

Plenary Speaker

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Primatological Research in Sri Lanka: past, present and future prospects

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Sri Lanka is home to five species of primates, the toque macaque (*Macaca sinica*), purple face langur (*Semnopithecus vetulus*), grey langur (*Semnopithecus priam*) and two species of slow loris (*Loris tardigradus*, *L. lydekkerianus*). The toque macaque, purple face langur and one species of slender loris (*L. tardigradus*) are endemic. In 2013, the Horton Plains slender loris, feared to be extinct, was sighted after 75 years. The country's diverse ecology, climate and geography provide Sri Lanka with a high degree of biodiversity in flora and fauna.



The primates are no exception, with multiple sub-species described for each of the species listed above.

While detailed records of the country's primates date back to as early as the chronicles of Robert Knox around 1681, modern primatological research began in the 1970's with the pioneering work of western scientists like Wolfgang Dittus, who has focused his long-term research at the archeological site of Polonnaruwa in the North-Central Province, a low elevation woodland forest in the dry zone. The majority of what is known about the behavior and ecology of this species, distributed widely across the island, is based on the efforts from this one site. A few studies have also been conducted on the purple face langur and slender loris. Despite the relatively long history of primate studies in Sri Lanka, only four professional Sri Lankan primatologists are conducting research in the country, and the subject primatology is offered only at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura under Biological Anthropology.

Since 2004, in collaboration with Kyoto University faculty, Michael A Huffman and Yoshi Kawamoto, we have been conducting multidisciplinary research on the macaque and langur species at sites across the island representative of their entire natural distribution. The topics we are investigating include fossil remains, morphology, phylogeography, parasitology, ethnoprimateology and human primate conflict. Current information about the nature and diversity of these primates and their interactions with humans across the country is limited; focusing to date largely on few locations.

Some of our current and future projects include, research on phylogeography of purple-faced leaf langur and gray langur, human primate conflict in agricultural areas, examination of primates bones excavated from prehistorical cave sites and to begin research on simian malaria and primate zoonosis studies. Several undergraduates and our first Masters student are conducting fieldwork at locations across the country.