

We train Colombian woolly monkeys to be wild again – and maybe save them from extinction

December 14 2018, by Mónica Alejandra Ramírez, Manuel Lequerica Tamara And Pablo Stevenson



A scientist from the University of the Andes observing captive woolly monkeys as part of Colombia's wildlife reintegration program. Credit: Monica Ramirez, Author provided

Colombia's Andes Mountains used to be loaded with wildlife, including South America's sole bear species, the spectacle bear, and the mountain tapir, which lives only in the world's highest altitudes.

You couldn't walk a mile in the jungle without seeing a woolly monkey – big, agile and charismatic primates with powerful long tails.

Now the species is [hard to spot](#). Over the past 50 years, [habitat loss](#), [poaching](#) and [smuggling for adoption as pets](#) have all decimated Colombia's woolly monkey populations. Andean woolly [monkeys](#) are at risk of extinction in the next century, scientists say. They have already [disappeared entirely in some parts of Colombia](#).

Restoring Colombia's jungles

To save the woolly monkey, Colombian [wildlife](#) and [environmental agencies](#) teamed up with scientists like [us](#) from the [Laboratory of Tropical Forest Ecology and Primatology](#) at Colombia's University of the Andes.

In August 2017, we released six captive woolly monkeys into the forests of southern Huila, about a 12-hour drive south of Bogota, the capital. This jungle-covered region was once home to many troops of these lovely primates. Now they're conspicuously absent.

We wanted to see if animals born in the wild, captured by traffickers and confiscated by Colombian authorities could learn to live there again.

Releasing animals who've spent time in captivity is risky. Often, they lack the [behaviors necessary to survive in the wild](#), such as self-defense and bonding strategies.

According to [a comprehensive review of wildlife reintroduction programs worldwide](#), only 26 percent are successful. Most either fail outright – the animals die – or do not last enough to evaluate the fate of the released animals.

To help us develop a training plan for [promoting natural behaviors](#), we first spent over a year observing dozens of captive woolly monkeys at zoos and sanctuaries across Colombia.

We saw that many woolly monkeys had become comparatively clumsy climbers, and rather than seek out food they tended to wait for their caretakers to feed them. They had also lost the ability to spot and flee predators.

Hope for woolly monkeys

After a year of assessing their behavior, we chose 11 candidates for possible reintegration into the wild based on their reproductive viability, strength, health and non-attachment to humans.

During the six-month rehabilitation process, we used what we call "environmental enrichment" to instill survival skills among these woolly monkeys.

To reduce time spent lolling on the ground and encourage climbing, we placed the monkeys' food high up on platforms simulated trees. We also promoted bonding by putting pairs of woolly monkeys together in "socialization cages," which encourages them to groom each other and interact one-on-one.

To boost predator response, we played sounds made by predators like eagles and jaguars, followed by other monkeys' alarm cries, so that the captive woolly monkeys would learn to recognize them as a threat.

After the training period, the six fittest monkeys were released into the Huila forest reserve, an area with ample food and protection from hunters. Two were juveniles. Four were adults.

All wore collars that tracked their location and recorded their behavior to evaluate the monkeys' adaptation process.

At first, we provided some food for the newly reintroduced monkeys. After five months they were weaned off entirely.

Cautious optimism

A year after the six monkeys were released, two had been recaptured because they were struggling to adapt, spending too much time on the forest floor and unwilling to bond with their troopmates.

Two had gone missing. And two died within months – one after falling from a tree and another of mysterious causes.

Admittedly, those aren't great results.

We think the problem may have been the location. The Huila nature reserve has enough fruit to feed the monkeys, but it gets quite cold there. In low temperatures, your body uses a lot of energy to heat itself. Perhaps their self-feeding skills weren't sufficiently developed for them to consume enough calories.

Group cohesion was also low in this cohort, causing some individuals to break away from their group – a dangerous thing to do in the jungle.

Worth the effort

Our project shows how difficult it is to restore endangered primate populations.

But we need to keep trying. Over half of all Colombia's [30 or so primates species](#) are in danger of going extinct, according to [Diana Guzman](#), president of the Colombian Primatology Association.

Their demise would have severe environmental consequences. South American primates have been shown to eat, digest and disperse each day about [2 million seeds per square mile of habitat](#) – an important [ecological service](#) for Colombia's tropical forests.

Colombia does not have enough animal sanctuaries and zoos to house [the thousands of primates recaptured from smugglers](#) every year. Many are [euthanized, "reintroduced" into inappropriate habitats or even returned to the black market](#). The lucky few that are taken into captivity often suffer from heart disease, obesity, behavioral disruptions and [psychological damage](#) – disorders linked to a sedentary lifestyle and inadequate diet.

Comprehensive, long-term [primate rehabilitation and reintroduction programs](#) like ours – which is funded by the Colombian government and the nonprofit Primate Conservation, Inc. – are costly. We spend about \$5,000 per monkey resettled.

But rehabilitating and releasing seized animals is far cheaper, and way more environmentally appropriate, than [keeping them behind bars for a lifetime](#). And ours is one of the few primate reintegration programs of its kind in Latin America.

The next generation of woolly monkeys

In November 2018, we released our second cohort of six rehabilitated

monkeys, including one female monkey recaptured last time.

This time, we chose the [Rey Zamuro](#) nature reserve, in the Meta Colombia region. The [jungle](#) there has warmer weather and likely a greater food supply, and we are hopeful they can establish themselves there.

So far, the Meta Colombia troop seems to be doing well, particularly in group bonding.

We'll keep checking in on them all year, learning from their experiences to help generations of rewilded woolly monkeys to come.

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