



Wildlife

Madagascar is a fascinating and critical habitat. Nearly 90% of the animals and plants that live in Madagascar don't live anywhere else in the world. This is partly because of how it formed as an island. Originally, it was connected to the African continent and to India. This allowed animals and plants to migrate between the different areas.

Around 180 million years ago, the landmass broke away from the African continent. This greatly reduced how far these creatures and plants could travel. Roughly 100 million years later, it finally separated from India. This means that for the last 80 million years, the flora (plants) and fauna (animals) of Madagascar have evolved without any interference from other species.

There aren't many large carnivores in Madagascar. The largest is the fossa. These cat-like creatures are the only animals capable of hunting adult lemurs. Even though they look like a cat, they aren't a member of the cat family. Instead, they have evolved similar features over the millions of years that they have been on the islands. When two types of creatures evolve similar traits but independently of each other, it is called convergent evolution. Fossas have developed flexible ankles that allow them to climb down trees head-first and jump between trees. This helps them to hunt their main prey - lemurs.

Large parts of Madagascar used to be covered in rainforests. This was home to even more unique species, many of which are now extinct. Most of the rainforest has been destroyed very recently. Only about 10% of the forest remains, and 40% has been removed since 1950.

One of the most iconic species of tree in Madagascar is the baobab tree. There are eight species of the baobab tree that are only found in Madagascar. On the western side of the main island, there is a large area of these trees, called baobab alley. This area contains six of the eight species. These trees can live for very long times. Some of the trees in the alley are over 800



years old and a colossal 30 meters tall. Because these trees store a lot of water, which gives them their unique shape, they are sometimes referred to as the bottle tree.

Off the southwest coast of Madagascar, you can find the Toliara reef. This is one of the biggest coral reefs in the world and home to thousands of species of animal. One of these is the coelacanth.

Coelacanths were alive at the same time as the dinosaurs - the species is believed to be around 400 million years old. The Toliara reef is one of the few places in the world where it still lives. The reef is also an important breeding ground for humpback whales. Rare blue whales have also been seen around the area. Unfortunately, it is in critical danger of being destroyed by climate change and pollution.

RETRIEVAL FOCUS

1. Which two places were originally connected to Madagascar?
2. Which country did it separate away from last?
3. How much rainforest has been lost on Madagascar since 1950?
4. How many species of baobab tree are there on Madagascar?
5. What is the largest carnivore in Madagascar?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

V

Which word in the first paragraph tells you that Madagascar is important for animals?

S

What is *convergent evolution*?

V

Find and copy a word that the author has used to give an impression of how tall baobab trees can be.

I

Why might it be important to protect coelacanths?

S

Why are baobab trees sometimes called bottle trees?