

Illegal domestic trade in Ecuadorian primates measured through rescue centre in-take.

H. Smith, M.R. Peck, F. Narvaez, V. Nijman
Oxford Brookes University, Department of Anthropology and Geography,
Sussex University, Department of Biology and Environmental Sciences

Contact: hels_smith@hotmail.co.uk



Introduction

Wildlife trade is one of the leading threats to biodiversity conservation. While international trade is regulated and monitored through the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), data on domestic trade is often difficult to obtain. In South America the off-take of primates for bushmeat has been estimated to involve millions of individuals a year but levels of primates traded alive are not readily available.

Animal rescue centres in primate range countries offer refuge to fauna rescued from trade. To date, few data are available on the composition or turnover of these populations. With potentially significant numbers of globally threatened species, rescue centres could make a significant contribution to their conservation.



Cebus alibifrons rescued from a circus in Quito.
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"Refuges walk a fine line between conservation and captivity, yet their mission is no less important."
Jane Goodall (PASA 2010)

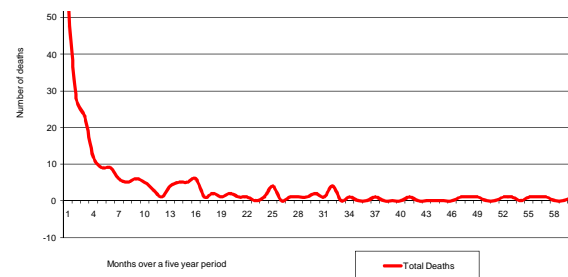
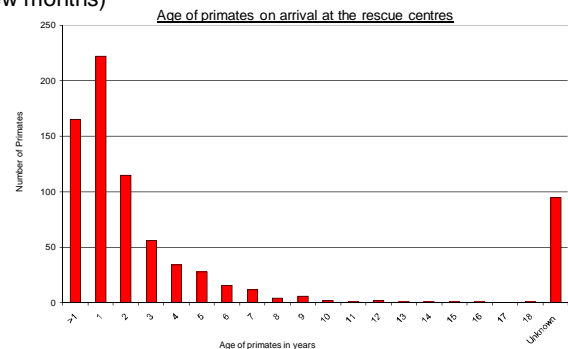
Methods

We obtained records from 23 animal rescue centres in Ecuador; this is one of the largest datasets on trade in live animals in any South American country (8,920 individuals over an 18-year period). We analyse which primates are prevalent in trade, in what volumes, and determine the fate of the individuals that arrive in the centres.

We also obtained records on primates held in South American zoos (International Species Information System . ISIS . for 2010) and on the number of primates exported from Ecuador (CITES trade database, 2003-2010).

Results

While in 2009 there were 355 primates in 13 zoos throughout South America, and Ecuador exported 316 primates over the last 6 years, no less than 1053 primates were admitted into rescue centres between 2003 and 2009. Primates make up a significant proportion (~30%) of the animals brought into the Ecuadorian rescue centres. Over half the primates were obtained from the vicinity of Ecuador's capital Quito. 1053 species were brought into the centres with *Saimiri sciureus* (457 individuals) and *Cebus alibifrons* (155) in the largest numbers. Two thirds of the primates were estimated to be less than 2 years of age when they arrived at the rescue centres, strongly suggesting the killing of adult primates in the process of obtaining pet primates. Despite best efforts and care three quarters die within 1 year after arrival (most of them in the first few months)



Discussion

The preponderance of primates arriving at the rescue centres points at their popularity as pets and as well as the large pressure the pet trade exerts on wild populations. The pet primate trade has been argued to be a by-product of the bushmeat trade, and the bias toward primate babies arriving at the centres corroborate this. The high mortality upon arrival at rescue centres is indicative of the unsuitability of wild primates to be kept as pets.