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Short Communication

A NOTE ON NON-HUMAN PRIMATES OF MURLEN NATIONAL PARK, MIZORAM, INDIA

Mizoram (Lushai Hills, the land of highlanders), formerly called Mizo district under the state of Assam. It attained statehood on 20 Feb., 1987, after being a Union Territory since 1972. As the state is basically an agrarian in nature it comes under the monsoon type of climate, where summer is warm and hot. The winter is cold and dry, average annual rainfall is about 2500 mm.

The survey of Murlen National Park was initiated to study the population trend of non-human primates in the little known northeastern state of Mizoram. The survey of the park was carried out in the month of October 1998. The park is situated in the eastern border of Mizoram with an area of 200 km² in the Champai district. Murlen, the natural habitat of the rare Hume's Bartailed Pheasant, with an area of 45 km² was initially declared as reserve forest. It was declared as National Park on 28 July 1991. Murlen National Park falls in montane sub-tropical semi-evergreen forest type. The forest consists of a mixture of numerous plant species.

There are four entry points to Murlen National Park out of which three are forest foot tracks and one point is fair weather jeepable road. The entry points are Vapar on the east, which is the only motorable road from Champai town; others are Rabung from the west, Talpui from the south and Hnallan from the northwest. Vapar is the village located just on the boundary of the Murlen National Park. Murlen village is somewhat placed at the center of the National Park (Fig. 1). There are about 50 houses with a population of approximately 200 people. Forest authorities are trying to shift the inhabitants from the park so as to rehabilitate them in other areas.

The survey team entered the park on foot from Vapar to Murlen village. This forest foot track stretches about 13 km. A thorough scan along the entire stretch from early morning could not reveal any monkey group or call of hoolock gibbons. This was later confirmed from the Forest personnel of the Park as also from villagers' that there was no monkey on this roadside forest from Vapar to Murlen village. The other three roads were also surveyed and it was noticed that stump-tailed monkeys are relatively more in numbers than other species of primates at Murlen.

Hoolock gibbon

One family of hoolock gibbon (*Bunopithecus hoolock hoolock*) was located consisted of 3 members, 1 adult male, 1 adult female and 1 juvenile. A call of gibbon was heard in close vicinity of the traced group. But there was no accessible track in the area to follow the group. Wildlife Institute of India conducted a census in January 1994 at Murlen N.P. and heard calls of two-hoolock gibbon in the core area (Chamdur) of the park (Shankar Raman *et al.*, 1995). The area was oak dominated, low canopied, and relatively open. The area from which the present sighting was made was not recorded earlier. Forest Department of Mizoram conducted a census during 1993 and recorded a total of 37 individuals of gibbon in the Murlen N.P. So, from the present survey it revealed that there is a sharp decline in their population in the last 5 years.

Capped langur

One group of Capped langur (*Trachypithecus pileatus*) consisting of 15–18 individuals was sighted from a distance. The sexes could not be identified clearly. There are only 2–3 groups of capped langur now inhabiting the park as reported by the villagers. The villagers often penetrate deep into the park for forest produce as their food items and procuring fodder for their livestock.

Stump-tailed macaque

Stump tailed macaque (*Macaca arctoides*) is fairly common in the inaccessible areas of the park, they do not approach the forest roads which is a very common feature in primates due to hunting pressure. Three groups were encountered in the park, 2 groups consisted of 37 monkeys, and the third group of 12–15 individuals was fleeing so the accurate count could not be made possible. The survey team met with a hunter with a kill of one female stump-tailed monkey (Fig. 2). On enquiry the hunter told us that during special occasion they normally try to kill monkeys though it was very difficult to trace. Survey on Murlen-Rabung foot track revealed no occurrence of primates.

CONCLUSION

The major threat to primates at Murlen National Park appears to be hunting pressure rather than shifting cultivation. Even in the forests the villagers still move with guns and monkeys are regarded as delicious meat. Traps and other indigenous devices are used for capturing monkeys, small mammals and birds. The wildlife of Mizoram is threatened, many almost to the brink of extinction due to extensive shifting cultivation and age-old practice of hunting. Wanton destruction of their habitat and hunting for sports are largely responsible of diminishing wildlife at Mizoram.

PLATE I



Fig. 1. : Murlen village inside the National Park.



Fig. 2. : Stump-tailed monkey, killed by a hunter in the N. Park.

Shifting cultivation has caused drastic changes in vegetation at Murlen N.P. At present new areas are not being jhummed, lowered reduced jhum cycles created many areas of bamboo vegetation not suitable for many primate species, especially langurs and hoolock gibbons. Many huts in the Murlen village where the survey team visited found the walls in front of the house adorned with skulls of gaur, bears, deer, serrow, rodents, porcupine, clouded leopard, pangolin and primates. Most of the houses of Vapar village, bordering the National Park on the east, are displayed with trophies of animal kills. These skulls are displayed as trophies and the villagers' boast of having maximum numbers.

So, the park now urgently needed adequate conservation and management measures to protect the remaining primate species and other wildlife.

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