

Will a Newly Discovered Lizard Help Scientists Protect Rain Forests?



A newly discovered lizard found in the Philippines has scientists thinking there might be other never-before-seen creatures on that country's islands. But scientists say those creatures might never be found because the islands' rain forests are in danger.

The latest lizard found -- a bright-speckled cousin of the monitor lizard -- was first spotted in 2001. Scientists saw members of the islands' Agta tribe carrying the lizard from the forest. The tribespeople would not give up their catch, because the lizard was going to be a tasty meal for them and their families. They did, however, let scientists take pictures of the lizard.

Finally, in 2009, scientists captured a lizard of their own to study. They named the new lizard the Northern Sierra Madre monitor lizard because it was discovered in the islands' Sierra Madre Mountains. The 6-½-foot-long lizard had bright yellow markings that distinguish it from more boring-looking monitors. Its legs were mainly yellow, and its tail was striped black and yellow. In some pictures, the 22-pound lizard looked like it had green or blue scales.

NEWS WORD BOX

trickle distinguish
realize conservation
uniquely camouflage

So how could scientists work in the Philippines' rain forests for years without finding the new lizard until now?

They say the Northern Sierra Madre monitor is unlike other monitor lizards and their larger cousin, the Komodo dragon. All of those lizards are meat-eaters. But the newfound lizard eats fruit. That means it never has to come down out of the trees. Its uniquely colored skin, quiet manner, and treetop home helped it remain camouflaged from scientists' view for many years.

The discovery of the Northern Sierra Madre monitor is making scientists realize that Philippines' rain forests may hold many undiscovered species. But those species will not be found if the rain forests keep disappearing. Twenty years ago, forests covered about 35 percent of the Philippines' land. But people have been logging that land and building on it. Today, forests cover less than 25 percent of the country's land.

The rain forests are a "conservation hot spot" that need to be protected, scientists say. "I hope we can make the new lizard a 'poster child' for conservation of the land," said one scientist. "Conserving the rain forest will trickle down to its other inhabitants."

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