

Morocco fights to save its iconic monkey

May 3 2017, by Hamza Mekouar



The only species of macaque outside Asia, the Barbary macaque lives on leaves and fruits and can weigh up to 20 kilogrammes (45 pounds)

"If nothing is done, this species will disappear within 10 years," warns a poster on Ahmed Harrad's ageing 4x4 showing Morocco's famed Barbary macaque monkey.

Harrad spends his time crisscrossing northern Morocco to try to convince locals to protect the endangered monkey.

The only [species](#) of macaque outside Asia, which lives on leaves and fruits and can weigh up to 20 kilogrammes (45 pounds), was once found throughout North Africa and parts of Europe.

But having disappeared from Libya and Tunisia, it is now restricted to mountainous regions of Algeria and Morocco's northern Rif region. Another semi-wild population of about 200 individuals in Gibraltar are the only free-ranging [monkeys](#) in Europe.

Today, the only native primate north of the Sahara, apart from humans, is in danger of extinction, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

Conservationists blame illegal poaching, tourists who feed the monkeys and overexploitation of the cedar and oak forests that form the species' natural habitat.

In response, Morocco has launched a campaign to save the species.

"We are working on two areas—monitoring and making a census of the species in the Rif and raising awareness among locals so that they actively help rescue it," Harrad said.



The Barbary macaque once lived throughout North Africa and parts of Europe, but is now only found in the mountainous regions of Algeria and Morocco's northern Rif region

As head of a local association, Barbary Macaque Awareness & Conservation (BMAC), Harrad has become a tireless advocate for the animal.

He says it is often sold to buyers in Europe for between \$110 and \$330

(100 and 300 euros) despite laws forbidding the trade.

"A lot of foreigners buy monkeys as pets," he said.

Seen as quiet and cute when it is young, the adult monkey can become a burden, Harrad said.

"It breaks things, bites, fights with children and climbs the curtains," prompting many owners to abandon their pets, he said.



Conservationists blame illegal poaching, tourism, and overexploitation of the cedar and oak forests that form the species' natural habitat for the decline of the Barbary macaques

Macaque remains 'in ashes of Pompeii'

But that hasn't stopped the tailless monkeys, with their thick grey-and-ginger fur, being highly sought-after by passing travellers throughout the ages.

According to National Geographic, skeletal remains of macaques have been discovered "in the ashes of Pompeii, deep within an ancient Egyptian catacomb, and buried beneath an Irish hilltop where the Bronze Age kings of Ulster once held court".

Zouhair Ahmaouch, an official at Morocco's High Commission for Water, Forests and Combating Desertification, said the new conservation plan focused on tackling poaching.

But Morocco "can't repatriate monkeys released in Europe, because we don't know whether they came from Gibraltar, Algeria or Morocco", he said.

The North African kingdom has never conducted a nationwide census of the macaque, but scientists believe its numbers fall every year.



Conservationists estimate that Morocco is home to between 3,000 and 10,000 Barbary macaques today, compared with 17,000 three decades ago

Based on various studies, they estimate that Morocco is home to between 3,000 and 10,000 macaques today, compared with 17,000 three decades ago.

They believe Algeria had around 5,500 Barbary macaques in the late 1980s. The number has since almost halved, according to the IUCN.

Algiers has also responded with plans to protect the species.

While the macaques are hard to spot in the wilds of Morocco's Rif, some individuals in the forests of the Middle Atlas are tame, attracting tourists who come to feed them.

But Ifrane National Park head Lahcen Oukennou said feeding can cause "health problems such as obesity, which affects their health and especially their reproductive capacity".

Anouar Jaoui, director of Talassemtane National Park in northern Morocco, home to several dozen macaques, said the conservation strategy includes measures to "rehabilitate and rebuild the species' habitat".



"If nothing is done, this species will disappear within 10 years," environmentalist Ahmed Harrad has warned on the plight of Barbary macaques

That requires "reducing the pressure from overexploitation of natural resources", he added.

In the forests of the Middle Atlas, authorities are organising awareness-raising sessions for tourists to discourage them from feeding or approaching the monkeys.

Pupils at local schools are also being educated about the species.



Barbary macaques are taken by poachers and often sold to buyers in Europe for between \$110 and \$330 (100 and 300 euros) despite laws forbidding the trade.

Last October, the Barbary macaque was listed as a species threatened

with extinction on the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).

That makes buying and selling the monkeys illegal except under exceptional circumstances.

Ahmaouch welcomed the move.

"It will allow Morocco and other countries to unify their efforts to fight against the illegal trade in Barbary macaques," he said. Morocco has a "global responsibility to conserve this heritage".



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