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Third of primates 'risk extinction'

White-headed langur: A Vietnamese primate under pressure
(*Zoological Society of San Diego*)

By Alex Kirby

BBC News Online environment correspondent

One-third of the world's primate species now face a serious risk of extinction, according to a report by an international group of conservationists.

They say the number of threatened species has risen sharply in the last three years.

Primates living in two south-east Asian countries are said to be especially endangered. But several species are judged a little safer than they used to be.

The report is entitled *Primates In Peril: The World's Top 25 Most Endangered Primates*. It is published by Conservation International (CI) and the primate specialist group of IUCN, the World Conservation Union.

Vietnamese crisis

The authors say the numbers of primate species

“
There's some good stuff going on, especially in Brazil and Madagascar
”
Russ Mittermeier

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and sub-species classified as either endangered or critically endangered have risen nearly 63%, from 120 to 1995, since the publication of an earlier report at the beginning of 2000.

Primates include apes, monkeys, lemurs and some lesser-known species.

Scientists say they are our closest living relatives. Nearly 45% of the world's most endangered primates live in Asia.



The rufous lemur: A target of the bushmeat trade (Lindsay Magnuson/Humboldt State Uni)

The president of CI, Russ Mittermeier, said: "Of particular concern is the situation in Vietnam and China. With several primates now numbering only in the dozens or low hundreds of individuals, Vietnam is at risk of undergoing a major primate extinction spasm within the next few years if rapid action is not taken.

"Twenty per cent of the top 25 primates are located in Vietnam, with another 16% from China and 12% from Indonesia."

He told BBC News Online: "Human pressures are more intense in these places; hunting in particular, both for meat and medicinal purposes, is hammering these animals."

Bigger picture

Of the 25 species listed, 23 are found in the world's "biodiversity hotspots".

These are regions identified by CI which are home to more than 60% of all terrestrial plants and animals, although together they cover only 1.4% of the Earth's land surface.

Six hotspots are judged the highest priorities for the survival of the most endangered primates.

They are Indo-Burma, Madagascar, Sundaland (the islands of Sumatra, Java and Borneo), the Guinean forests of West Africa, the Atlantic forests of Brazil, and the western Ghats/Sri Lanka.

Bill Constant of CI, co-author of the report, said the list of the top 25 was just the tip of the iceberg. He said: "For each primate on it, any one of several other equally endangered species might have been chosen instead."



Tana river mangabey: Facing loss of habitat in Tanzania and Kenya
(Julie Wieczkowski and University of Georgia)

Praise for Brazil

The main cause of the primates' decline, the report says, is habitat loss caused by the clearing of tropical forests.

It calls hunting "an insidious and major threat, especially in Africa and Asia. Once done mainly for subsistence purposes, it has now taken on a major commercial dimension."

But the capture of animals for the pet trade and medical research "have become lesser concerns".

The report says primates are important for ecosystem health, because they disperse fruit seeds and the remains of other food they eat.

"It's important to mention that it is not all doom and gloom," Russ



The pig-tailed snub-nosed monkey struggles in

Mittermeier told BBC
News Online.

Indonesia
(Richard Tenaza)

"There's some good stuff going on, especially in Brazil and Madagascar - and some of the species that were on the list last time have been taken off because they are doing better and some that are still on the list are in fact getting a lot of attention.

"The technologies and the manpower are there to do it; what we need is an order of magnitude increase in resources so we can do it in many more places."

The top 25 most endangered primates: Greater bamboo lemur (Madagascar); Perrier's sifaka (Madagascar); Silky sifaka (Madagascar); Black-faced lion tamarin (Brazil); Buff-headed capuchin (Brazil) Northern muriqui (Brazil); Miss Waldron's red colobus (Ghana and Ivory Coast); Roloway guenon (Ghana and Ivory Coast); Tana River mangabey and Tana River red colobus (Kenya); Sanje mangabey (Tanzania) Natuna banded leaf monkey (Indonesia); Pig-tailed snub-nosed monkey or "simakobu" (Indonesia); Sumatran orang-utan (Indonesia) Delacour's langur (Vietnam); Golden-headed langur (Vietnam) White-headed langur (Vietnam); Grey-shanked douc (Vietnam) Tonkin snub-nosed monkey (Vietnam); Yunnan snub-nosed monkey (China); Guizhou snub-nosed monkey (China); Eastern black-crested gibbon (China and Vietnam); Mountain gorilla (DR Congo, Rwanda and Uganda); Cross River gorilla (Nigeria and Cameroon)

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