

## DR ALISON JOLLY: A PERSONAL APPRECIATION

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Alison Jolly, primatologist and conservationist, born 9 May 1937, died 6 February 2014.

Somehow the title 'primatologist' feels wrong. It conjures up the image of a soulless scientist whilst as members of the AMS know, Alison was one of the warmest, funniest and most passionate lovers of Madagascar that you could meet. But first, the scientific bit. As a graduate student of Yale University in 1959 she was studying sea sponges (surely that specialisation was doomed!) when she became accidentally involved with laboratory lemurs. And that was it – not just a scientific interest but a love affair. The primatologist part was of world-wide importance, of course. She wrote the ground-breaking *Lemur Behavior: A Madagascar Field Study* in 1966, the first to note the female dominance of *lemur catta*, *The Evolution of Primate Behavior* in 1972 and, three decades later, *Lucy's Legacy: Sex and Intelligence in Human Evolution*. American-born Alison held a BA from Cornell, and a PhD from Yale. She had been a researcher at the New York Zoological Society, and the universities of Cambridge, Sussex, Rockefeller and Princeton. At the time of her death she was a Visiting Scientist at the University of Sussex. She was President of the International Primatological Society 1992/96 and received its Lifetime Achievement Award in 2010. She was awarded a Knighthood by the National Order of Madagascar in 1998 and the Osman Hill Medal by the Primate Society of Great Britain in 2008. She received Honorary Doctorates from the University of Antananarivo and the Università degli Studi di Torino both in 2012. In June 2006, a new species of [mouse lemur](#), [Microcebus jollyae](#), was named in her honour, while a parcel of recently restored mining forest in Madagascar was named for her in January 2014, reflecting the hope that in so doing the people involved will be more likely to sustain it.

An impressive list of achievements, but I want to talk about Alison the person, and my friendship with her over the years, sharing a love of lemurs and Madagascar but from different standpoints. I first came to Madagascar as a tourist in 1976, with zero knowledge of lemurs. When I saw my first lemurs in Nosy Komba I thought the sexually dimorphic black lemurs (only the males are black) were two different species. By that time Alison had been studying ring-tailed lemurs in Berenty for 14 years and was *the* expert on the subject. So when I was asked to lead a pioneering tour of Madagascar in 1982 I bought her book *A World like our own: Man and Nature in Madagascar*. It changed my life. Here was a description of all aspects of this lovely, but challenging country, with intimate portraits of lemurs but also of the people and the dilemmas of promoting conservation in an island where poverty is rife. In that book I also 'met' Richard Jolly in the dedication. "Tell the whole story" he said "ecology with people, not just your animals." And that's what she did, with Richard's continuing encouragement, for the rest of her life. Lemurs were only part of the picture, not the obsessive whole, because she knew and understood the people – from dignitaries to peasants -- as well as she knew the lemurs. *A World like our Own* showcased Alison the writer. Her talent for narrative and description is the equal of the best of our travel writers, and brought the island of Madagascar to the notice of the general public for the first time. For a while we had a lively correspondence about the possibility of my reissuing the book as a paperback which sadly never happened, but it gave me an excuse to

get to know her and she was a generous contributor to many editions of my guide to Madagascar.

Any appreciation of Alison needs to include Richard. She writes in her yet-to-be-published account of the early days in Madagascar: “I arrived Madagascar in 1962 as a stunningly ignorant Yale PhD. Like others of my kind—privileged Western scientists—I was single-minded: I wanted to watch lemurs, not people. Besides, I was in love. I hoped to get married and live happily ever after, far from Madagascar—if only Richard Jolly would make up his mind to propose! Richard was and is an economist who actually likes people.” Whether Alison would have achieved what she did without Richard’s support is debatable.

In the 1990s I visited the Jollys at their home on Roosevelt Island in New York (before they moved to Lewes), and our paths sometimes crossed when I was leading tours to Berenty. When we could, we swapped stories of our problem clients (she used to lead research trips for Earthwatch). “After one group”, she told me “I wrote a detective story and killed them all off one by one.” Alison’s humour was infectious. You might start talking seriously about lemur behaviour but end up hooting with laughter over the lighter side of Madagascar. Alison was as anthropomorphic about lemurs as the rest of us. When the albino lemur, Sapphire (subject of a TV programme) died she told me “The death of Little Nell was nothing compared with our reactions to the demise of this little lemur”. Where she was absolutely serious, however, was when discussing conservation issues where her views were her own and based on her intimate knowledge of the country rather than popular, but less informed, opinion. Thus she came down firmly on the side of the controversial Rio Tinto titanium mine and I can’t imagine that anyone listening to her arguments could have disagreed with her. As she said: “If you think that people and forest will somehow muddle through before the hills are scraped as bare as Haiti, then there is no reason to think that money and organization will improve life. If you look at the statistics of forest loss, you opt for the mine.”

Perhaps her most accessible book of all was *Lords & Lemurs: Mad Scientists, Kings With Spears, and the Survival of Diversity in Madagascar* published in 2004. It is Alison at her best: funny, fascinating and illuminating. Anyone who has been to, or is thinking of going to, Berenty can enjoy it. Her final published work is the *The Ako Series* of books about Madagascar’s endangered animals, in Malagasy and English, aimed at the country’s children which she wrote with her Malagasy colleague, Hanta Rasaminanana. There is, however, a final book in the pipeline, provisionally called *Saving Madagascar: Conservation Diaries of Alison Jolly*. I have been privileged to see a couple of chapters and it will make inspiring and fascinating reading, as you would expect. The book describes the four international conferences on Madagascar in 1970, 1985, 1998, and 2013 so will be of wide interest and importance. It will be a lasting memorial to this extraordinary woman.