

Brains Beat Brawn As Smart Lemurs Make More Friends

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THE SMARTER THE LEMUR, THE MORE FRIENDS THEY HAVE. ANDREA IZZOTTI/SHUTTERSTOCK

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Despite what you may have been led to believe, geeks beat jocks when it comes to popularity. That's the case if you're a ring-tailed lemur, at least. It turns out that the smartest primates in a troop also [make the most friends](#), in what researchers believe is a feedback loop.

The team from Princeton University tested two free-roaming groups of lemurs on St Catherine's Island, Georgia, with a puzzle. This consisted of a single grape in a Plexiglas box, which could only be retrieved by pulling open a draw. Not all the primates had the intellect to do this, but a handful managed it successfully. What was interesting to the researchers, however, is what happened next.

"We found that lemurs who were frequently observed by others while solving the task to retrieve the food received more affiliative behaviors than they did before they learned," explains Ipek Kulahci, who led the research published in [Current Biology](#), in a [statement](#).

In other words, those lemurs with the problem-solving skills to get the grape were also more likely to be groomed by other members of the group keen to make bonds and network.

"As a result, they became more socially central than they were before the experiment," says Kulahci.

The researchers were careful not to give those who came over to groom the problem solvers any immediate advantages of doing so. While previous tests had rewarded the problem-solving lemurs with entire bunches of

grapes – meaning that the subsequent groomers might poach a grape themselves – this latest study only rewarded the smart lemurs with a single grape that they then ate straight away.

But the results show that to the other lemurs, this didn't actually matter and that they still wanted to come over and associate with the clever primate. This suggests that it's not the immediate reward that they're seeking but perhaps an association with lemurs perceived as more successful.

It is likely that by forming bonds and connections with the best problem-solving lemurs, they hope to gain an advantage in the future by either getting access to harder-to-reach food or simply by learning from the smarter primates.

This means that when a lemur learns how to solve a problem, it gets more friends in the group and in turn learns from them, and so gains more friends. This is interesting because it is [the first time](#) that any study has found that learning and social status are placed in a feedback loop.

The researchers hope to show that while social connections influence the spread of information, the reverse can also happen and that these networks in wild animals are far richer and more flexible than previously expected.