

MARK CARWARDINE



On the wild thoughts that won't let him sleep. This month:

Madagascar madness

Madagascar has been top of my 'worry list' for a long time, and I'm certainly not alone. But figures just released, after a new assessment by the IUCN Species Survival Commission, ring alarm bells louder than ever before.

No fewer than 94 of the world's 103 lemur species are now threatened with extinction. That's almost twice as many as the IUCN estimated during the last assessment in 2005, and it means that lemurs have become the most endangered group of vertebrates in the world.

The many species teetering on the brink include the indri, the largest lemur; Madame Berthe's mouse lemur, the world's smallest primate; and the northern sportive lemur which, with just 18 known survivors in the wild, is the rarest of all.

The reason is simple – 90 per cent of Madagascar's original forest has been lost, and it's still being slashed and burned to make yet more elbow room for agriculture, plundered for timber and cut for fuelwood and charcoal.

So it's not surprising that Madagascar's lemurs – and many other endemic forest-dwelling species – are clinging to an increasingly precarious existence in the rapidly disappearing fragments that are left. As if

that's not enough, lemurs are also being illegally hunted – at levels never seen before – for the bushmeat trade.

The situation has worsened considerably since the military coup in 2009, which plunged the country into turmoil, scaring away tourists and unleashing a dramatic rise in criminal plundering of protected areas.

Madagascar is already one of the highest conservation priorities on Earth, and there are some outstandingly good

Madame Berthe's mouse lemur: surely worth saving.



“*Lemurs have become the most endangered group of vertebrates in the world.*”

conservation groups working there. But it's clearly not enough. Given that virtually all of the wildlife living in this fragile paradise doesn't exist anywhere else, you'd have thought this would galvanise the world into action. And yet it doesn't – so how bad do things have to get?

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, photographer, writer, conservationist and BBC TV presenter.

Mark Carwardine