

DIFFERENT STRATEGIES NEEDED TO CONSERVE LION-TAILED, BONNET MACAQUES, SAYS STUDY

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Biodiversity, Ecology, and Wildlife Related Issues

A lion-tailed macaque with its young one. | Photo Credit: [Ganesh Raghunathan](#)

A recent review article makes the point that very different approaches are needed to protect animals that are essentially forest-dwellers and those that are habitat generalists and often share their habitats and resources with people. The contrasting examples chosen for this meta-analysis are the lion-tailed macaque (*Macaca silenus*) and the bonnet macaque (*Macaca radiata*). The article was published in *International Journal of Primatology*.

“There are two kinds of species — obligatory forest-dwelling and those that dwell among people. You need to conserve both, but you cannot have the same strategy for both. This is a case study that supports this idea,” says Prof. Mewa Singh, wildlife biologist from Mysore University and author of the paper.

The lion-tailed macaque is endemic to the rainforests of the Western Ghats and spreads over three States — Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala. They have an estimated population of about 3,500 individuals which is fragmented into 49 sub-populations. Because they only eat fruit and insects, they are restricted to rainforests where these resources are available throughout the year. They have a unimale-multifemale social system. Illegal hunting, and accidents due to electrocution or being run over by vehicles caused a decline in population in some places, which led to their IUCN classification as a “threatened species”.

Analysis of earlier studies on the Anamalai Tiger Reserve area, which is an important distributional range of the lion-tailed macaque shows that fragmentation of forests in this area have resulted in a variable density, demography and birth rate of species as compared to those in contiguous forests. Habitat fragmentation also means the lion-tailed macaque spend more time on the ground and low trees, leading to higher accident rates. Uncharacteristically, the monkeys were also seen to beg food from people, even steal from vehicles.

Governmental policy mainly includes stopping encroachment into lion-tailed macaque habitats, and controlling hunting, road-kills and electrocution. The study advocates that the focus should shift to management of forest fragments, restoration of degraded habitats and conservation breeding.

In an interesting initiative, Nature Conservation Foundation, an NGO, and the Tamil Nadu State Forest Department built a bridge out of wooden ladders to link the canopies across a road. Eventually, the monkeys started using this and reduced their habit of crossing the road. Such experiments could be carried out in other habitats, also using more durable material than wood.

Earlier work by Kamalakumari Anitha from International Forestry Research, Bogor, Indonesia and Conservation Research Group, Kochi, and coworkers, published in *Primate Conservation* found that only 156 hectares of land was required to link critical forest fragments to help the movement of lion-tailed macaques and other arboreal and terrestrial mammals.

The bonnet macaque, on the other hand, is endemic to southern India. Occupying an area of over 630,000 square kilometres, they have a total population of over 150,000 individuals. They mostly inhabit areas near human settlements, especially temples, roadsides, tourist spots etc.

The population is declining in some areas, and they have been listed as a “least concern” species by IUCN. The study notes that the spread of the more aggressive rhesus macaques (*Macaca mulatta*) into the range of the bonnet macaque is a matter of concern.

In the last few decades there has been less support, and the bonnet monkeys have been chased away, or trapped and released elsewhere. Their traditional habitats around temples and tourist spots are unstable. Removal of tamarind and banyan trees on highways for widening the roads have also resulted in habitat loss.

The study puts forth the idea that hillocks with temples on top be declared protected zones for commensal macaques. Considering the species has suffered a population decline in the last few decades, it also emphasises that the bonnet macaque’s conservation status be re-evaluated.

“Wild dogs or tigers rarely come out of the forests, whereas leopards are seen often in cropland and scrub jungles. Wolves and foxes also live among humans. We require different approaches to conserve each of these species,” says Prof. Singh.

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