

Midwest Primate Interest Group Newsletter

Issue 2
February 2021

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Midwest Primatologists,

Happy New Year! We have certainly been through quite a bit in the past month, let alone the past year. The last time I wrote this letter, we had no idea how dramatically our day-to-day lives were about to transform. Now I struggle to remember what 'things were like before.' I fear that any attempt by me to fully address the magnitude of what we are living through will fall short. So, instead of trying to find the perfect words, let me simply say that I wish each and every one of you the strength you need to get through whatever challenges you are facing. Please also remember that the essence of MPIG is community, and that beyond the science that we do, we strive to support each other professionally and personally. Always feel free to reach out.

Despite all of the setbacks we have experienced, the past year facilitated an exciting new opportunity for MPIG. While we were disappointed to have to cancel our in-person annual meeting, we successfully shifted to a virtual format. Instead of typical scientific presentations, this meeting was centered around three panel discussions that addressed critical issues facing the field: The Ethics of Fieldwork During a Pandemic, Activism in Primate Conservation, and Diversity & Inclusion in Primatology. More than 100 participants joined us from all over the world to absorb and contribute diverse perspectives on each topic. I want to thank all of our panelists for their time and all of our participants for fostering such a vibrant discussion space. Please feel free to check out the recordings on our website (<https://midwestprimates.org/2020-annual-meeting/>) if you were unable to join us. I also want to share how happy it made me to see everyone's faces on the screen. MPIG Musical Breakout Rooms may have been the social highlight of my 2020.

Moving forward, we are hoping to be able to reconvene for our annual meeting this fall at the Lester E. Fisher Center for the Study and Conservation of Apes at the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago. We will monitor this situation over the next few months and keep you updated as we have a better feel for our ability to hold an in-person meeting. In the meantime, based on the enthusiasm around the topics of our virtual meeting, we are discussing a follow-up virtual discussion this spring that revisits the issues of social and environmental justice that wove through our panels in the fall. Please let us know if you would like to help design it – we welcome input from all backgrounds and career levels.

Finally, I am lucky to be working with a fantastic MPIG executive team. I want to thank them for all of their work keeping things on track over the past two-years. As this term comes to a close, we are looking for new voices to contribute to the team. Please reach out if you are interested in helping out as an officer or otherwise. We would love to have you on board.



Health and happiness to you all.

Sincerely,
Katie Amato

RECAP: MPIG 2020 “Virtual Edition” MEETING

Despite the challenges of hosting a conference during a pandemic, MPIG 2020 went fantastically! This meeting was not only unique in the sense that it was held online but also, it did not follow the typical format of our past conferences. This year, we featured three roundtable sessions on pressing topics in the field of primatology. These were the “Ethics of Fieldwork During a Pandemic”, “Activism in Primate Conservation”, and “Diversity and Inclusion in Primatology”. The open dialogue and welcoming atmosphere of each session lent itself to meaningful conversation and exchange of ideas. We were pleasantly surprised when we saw that each session was well attended with **over 100 attendees**. In order to engage with attendees in a creative way and give folks the opportunity to share research, we featured submitted scientific posters to our Facebook and Twitter while also posting about session updates and conversation. If you were unable to attend and are interested in viewing recordings of the sessions, please check out our website. We are hopeful we will be able to see everyone in Fall of 2021 at the Lincoln Park Zoo!

We would like to extend our deepest gratitude to those of you who donated a registration fee this year! These extra funds will be used to make the next in-person meeting extra memorable.

You can access the video links and a description of the speakers/events using by [CLICKING HERE](#).



Photo above: A moment captured from the start of our program. This was not necessarily the year for photo ops, but hopefully next year we can finally see each other face-to-face. We are so thankful that so many members were able to attend!



NEWS and VIEWS

Diversity and inclusion in primatology

Dr. Michelle A. Rodrigues, Department of Social and Cultural Sciences, Marquette University.

At the 2020 virtual MPIG meeting, we had a roundtable on diversity of primatology, featuring panelists Laura Abondano, Raymond Vagell, and Emily Boeving. We discussed obstacles to inclusion in primatology, including the financial barriers to primatological training, particularly in accessing field courses and unpaid/underpaid research assistant and field assistant positions (Fournier et al., 2019, Blair 2019). Additional barriers to primatology include safety issues in conducting fieldwork (Clancy et al, 2014, Nelson et al, 2017). Furthermore, within the broader field of biological anthropology, the diversity that is present in interested students at the undergraduate level is lost when proceeding through the levels of graduate school, and transition to professional positions (Anton et al., 2018). As a result, American primatology is primarily a white, middle-class endeavor, like the “public white spaces” that characterize the parent discipline of anthropology (Fuentes, 2011, Brodtkin 2011). Furthermore, as students pointed out after the 2020 panel, primatology is overdue to discuss issues of ableism and stigmatization of mental health issues. Creating inclusive spaces within primatology requires recognizing these obstacles, including a recognition of how racism sexism, homophobia, classism, and ableism may intersect to intensify barriers to inclusion, and taking active effort to counter them. Scholarships, REUs, and building funding requests for research assistants into grant proposals are one step into diversifying opportunities for training in primatology. Public engagement efforts, such as those conducted by #BlackInBioAnth, highlight the role of minoritized scholars with biological anthropology and primatology. One of the challenges that minoritized scholars encounter is a lack of inclusion in existing networks, which makes it more challenging to build

comparable networks for support, collaboration, advancement, and recognition (Rodrigues et al., 2021). However, particularly during a time of greater virtual connectivity, creating spaces for marginalized scholars to connect can counter those barriers. Furthermore, allies can help support scholars of color by recognizing that beyond implicit bias, overt racism does exist in their fields; however, they can tackle these problems by actively intervening when they are present to witness to racist or otherwise problematic behavior (Rodrigues et al., 2021). Finally, we should recognize that rather than simply diversifying and including marginalized scholars, primatology needs to go further to address power inequities in field research and take active steps to decolonize the field.

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Madagascar's altered landscape – the great interruption of COVID-19

Dr. Mitch Irwin

On a personal level, I was pretty bummed out to not go to Madagascar in 2020. But, let's stop right there. I'm still one of the fortunate ones. I was able to go about 20 times before that. I can still work, be paid for that work, and do it remotely. Many, even in my community, have had it much worse.

The country I have worked in and known for 20 years, Madagascar, can't say the same. The first COVID-19 case was reported on 20 March 2020, but by the end of 2020 there were only 18,000 cases and just 261 deaths reported. This seems mild, but there [is significant question](#) about whether many more infections and deaths went unrecorded. A recent study of donated blood found that [40% of 8,000 samples had COVID-19 antibodies](#). This raises the possibility that millions could have contracted the virus. Perhaps fatalities were low because of demography – many fewer people in older age brackets compared to developed countries.

So, while our headlines have been largely filled by COVID stories from New York, California, Italy and the UK, what's been happening in developing nations like Madagascar?

According to [the World Bank](#), Madagascar's GDP contracted by 4.2% in 2020, and the pandemic pushed 1.38 million people (in a population of 27 million) into poverty (measured as making less than \$1.90/day). One very predictable reason for this slide into (deeper) poverty is Madagascar's reliance on the tourism sector. In a normal year, Madagascar receives 200,000 – 400,000 tourists – this is not a massive number but it is a large share of the economy and in normal times supports 300,000 jobs across the country. Not surprisingly, the drop of tourism to virtually zero arrivals has been followed by reports of increasing [deforestation](#) and [hunting](#) – newly unemployed people have looked to the environment for income, and fled the crowded

cities to join family in rural areas. Meanwhile, Madagascar's south is experiencing the worst drought in a decade, with [1.35 million people expected to experience famine this year](#).

Madagascar's aspiring primatologists are also having a rough year. After a long delay due to lockdowns in the city, a cohort of 15 students is currently wrapping up coursework in the Anthropobiology and Sustainable Development department at the University of Antananarivo. In a normal year, they'd get paired off with foreign research teams who provide financial support and mentoring. This year, they don't know what they will do.

Finally, the relief many of us are feeling in the developed world at the deployment of COVID-19 vaccines is unlikely to be felt soon in Madagascar. Many of the world's poor countries are relying on international aid to have access to vaccines, and it's unclear how long those at the back of the line will have to wait. On top of that, [Madagascar's president has promoted a herbal remedy and it appears the country may actually refuse vaccine access](#).

As some field primatologists have rightly pointed out, our reaction to the COVID pandemic is tricky. Stubbornly continuing fieldwork can absolutely endanger both the primates we study and the local collaborators we rely on. Yet we are the lucky ones: a pause of two years in my fieldwork is something I can work around in my career. For those of us living in developed countries, there has been economic suffering evident here at home - but a 2-year economic downturn in Madagascar is going to have a massive impact on people, primates and ecosystems, and this downturn will reduce the already slim remaining natural habitats, making Paul Garber's points about our responsibilities as primatologists even more poignant (*see the next article, "Activism and conservation during a pandemic"*).

Activism and conservation during a pandemic

Dr. Paul A. Garber, Department of Anthropology, Program in Ecology, Evolution, and Conservation Biology, University of Illinois, Urbana, IL, USA

The world is facing a number of existential crises, most immediately the health and economic effects of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, climate change, and the impending extinction of over one million animal and plant species (IPBES 2019), including 65% of all nonhuman primates (IUCN 2020). And, although many primate researchers have dedicated their careers to the goals of primate conservation, and many primatologists have strongly advocated for protecting the world's primates and their habitats in their research, scholarly publications, classroom presentations, and public lectures, the reality we face is that primate populations are continuing to decline in the face of deforestation, habitat fragmentation, the expansion of industrial agriculture and cattle ranching, air, water, and soil pollution, and the construction of road and rail networks that have intensified spatial conflict between humans and nonhuman primates.

Certainly, there have been many important local or small-scale successes in our collective conservation efforts, and we need to build on those. However, business-as-usual is no longer an option as primate populations continue to decline worldwide. What is required is sustainable and transformational change. The good news is that there are many actions primatologists can take, and many organizations that primatologists can work with to effect transformational change (see Garber,

in press for a more complete discussion of activism in primate conservation). Engaging in “scientific activism requires speaking truth to power. It necessitates inspiring, organizing, and mobilizing others to join together and take actions designed to effect change. This may involve public information campaigns using social media; educating global citizens, politicians and law makers to the harm that particular products (e.g. palm oil, pesticides, plastics), businesses (e.g. fossil fuel industry and agrochemical companies), and policies (e.g. regulations concerning hunting or carbon emissions) have on biodiversity, human health and the environment. Scientific activism may include organizing boycotts; recommending alternative and environmentally friendly products; and participating in demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience” (Garber, in press). We are the experts and therefore it is our responsibility to make scientific activism a normative part of our personal lives and professional careers. The time to act is now!

References

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Pandemics and Conservation

By Dr. Tony Goldberg

Many people refer to this time of COVID-19 as “unprecedented.” In fact, and unfortunately, it’s not. Pandemics have occurred repeatedly over the centuries of recorded history, and the experiences of today seem like déjà vu to historians of these past plagues. And, not all these pandemics involved human infectious diseases. For example, the chytrid fungus *Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis* swept across the world in the 1990s to cause mass extinctions of frogs. So, pandemics have indeed set a precedent for human suffering and animal populations declines. What of COVID and nonhuman primates? [Ample research has shown](#) that nonhuman apes are susceptible to many, if not all, human respiratory viruses and that, in general, the clinical consequences for nonhuman apes are more severe than for humans. This is probably because, unlike humans, nonhuman apes are new to these agents and therefore [lack the genetic mechanisms of resistance](#) that humans have evolved since the first agricultural revolution. [COVID in gorillas at the San Diego Zoo](#) confirms what we’ve suspected all along – that nonhuman apes have the biochemical “machinery” to support SARS-CoV-2 replication and that they get sick. Unlike gorillas in zoos, wild gorillas don’t have access to teams of caring veterinarians to see them through the course of disease. If wild apes contract COVID, it will probably look like the more severe human respiratory disease outbreaks they have suffered – many will get sick, some will die, some will recover, and the outbreak will disrupt their social organization for a generation. One ray of hope is that transmission of SARS-CoV-2 between

nonhuman ape social groups is relatively unlikely. Between-group encounters are rare, so it would have to be a “perfect storm” of events for a virus with a short infectious period to spread throughout a forest. Still, let’s keep COVID away from all wild nonhuman primates, apes and otherwise, because even though their populations may recover the primates themselves are individuals with inherent individual value. Vaccination of wild nonhuman primates is not practical, especially with the current two-dose vaccines available (can you imagine?), so the best thing we can do is to keep the virus out. That’s the focus of the [IUCN Specialist Group on Great Apes and COVID-19](#), in fact. We are working hard to integrate rapidly emerging information on the virus, including its evolution and expanding known host range, to make actionable recommendations for great ape research and tourism. We are aware of the complexity of the situation. For example, if people are excluded entirely from wild nonhuman primate habitats, will we inadvertently make the apes more susceptible to poaching? As with pandemics of the past, the decisions are sometimes untenable. Eventually, SARS-CoV-2 will either disappear or (I think more likely) become the next in a long list of zoonotic pathogens that becomes endemic in people and adapts to us (and we to it). With their small, shrinking, and disconnected populations, however, most nonhuman primates probably can’t adapt. It’s therefore incumbent on all of us as primatologists to raise the bar for the precautions with which we approach field research on nonhuman primates and to set a new (and yes, unprecedented) example.

For additional reading about conducting fieldwork during a pandemic, [CLICK HERE](#) to access a best practices action letter published by ASP.



Pandemic research contribution opportunity for faculty

Academic institutions are starting to recognize a mental health crisis in students. But what about faculty? Research suggests that 36% of academics have or would like to receive help for work related anxiety or depression and 80% viewed that competition has fostered mean and aggressive behavior in the workplace.

To understand how universities are responding to the needs of faculty, and what resources, practices, and policies are in place that address faculty mental health and well-being, we seek personal narratives.

If you have a narrative that you are willing to share, please go to this link. Your response will be anonymous. IRB# NCR202765

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1rFo7ITsS3YbSbT1SNMLpij4NRvEDua55zR54sdUzAq0>

Thank you very much for your help.

Dr. Colin A. Chapman

Professor, Canada Research Chair, Fellow of the Royal Society, Velan Award for Humanitarian Service, Konrad Adenauer Research Award from the Humboldt Foundation, Conservation Fellow of the Wildlife Conservation Society, Killam Research Fellow

FUNDRAISER FOR CHIMPANZEE CONSERVATION



Below is an original art print of a gouache painting made for the Chimpanzee SAFE Gala, a virtual fundraising gala that took place on January 29, 2021! Each print is hand signed, approximately 8.75" x 7.5", and ready to be framed! Cost includes domestic shipping.

****50% of profits will go to the Chimpanzee SAFE program!****

[CLICK HERE TO PURCHASE](#)

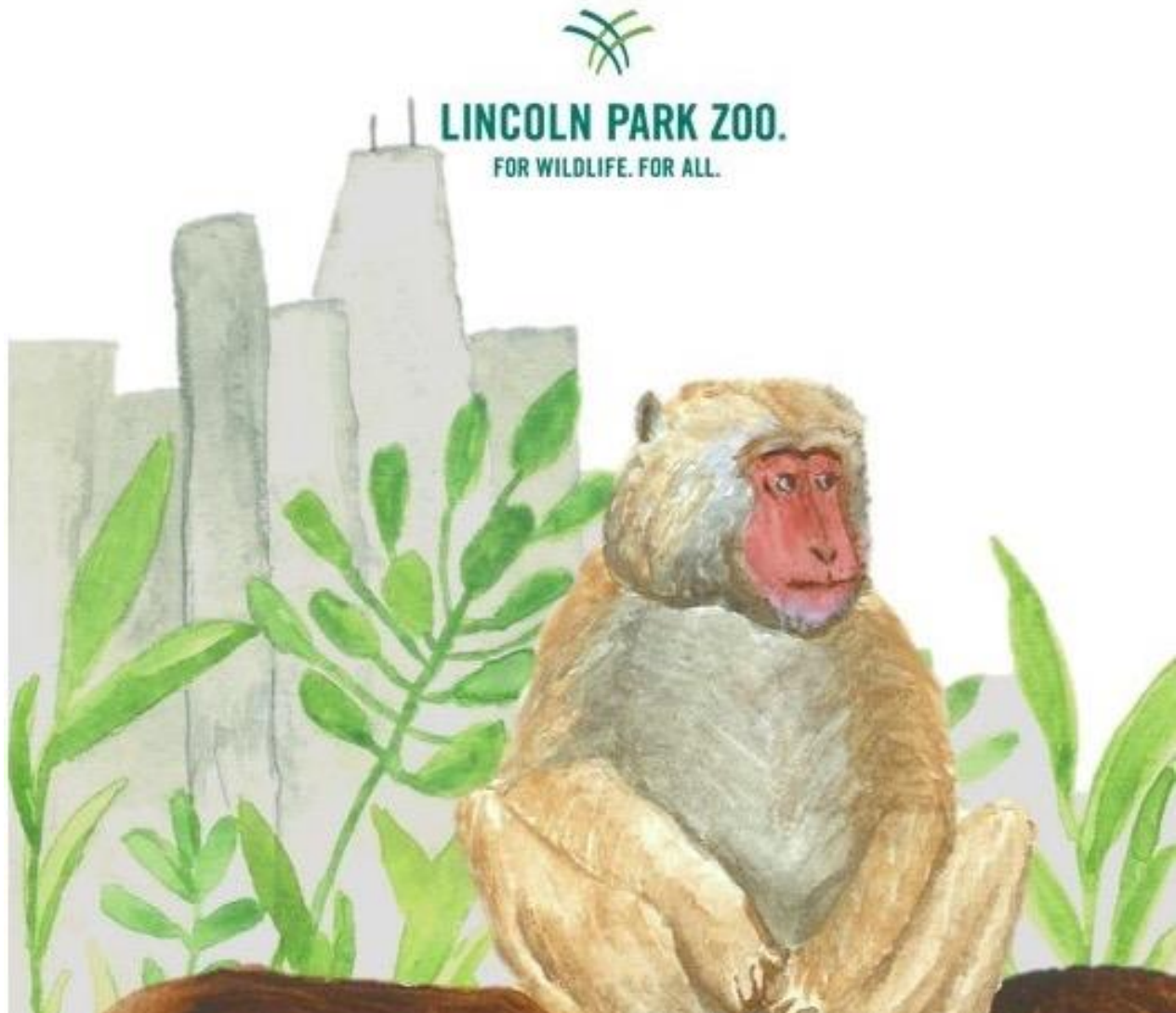
More information on the Chimpanzee SAFE program:
Despite commendable efforts of many talented conservationists over the past 40 years, chimpanzee populations have significantly declined due to habitat destruction, bushmeat trade, and disease. Their populations will continue to decline unless the scale of conservation efforts increase. The Chimpanzee SAFE program aims to enhance support for chimpanzee conservation efforts by contributing to scientific advances in chimpanzee research, engaging visitors at AZA-accredited facilities, and equipping several AZA-accredited zoos with tools to work directly with chimpanzee field conservation efforts.

MPIG 2021 AT THE LINCOLN PARK ZOO?

The annual Midwest Primate Interest Group meeting this year will potentially be held this Fall (date TBD) at the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago! Accommodations and more information will be posted closer to the conference on our website, Facebook page, and new Twitter account.

An in-person meeting will entirely depend on public health recommendations and concerns.

To be hosted by the Lester E. Fisher Center for the Study and Conservation of Apes, Lincoln Park Zoo



CALLING ALL LAB PIs!

For the benefit of furthering the research capacity of our student members, MPIG is creating an online repository of the available laboratory services and equipment found within the region. Our hope is to create a space where students and others can find pertinent information needed to better develop projects, work out methods, and potentially build collaborations. Working on a regional scale helps reduce travel time and costs, and promotes partnerships between MPIG members.

If you would like to participate and be listed on the MPIG website, please submit the following information using the example format: PI name, lab specialty, location, analysis capabilities, types of equipment, costs/fees, preferred contact information, and any other pertinent information you feel is appropriate (lab name, website, etc). Below is an example of a submission:

PI name: Mitch Irwin

Lab specialty: nutritional analysis of primate foods

Location: Northern Illinois University

Capabilities: crude protein, available protein, simple sugars, lipid content, fiber (NDF/ADF/lignin), tannins

Equipment: Leco nitrogen analyzer, ANKOM fiber analyzer, ANKOM Daisy incubator, ThermoScientific Spectrophotometer

Fees: project dependent, please contact

Contact: mirwin@niu.edu

Website: <https://www.niu.edu/anthropology/about/faculty-directory/irwin.shtml>



INTERVIEW WITH A PRIMATOLOGIST



Dr. Michael D. Wasserman is currently an assistant professor of Anthropology and Human Biology at Indiana University Bloomington. Here he founded the Primate Environmental Endocrinology Lab (PEEL), which focuses on how the exposome affects nonhuman primates through interactions with their neuroendocrine system. You can read more about PEEL at this website: www.mdwasserman.com.



MPIG: *When were you first inspired to become a primatologist?*

MDW: Growing up in Toledo, Ohio, I wanted to be a biologist from an early age and wrote about a future career as a professor when I was in high school. However, it wasn't until I took a few primatology classes as an undergraduate at the University of Florida, participated in a summer study abroad program focused on tropical forest ecology and conservation in Costa Rica, and conducted research examining the nutritional ecology of colobus monkeys in Uganda for a senior thesis project that my specific biological interests focused in on primates. If I had to pick a particular moment when I was inspired to become a primatologist, I would say the study abroad program in Costa Rica when I first saw wild primates – howler monkeys in Santa Rosa National Park.

MPIG: *Tell us about someone who influenced your decision to work with primates.*

MDW: Colin Chapman was my undergraduate research advisor, and he played a significant role in influencing my scientific career towards primates. When I was applying for graduate programs, he provided a lot of guidance in terms of schools, advisors, and funding. I was contemplating a number of different experiences after my undergraduate studies, including Peace Corps, medical school, and various graduate programs in labs ranging from those focused on primates to forest ecology to marine mammal endocrinology. His encouragement to continue my work with primates in Uganda led to my PhD project on phytoestrogens that directly connected the nutritional and endocrinological work I had been doing in his lab.

MPIG: *What is your most memorable “fieldwork fail”?*

MDW: There are many fieldwork fails! The first occurred during the study abroad program in Costa Rica. We started the program in Corcovado National Park, and I had never spent time in a tropical rainforest before. I was totally unprepared – stuck on the trails in the pouring rain with my glasses completely useless so I could barely see a thing, as well as horribly sore, wet feet at the end of the day since I had worn new hiking boots that I didn't break in before the program started. To say I didn't have a clue what I was doing in that forest is an understatement. Then, the first time I traveled to Uganda to study red colobus monkeys in Kibale National Park, I struggled to have the neck stamina required to continuously look up at the canopy through binoculars. I was ready for the forest that time, but not the arboreal primates! More recently, when I traveled to Thailand for my first experience in an Asian forest, I was completely unprepared for the leeches. Now, I had to struggle between looking up at the canopy to watch the gibbons and obsessively checking the ground for the impending attack of approaching blood suckers! There are always new challenges and fails when studying primates. The key is to learn from your mistakes and be willing to laugh at yourself.

MPIG: *What are you doing to actively address diversity and inclusion in your laboratory at Indiana University?*

MDW: One way our laboratory has promoted diversity and inclusion in STEM fields is through our National Science Foundation International Research Experience for Students program that brings students to the sites where I work in order for them to have experiences similar to those I participated in when I was a student. So far, we have taken three cohorts of five students to Costa Rica each year starting in 2017. Although this program has been delayed due to COVID-19, we are hoping to get back to Costa Rica sometime in 2021 with our fourth cohort. Moving forward, we will be taking students to Uganda starting in 2022 and Panama starting in 2023. In addition to conducting rigorous independent scientific research during these 10-week trips, we strive to create cohorts that represent a diverse and inclusive group of students, including undergraduate and graduate students from Indiana University, St. Edward's University, University of Puerto Rico, University of Georgia, and Boise State University. I encourage any students interested in getting involved with this program to read through the details of this project here:

<https://www.scientia.global/dr-peter-beck-dr-michael-wasserman-saving-tropical-forests-through-international-research-collaboration/> and contact me by email.

MPIG: *How has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the way you think about human-nonhuman primate interactions?*

MDW: The shutdown from COVID-19 significantly altered a number of research and teaching activities in our lab that were planned for 2020. It also led to a lot of reflection on the risks to non-human primates from human activities like ecotourism and research. We have been keeping a close eye on our understanding of the risks to non-human primates, as well as the problems occurring due to a lack of visitors to research stations and ecotourist sites. This reflection and shutdown have forced us to think even more carefully about protocols for how to study primates, including how much distance to maintain between the researcher (or tourist) and non-human primate, how much time to spend with them, what PPE should be used in the forest, and safety precautions surrounding collection and analyses of biological samples. Overall, the pandemic has influenced the way I think about these interactions similarly to how I think about day-to-day interactions in society: wear a mask, keep at a safe distance, and stay home if you have any symptoms of illness. I think these commonsense practices not only improve both human and non-human primate health during the pandemic, but will be beneficial over the long-term given the risks of zoonotics and anthroponotics to humans and non-human primates alike.

MPIG: *What advice do you have for young students interested in primatology?*

MDW: In addition to reading books and articles and taking classes to learn about primatology, biology, anthropology, and other related fields from school or home, once we get through this pandemic, I think the most important thing you can do for a future career in primatology is to get field experience either through a study abroad program or a research project. The Career Center on the Primate Info Net run by the University of Wisconsin-Madison National Primate Research Center (<https://primate.wisc.edu/primate-info-net/career-center/>) is great place to find such experiences. You might think you want to be a primatologist, but you'll only know this for sure once you live and work like one. It is a wonderful career, and I couldn't imagine doing anything else, but you have to be ready for the downpours, sore feet and neck, and leeches and other parasites, in addition to the rewards of time spent in the forest with primates collecting samples and data to address interesting, unanswered questions.

Know a primatologist that you would like featured in the next newsletter? Contact us at midwestprimates@gmail.com to submit your nomination!

UNCOMING MEETINGS OF INTEREST



Registration is open now! Present a poster or a talk!

Abstracts due February 22nd

To learn more, visit
sites.google.com/view/meec2021



MEETINGS OF INTEREST CONTINUED...

Animal Behavior Conference at Indiana University (**Virtual**)

<https://animalbehavior.indiana.edu/news-events/conference/index.html>

American Society of Mammalogists (**Virtual**)

<https://mammalmeetings.org/>

American Association of Physical Anthropologists (**Virtual**)

<https://physanth.org/meetings-and-webinars/90th-annual-meeting-7-10-april-2021-baltimore/>

International Primatological Society (**2022 in Ecuador**)

<https://ipsquito.com/>

Society for Conservation Biology

<https://conbio.org/mini-sites/iccb-2021>

Society for Integrative and Comparative Biology (**currently ongoing, virtual**)

<http://burkclients.com/sicb/meetings/2021/site/index.html>

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