

Tiny primate 'punk' in danger of extinction

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Charismatic Colombian primate population suffers significant drop.

A tiny, charismatic Colombian [primate](#) known for its distinctive punk-rock hairstyle, is in imminent danger of [extinction](#), according to new population figures.

New research has revealed that numbers of the critically endangered cotton-top tamarin have drastically decreased over the last forty years.

The latest study, carried out in Colombia with methods created by researchers at the University of St Andrews, estimates that there are just over seven thousand of the species left in the wild.

The research uses a new population sampling method developed by Dr Len Thomas at the Centre for Research into Ecological and Environmental Modelling at St Andrews, in collaboration with Dr Anne Savage at Disney's Animal Kingdom and Colombian NGO Proyecto Tití.

Dr Thomas commented, "Before our study, there was no reliable estimate of the number of these animals left in the wild, and no feasible method of counting them. All we knew was that between twenty - thirty thousand had been exported to the USA in the 1960s and 1970s for use in medical laboratories, before international trade was stopped. It took a lot of thinking, and several failed attempts, before we came up with a survey method that worked. Our results are quite shocking, because they demonstrate that almost all of the forest where cotton-top tamarins used to live has been cut down. We have documented, at least in the areas we could safely survey, where the last remaining wild animals are living, so conservation organizations can focus their efforts on preserving and hopefully expanding these remnant populations. Because of our work, cotton-top tamarins are on the List of the World's 25 Most Endangered Primates."

Cotton-top tamarins are endemic to northwestern Colombia, where they are known locally as "Titís". They are threatened by habitat destruction, where natural forest is converted to cattle pasture, and trees are used for housing and fuel. They are also captured as part of an illegal wildlife trade.

Dr Thomas collaborated with Dr Anne Savage of Disney's [Animal Kingdom](#) in the study. Dr Savage has worked on cotton-top tamarins for many years, founding Proyecto Tití, a multidisciplinary conservation

program that works to conserve this species by developing effective education programs and sustainable alternatives for communities to reduce their dependence on extracting products from the forests that the tamarins need to survive.

The seeds of the collaboration were sown back in 2003, at a training workshop in St Andrews co-taught by Dr Thomas and attended by Dr Savage. Counting cotton-tops was clearly a difficult problem since the tiny animals - just 25cm long - live 20m up in the forest canopy and flee at the first sign of humans. However, Dr Savage knew that they were attracted to playback recordings of tamarin vocalizations and that proved to be the key to surveying this shy primate. The method they developed involves two teams walking along parallel transects, playing recordings of cotton-top tamarin long calls and counting all the animals that came from between the teams to find the source of the vocalization. Cotton-tops readily responded to hearing an “intruder” in their territory and displayed appropriate behaviour of investigating the source of the “unfamiliar cotton-top”

Dr Savage, who also works with Joanne Potts, a St Andrews PhD student in studies of endangered small mammals in Florida, commented, “Our partnership with the University of St Andrews has been instrumental in helping to establish accurate [population](#) estimates for Key Largo woodrats, an endangered rodent species found in Florida.”

The research is published in the journal *Nature Communications*.

More information: www.nature.com/ncomms/

Provided by University of St Andrews

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