
SIAN'S REPORT

Travel Grant to NGO Reniala, Madagascar with the Jim Cronin Memorial Fund



Lemurs were the first primate species I worked with, and this ignited my love for primates and my desire to work with them. As part of the small monkey team at Monkey World, I work with a variety of monkeys including ring-tailed lemurs. I have always wanted to work with lemurs in their native habitat and share my knowledge, as well as learn from those working to re-integrate and release them back into the wild. The Lemur Rescue Centre set up by the NGO Reniala, is the first and only rescue centre for ring-tailed lemurs or lemur catta in Madagascar. The Reniala Reserve is located less than 1km from the Mozambique Channel, 25 km North of Tulear.

My first task was to introduce a young castrated male called Lebandy. He was rescued from the illegal pet-trade to an established pair, Gabri and Amjani. For the first day I sat observing the interactions through the window. As the window was located 50cm off the ground, I placed some branches and a chair either side of it. These could be used by the individuals to enable them to gain a better view of each other. This idea proved successful and over the next few days they began to become more curious about each other.

With Lebandy not showing many lemur behaviours like scent marking, I decided to move the introduction to the adjacent pens, as they were divided by mesh rather than a wall. I knew that Lebandy would do better if he could get acquainted with lemur behaviour through mesh rather than a wall with a window. The move went well and although Lebandy was a little nervous at first, after a few hours things were progressing nicely and over the weekend I saw positive interactions through the mesh between Gabri and Lebandy. Lebandy's confidence began to grow.

With all going well through the mesh with Gabri and Lebandy, it was time to allow full contact. They became closer, while Gabri also provided comfort and loyalty to Amjani through the mesh. I then opened the dividing door again and Amjani could join. With

Amjani's fiery personality, I was sceptical whether she would accept Lebandy but she proved me wrong, as within days mutual grooming began between them. It was wonderful to see the three all happily huddled together within a shelter box awaiting the morning sunrise. Being able to help Lebandy integrate into a small group was the highlight of my trip.

After the introduction, it was time to focus on adding additional structures to Bonnie and Clyde's enclosure. Despite the very limited supplies, I set about planning an enclosure makeover for the pair by adding additional branches, ropes to encourage suspension feeding, a hammock and a much-needed area for shelter, as well as a new shelter box. Whilst all of the above sounded wonderful in theory, I still had one massive hurdle to overcome before I could get started; I would need to crate train both Bonnie and Clyde, so that I could remove them from the enclosure safely. The crate training went incredibly well, and I was able to give their enclosure a basic makeover in record time. It was great to see both Bonnie and Clyde investigating the new additions to their enclosure. Clyde was first to inspect the new shelter box and within a few minutes he had become so relaxed that he had settled down on his back with his feet sprawled out in all directions. The addition of new branches allowed them to feed upside down as they would in the wild, while the hammock provided a new resting area.

I then moved onto the smaller cages. As they were currently housing individuals on a long-term basis, I could add perches and branches, giving the lemurs new pathways to explore, items to scent mark and new resting positions to gain access to sunning spots. The new branches were a big improvement as they provided different elevations to hang enrichment from, as well as providing perching and stability for the lemurs, helping to improve their balance, coordination and muscle development.

The JCMF and Monkey World sent a charitable donation of medical supplies to the centre, including syringes, needles and other surgical supplies. The existing medical supplies store needed sorting, so my time was well spent discarding the used items. Once completed, all items were stored in a lockable cupboard, reducing pest contamination and allowing the supplies to be found promptly. I was also asked to design and create different enrichment for the lemurs. I covered everything from physical enrichment which can be achieved by providing or changing the climbing frames and by adding new perching to many of the enclosures. I also made sure that I addressed the cognitive enrichment side of things by incorporating problem solving activities for the lemurs, such as wire mesh cubes, handbags, bottle enrichment and 'Lemur Ker Plunk'. Rolo and Nicolas were extremely fond of this game and their happy squeaks and grunts were a delight to hear. The wire baskets that I made with moveable lids were also very popular, however they proved a bit of a challenge for Bonnie and Clyde and it took several days before they were able to figure them out.

I needed to also look at both social and sensory enrichment, as ring-tailed lemurs are generally highly social beings and group interaction is essential to their psychological well-being. I also collected numerous baobab fruits from the forest and used these natural round shells for enrichment, along with snake skins, flowers and herbs to use as sensory stimuli for the lemurs. The last item on my enrichment 'To Do List' was to look at nutrition, an important part of any enrichment program as captivity does not place the same pressure on individuals to find their own food. Presenting the lemurs'

food in challenging ways was vital. With high temperatures, I provided a cold refreshment in the way of ice lollies. Fruit chunks were frozen within blended banana and water into reusable plastic cups. String was also placed into the cups prior to freezing to enable the lollies to be hung. At first, the lemurs were unsure of their cold appetizers, but they soon began to enjoy them. I also made sure their whole veg feeds were given in a different way, as well as introducing them to some new ideas, from food kebabs to collecting natural vegetation. I then hung this from different elevations within their enclosures to mimic the difficulties they would face reaching their chosen foods in the forest.

During my stay, I put together a pocket guide to making enrichment and I hope this will be useful to future volunteers and keepers. From collecting monthly weights for the lemurs, to making shelter boxes to provide resting places out of the sun, I was kept busy every day. I can only describe my trip as an emotional roller coaster but despite the ups, downs, remote location and limited resources, I can now look back at my time at the centre as a great accomplishment. I was able to enrich the lives of the lemurs at the centre, as well as meet and work with some incredible people. Thank you to the Jim Cronin Memorial Fund for funding my travel grant!