

Project Update: April 2006

Aim

To harness the new-found interest in the recently discovered Arunachal macaque to highlight the astounding wildlife of this region to a wider audience and more importantly, use this to create a sense of pride among local people.

Two media, namely a film of 25-30 minutes in length and an accompanying poster, both describing the Arunachal macaque and stressing on the need to conserve the species and its habitat, are to be produced and screened/distributed mainly in the districts of West Kameng and Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh.

Progress

Treatment The film is built on a series of interviews with local people and the biologists studying the monkey. Through this soft narrative technique, the film aims to piece together the different ways in which the people perceive the monkey. Some find it an amusing afternoon pastime, merely to sit beneath a tree and watch a troop feeding or grooming; some others narrate a creation myth involving monkeys; some other complain bitterly about heavy losses to their agricultural yields owing to crop raiding macaques; the scientists voice their concerns about the animal's future. Several such interviews woven together provide a picture of the larger context in which the "newest" of macaque's lives, and its relationship with the people who share its habitat.

Research for the film began in August 2005. There is currently little published information on this species, and much of the information came from personal observations by the scientists who made the discovery and a student carrying out a study. We gathered information on troop size, range size and feeding behaviour from previously published work and from the study data.

Location West Kameng and Tawang districts of Arunachal Pradesh where the macaque is currently known from, are inhabited by the Monpa people. They are a group of hill tribes who speak a language derived from Tibetan. Closely related both to the people of Bhutan and Sikkim, the Monpa are a gentle, hardworking Buddhist community, who possess a wonderfully wry and completed unexpected sense of humour. We knew from our previous visits and from the initial information generated by the study that the area around Zemithang village, in the valley of the Nyamjang Chu river, to the west of Tawang town, had several troops of Arunachal macaques and decided this would be the best place to be based while shooting the film. Data showed that there were at least four troops within an area of 5-6 sq km and average troop size was a little over 20 individuals. The Nyamjang Chu valley is long and narrow, bordering Bhutan to the east and China to the north. The area has two main villages, Zemithang and Gorsam, some open areas and some forested patches, on either side of the river. This location is also reported to have a much lower incidence of hunting than other parts of Tawang district. It would be the ideal place to spot the monkeys and, hopefully, film them.

Production We decided to shoot the film over two schedules. The first schedule would focus on filming the macaques in the natural habitat and recording as wide a range of behaviour as possible. The second was meant to focus on interviews with people, recording cultural events which had references to the monkey.

Schedule I of filming began in November 2005. Over three weeks we followed the four troops we had identified and filmed them for three hours in the morning and three hours in the afternoon. Reduced daylight hours did not permit longer hours in field.

During this time, we met and spoke with a number of local people, including hunters, former hunters, agriculturists, homemakers and daily wage labourers. We gathered anecdotal information of the macaque's behaviour, ranging, crop raiding patterns, and documented several folk tales about the animal. We also identified persons with whom we planned to hold interviews with during the second schedule of shooting. The first schedule ended on 30 November 2005 and we returned to office with 19 hours of footage.

We began viewing the tapes in mid-December 2005 and logged the 19 hours of footage. We also made moderate changes to the prepared storyline, based on the shots we had managed to acquire.

We returned to Tawang the following March. Tawang is cut off from the rest of the country for much of the winter, when roads going over passes like Sela (>13000 ft) become snow bound. Our arrival in Tawang coincided with the end of the month of Lossar, which marks the Tibetan New Year. People had already begun tilling their fields, and sowing corn, wheat and *morua*, another kind of cereal. This time we halted at a picturesque little village called Thongleng, where we shot most of the interviews with the people we had already spoken with during the previous schedule.

Once the interviews were all complete, we headed once again to Zemithang, for the Gorsam *mela*, a religious and cultural festival during which villagers from Shakti, a settlement downstream from Gorsam, performed a "monkey dance." Depicting the story of Lord Padmasmabhava's struggles during the building of the Samya monastery in Tibet during the 11th Century, the dance tells of the role a troop of macaques played in helping complete the massive construction. After the three heady days of the *mela*, we began looking again for the two troops we had filmed in the first schedule. But (seemingly) frightened by the sudden explosion of people in the otherwise empty valley, the monkeys had fled, one troop uphill and another across the river. After four days of looking for them in vain, we finally spotted a troop grooming by the river, and completed filming an interview with Dr. Sinha, in which he described the morphological traits that set this species apart from other macaques. A day later we held and filmed a meeting with villagers who spoke with Dr. Mishra about crop raiding patterns and ways to mitigate the conflict. With that the shooting was completed successfully. We are now in the midst of watching and logging another 9 hours of footage.

Postproduction Schedule We have planned to complete editing of the film and printing of the posters by late-June 2006.

Outreach

Once complete, the film will first be distributed to several schools and colleges in the Tawang and West Kameng districts. Copies will also be given to the offices of the Forest Department and to other non-profit organisations working in the area. We plan to hold screenings of the film in villages where crop raiding and other issues of conflict with the monkeys are intense, and to use it as a means to a. raise interest in the species and b. initiate discussions on mitigating conflict. Screenings held in schools will be followed by discussions which use the film to introduce children to other conservation concerns in the area (logging, quarrying, etc.).