

Oxen feared extinct may never have existed

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U.S. scientists say a species of ox discovered in Cambodia in 1937 and hailed as one of the 20th century's most famous finds might never have existed.

The kouprey -- an ox with dramatic, curving horns -- has been an icon of Southeast Asian conservation since its recognition as a new species. Feared extinct, it's been the object of many expeditions to the Cambodian jungles.

But now Northwestern University biologists have presented genetic evidence suggesting the kouprey might never have existed as a wild, natural species.

The researchers compared kouprey DNA with DNA from a Cambodian wild ox, the banteng. The researchers predicted they'd find the kouprey was a hybrid and would show mitochondrial DNA similar to that of the banteng. The prediction was confirmed by the DNA analysis.

"The kouprey has acquired a rather romantic, exotic reputation," said Gary Galbreath, senior author of the study and associate director of Northwestern's Program in Biological Sciences. "Some people would understandably be sad to see it dethroned as a species."

But, added Galbreath, "In the end, good science is about what is true, not what is desired to be true."

The research appears in the *Journal of Zoology*.

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