at least two species of giant tortoises ... elephant birds (the largest birds that ever lived; their eggs weighed 20 pounds) ... and a species of lemur which grew to be as large as a female gorilla.

World Wildlife Fund desperately wants to save what remains of Madagascar's forests and their incredible array of animal and plant life. But we're going to need your help.

Here's the situation.

Madagascar is a poor country. To cover the cost of conservation measures, the Malagasy government urgently needs long-term, sustainable financial support.

That's why World Wildlife Fund was so committed to securing a debt-for-nature agreement with the Malagasy government -- the very FIRST agreement of its kind in Africa. And one I was personally very proud to sign in Madagascar.

WWF has now made a commitment to buy up to $3 million of Malagasy debt -- at a price of just 45 cents on the dollar.

In other words, every dollar we commit will be worth more than twice that in Malagasy francs.

What's more -- and this is extremely important -- these debt-swap funds have been specifically earmarked for conservation action.

And believe me, I do not exaggerate when I say that immediate conservation action in Madagascar is absolutely imperative!

Madagascar has more chameleon species than the rest of the world combined. The island has more orchids than all of Africa combined. And that's not all. Madagascar has nearly as many species of primates as its mainland neighbor -- despite the fact that Madagascar has neither monkeys nor apes.

The primates are all lemurs -- animals that have either disappeared elsewhere on Earth or have been relegated to nocturnal haunts by more advanced primates and apes. But on Madagascar, they have evolved to fill a host of ecological niches.

For instance, there's the 4-inch-long mouse lemur ... and the spectacular indri, which looks like a cross between a giant panda and a teddy bear.

But probably the most bizarre lemur on Madagascar is the aye-aye -- nature's best stab at a mammalian woodpecker.

This nocturnal primate uses its batlike ears to hear insect

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larvae moving inside a tree. Then it gnaws a hole in the bark, probes the hole with its long middle finger, stirs the larvae into a soup, and flips the meal into its mouth.

The trouble is, Madagascar's lemurs are today under assault as never before. Hunting has taken a terrible toll. Two species, the indri and sifakas, are now endangered.

An even greater concern is the relentless pace of forest destruction.

Stands of virgin forest are being rapidly destroyed for agriculture or firewood and charcoal. And erosion is now as serious here on Madagascar as anywhere on the planet. Every year the island's rivers run red with soil.

It would be an incalculable catastrophe if the island's last stretches of unbroken forest, teeming with life, were leveled.

That's why World Wildlife Fund worked so hard to reach a debt-swap agreement with the Malagasy government. And that's why your immediate financial support is so vitally important.

Remember, every dollar you send now will do the work of over two! And here's how World Wildlife Fund will put your dollars to work:

1. We will protect and manage Madagascar's most important conservation sites.

Priority areas will include nature reserves, national parks, and other areas critical to the preservation of biological diversity.

2. We will launch programs to save specific endangered animals and plants.

Many of Madagascar's unique animals and plants serve as critical indicators of the health of the ecosystems in which they live. These are called flagship species.

They include the plowshare tortoise, the indri, as well as plants like the highland periwinkle and the triangle palm. Great care must be taken to safeguard flagship species now. For as they go, so go the ecosystems which sustain them.

3. We will train over 400 park rangers to protect Madagascar's incredible array of wildlife.

WWF's in-the-field experience in Latin America and mainland Africa is unrivaled. Again and again we have helped establish

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