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In Colombia, activist works to preserve monkeys

Angela Maldonado, an award-winning conservationist, has made her lifework keeping night monkeys out of the hands of indigenous hunters who sell them to laboratories for infectious disease research.

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Peering up into tree branches 100 feet above the floor of the jungle, Angela Maldonado spots a family of monkeys where someone with a less practiced eye would see nothing but a maze of brown and green foliage.

"They're intelligent, charismatic creatures that express happiness, pain and grief. They make you feel what they are feeling," Maldonado said, squinting up at the rain forest canopy outside this sweltering Amazon port city. "They're a lot like us."

Such empathy explains why Maldonado, a 36-year-old primate conservationist, has sought, as her lifework, to keep Colombia's night monkeys out of the hands of indigenous hunters who sell them to medical laboratories for infectious disease research.

Maldonado's campaign received a boost in May when she was awarded a "Green Oscar" from the Whitley Fund for Nature in a ceremony at Britain's Royal Geographical Society. Princess Anne made the presentation.

With the \$90,000 award, Maldonado will, she says, perform a feasibility study of alternative livelihoods for the Tikuna tribe, which, with permission from the Colombian government, captures up to 1,600 night monkeys a year and sells them at \$50 apiece to the FIDIC, the Immunology Institute of Colombia Foundation.

FIDIC's director, Manuel Elkin Patarroyo, a well-known malaria researcher who has donated his patents to the World Health Organization, did not respond to e-mailed requests for comment. His research has been internationally recognized and published in numerous medical journals.

Researchers at FIDIC prefer night monkeys for testing malaria vaccines because their response to the disease is similar to humans', said one former employee who commented on condition that she not be named because of the political sensitivity of the issue.

Not categorically opposed to indigenous people hunting the animals, Maldonado favors reduced captures and wants FIDIC to perform research only on animals bred and raised in captivity. If not, she fears the 2-foot-long saucer-eyed primates are doomed to disappear from the area (the monkeys also live in neighboring countries). Her feasibility study is looking into helping the Indians earn money instead by selling freeze-dried fruits, including acai.

Maldonado is but one conservationist working on behalf of threatened Latin American native species. The trade in the region's wild birds, reptiles, mammals and insects is a \$2-billion business that for the most part is for nonmedical purposes, such as private animal collecting or the apparel industry.

The demand for wild animals on the part of laboratories such as FIDIC only adds to the repercussions that pet trafficking and logging are having on monkey species, said Marta Bueno, a genetics professor and primate specialist at the National University of Colombia in Bogota, the capital.

"These monkeys are very territorial and live in family groups of seven or eight that control two to three acres. So if you are hunting 1,600 per year, you are having a devastating effect on a large part of the local ecosystem," Bueno said. In her study, Maldonado plans a census of the night monkey species to estimate what percentage of the population is represented by the annual sales to FIDIC.

Economic factors make the battle waged by Maldonado to reduce if not put a halt to live monkey commerce an uphill struggle, said Bernardo Ortiz, South America director of TRAFFIC, a wildlife conservation group with a regional base in Quito, Ecuador.

"Medical use of animals is just one more abuse of species that could just as well be raised in captivity," Ortiz said, adding that all Colombian primates, including night monkeys, are under threat. "But [FIDIC] refuses to consider it because their costs would be much higher."

Maldonado says FIDIC's studies are proceeding at the cost of the Amazon's "connectivity," or the symbiosis of animals and plants. For example, night monkeys eat and, through defecation, disperse the seeds of trees that are part of the jungle canopy. The monkeys' disappearance could over the long term reduce the tree population, she says.

Maldonado says the Tikuna are increasingly turning for food to once-taboo animals such as anteaters and deer because traditional food sources such as tapirs, large monkeys and the capybara, a large rodent, have been hunted to near extinction.

Maldonado, as a scholarship student at Oxford Brookes University in England, earned a Ph.D. in primate conservation this year. She said she found her calling in the late 1990s while running a supermarket, her first job after finishing undergraduate studies in business.

After the driver of a grocery delivery truck traded his pet woolly monkey to her in exchange for cash to repair his vehicle, Maldonado couldn't bear to keep the animal captive. She decided to set it free in the far eastern jungle state of Vaupes, where U.S. biologist Thomas Defler ran a primate rehabilitation center.

Upon her return to Bogota, she was to start a management track job with Coca-Cola. "But I found that I loved the animals, loved the rain forest," she said.

When a guerrilla attack forced Defler to leave Vaupes, Maldonado decided to leave Coca-Cola and manage the station. She stayed for three years.

"I realized the jungle is where I belong," Maldonado said. "Working just to survive didn't make sense."

Kraul is a special correspondent.

