A rare and little-known group of monkeys could help save Africa's tropical forests

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Examples of red colobus from west, central, and east Africa. From left to right, top: P. badius badius in Côte d'Ivoire, P. pennantii on Bioko Island, Equatorial Guinea; and bottom: P. tephrosceles in Uganda, and P. kirkii. Credit: *Conservation Letters* (2024). DOI: 10.1111/conl.13014

Conservationists and scientists from almost 20 institutions in the United

States, Europe, and Africa, have concluded that immediate conservation efforts to protect red colobus monkey species could have cascading net positive impacts on African tropical forest health in the face of a growing biodiversity crisis.

At a time when hunting of wildlife and habitat loss are driving long-term changes to ecosystems, including stark wildlife population declines and greater vulnerability to climate change and zoonotic disease transmission, the scientists identified red colobus monkeys as key indicators of tropical forest health and flagships for local and international conservation initiatives.

Writing in the journal *Conservation Letters*, the authors focus on five priority action areas:

- Providing legal protections for all red colobus and including them as priority conservation species in national laws and international treaties
- Carrying out ecological surveys to determine populations in need of protection
- Supporting greater investment in protected area creation and management
- Prioritizing support to and engagement with people living in proximity to red colobus monkeys
- Investing in greater conservation education and awareness-raising

The above actions build on the Red Colobus Conservation Action Plan, initiated by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Species Survival Commission Primate Specialist Group and the African Primatological Society. The action plan aims to make red colobus a priority conservation target, which will help to secure Africa's tropical forests and reduce unsustainable hunting for wild meat. A Red Colobus Working Group (RCWG) has been formed to guide implementation of

the action plan and a Red Colobus Conservation Network (RCCN) has been created to promote communication, capacity-building and monitoring of red colobus conservation efforts.

Florence Aghomo, the RCCN Coordinator, said, "The Red Colobus Conservation Action Plan provides the blueprint for the conservation of red colobus monkeys. Through the collective efforts of the Red Colobus Conservation Network, we are striving to elevate red colobus monkeys to flagship species status, ensuring their survival for generations to come. With a focus on science-based solutions, community engagement, and capacity building for young African primate conservationists, the RCCN is forging a united front to address the urgent threats facing red colobus monkeys across Africa."

In Africa, the 17 red colobus species (18 taxa if you count one species with two subspecies) range widely from Senegal in the west to the Zanzibar Archipelago in the east. One of the most imperiled and understudied primate groups, all 18 taxa are threatened with extinction and 14 of the 18 taxa are listed as Endangered or Critically Endangered on the Red List of Threatened Species maintained by the IUCN.

The authors conclude that declining populations of red colobus "forewarn the fate of other large-bodied terrestrial vertebrates across African tropical forests and portend a bleak future for Africa's biodiversity if a business-as-usual approach is followed." The authors call for scientists, civil society groups, local communities, governments, funding agencies and others to invest in red colobus conservation efforts to help protect Africa's tropical forests and biodiversity, mitigate the impacts of climate change, and improve food security and public health.

"One red colobus species may already be extinct due, primarily, to hunting and others are trending in that direction," said Joshua Linder, lead author of the article and primatologist. "The time is now to ensure

the future of Africa's most endangered group of monkeys and the tropical forests they inhabit."

Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) research scientist Fiona Maisels added, "Red colobus are among the first mammal species to vanish from African forests, because they are large-bodied—providing a lot of meat with a single shot—and because they tend to look with interest at the hunter, rather than fleeing sensibly like most other monkeys. They often form large, noisy groups that are easy for a hunter to find compared with many of the smaller monkey species.

"The result can be that a perfectly good forest can swiftly be rendered red-colobus free within just a few years of hunting starting within it. Many of our priority action areas are in fact applicable to conservation of a wide range of species, and, indeed, of landscape protection as a whole."

Barney Long of Re:wild remarked, "As the first species to be hunted out of the tropical forests of Africa, red colobus monkeys are the proverbial canary in the coalmine for biodiversity loss in these forests. Forests with red colobus remain healthy and so these monkeys should be elevated to be a key indicator of forest ecosystem integrity and closely monitored to track conservation effectiveness. Given the first primate extinction in modern times, may be a red colobus monkey—Miss Waldron's red colobus—all conservation efforts should be made to prevent the loss of additional species and subsequent degradation of forest ecosystems across Africa."

Drew Cronin from the North Carolina Zoo concluded, "Protecting red colobus monkeys isn't just about saving a species; it's about safeguarding Africa's tropical forests, mitigating climate change, enhancing food security, and ensuring a thriving ecosystem for generations to come. Their survival symbolizes our commitment to conservation, urging us all

to unite in action for a brighter, biodiverse future."

More information: Joshua M. Linder et al, To conserve African tropical forests, invest in the protection of its most endangered group of monkeys, red colobus, *Conservation Letters* (2024). DOI: 10.1111/conl.13014

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