

Biodiversity on Madagascar



Madagascar's biodiversity is very high. The island:

- Is home to 5% of the world's plant and animal species,
- Is a major 'hotspot' of biodiversity, over 70% of its 250,000 animal species and 90% of its 14,000 plants are found nowhere else in the world.
- Has the 3rd largest coral reef system in the world, the Toliara coral reef, off the south-western coast.
- Was largely covered in forests until recently. In just the past 80 years over 75% of the land has been converted to croplands, rangelands for cattle and towns and villages.
- Since people arrived 2,000 years ago over 90% of the natural forest has been lost. Of the forest that remains, some 26% of the island, 80% is exotic *Eucalyptus* and other species, mostly planted for charcoal.

Evolution

- World's oldest – and fourth largest – island.
- Biodiversity is a result of long isolation, diverse habitats and its location in the tropics.
- All native terrestrial mammals evolved from just four founder individuals:
 - Lemurs
 - Tenrecs
 - Carnivores
 - Rodents
- Isolation and range of geology and climates produced diversification of plants – palms, orchids – and animals – chameleons, leaf tailed geckos, many invertebrates.
- Islands produce giants and miniatures; Elephant bird, largest bird which ever lived; a lemur the size of a gorilla, a mouse lemur that is the world's smallest mammal and world's smallest chameleons.
- Dry habitats have resulted in many species with swollen trunks and stems; Baobabs and other species of the Spiny Forest.

Extinction

The loss of natural habitat has had a major impact on the native species, and many are under threat of extinction as their habitats are lost. Only a small proportion of the remaining forest is in pristine condition; although much of this is protected, the sites are often quite small and therefore the animals and plants living there are vulnerable. Even these areas are under pressure from people looking for fuel, grazing land, building materials and wild foods and natural remedies. Lemurs require quite large home ranges to obtain the range of foods they need, the impacts of climate change (droughts, floods, storms) are being felt all over the island and lemurs are sometimes still hunted for food. The value of wildlife as an attraction to tourists, one of the few sources of foreign income, is recognised but often not high enough to save the animals and their forest habitats.