

Monkey species discovery overshadowed by threat

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The discovery of a new monkey species that's found only in Uganda is being overshadowed by the imminent destruction of much of the animal's habitat.

Primatologist Colin Groves from the School of Archaeology and Anthropology at ANU said his analysis of the gray-cheeked mangabey (*Lophocebus albigena*) in the small, central African nation has revealed that the local monkeys constitute a new species – but that there are plans afoot to clear the forest that's home to a quarter of the animal's population.

“By taking careful measurements of the skulls of the gray-cheeked mangabeys in Uganda, I discovered that they were considerably different compared to those of similar monkeys in surrounding countries,” Professor Groves said.

“These animals will soon be named the Ugandan gray-cheeked mangabey (*Lophocebus ugandae*), making them the first monkey species endemic to Uganda.”

But Professor Groves said that the new species faces a serious threat if a plan to clear its major habitat area goes ahead. He said the Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni had given permission for 7,000 hectares of the Mabira Forest to be cleared for sugar and palm oil production. This decision was attacked by many Ugandans, who saw it as a threat to tourism and water resources.

Professor Groves said the forest clearing would also be a catastrophic blow for the local mangabeys.

“This threat to the Mabira Forest makes it all the more urgent that *L. ugandae* is officially recognised as an endemic Ugandan monkey species.

“Although the species is widespread in the western and lakeshore forests of Uganda, it is very abundant in Mabira, and the loss of this population would probably mean that about a quarter of the total population would disappear.

“In an age where more and more animal species are coming under threat from human development and its consequences, it’s more important than ever that we safeguard our biodiversity. This seems even more pressing when it’s one of our near relatives, a fellow primate, that is facing extinction.”

Source: Australian National University

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