

# MIZZOU

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## Around the Columns

### Preserving African elephants

As an undergraduate hoping to get started in research, Amanda Prasuhn knew she might have to take on her lab's "dirty work." Her assignment — extracting DNA from elephant dung — certainly seemed to fit that description, but it wasn't thankless work. After nearly a year of research, she presented her findings to state legislators in March 2011 and is writing an academic journal article that she hopes will help protect endangered African elephants.

Since August 2010, Prasuhn has been studying the evolutionary history of two types of African elephants: the savannah and the forest. By comparing the nuclear intron sequences, which are DNA areas that don't code for a protein and tend to vary across populations, she can determine how these two groups are genetically related.

"My faculty mentor, Lori Eggert, started working on this project 11 years ago and then put it on the back burner," says Prasuhn, a senior biological sciences major from Kirkwood, Mo. "After a year working in her lab, I wanted my own project. She told me I could take on this research and have it as my own."

African elephants once were thought to be a single species, but Prasuhn's findings and other recent publications suggest that the savannah and forest elephants are genetically different enough to be classified as separate species.

"It's important to know the differences between the two types," Prasuhn says. "Their habitats, diets and genetics are different, and conservation managers can use this information to make two distinct conservation plans instead of lumping them together."



Amanda Prasuhn, 2011 Goldwater Scholar and biological sciences senior, hopes her research can save African elephants from extinction. Photo by Rob Hill

Prasuhn joined 18 other Mizzou students at this year's Undergraduate Research Day at the Capitol in Jefferson City, Mo., where she described why research on African elephants is relevant to Missouri.

“My ultimate goal is to help protect animals from becoming extinct, even though research is indirect and often takes longer to make an impact,” says Prasuhn, who recently won a 2011 Barry M. Goldwater Scholarship, a highly competitive national award. “I think it’s important that our university and labs not only tackle issues that affect people locally but also keep up in the international research field.”

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