

Regional

Rehg studies monkeys to better understand humans

Sometimes anthropologists try to understand human behavior by observing the way our ancestors—monkeys—conduct themselves. That is the case for Jennifer Rehg, an associate professor in the department of anthropology at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Rehg was born in St. Louis, where she received her bachelor's degree in anthropology at Washington University. She went on to earn her master's and doctoral degrees at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in biological anthropology.

Her work with monkeys involves looking at their group structure and why they live in groups. The research helps her to better understand why humans are the very social animals that we are.

"A lot of my work right now is being done on the ecology of the monkeys, their habitats, what kinds of things they feed on and how that relates to conservation issues in many places of the world," Rehg said.

Having previously conducted research in Costa Rica and Brazil, Rehg spent the summer of 2011 in Peru studying various species of monkeys, but one in particular was the center of her attention: the callimico monkey. "It is a very rare monkey about the size of a squirrel, difficult to study in the past so there is a lot that is unknown about them," said Rehg.

These monkeys, along with other species of primates (gorillas, orangutans, etc.) are considered threatened or endangered, largely due to the destruction of their habitat by humans. "I think there is a good chance that we have to worry about actually losing some species over the next several decades,"

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

Rehg said. "I think there is a serious threat of actually losing wild orangutans and gorillas, and some other species that are less well known. The lemurs of Madagascar are a great example."

Rehg's conservation interests are not limited to primates or even to exotic places. She recently led a successful effort to create a nature preserve on the SIUE campus, where, in addition to obvious species such as deer, there are many lesser-known animals such as flying squirrels, several species of bats and a rare species of turtles.

"Probably some of the most interesting are a number of birds—especially during spring migration—that do stop and use this area," Rehg said. "And so the area has traditionally been incorporated into the Christmas bird counts (by the Audubon Society) that are done to monitor populations of birds throughout the country. So this portion of the campus actually has a history of being important in the community and for other environmental reasons."

One of the courses that Rehg teaches at SIUE is titled "Anthropology through Films and Fiction," which includes the study of how Hollywood has influenced the view of the general public about anthropologists and their work.

"This is a class I really enjoy teaching because I think it highlights how popular culture does influence our views of anthro-



Photo by Ines Nole Bazan

Dr. Rehg while doing fieldwork in Peru.

pology and also about human societies and different cultures and our evolution in particular ways," Rehg said.

"And it highlights too why taking an anthropological perspective in viewing pop-

ular media, viewing films and thinking about fiction, how that can really help us reflect back on our own culture and think critically about the messages that we get every single day from around us that we just accept often

and don't think about where they are coming from or what they really mean." The original "Planet of the Apes" is just one example she has used in past classes. "This is an interesting film since it was originally designed as an anti-racist commentary, and has subsequently really been reinterpreted as more of an animal rights activist perspective," she said.

Rehg not only does research in Latin America but also takes students to study there. "They involve looking at some of the natural environments as well as some of the cultural heritage of Costa Rica," she said about her classes taught abroad. "One year I taught a field school for Brazilians in Brazil which is something I was really happy to do because although I love taking students from here to other places, it is also nice to be able to interact with students of other nationalities in places where I work, where I can hopefully give something back."

She is now writing grant proposals that would allow her to return to Peru. "I am looking to go back to Peru next summer for a little bit at the beginning and hopefully visit some additional sites to look for this mysterious monkey, callimico, and collect some more information on the species and how they are using their habitats and learn more about their group behavior."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.