

Folk medicine poses global threat to primate species

By Matt Walker
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Traditional folk medicine poses a significant and ongoing threat to the future of primates around the world.

According to a major scientific survey at least 101 primate species are still used in traditional folk practices and in magic or religious rituals.

For example, spider monkeys are eaten to treat rheumatism, while gorilla parts are given to pregnant women.

Such practises are accelerating the declines of many already vulnerable species, say the survey's authors.

Details of the survey are published in Mammal Review, the journal of the UK Mammal Society.

Of 390 species studied, 101, or more than a quarter, are regularly killed for their body parts, with 47 species being used for their supposed medicinal properties, 34 for use in magical or religious practices, and 20 for both purposes.

MONKEY MEDICINE

Around the world, the number of primate species used in traditional medicine varies:

Neotropics: 19 of 139 species

Africa: 25 of 79 species

Madagascar: 10 of 93 species

Asia: 47 of 79 species

These primates belong to 38 genera and 10 different families, ranging from monkeys such as langurs and macaques to apes such as gorillas, and smaller primates such as lorises.

"Despite laws, use and trade of the species for medicinal purposes persists," says Professor Romulo Alves of the State University of Paraiba in Brazil, who conducted the survey with colleagues.

The trade in all primate species is tightly regulated by CITES legislation.

Yet despite this, their body parts are being put to a range of uses.

Curing ailments

At least 30% of the primates used are administered to treat one than one ailment.

Black-faced spider monkeys (*Ateles chamek*) and brown or tufted capuchins (*Cebus apella*) are each used to treat more than six ailments, for example, with spider monkey body parts used in Bolivia to cure snake bites, spider bites, fever, coughs, colds, shoulder pain, sleeping problems and leishmaniasis.



Assamese macaques are eaten to treat rheumatism

In India, say the survey's authors, many people believe that eating the blood of macaques (*Macaca assamensis* and *M. mulatta*) treats asthma.

Other monkeys or lorises have their bones or skulls ground up into powder administered with tea, or have their gall bladders ingested or blood or fat used as ointments.

Matter of faith

Primates are also commonly associated with myths within the faiths of different countries, say the survey's authors.

For example, in Sierra Leone, a small piece of chimpanzee bone is sometimes tied around the waists or wrists of children in the belief that it makes them stronger as they grow into adulthood.

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In India, the eye of the Hanuman langur (*Semnopithecus entellus*) is sometimes worn in an amulet to increase courage.

Although many primates are killed for magical or religious purposes, the authors point out that folk beliefs can in some cases help conserve species.

In parts of Asia, Hindu beliefs help protect species such as long-tailed macaques (*Macaca fascicularis*) in Bali or grey langurs (*Semnopithecus spp*) in India.

While in the village of Bossou in the Republic of Guinea, the Manon people consider chimpanzees sacred.

The researchers who conducted the survey also emphasise that many pressures, such as habitat loss, subsistence hunting and the trade in bushmeat, are decreasing primate numbers.



Chimp parts are thought make infants stronger

But the trade in primate body parts is often overlooked, yet could help drive many species toward extinction.

Of the 101 primates recorded by the survey, 12 are classified by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature as being critically endangered, 23 as endangered and 22 as vulnerable.

For example, in Vietnam, pygmy lorises are severely threatened, but the biggest hazard to them is now the high prices people will pay to smuggle the animals into China to be used in medicines.

Many langur species are similarly threatened, not just from subsistence hunting and habitat loss but by hunting for body parts and tissues to satisfy demand for amulets, remedies and aphrodisiacs.