

Watching the monkeys



by Luis Wilfrido Atienza

Monkeys' interactions with people could be deleterious to their species. How so? A team of researchers from the University of the Philippines Mindanao, the University of the Philippines Los Baños, and the Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park Management Office wanted to shed some light on the long-tailed macaque's interactions with humans.

The long-tailed macaque (*Macaca fascicularis*), also known as the crab-eating macaque, is a species of monkey found all over Southeast Asia. One of the most common primate species, it is known for its frequent interactions with humans. Countries such as Thailand, Indonesia, and Cambodia are known for their temples, nature parks, and urban areas where large numbers of this species of monkey gather and interact with locals and tourists.

This species of monkey is also common throughout the Philippines and thus classified by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as a species of Least Concern. However, its subspecies (*Macaca fascicularis philippensis*) is classified by the IUCN as Near Threatened, meaning at risk of becoming an endangered species to be closely observed.

Published in the *Journal of Threatened Taxa*, the team's work looks into such interactions specifically of the macaques in Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park. The macaques frequently interact with families living in the area, park personnel, and tourists.

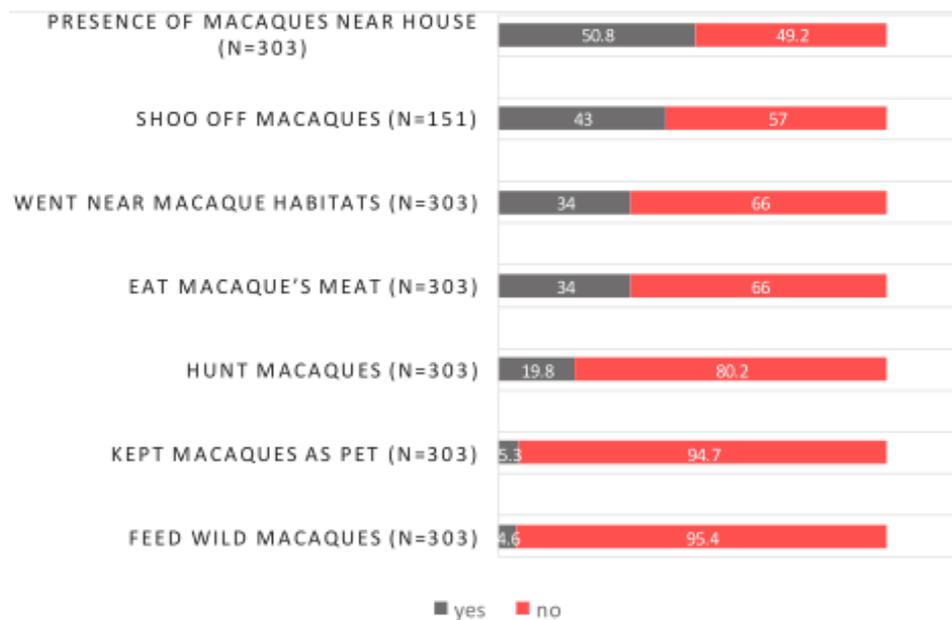
Getting a clear picture of how macaques and humans interact is the first step in coming up with ways to

manage macaques' negative behavior and minimize conflict between macaques and humans: the development of policies and practices to balance the macaques' welfare, the locals' welfare, and the park's status as a popular tourist destination. While there are many studies looking into human-macaque interactions, very few deal with the Philippines specifically.

The researchers observed macaques for 165 hours in August and September 2017 in the park's Central Park Station. They interviewed park personnel, accessed their database of tourist complaints, and surveyed over 300 households in the area. The researchers wanted to get insight into not only how the macaques and humans interacted but also what the attitudes of the locals and tourists had toward the macaques. Ideally the researchers would shed light on any ongoing or potential human-macaque conflict and on how to solve or preemptively address it.

The straightforward methodology yielded interesting observations. The most common problem in the Central Park Station was littering—usually a case of the macaques getting into the park's trash cans and scattering trash everywhere. Other incidents included aggressive behavior toward park personnel and damaging the rooftop of a facility.

The most common interaction with tourists was the macaques stealing food and plastic bags from the tourists. Park officials mentioned that the macaques might take plastic bags in particular because tourists used to be allowed to feed them with food carried in plastic bags.



The different interactions the local residents had with macaques.

Interactions with local residents seemed to be the most contentious, the most common being instances of the macaques eating or otherwise damaging the locals' crops. Over half of the surveyed households reported having macaques near their houses, and slightly less than half reported having to scare macaques away from them. The macaques eating crops being grown is, according to the researchers, likely due to farms being established in the middle of macaque habitats.

There were also fairly widespread reports of people hunting the macaques and eating macaque meat. Such behavior not only is harmful to the macaques but also can pose a threat to the people. The macaques can carry dangerous diseases, which can infect humans through contact, such as during hunting or butchering, or when humans eat infected macaque meat. These diseases could also spread through physical contact as when the macaques have conflicts with park personnel or when the macaques steal food from the tourists.

A small number of households also reported keeping macaques as pets—a result of people either capturing wild macaques or buying already captured ones. This raised concerns because the macaques were usually not kept properly and were secured only with ropes tied around their waists. Moreover, macaques are not fit to be kept as pets because they usually get aggressive as they get older and can harm human owners.

Having formed a clear picture of the most common interactions between macaques and humans at the

park, the researchers came up with some possible improvements to help reduce human-macaque conflicts: reinforcing trash can lids to prevent littering, planting fruit trees near farmland, and information campaigns to ensure that the macaques are treated well and that they do not cause undue harm to humans. Further research can refine such improvements and assess their effectiveness or create a more detailed picture of macaque-human interactions.

REFERENCES

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Luis Wilfrido Atienza graduated from the Ateneo de Manila University, with a BS in Biology and a minor in poetry. He currently works as a writer for a medical communications agency and spends some of his free time writing about science.