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# SunLife

YOUR WEEKEND COMPANION

**BORNEO  
JUNGLE  
DIARIES**

## ENCOUNTERS FROM THE TWILIGHT ZONE

MEET THE SLOW LORIS  
IN ITS NATURAL HOME

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# 'Slow Lorises belong in the wild, not as pets'

**BORNEO  
JUNGLE  
DIARIES**

A slow loris' enormous eyes are highly developed hunting tools. © Scubazoo

**N**OT many wild animals have a social media presence. Of all the creatures one might find in the jungles of Borneo, only one can claim to have gone viral. However, celebrity status is a fickle friend, and sometimes our desire to be entertained can cause more harm than good. No animal exemplifies this better than the Slow Loris.

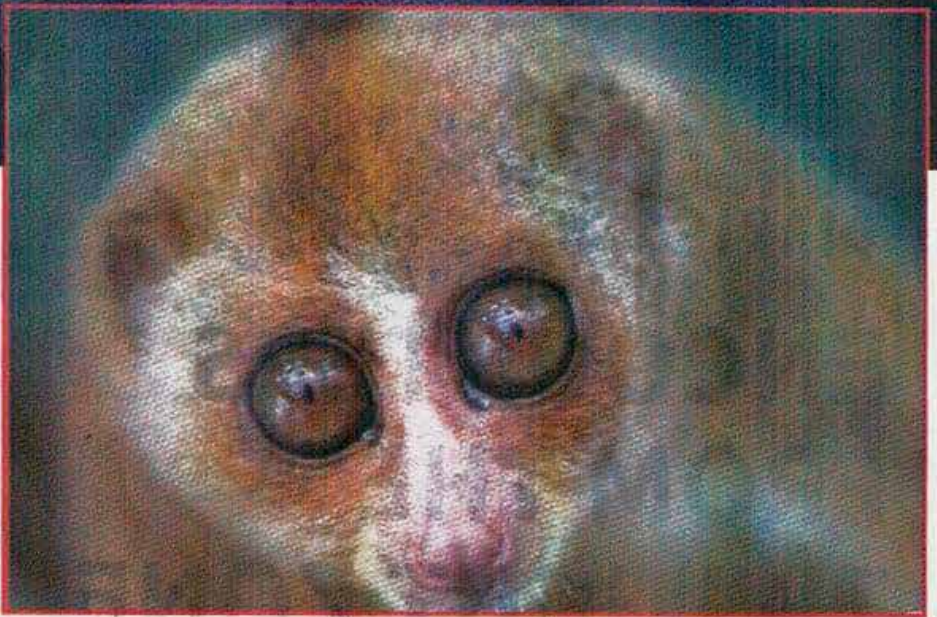
Danica Stark knows more than most how great the gap is between our popular perception of the slow loris, and its strange, twilight reality. Danica oversees the Nocturnal Primate Project at the Danau Girang Field Centre (DGFC) on the banks of the Kinabatangan river, and has done so since she arrived in Sabah in 2010.

"In the short term, we just want to understand the basic ecology of these animals", Danica explains. "Slow lorises belong in the wild, not as pets"; at DGFC, she continues, "we can use all that information to inform conservation plans".

#### Slow Loris

Slow lorises inhabit a world entirely different from the one occupied by humans. As such, the features that make them so successful in their natural environment have placed them under enormous threat from animal traffickers. Despite their cute, wide-eyed appearance, slow lorises are stealthy nocturnal predators.

A loris' famous, enormous eyes allow their pupils to dilate to such an extent that they can see clearly in the pitch-black of the nighttime jungle. With more



Slow lorises' adorable appearance is their biggest threat, due to the illegal pet trade. © Scubazoo

vertebrae than commonly seen in primates, coupled with extremely mobile joints and opposable thumbs like humans, they are perfectly suited to sweeping through the forest canopy in search of prey.

Not only are slow lorises stealthy, they have a unique weapon. A pair of glands on their upper arms secrete a toxin that the loris then licks and mixes

with its saliva. This toxin has several functions.

Mothers lick their cubs to cover them it while they sleep; the toxin's potency – and its potent smell – keeps the cub safe while the mother departs to hunt and defecate. It also adds a venomous edge to the loris' surprisingly sharp bite.

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# 'People want them because they're cute'

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All this begs the question: why do these enigmatic primates so frequently end up in our homes, markets and online videos?

"The main threat for the slow loris is the pet trade", Danica says. "People want them because they're cute, they're fluffy, they've got the big eyes. If perceptions don't change about having these animals as pets, I think that the future is actually quite bleak".

Slow lorises are relentlessly targeted by poachers, who remove them from the jungle and brutally remove their sharp teeth with pliers. They are frequently drugged in order to stop the animals, traumatised and in enormous pain, from trying to bite their handlers.

The near-inevitable infection is often the first cause of death. But furthermore, "slow lorises have a specialised and very diverse diet, and feeding them bananas or rice balls results in these animals dying quite quickly in captivity. Besides eating fruits and leaves (which is what most people expect primates to feed on), they also rely quite heavily on flowers, gum from trees, invertebrates and small vertebrates".

The demand for slow lorises, whether as pets or to pose with in pictures at tourist sites, means that poachers keep returning to the forest, and the population continues to decline.

## Guests in the Lorises' Home

A forest that has slow lorises living and breeding within it is a healthy forest. Danica explains: "The presence of a breeding population of slow lorises can indicate the continued suitability of the habitat.

"Slow lorises require connected forest canopy to move around, and therefore by having a connected canopy, many other species can benefit or thrive as well. Because slow lorises consume such a variety of foods, "a forest that has these food stuffs available for them also can indicate a relatively healthy ecosystem".

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“The main threat for the slow loris is the pet trade... people want them because they're cute, they're fluffy, they've got the big eyes.”

- Danica

In the thick nighttime jungle Danica, who oversees the Nocturnal Primates studies (slow lorises and tarsiers) is reliant on radio telemetry to track her subjects. © Danica Stark / DGFC



## 'DGFC home to 10 different primate species'

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For that reason, Danica and her colleagues at DGFC have made it a priority to learn more about the slow lorises of the Kinabatangan. When I ask about the project, Danica can't hide her enthusiasm.

"The forest around Danau Girang Field Centre is home to 10 different primate species! This is an incredible amount of primate diversity and it is important to understand the role each of these primate species plays in this ecosystem."

To track the primates, whose lives take place in a world almost inaccessible to researchers, Danica and her team have fitted a number of slow lorises with small radio collars. Recently, they have added a new innovation: an accelerometer.

Accelerometers are most frequently found in mobile phones and GPS devices. They are a sophisticated kind of sensor that allow the device to track the direction and intensity of its own movements.

While a VHF radio collar on its own can tell a scientist where a slow loris is, with enough data Danica can distinguish what it is doing, by interpreting patterns of movement the accelerometer records. In doing so, DGFC can start to build a more detailed picture of nocturnal primates' behaviours and habits.

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Using low-frequency redlights, Danica is able to gently get to grips with Boss the Loris. © Danica Stark / DGFC



So nice to see you!  
Presenter, Aaron 'Bertie'  
Gekoski, finds himself face-  
to-face with a slow loris.  
© Scubazoo

## 'Proud to protect natural neighbourhood'

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What is the need for all this work? Danica argues that "with the information we are able to learn from these studies, we can aid the Sabah Wildlife Department in designing effective management plans" that can not only protect existing animal populations, but learn how to work with the environment to better manage it for the future.

"Due to the protection status of the Lower Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary (in which DGFC is found)", she goes on, "the area is a good example of how these animals are able to survive in a fragmented and recovering habitat".

By learning how the forest and its inhabitants manage themselves, Danica and her team can offer suggestions on how to manage the forest for all who use it.

"Malaysians should be proud to have such unique species as their neighbours in the forest," Danica said.

If Malaysia wants to preserve its natural history, the people have a responsibility to live in a way that sustains it. Every action has a consequence far beyond our own daily lives. Taking a tree from the forest might help build a home, but it destroys one for another creature.

Clicking on a cute animal video might seem harmless, but it increases demand for the abduction and cruel treatment of these strange, fascinating

creatures.

As Danica says before heading back into the forest, "the biggest thing that we have to do is tell people that slow lorises belong in the wild, not as pets – and then there can be some hope".

### SZtv

Presenting this new exciting series – Borneo Jungle Diaries – with environmental photojournalist, Aaron 'Bertie' Gekoski, investigating life behind-the-scenes at the Danau Girang Field Centre.

All episodes will have Bahasa Malaysia subtitles and be released SZtv's website (Scubazoo.tv) and Youtube, as well as on the Facebook pages of SZtv & DGFC. The episodes will also be featured on the Daily Express and Malay Mail Online.

What's more, viewers are encouraged to take part in the competition that is being held; All you have to do is answer five questions from the episode correctly each week to win a 4-day / 3-night stay the Danau Girang Field Centre.

There will also be a grand prize at the end of the 10-series Borneo Jungle Diaries for those who get all questions correct across all quizzes. For more information, check out Borneo Jungle Diaries on the SZtv website.