals and humans. Illegal wildlife trade threatens the security and prosperity of people. Poor inspection processes at border crossings allow the spread of animal diseases. Park rangers are killed by organized criminals linked to global illegal markets, and local communities see their livelihoods threatened by the disappearance of natural resources, according to Gore.

Reductions in biodiversity from illegal wildlife trade can have other substantial negative human health impacts, including the loss of potential sources of pharmaceuticals, experimental models for studying disease, crop pollination and micronutrients for humans lacking alternative sources of protein.

Globally, illegal wildlife trade is often framed as a security issue that converges with other serious and often transnational crimes such as drug, gun and human trafficking. The United States, Peru, China, Mozambique and United Kingdom have passed new, or bolstered existing, legislation designed to enhance efforts to combat illegal wildlife trade and reduce risks to security.

Criminologists, computer scientists, geographers and social marketers voiced a willingness to share data, collaborate on problem solving and use new methods for communicating science with decision makers.

"Tackling the illegal wildlife trade will require a deep understanding of human behavior, of the poachers that engage in the supply side of the trade, and the consumers that drive the demand for wildlife products," said Diogo Verissimo, David H. Smith Conservation Fellow, Johns Hopkins University.

Science can help measure the scope, scale and impact of illegal wildlife trade, map illicit networks and assess the effect of social marketing and other interventions designed to reduce demand.

"If we are going to fight organized crime, we have to be organized in our response," said Adrian Reuter, Latin America Wildlife Trafficking Coordinator for the Wildlife Conservation Society.

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