A Field Study of the Pigtail Monkey
(Macaca nemestrina)¹)

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ABSTRACT  A field study of the pigtail monkey (Macaca nemestrina) was conducted in Malaysia. An initial six month survey revealed a badly disturbed, diminishing population. Intensive observation required prolonged extensive habituation efforts including a modified form of provisionization and the use of a trained captive pigtail monkey. The pigtail monkey was found to be an arboreal deep forest animal which, nonetheless, came to the ground more often than any other monkey in the forests of Malaya. Responses observed in the natural habitat could not be differentiated from those seen in captive groups; but response frequencies differed. Social patterns observed were similar to those seen in other macaques but differed notably from those seen in sympatric leaf monkeys. Travel patterns, feeding, agonistic responses, sexual behavior, play and other responses are described and discussed.

After two years of work with captive groups of pigtail monkeys, a study of wild troops in the natural habitat was undertaken. Data collection procedures were designed to permit comparisons of response expression and frequencies under natural and captive conditions in order to relate activity patterns observed in captivity with natural behavior. Extensive survey was required to select a suitable study site and during this period data were collected on the distribution and population of pigtail monkeys in Malaya and Southern Thailand. Data collecting techniques developed in the laboratory were modified in the field, and the opportunity was taken to collect data on: sympatric primates, monkey capture techniques, and the training and later use of pigtail monkeys in the harvesting of coconuts.

Survey

In the survey period it became clear that the pigtail monkey was subject to extensive human predation. Monkeys are part of the diet of many people; some regard portions of the pigtail monkey as a culinary delicacy, and others believe the meat has special body building powers. Even in sections where pigtail monkeys are not ordinarily eaten, every effort is made to capture them because of the high prices offered for young males suitable for training as

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coconut pickers, (see Corner, 1955; Bertrand, 1967) and other animals can be readily sold for export.

The pigtail is a hardy animal in captivity, subsisting on kitchen scraps about as well as local dogs and chickens do, and can therefore be easily kept until the opportunity for sale or trade presents itself. Dealers and their agents make irregular trips to even the remotest villages to buy captured animals. In the deep forest aborigines have long hunted monkeys for food, but the former balance achieved, due to the limitations of the blowpipe, has been recently upset by the introduction of shotguns, supplied by the government as part of a program to settle the aborigines. Aborigine hunters also save monkey infants for future sale or barter with government agents and dealer representatives.

As a result of this predation pressure the pigtail monkey population is everywhere disturbed and troops cannot be found near centers of population. M. irus, in contrast, can be found in towns and parks as well as in the forest. It is difficult to tell if the pigtail monkey could also exploit these habitats, and it can only be said that pigtail monkeys are presently found only in dense forest. They are also absent in large sectors of forest which appear suitable, and in many such areas there are reports that the pigtail monkeys used to live there but have “moved away.” Even in protected forests, it is easy to obtain permission, and even assistance, to shoot animals which “have been a nuisance” or are accused of raiding crops or coming too close to human habitation. The big males are respected and feared and therefore shot at every opportunity.

A decreasing supply has caused a steady increase in price for pigtail monkeys in the local markets; and along the east coast of Malaya, where extensive coconut plantations exist, the price may be triple that paid elsewhere. The Game Warden in the west coast state of Kelantan showed me a male M. irus which had been trained as a coconut picker because a suitable pigtail monkey could not be obtained. Pigtail monkeys are much preferred because of their greater size, strength, and reputed ability to work longer and more consistently. For the same reasons, males are preferred over females.

The survey did not include sections of the rainforest closed for military reasons and, since these were often remote from any tracks or roads, perhaps pigtail monkeys may still exist in some numbers in these locations. On the other hand, travel into remote parts of the national park failed to reveal any appreciable increase in the population density of M. nemestrina.

Despite all efforts, it was not possible to obtain a good estimate of the surviving population of pigtail monkeys. In the approximately 75,000 square kilometers of tropical rainforest remaining in Malaya, the pigtail monkey is absent in many areas and represented unevenly in the remainder. Population surveys also tended to be inaccurate because the surviving troops are very wary of humans and have become experts at escape and evasion.