# Sia Sin Wei

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**Writing Genre**

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**Writing Genre**

**Non Fiction Articles on science**

* Factual and feature articles on scientific topics
* Event reporting for science related events

**Future Expansion & Goals**

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* Writing opinion/commentary style articles

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The Value of Poop

The Raffles’ banded langurs (*Presbytis femoralis femoralis*) are extremely shy. Hence, a good day in the field is when our primatologists are able to see and follow these tree-dwelling primates. But nothing gets our primatologists more excited than the sight of langur faeces! To the uninitiated, a pile of smelly faeces should be nothing exciting or worth bothering about. In fact, langur faeces are a treasure trove of DNA information!

Well, you may wonder why researchers can’t just capture the langurs and extract some blood for analyses, but instead go through the trouble of finding faeces? Firstly, the trapping of shy and rare langurs in the forest poses a great deal of risk for the langurs. As the langurs are shy, it is hard for researchers to come close enough below them to catch them as they fall from the trees after being sedated. Even if researchers manage to be right underneath them as they drop from the trees, the langurs may injure themselves during the fall.

Secondly, collecting faecal sample is non-invasive to the animals. The langurs are not harmed during the process. Thirdly, faeces provide information on the genetic diversity of the langur population, DNA of the plants consumed, and data on gut parasites within the langurs. In short, faeces give our researchers the information needed to take appropriate measures for the conservation of langurs and their forest habitat.

So, what has the DNA told us about our local langurs? Our langur population exhibits very little genetic variation, which is to say that different individuals are actually very closely related to each other. This spells trouble, as low genetic diversity in a population indicates that there may be inbreeding. Just like how inbreeding in humans can result in physical deformities and genetic disorders in babies, inbreeding in langurs can affect infant survivorship. Inbreeding is quite typical of small populations. Over 150 years of development in Singapore has caused our langurs to experience a large degree of habitat loss. While langurs presumably were found in various forests on the island before large-scale development began, by the end of the 1970s and 1980s their population had decreased tremendously. While the current population appears to stabilise at about 40-60 individuals, the langur population has already lost a significant portion of their genetic variation. This makes the long-term future of our langurs an uncertain one. A population that has low genetic variation is not a population that can readily cope with habitat changes and environmental disturbances. Is there anything that we can do to rescue their gene pool? The Raffles’ banded langurs are found not only in Singapore, but also in Johor, Malaysia. The translocation of langurs between Singapore and Johor has the potential to facilitate genetic exchange between the two populations for the long-term survival of the species, but further studies needs to be done before such a serious undertaking is feasible.

Langur DNA is not the only genetic material that can be extracted from langur faecal samples. Chloroplast (the photosynthetic factories of the plant cell) DNA from the remains of plant matter the langurs consumed can also be recovered and identified to plant species! While diet information can also be collected through field observations, this method relies on the observer’s ability to track the langurs over time, which is challenging for elusive primates such as Raffles’ banded langurs. On the other hand, the plant genetic data obtained through faeces is basically a 48-hour sample of the diet which allows for rare components of the langur diet to be detected. Such a 48-hour sample of the diet cannot be achieved on the field because researchers also have to eat and sleep (and also apply for grants for fieldwork!)

Field observations have shown that the langurs consumed 27 species of plants from 24 genera and 20 families. With the help of modern genetic techniques, at least 36 additional species were revealed. The genetic data is broadly consistent with field observations, showing that genetic methods can give reliable biological data to complement traditional field techniques.

What does such dietary data mean for langur conservation? It shows that langurs have a relatively broad diet, which includes a number of non-native plants such as rubber trees. Conserving our langurs means conserving plant diversity in our forests, taking into account some non-native plants which are food plants for our native animals. Food trees of the animals can also be planted during remediation of degraded habitats and reforestation work (such as the Eco link connecting the Central Catchment and Bukit Timah Nature Reserves).

Genetic techniques have allowed our researchers to explore and to understand certain aspects of langur biology and ecology that would have been impractical and time-consuming for fieldwork to uncover. It is thus essential to combine both traditional field work and genetic tools for research and conservation. And with newer molecular techniques constantly being developed, who knows what secrets of the langurs might be uncovered in the future?

*Contributed by Sia Sin Wei*

**Further reads**

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Extinct Animals 200th Anniversary

Singapore has developed rapidly into the global metropolis. However, development have its costs, namely, we are losing our local wildlife in the course of development. In an assessment of local extinctions, Brook and Sodhi (2003) found an overall extinction rate for local biodiversity of 28%. Some species become endangered even before researchers have a chance to document them. At this point, the extinction rate almost reached a peak of 73%! A sobering thought, isn’t it?

At the same time, forest cover in Singapore has declined over the same period – over 95% of our original vegetation in 1819 has been lost in the 200 years between Raffles’ fateful visit and the present day. The loss of our native forests is undeniably related to the increase in species extinctions in Singapore over the last 200 years. Development leads to habitat loss and fragmentation. After all, all our modern infrastructure and amenities that we take for granted takes up space! For much of our biodiversity, such habitat destruction is bad news.

The tiger (Panthera tigris) exemplifies the loss of biodiversity that Singapore has experienced for the last two centuries. While it may be hard to imagine, there was a time that tigers roamed freely in Singapore. Before 1819, tigers lived in the forest but they were perceived to be a threat to the villagers.

With the founding of Singapore, the settlement expanded to accommodate the immigrants who wanted to make Singapore their new home. Eventually, some of these people felt that they could make more money planting gambier and pepper. They expanded their plantations. When they ran out of space in the settlement, their plantations encroached onto the jungle areas.

While the people gained profits from their plantations, the tigers found their home intruded. With an increase in tiger-human contact and a decrease in the numbers of the pigs and deer that the tigers fed on, it was inevitable that human-tiger conflict occurred. Soon, coolies working in the plantations had to deal with a new occupational hazard of tiger attacks.

From 1830s to the 1860s, tiger attacks were a regular occurrence in Singapore. Naturally, people disliked tigers as people were killed as a result of such adverse interactions. The colonial government responded by offering a reward of $20 for every tiger killed. Given the continued outcry over tiger attacks, the reward was increased to a much more lucrative $100. With such incentives, it was not surprising that tiger hunting became the latest fad in town.

One enterprising major decided that the Indian convicts should have a much more meaningful way to occupy their time by patrolling certain hotspots in Bukit Timah and Chua Chu Kang. This was effective and eventually, due to prosecution and further habitat incursion, dwindled. However, there was occasional attacks reported at the end of the 1890s. The coup de grace occurred in the 1930s when the last wild tiger was shot dead in Chua Chu Kang. While everyone happily posed for a picture to celebrate their victory, the bell toiled for a top predator of our local ecosystems.

While some may argue that large carnivores like tigers were especially vulnerable to extinction due to human wildlife conflict and the need for large territories, there were actually many smaller animals which were victims of extinction. Take for example, the Cream Coloured Giant Squirrel (Rafufa affinis affinis). It has not been sighted since 1995, and it is presumed to be extinct. Being restricted to primary forests made it especially vulnerable to habitat destruction due to development. Some people may argue that a small population may still exist somewhere in our nature reserves, however, its present survival is unlikely.

These stories of extinction of our wildlife is nonetheless sad and we cannot undo the mistakes. We should conserve the remaining wild habitats which preserves half of our remaining biodiversity. We should also transform our urban environments to make it more hospitable to our local biodiversity.

Protecting our biodiversity should not be left to a small group of conservationists. This is a cause in which everyone could and should participate in. Our biodiversity will remain safe for the foreseeable future only with cooperation from all stakeholders and public that are committed to preserve our natural heritage.

Monkey Guarding

We are the Monkey Guards team from JGIS! We are a team of volunteers that shares a common passion for working with long tailed macaques (Macaca fascicularis), educating people about our primate neighbours and mitigate any human-macaque conflicts that might be present through an integrated approach together with the Long-tailed Macaque Working Group. Our aim is to ensure a harmonious relationship between macaques and the humans who work, live or play close to the area they inhibit.

Monkey guarding as an idea is not new. In fact, it has been practised by groups of trained personnel around the world. An example of such a similar program can be found in the British territory of Gibraltar where there are trained personnel to patrol the Rock where Barbary macaques are present。In this way, any negative interactions between tourists and macaques can be minimised.

So, as you may ask, what do we do as monkey guards? We patrol various hotspots where human-macaque conflict has been an issue. Current hotspots involve the residential condos at the outer edges of Bukit Timah Nature Reserve and Macritchie Reservoir. We use our knowledge of macaque behaviour to prevent the macaques from entering areas that they are not supposed to go and doing things that they should not do.

Besides dealing with macaques, we work with residents and other stakeholders by engaging them and providing alternatives to foster harmonious co-existence.

We collaborate with the Long Tailed Macaque Working Group (LTMWG). The LTMWG, which our parent organisation, JGIS, is a partner of, identifies various hotspots that needs patrolling. In turn, our observations on the ground together with ACRES and NParks – help inform the crafting of various measures by the LTMWG to mitigate and prevent human-wildlife conflicts.

Joint resident visits at conflict hotspots by us and our fellow representatives of our LTMWG help us understand the situation on the ground. Taking the time to learn the needs and altitudes of our residents is essential if we were to educate and give personalised advice to residents on making their residence a more macaque-proof place. By changing a few residents’ attitudes, we hope to influence the rest of the residents to do the same! While it is unlikely that an advocate who culls macaques will be transformed to a macaque lover overnight, persuading residents to adapt to and embrace the presence of macaques along with other local wildlife is important in achieving our vision.

An important aspect of Monkey Guarding is basically trying to keep food out of reach of macaques. The presence of human food drives macaque intrusions onto residential areas. After all, even humans would prefer a processed treat to natural food (i.e fruits). Giving macaques access to food encourages macaques to spend more time in urban areas, which changes their behavioural patterns, exposes them to urban dangers (such as being struck down by passing vehicles) and increasing the likelihood of adverse human-macaques interactions. Macaques that feast on human food are not performing the valuable ecosystem service of dispersing seeds of plants, which is what macaques do when they consume their normal diet of fruit.

Besides advising residents to keep their food out of sight and reach by closing access points to the homes, we advise the management to make their trash bins monkey-proof and clean up any discarded food lying around. We also monitor instances of deliberate feeding of macaques and advise anyone doing that to cease being part of the problem. Education about our most common primate neighbours is important which brings us to our next major aspect of Monkey Guarding – outreach!

Outreach is an important part of Monkey Guarding as an enlightened public is more likely to support and embrace macaques as a part of their natural heritage and environment. We run booths in various biodiversity events such as the Festival of Biodiversity; give presentations about what we do for schools and facilitate Monkey Watch for International Primate Day. While we may educate and inform the public for a variety of methods and audiences, the underlying goal is the same, that is, to raise awareness on how to coexist with our primate neighbours positively! Awareness fosters empathy for the macaques which in turns allows us to live harmoniously with them.

As Monkeys Guards, we combine our scientific knowledge of macaque behaviour and working with various stakeholders consisting of our partners at LTMWG, residents, management and the general public to attain our vision of peaceful and harmonious coexistence between humans and macaques. It is not an easy road – but such work is essential if we were to ensure that relationship between macaques and humans remains a positive one. Macaques are an indispensable part of our natural heritage which have equal rights to coexist with humans in our wild city (just like the otters we find adorable).

If you think that being a Monkey Guard is a meaningful way to contribute to saving our local biodiversity, please drop an email to Sabrina at macaque90@gmail.com to find out more!

Resilience in Nature

Resilience of nature is evident at the Thomson Nature Park. Once the location of a thriving village, nature seemed to have reclaimed this tract of land. Pioneer plants, the typical denizens of secondary forests, now grow in abundance in the park. The ruins of the village stand in testament to a time that has moved on, as the agricultural activity of the Hainanese village that existed here a few decades ago has fallen into abeyance. Today, this patch of forest acts as a refuge for some of Singapore’s threatened flora and fauna and acts as a buffer for the nature reserve next to it.

At first glance, the forest appears to be a dense growth of plants to the untrained eye. But upon a closer look, the forest reveals its botanical diversity. Some plants grow as trees, looking imposing like sentinels looking over the entire landscape, while some plants thrive as climbers or as small herbs growing on the forest floor. Nature is a resilient force, growing over the remains of human settlement in triumph while having the last laugh when human civilization disappears.

An even closer look reveals characteristics that make each species of plant unique – all two hundred of them in this patch of forest, recovering from human impact and still hanging on. It would take time to learn the various subtleties of classifying and identifying every species of plant in this forest – from the mahang trees to the fig trees.

But such an effort would be worthwhile, for plants are the key to understanding how this precious forest works. The plants of the forest are essential to the forest ecosystem as plants are the base of their food web. Plants form interesting intricate relationships with other more charismatic wildlife such as animals and fungi. Lastly, plants form the three-dimensional environment that animals live in. Ultimately, if we want to understand the natural history of charismatic fauna like macaques and birds, we must understand the plants they live beside.

Entering this forest, the sound of the multiple forest streams crisscrossing this park can be heard. Smoothing and relaxing, it is perfect for taking our minds off the vicissitudes of our daily lives. Ferns, mosses and other moisture-loving plants grow on their banks, giving them a green and living carpet. Dragonflies fly and hover around like multicoloured acrobats, resting occasionally on any convenient perch available. These little living things are eking out a niche in their very own microhabitat, managing a demanding lifestyle with aplomb!

Resilience is not only present in the streams but can be also found elsewhere. The sunlight reflected and gleamed off on the bottom of the forest floor, revealing the spiderwebs attached to the foliage, with the surface of the temporary pools acting as a mirror below. The foliage of the plants displayed their own shiness, as the rays of the Sun contacted the glittering droplets of dew on the leaves. The forest floor also is home to various seedlings from the next generation of trees, waiting patiently for an opportunity to grow and take their place from their seniors.

Walking in the forest allows us to see what such opportunities are. Despite their static look, forests are dynamic places. Every so often, gaps in the canopy develop when the mature trees fall over or fall victim to disease or injury. While it is a tragedy for such mature trees, it provides opportunities for other organisms. The seedlings are now liberated to kickstart their race to the top, while fungi and other decomposers get a feast! The cycle of life continues in this former village, restoring important ecosystem processes and services while recovering from the impact of human inhabitation.

The scars of human inhabitation remain. Patches of ginger and pandan plants still grow in the parks, forming organised ranks and rows not found in nature. Various fruit trees still stand – once grown for human palates, they are now a source of food for animals in the area. Every ruin still standing is covered in moss and climbers – reminding me of the archaeological sites that I saw on TV and dreamed of visiting since I was young. It was the kind of place that every child would like to go so that they can indulge in their archaeological fantasies.

Around the ruins, the calls of the birds could be heard. Chirping, buzzing, and shrilling as the birds go around their daily morning routines. Their cacophony filled the air around us. Suddenly, the branches moved and swayed. The sound of branches as they moved and snapped, revealing a group of beige coloured animals with long tails and a simian-like face.

These are long-tailed macaques – Singapore’s most common non-human primate.

A regular sight in the forests of Singapore, they browsed from tree to tree, searching for tasty edible fruit hidden in the foliage for their breakfast as well. The interaction between plants and animals is on show here, putting paid to the idea that they could be studied independently without consideration of the other. The intimacy of their interaction strengthens the whole forest ecosystem, making the forests resilient in the face of anthropogenic pressure and climate change.

Despite what we have thrown at it, most of the ecosystem processes have remained functioning. This shows that nature can bounce back if we give it a chance to do so at the slow and steady pace that it most often favours. But if we wantonly destroy it before it gets the chance to heal, how can it recover?

The economic advantages we gain from destroying the precious tracts of forest are valuable, but not as much as the forests themselves. We may destroy the forest in one week, but the biodiversity that it contains might take decades to centuries to recover fully, if at all. So what should we choose? The choice is ours to make.

Our journey to Thomson Nature Park has shown the resilience of nature and how it can recover from impacts imposed upon it by our activities. Despite a legacy of human settlement, the forests of Thomson Nature Park are in the midst of recovery with most of their ecosystem processes still intact and working.

From the mahang trees to the long-tailed macaques, these forests are still a refuge for much of our local biodiversity. Thanks to the innate resilience of nature, there is still hope for our wildlife for our future generations to enjoy if we are mindful of the imprint that our activities have on our environment.

Charismatic Primates of Malaysia Event Recap

It was a wet Sunday afternoon as our counterparts from across the CauseWay graced our UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) Heritage Site by giving a public talk on the primate conservation scene in Malaysia and what is being done to save non-human primates there. Overall, it was an enriching time for anyone interested in the natural history of primates and particularly, their conservation.

Dr Nadine gave an overview of the primate diversity in Malaysia and talked about several innovative projects. Malaysia is home to over 25 species of primates, with representatives from all grades of primates (lorises, tarsiers, monkeys, and apes), making it a fertile place for wanna-be primatologists. Primatology has indeed come a long way since Jane Goodall picked up her binoculars and went to Gombe! With the clever use of technology such as drones and heat cameras, it is now possible to answer questions that cannot be answered 50 years ago. For example, gibbons are traditionally hard to observe visually and must be tracked by their calls. While the traditional way is to trek in the forest, listen and take compass bearings, technology has allowed researchers to get sound recordings and figure out the locations of gibbons within the forest in a more effective manner. Other interesting projects include the study on pig-tailed macaques (*Macaca nemestrina*) as biological control in oil palm plantations. Macaques are usually regarded by farmers as pests due to crop raiding, but if they are found to be controlling the rat infestation in farm areas, people may develop better impressions of macaques which can aid in their conservation.

Ms. Joleene Yap next shared about her conservation group called Langur Project Penang. Like our Raffles’ Banded Langur project, it comprises of two major components – field research and community outreach. It concerns the conservation of the dusky leaf monkey (*Trachypithecus obscurus*). A close relative to our local langurs (*Presbytis femoralis femoralis*) the dusky leaf monkey can be differentiated from the banded langur by its thick white eye rings and orange juveniles (banded langur babies are white in colour). The thick eye rings are the reason behind its other common name – the spectacled langur.

But why focus on dusky leaf monkeys? Firstly, they perform an important role in the forest ecosystems of Penang. They are major seed dispersers which is important in an island that lacks large land animals to perform such an important ecosystem service. Seeds are swallowed with any fruits they consume and are passed out in the feces which helps the plants reproduce and thus aids in the regeneration of Penang’s forests. The dusky leaf monkeys also interact with other animal species in their habitat, such as racket-tailed drongos. These birds which follow the monkeys to feed on any insects disturbed during the monkeys’ daily activities. Their importance in the forest ecosystem, together with their charisma mean that the dusky leaf monkeys makes a good flagship and umbrella species for public outreach and conservation. Conserving leaf monkeys means their fellow animal inhabitants can be protected too!

Like Singapore, Penang is undergoing rapid development and urbanisation which results in habitat loss and fragmentation. Habitat fragmentation makes it more difficult for the monkeys to travel between patches of suitable habitat. While most monkeys can navigate the urban environment even if this means having to climb a man-made cable, older and younger monkeys who are unable to do that must cross the road. Being fleet-footed means that the monkeys can cross the road relatively fast most of the time, but failure is fatal. In an urban area that Joleene and her team surveyed, 7 cases of roadkill have been reported since August 2016.

Habitat loss and fragmentation also means that humans and langurs meet each other more often. One of the ways that humans interact with langurs is by feeding them, and this is bad for langurs. Feeding langurs raises the likelihood of human primate conflict. Langurs become aggressive once they have developed a dependency on human handouts. Besides losing an instinct for foraging, langurs tend to crowd around waiting for human food. As overcrowding makes a great incubator for outbreaks of infectious diseases, such feeding has a deleterious impact on langur populations. Monkeys on a human diet also tend to be overweight which negatively impacts their health. There are better ways to show your love for nature, such as volunteering in local conservation groups!

People keeping dusky leaf monkeys (and other animals) is also threatening their survival. Monkeys may look cute, but keeping them as pets supports a cruel trade. For every individual that makes it to the market, many more die in the process.

Ms. Bam Mariani of the Gibbon Protection Society next spoke about her work with gibbons, also known as the smaller apes. Comprising of 20 species in 4 genera, they are well adapted for a life swinging in the trees. Much of Bam’s work revolves around her “school” for gibbons. These gibbon students in her school need to learn survival skills to go back to the wild. Most of the students have been liberated by Malaysia’s wildlife enforcement from a life in captivity as pets. While taking care of the gibbons, Bam witnesses the physical and psychological damage dealt by the pet trade. She receives scratches and bites from many of these gibbons, which shows how much they have been traumatized as caged pets. Despite the care that she and her team gives, some of these gibbon students were unable to “graduate” and die in the process of rehabilitation. While there are several orangutan sanctuaries, such sanctuaries for gibbons are relatively rare in Malaysia. Therefore, Bam also spends her time trying to get more support for gibbon conservation.

There is a thriving illegal pet trade market which makes use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. The process in which such primates are procured are typically cruel and inhumane – for every primate infant that makes it onto Instagram for sale, there is a lot more primates that are killed or died on the way to the market as the poachers can wipe out an entire family of primates just to get one baby. It has been estimated that for every primate on the market, 200 individuals would have perished. The young primates are also deliberately starved to bring out the sympathy in prospective buyers. To add to the problem, the keeping of primates is popular among celebrities in Malaysia, which further fuels the pet trade. For every like on the photo of the with their pet primate, thousands of primate lives will be destroyed even if 1% of the followers ends up getting their own pet primate. If celebrity power fuels the pet trade, can it be used to dissuade people from getting primates as pets? Not everyone has a background in biology so we must engage them on the issues involved and advise them against having pet primates.

Overall, it was a great day for primate enthusiasts to learn about the primatology scene in Malaysia. We learned that public outreach (such as this talk!) is extremely important for the survival of our primate relatives on both sides of the Causeway can be assured for the future. Anyone can play a part in primate conservation, so please feel free to drop us a line if you are interested!

Earth Day Volunteer Appreciation

In JGIS, we always try to create opportunities for our volunteers from different parts of our operations to bond with one another. This time around, we marked Earth Day with a volunteer appreciation event. In the spirit of the “No Plastic” theme of Earth Day this year, our activities were designed to educate our volunteers about decreasing their use of single-use plastics. Together, we bonded over food and learning how to stay “plastic-lite”.

To help us understand more about the issues surrounding plastics and sustainability, we invited our fellow NGO, Plastic-lite Singapore, to shed some light on the subject. Instead of the usual Powerpoint presentation, our learning was gamified by the speaker’s use of Kahoot!

Kahoot! should be familiar for any readers working in education, but if you are not, Kahoot! is an edu-tech quiz tool that has been popular among educators and students. Kahoot! proved to be just as engaging for the volunteers as for students– we competed to get as many points as possible. Fastest fingers first!

While having fun, we learnt some sobering facts about plastics and the potential environmental damage they can potentially cause. Did you know that you are ingesting microplastics (small fibres of plastics) whenever you drink bottled water? Or that up to 90% of seabirds have plastic waste in their guts? The damage that our single-use plastic habits can cause might not be visible immediately, but has serious consequences for our health and the environment.

We next had a roundtable discussion to clear up some misconceptions and to share any difficulties we had in reducing our use of plastics. While recycling plastics and using bioplastics does mitigate some of the potential harm caused, it would be better if we used less plastics in the first place. One major problem in going plastic-lite is that the use of plastics is imposed on us, as the average member of the public is not aware of the issue. Some of us related that most retailers or stallholders will use plastic items such as straws or bags by default, without asking us whether we needed them or not. One of our volunteers tried to request a ceramic mug instead of the usual plastic cup for her chilled coffee in a coffeehouse. It turned out to be much more difficult than she thought. Such anecdotes are an indicator that more public awareness is certainly needed on this issue!

Following the sharing, the JGIS volunteers watched the documentary “Battle of the Bag”, by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Even though it was released 10 years ago, it has aged remarkably well. The issues it raises are still relevant to us – a clear sign that in the decade between its original release and now, the overuse of single-use plastics remains pervasive. There has been recent progress and victories (such as the ban on plastic straws in the UK taking effect from 2019), but there is still much work to be done before society, and the world, can go plastic-lite.

After the documentary, we had the usual group photos before the gathering ended.

Everyone had a great time! If you would like to contribute to our work (and be part of such events), please write to us. We would be glad to hear from you!

JGIS Human Wildlife Conference

The much anticipated visit from Dr Jane Goodall had finally arrived! To kickstart her latest visit, we launched our inaugural ConservAction Week, a series of events and talks to inform and inspire the public with our eponymous founder. The first event was our first major full day conference – Human-Wildlife Coexistence in Asia: Conflicts and Mitigations. Insights on these issues were explored in the presentations from experts working on Asian primates.

After our president, Dr Andie Ang, gave the introduction and welcome message, our guest of honour, Mr Desmond Lim gave his opening remarks. He gave an overview of the history of the biodiversity scene in Singapore from the arrival of Raffles to our modern efforts for a biophilic city. After that, he summarized our local efforts to ameliorate our own human-wildlife conflicts through science, education, and outreach. Lastly, he announced two new projects we have with our collaborators, namely, a new study on our local monkeys and a “no feeding” campaign. More new details will be coming your way, so keep your eyes open for our announcement!

Dr Jane gave the opening plenary in this event. She gave a summary and several examples of human wildlife conflicts around the world. She reminded the audience that the humans living with conflicts with the wildlife are not the “bad guys”. Rather, it is their cooperation that we seek to gain in order to solve the problems. She emphasized the importance of not feeding wildlife as this is the root of much of human-wildlife conflict. Finally, she ended her speech with a message of hope: “Nature is resilient, and we can still save our biodiversity and stop climate change in its tracks, as long as we act now!” This is such an encouraging message and it gave everyone a positive vibe as we start the conference.

The first group of presentations in the conference touched on macaques in both Hong Kong and Singapore. Ms Alexandra Wong and Ms Amy Kwan gave the run down on human-macaque conflicts in Hong Kong and its management, particularly through contraception of local macaques. Our very own Sabrina Jabbar talked about how Singapore manages its own macaques, including our Monkey Guards Programme. It was fascinating to look at the parallels between the stratagems taken in both cities, despite the different contexts.

The second group of presentations took us further afield as Mr Bui Van Tuan and Dr Niu Kefeng introduced the primate diversity and talked about their projects in Vietnam and China respectively. It takes a combination of research, science communication and engaging stakeholders for them to achieve their goals and ensure that the monkeys (douc langurs (Pygathrix sp.) and François' langur (Trachypithecus francoisi)) they study have a future.

The third group of presentations was about the illegal wildlife trade from a perspective from a researcher and a director of an NGO. Mr Zaki Zainol talked about his research on the online primate pet trade in Malaysia while Ms Kanitha Krishnasamy spoke about the efforts of TRAFFIC. Boots-on-the ground enforcement and investigation are important strategies for fighting the illegal wildlife trade. At the same time, educating, and engaging the public and other parties concerned are indispensable for sustainability of our wildlife resources.

Finally, Dr Erik Meijaard gave the closing plenary on his research on orangutans. His talk taught us the need to revisit and even question established paradigms in conservation in the search for more effective solutions to wicked problems. The various talks covered a wide range of issues on the relationship between humans and the wildlife we coexist with. It was a fruitful time for the audience as they engaged in the latest developments in conservation and connected with friends. In the words of one participant: “Despite the conference lasting the entire day, time seemed to have flown by as we were having fun!”

If you have missed out on all the fun, please follow us on social media for we hope to have ConservAction weeks in the future.

[Recap] Tales from the Americas: Protecting Yellow-Tailed Woolly Monkeys in Peru

The Jane Goodall Institute (Singapore) holds many projects and events to fulfill its outreach goals to raise awareness on wildlife conservation. One of our major events is the ConservAction series of lectures, which was launched during Jane Goodall’s visit to Singapore with our ConservAction conference. A series of lectures were planned for 2020, however…

Covid-19 hit, and like everyone else, we were forced to re-look at how we can adapt our normal operations while ensuring the safety of the public and our volunteers. Covid-19 was a reminder on the importance of humans co-existing with nature. In line with the Covid-19 measures, we were forced to adapt our lecture series to the new normal so we took our lecture series online. While the intimacy of face-to-face events might have to be compromised, our online lectures retained the educational value of highlighting the vital importance of wildlife in our ecosystem. In 2020, our highlight was primate conservation in Africa.

This year, we shifted our focus to the primates of the New World. In May 2021, Dr. Sam Shanee of Neotropical Primate Conservation shared about the Yellow-Tailed Woolly Monkey (*Lagothrix flavicauda*) and the conservation project he manages in Peru in one of our lecture series on primates conservation.

After talking about how he became involved in conservation and primatology, Dr Shanee talked about the biology of Yellow-Tailed Woolly Monkeys. These monkeys are one of 11 species of primates which are endemic to Peru. They live in the high altitude (or cloud) forests of the Peruvian Andes. First described in the 19th century, the woolly monkeys were recorded in the 1920s. However, they were not recorded again until the 1970s. It was then that extensive field studies began earnestly for the species.

The Yellow-Tailed Woolly Monkeys are the largest primate species in Peru. These dark red monkeys have the characteristic yellow patch at the end of their tails. Woolly monkeys mostly live on trees, rarely coming down to the ground except when foraging through soil. They live in groups with multiple males and females, in an average group size of seven to 14 individuals. Like our native monkeys, they are the most active during the mornings and evenings.

Their dominant diet is fruit, with a smaller amount of leaves and insects to supplement their diet. This may vary around the year. As different species of trees fruit at different times, a troop of monkeys requires large home ranges to ensure they get enough food. Unfortunately, these amazing primates are now among the 25 most endangered primate species due to habitat loss, poaching for wildlife trade and mining.

In his lecture, Dr Shanee talked about the various projects he undertook with the local communities to empower them to conserve the woolly monkeys and the wildlife around them. There are various environmental education programs such as training new teachers, the development of textbooks featuring local biodiversity and field courses for students. There are also initiatives to help combat the growing illegal wildlife trade in the region.

But the most important conservation project that Dr Shanee has done is to empower the local village communities to set up and maintain their local forest tracts as reserves. Starting from a single village, the project now helps to manage multiple community reserves through the region, with positive outcomes for woolly monkey populations and other wildlife.

Dr Shanee’s conservation project exemplifies modern, 21st-century conservation. It shows the importance in engaging and empowering local communities that are living alongside the endangered primates, as local people are important stakeholders together with governments and NGOs. Conservation can only be successful if all stakeholders work alongside as equal partners in making a better world for both people and wildlife.

If this whets your appetite for more, you may watch our event recording at our Youtube channel, where our 2020 webinars on African primates are also available. To stay informed of more events like this, please follow us on Facebook, Instagram and our website. We are mostly volunteer-run, so if you want to help us run our events and projects, please sign up here. We would be happy to hear from you!