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BRAZILIAN PRIMATES, WELL LOVED AND BADLY PRESERVED

By LIANA JOHN. Photos by EULER CÁSSIA and CARLOS LIMEIRA

The great majority of the 60 species and subspecies of already identified Brazilian primates is still better known to hunters than to specialists and environmentalists.

Even the 33 primates in the official endangered species list are relatively unknown to the scientific world. Their preservation depends basically on their own ability to hide, and their luck to escape.

A scattered few count on the help of regular conservation programs run by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or research institutions, and financed by international entities. But even these are far from victorious in their struggle against extinction.

The two primates better known to the general public, the murequi, or mono carvoeiro, natural of the Brazilian Southeastern region, and the golden lion-tamarin, of the Rio de Janeiro forests have international marketing in their favor: their faces and antics are stamped on t-shirts printed worldwide. They also continue to be the among the most threatened of the primate species.

Both the murequi and the golden-lion tamarin depend on the dedication and goodwill of some few researchers, who fight to hold together remaining traces of natural habitats, so as to protect the specimens still in the wild from hunters and collectors. These researchers also work in nursery breeding, for eventual reintroduction of species to native niches.

Like the world famous golden lion-tamarin, its relative in Bahia, the golden-faced lion-tamarin is also becoming well-known. Other tamarin species, such as the recently discovered caissara lion-tamarin, of Paraná and São Paulo states, and the black lion-tamarin, also found in São Paulo have joined their cousins in the limelight.

But the survival of all of the tamarins, equally threatened by extinction, once again depends on the personal efforts of scientists and environmentalists directly involved with conservation and environmental education programs.

There is no regional or national policy for the preservation of primates in Brazil. This country has probably the largest population of primates in the world, and a great diversity of species.

Not even the Primatology Center of Rio de Janeiro, which has fought for the past ten years for the reproduction in nurseries of endangered species, counts on the necessary support.

"We survive with few resources, with the help of private companies (Souza Cruz - British American Tobacco), and international entities (World Wildlife Fund and Wildlife Preservation Trust)," said Ademar Coimbra Filho, founder and administrator of the center.

Some 315 representatives of 12 endangered species reproduce in nurseries spread out in this stretch of native forest 200 kilometers from Rio de Janeiro.

"Here we do the intermediary work in conservation: we raise and reproduce the endangered species in order to one day return them to their natural habitat," said Alcides Pissinatti, a veterinarian from the center.

"The problem is that there is no wildlife management, nor are the parks safe enough to reintroduce these primates," he lamented.

Even within the conservation areas, and in the 260- hectare island of forests of the Center of Primatology, the threat of the killing the larger primates for the tasty meat, the hunters present a menace to both the fragile social structure and long-term survival of the small tamarins and monkeys, captured as pets, or for commercialization in clandestine markets.

A study done by the Environmental Monitoring Nucleus, of the Brazilian Company for Agropecuary Research, NMA/Embrapa, in the Alto Juruá region, in the northern Brazilian amazon state of Acre, showed that many amazon populations still depend on wildlife meat for their survival.

Even the so-called "people of the forest," now famous for their struggle for the preservation of the rubber trees, consume great quantities of this meat, especially in-between rubber harvests.

Primate meat is a favored delicacy.

According to the calculations of NMA technician, José Roberto Miranda, an average 92 kilos of wildlife meat is consumed per month per rubber-tapper family (about 10 members). Of this total, almost 13 kilos are primate meat, with a certain preference for the "guaiba," "Prego monkey," and "spider monkey."

There are no available figures for the Southeast, Northeast or Center-west regions, but it is a well-known fact that, near human inhabited areas, the bigger primates are always the first to disappear.

A researcher from the Smithsonian Institute, Louise Emmons, said that the record of extinctions in the area are of the "macaco barrigudo" and the "spider monkey," both greatly appreciated for their rich meat.

In her guide of Neotropical Mammals of the Humid Forest, Emmons listed at least 12 Brazilian primate species threatened because of the popularity of their meat.

Two other species, the "night monkey" and "smell monkey," are in high demand in the laboratories of the so-called "developed world," which use them for AID, yellow fever and cancer research. Some species have become increasingly rare due to capturing activities and commercialization in the black market.

Many of the primates captured in the North and Northeastern regions die before they get to the consumer markets in the Southeastern region and the ports from which they are smuggled to other countries.

Losses of the illegally transported animals reaches 90 percent, said Captain Elson Roney Sevilha, commander of the Forestry police of the interior of Sao Paulo state.

"They are piled up in true "slave trucks," in very small cages, with no air, light or food, hidden under the cargo to escape fiscalization," he said. "When they die they are dumped in the side of the road, or near gas stations." he added.

If caught by the police before dying, their luck is no better. "We have no place to put them, and many times do not know how to feed these animals, usually tamarins and monkeys, and they end up dying anyway," said Sevilha.

The primates are often let loose in forests to which they are not native, where they end up competing with local species, bringing losses for both.

"That is why the support for the legalization of the nurseries and the regularization of the commerce of nursery-raised primates, in order to protect animals born in the wild, is important," said Sevilha.

When they escape death in the "slave trucks," and fiscalization, pets may survive in the hands of private owners, but will rarely have contact with their own species again, an unfortunate fact in the case of the endangered species.

Primates, unlike most other mammals, have complex social structures. These systems often depend on the capacity of the species to reproduce and raise their young.

"The female golden lion-tamarins, for example, learn nurturing by helping their own mothers and aunts to take care of younger siblings," said biologist Vania da Silva Nunes. Vania worked for several months with the species in the Washington Zoo, and accompanied its reintroduction to the wild at the Poço das Antas Reserve, in Rio de Janeiro, in 1989.

When separated from the group to become pets, or are exposed to cages, female primates usually abandon their instinctive behavior in favor of human behavior, and become incapable of raising their young.

The males also, separated from the family structure, tend to "fall in love" with people, and have difficulty relating to females of their own species. This happened to a couple of black cuxiús in the Poço das Antas center.

"They were raised in homes from the time they were little, and are completely crazy and unable to relate to each other," said Ademar Coimbra.

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This is a difficult question to work into the environmental education programs: "why Brazilians are used to valuing animals they are able to nurture and pet," said Suzana Pádua, who has established a model environmental education program with the communities close to the Morro do Diabo State Park, home of the last surviving black lion-tamarins.

"Conservation is not for public visiting," said Coimbra, "It is for science and the preservation of patrimony," he added.

Note: The scientific names of the cited primate species are listed below in order of appearance: *Brachyteles arachnoides* (muriqui), *Leontopithecus rosalia* (golden lion-tamarin), *L. chrysomelas* (golden-faced lion-tamarin), *L. chrysopygus* (Black lion-tamarin), *L. caissara* (caissara lion-tamarin), *Alouatta spp.* (guariba), *Ateles paniscus* or *A. belzebuth* (spider monkey), *Cebus apella* or *C. albifrons* (prego monkey), *Lagothrix lagothricha* (Belly monkey), *Aotus spp.* (monkey of the night), *Saimiri sciureus* (small monkey), and *Chiropotes satanus* (cuxiú preto).