

# **Local perceptions of the Mount Heycock Buffer Zone Project and endemic primates, southwestern Sri Lanka.**

**Alex Boulton**

alexpboulton@yahoo.co.uk

The Kings Arms, Wheatley Road, Forest Hill,  
Oxfordshire, OX33 1EH

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Community-based conservation (CBC) projects emphasise the importance of co-management partnerships between rural communities and plural stakeholders in place of the antagonistic policies and resource-use conflicts typified by protectionist strategies. CBC has been projected as the most practical approach to stem biodiversity loss in developing countries and particularly among agricultural-based societies where a negative perception of wildlife due to crop damage and livestock depredation often dominates.

This study examined the attitudes of rural communities towards a local rainforest restoration project and endemic primate species in southwestern Sri Lanka. Semi-structured interviews were used to elicit information on attitudes towards conservation in general and towards primates and the policies of the project, in particular. These attitudes were assessed in regards to demographic and socio-economic factors to investigate their influence, if any, on a pro-conservation sentiment.

In addition, an environmental education programme for regional schoolchildren was included in my research; an activity-based education pack and classroom resources were disseminated to school teachers and clergy, and environmental education workshops and tree-planting campaigns were held in-situ at temple hermitages.

The study suggests that attitudes towards primates in communities living adjacent to the Mount Heycock Buffer Zone are a function of age, level of education and the

relative infrequency of crop-raiding events. Predominantly positive feelings came easily for most residents since the primates did not conflict with their farming activities or jeopardise their livelihoods. There was widespread local support for the project and education programme, and an underlying pro-conservation sentiment which denotes long-term success for achieving biodiversity conservation aims.



Contents of education pack. Photograph © Drake, 2006