



For Immediate Release

MEDIA CONTACTS:

Keisha N. Hines, Director of Public Relations and Communications
404.624.5980 –office
404.309.2238 –cell
khines@zooatlanta.org

Simone Griffin, Public Relations Coordinator
404.624.2809
sgriffin@zooatlanta.org

ZOO ATLANTA SCIENTIST PUBLISHES EVIDENCE OF SOCIAL LEARNING IN LEMURS

Behavior was previously not attributed to prosimians

ATLANTA – January 27, 2011 – A Zoo Atlanta primatologist has co-authored a revealing new study suggesting that lemurs may possess the base criteria for what is generally understood by anthropologists as culture. Tara Stoinski, PhD, Manager of Conservation Partnerships, and a team of research colleagues managed the study with the participation of black-and-white-ruffed lemurs living at Zoo Atlanta, with results soon to be published in the scientific journal Biology Letters.

To test their hypothesis, the team constructed an apparatus featuring two doors, one on a hinge and one that slid open. The tube was then filled with food, and a single lemur was trained to open it using both the sliding and hinged options. Four other lemurs were permitted to watch the trained animal use the hinged door to retrieve food, and when given their own chances at the tube, automatically opted for the hinged door. When four new individuals were allowed to watch that a different lemur opened the tube using the sliding door, they likewise chose the sliding door as they had seen the trendsetter do. The fact that both control groups deliberately copied the behavior of the trained animal demonstrated capabilities for social learning, a phenomenon critical to the origins of culture and previously not attributed to lemurs.

“This is just one example of the role zoos can play in contributing to our understanding of species in general, and it opens a window on the many things we still have to discover about how animals learn,” Stoinski says. “But it also underscores the need to protect these animals in the wild. To truly pursue these findings, we really need to be able to observe lemurs in their native habitat.”

Found only on the island of Madagascar, all of the world’s remaining lemur species are endangered. Wild lemurs are in significant decline due to habitat destruction, poaching and collection for the pet trade. Home to six black-and-white-ruffed lemurs, Zoo Atlanta is also home to four ringtailed lemurs.

One of the Zoo's most prolific scientists, Stoinski has authored or co-authored more than 50 peer-reviewed papers in her field. She also serves as the Pat and Forrest McGrath Chair of Research and Conservation for the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International, headquartered at Zoo Atlanta.

About Zoo Atlanta

An accredited member of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), Zoo Atlanta inspires value and preservation of wildlife through a unique mix of education and outdoor family fun. From well-known native wildlife to critically endangered species on the brink of extinction, the Zoo offers memorable close encounters with more than 1,000 animals from around the world. Opening in March 2011 is Complex Carnivores, a new series of exhibits featuring bush dogs, fossa and binturong. Zoo Atlanta is also proud to be one of only four zoos in the U.S. that giant pandas call home: Lun Lun's newest cub, born November 3, 2010, makes his public debut in spring 2011. Other highlights include the nation's largest collection of western lowland gorillas, the nation's largest zoological collection of orangutans and a global center of excellence for the care and study of vanishing reptiles and amphibians. The Zoo is open daily with the exceptions of Thanksgiving and Christmas Day. Keeper talks, interactive wildlife shows, education programs and special events run year-round. For more information, call 404.624.WILD or visit zooatlanta.org.

###