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Observing a monkey so little observed

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A review of Primate Archaeology and Adaptation: A Study of Nicobar Long-Tailed Macaques in India by Jayashree Mazumder. Routledge, 2027. 218 pp.

With 24 or so species, India has a rich diversity of nonhuman primates from lorises through macaques and langurs to apes. Whereas some species such as rhesus macaque (*Macaca mulatta*), bonnet macaque (*M. radiata*), lion-tailed macaque (*M. silenus*), and grey langur (*Semnopithecus entellus*) have been widely researched, the Nicobar long-tailed macaque (NLTM) (*M. fascicularis umbrosus*) has only been recently studied scientifically. The first proper survey-based report on its distribution was published by G. Umapathy, Mewa Singh and S. M. Mohnot in 2005. The NLTM is found only in the Great Nicobar, Little Nicobar, and Katchal islands. This report triggered a lot of interest in this subspecies, and in the last 15 years or so, a total of 23 research papers (in 14 of which, one of us -Mewa Singh - is a co-author) have been published. However, Mazumder's book titled 'Primate Archaeology and Adaptation: A Study of Nicobar Long-Tailed Macaques in India' is the first comprehensive monograph that covers several aspects of the ecology, biology, and conservation of this subspecies.

The contents of the book cover a vast field of topics that include theoretical perspectives as well as empirical data. A recent sub discipline called Primate Archeology illustrates the study of the material traces that nonhuman primates leave behind. This topic is discussed in terms of how specifically fossils and archeological sites from India provide a rich background to the study of this discipline. Islands and the study species are described in Chapter 2. Ecology, foraging patterns, and several aspects of behavior are discussed in Chapters 3 through 5. Tool use, culture, reproduction, and communication in the subspecies are reported in Chapter 6. The author makes a long and very important discussion on the issues related to the planned Great Nicobar Island Development Project and its implications for the conservation of the long-tailed macaque and other wildlife in Chapter 7.

The NLTM forages on a variety of food items ranging from forest fruits, coconuts from the cultivated gardens, and cooked food available from human settlements. Hard foods, especially coconuts, are taken to hard surfaces such as dry wood or stones and are hit repeatedly to break the outer shell without harming the inner edible core. If there are thorns or splinters on a coconut, the macaques envelop the nuts with broad leaves, or use such leaves as gloves. As coconut debris often gets stuck between the teeth, the macaques, especially the females, floss with thin metal wires, bird feathers, or thin threads, which is an excellent example of tool use. Some animals were observed to tap on iron rods in unfinished buildings to produce reverberating sounds, a behavior not related to foraging and of a recent origin since such structures have come up in these islands only a few decades ago. The author mentions a curious difference between the long-tailed macaques in Thailand that use a variety of stones, etc., as tools to break hard foods. The NLTM does not use such tools and only looks for hard surfaces to pound the hard food items. We wish the author had discussed this issue of whether the difference between the macaques of these two populations is because of the absence of sessile oysters in the Nicobar Islands, or whether this technique disappeared after the great Tsunami, or whether the behavior never arose in the NLTM! The author could have also pointed to more archeological research in the islands. This is the kind of comparison that primate archaeology exists to exploit.

We have often come across in primate literature where a single or a few observations are generalized into something grander. An animal touching an object becomes evidence of culture. The author has rightly defined a tool as an external object that an animal holds or manipulates to accomplish a specific task such as food extraction or flossing. The NLTM are often observed manipulating sticks. A careless author could have interpreted it as tool use. Mazumder, however, calls it just 'object manipulation' because there was no clear functional outcome of the behaviour. Regarding social learning being transmitted through observation of certain behaviours of adults by the

younger individuals, it is once again, described with caution, as there was no direct evidence for this in the NLTM.

The behavioral descriptions are illustrated in excellent photographs indicating evidence and not just decoration.

The book deserves a place on the desks of scholars in ecology, animal behavior, evolution, and conservation. However, we detected a few weak points that possibly happened due to the inexperience of a young scholar. Though the book is based on Ph.D. research by the author, what is conspicuously missing are the details of the research methodology, the sampling procedures, the research design, the actual duration of field observations, the number of times some typical behaviors were observed, *etc.* Only saying 'frequently' or 'rarely' is not enough in a scientific document. We can understand the difficulties faced in environments such as the Nicobar Islands, but many research protocol details that must be available to the author could have been reported. Another weakness is the repetitiveness of several titles; behavioral aspects such as plasticity and flexibility, ecological affordance *etc.*, are repeatedly presented in several chapters. Further, many titles such as 'Discovering Newness and Local Vibes', 'Use of Sex Toys', 'Alphas and Power Play' are not justified, as the materials provided in the content do not qualify for these seemingly catchy titles not usually used in a scientific document.

We consider the most significant contribution by the author in this book is an objective and fearless commentary on the highly controversial Great Nicobar Island Development Project. On an island of 910 square kilometers, the project plans to take 160 square kilometers, with about 130 square kilometers of primary rainforest, for building the infrastructure for a transshipment terminal at Galathea Bay. There would be a township, a power plant, and a dual-use, military and civil, airport. Many critics of this project have aggressively opposed it. Mazumder has made a gentle analysis of the project, its ecological consequences, and its effect on the behaviour and conservation, not only of the NLTM, but also of the total wildlife of the region. For example, if the few substrates available for tool use disappear, it may result in the disappearance of the very skill in the population. The author, very scholarly, illustrates that if the behavioural landscape is overlooked in the conservation plans, there is a risk of preserving populations while eroding the ecological contexts necessary for behavioural persistence. There are many primate populations where local traditions such as tool use, a washing activity, breaking hard fruits, *etc.*, depend on the presence of a particular tree, a particular stone outcrop, or even a particular tolerant village. She therefore proposes a systematic archeological survey to map the localities where the NLTM use tools.

Despite being indicative of having been written by an inexperienced young scholar due to its thin methodology, uneven presentations, over titling, *etc.*, the book is praiseworthy as it documents details on ecology, behavior, and conservation issues of a unique island primate that ecologists and primatologists paid little attention to till recently. During our decades-long experience of research and teaching, we have come across many promising doctoral scholars who simply disappear after publishing two or three research papers from their dissertations. Mazumder's contribution in the form of a book based on her doctoral thesis therefore deserves appreciation. This book would be very useful to a graduate student, a researcher, or a conservation policymaker in Delhi.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Mewa Singh holds the editor-in-chief positions at the Journal of Wildlife Science. However, he did not participate in the peer review process of this article except as an author. The authors declare that they have no other competing interests.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Both authors contributed equally.