

Preliminary field survey of pygmy slow loris (*Nycticebus pygmaeus*) and Bengal slow loris (*Nycticebus bengalensis*); assessment of hunting pressure and local attitudes towards the two species in Veun Sai Forests, Cambodia.

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Abstract

Night surveys are sparse in Southeast Asia and therefore only limited data are available on the distribution, densities and ecology of nocturnal animals. Two species of lorises are found in Cambodia. According to IUCN, Bengal slow loris (*Nycticebus bengalensis*) and pygmy loris (*N. pygmaeus*) sympatrically inhabit the northeast of the country. However, no confirmed sightings of *N. pygmaeus* west of the Mekong River and no reported sightings of *N. bengalensis* east of the Mekong River suggest that either this body of water provides a natural barrier or that the species have been expatriated from the large areas. In Cambodia both species face considerable anthropogenic threats in form of habitat loss and unsustainable off-take for traditional medicine. This study was conducted in Veun Sai Forests (VSF) of north eastern Cambodia and aimed at verifying sympatric coexistence and estimating densities of *N. bengalensis* and *N. pygmaeus* in the area as well as evaluating hunting pressure, economic importance and differences in hunting habits, knowledge and attitudes towards lorises by Kavet and Lao ethnic groups inhabiting VSF.

Loris densities were estimated through night surveys of seven freshly cut transects in evergreen, semi-evergreen and deciduous forest types and totalled 17.2 km. Densities were calculated using perpendicular distance of the animal from the transect line and took into account visibility along the transects. Ethnological aspects were examined through structured interviews with open-ended questions. A total of 62 interviews were conducted during the study in five local villages with equal representation of Lao and Kavet ethnic groups. Forty-two hunters and twenty users of traditional medicine participated in the study.

During the night surveys there were no *N. bengalensis* detected, and therefore their sympatric coexistence with *N. pygmaeus* in the area could not be confirmed. This indicates that despite presence of the suitable habitat east of the Mekong River, this body of water creates a natural barrier. The encounter rate for pygmy lorises was 0.29 animals km⁻¹ (SD±0.35) with the mean density of 8.5 animals km⁻². The densities of *N. pygmaeus* in VSF were found to be lower than in the previous study in the area but comparable with densities from other sites.

Habitat destruction in the area is evident and interviews with the local population indicated that hunting pressure is high. According to the local population, numbers of lorises in the area are rapidly declining. Lorises are amongst most desired species for hunters as they present high medicinal and economic value. Kavet people hunt, sell and use lorises as medicine more often than Lao. However, they are also more willing to use alternative means if they were available.

The study concluded that conservation measures and management of loris populations in VSF should take a multifaceted approach and concentrate on helping the local population to establish sustainable livelihoods, educate about the environment and alternatives to animal-based traditional medicines. All existing and future conservation agreements should be closely monitored with adequate law enforcement.

