

JASs cover story

Primate conservation and taxonomy

The 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity revived interest in taxonomy. Coupled with the advancement of molecular techniques and how species are considered, this led to a true revolution of primate taxonomy and systematics which is today fundamental for setting *objective* conservation priorities. However even the relatively well-known order Primates show that biased taxonomic knowledge and assessments make it difficult to arrive at any firm conclusions regarding conservation priorities. Past interest in primate subspecies among African primates is an example of it. Regardless of the taxonomic level adopted, all recognised taxa of African apes (*Pan paniscus*, *Pan troglodytes troglodytes*, *Pan troglodytes schweinfurthii*, *Pan troglodytes verus*, *Pan troglodytes vellerosus*, *Gorilla gorilla gorilla*, *Gorilla gorilla diehli*, *Gorilla beringei beringei*, *Gorilla beringei graueri*) are covered by conservation action plans and considered as Evolutionary Significant Units (ESUs). Debate over the taxonomic status of isolated gorilla population (i.e. Bwindi Forest in Uganda) continues and new taxa have been taxonomically re-evaluated following detailed revision (e.g. *Pan troglodytes marungensis*). Taxonomic splitting obviously influences conservation assessments by reducing the range and population size of assessed taxa. The already dramatic situation of *Gorilla beringei beringei* (about 700 surviving individuals) would deteriorate if the Bwindi population were to be taxonomically separated from the Virunga highland population, as proposed by some authors. Furthermore, this would open the way to further taxonomic re-assessment of several isolated populations of *Gorilla beringei* (i.e. Mt. Kahuzi, Mt. Tshiaberimu, Itombwe mountains).

In the meantime, we lack a modern revision of intraspecific variability in many other African Primate taxa, such as *Cercopithecus mitis* and *Cercopithecus albogularis*. In the case of these relatively widely distributed taxa, not only have subspecies been generally neglected in conservation practices (with regional exceptions such as in South Africa), but some subspecies have also been placed in synonymy without any study of appropriate material or have been overlooked in conservation assessments. This is the case of the white-throated guenon endemic of the riverine forests of the Jubba and Uebi Shebeli Rivers in Somalia, *Cercopithecus albogularis zammaranoi*, which have been recently synonymized with the Tana River subspecies despite the fact that no specimen has been studied. The nominal *Cercopithecus mitis* subspecies is another interesting example. Despite the unique geographical distribution of this taxon, near the Atlantic Coast of Angola, this monkey and all this region have received little attention by researchers and conservationists despite evidence of a reduction in taxon range¹. This fact possibly reflects the recent political instability of Angola and Somalia. Another reason could be linked to the history of both countries which are former colonies of Latin countries such as Portugal and Italy. There is a serious risk that little-known taxa with a limited distribution are overlooked while a few, well-studied charismatic taxa, received unlimited scientific attention owing to the availability of materials and funding.

It is difficult to find a solution to this problem of biased taxonomy and scientific knowledge, a phenomenon which is not restricted to Primates². However, it is important that at least the scientific community becomes aware of the dangers that current attitudes could cause in matters concerning biodiversity evaluation and conservation

¹ Gippoliti S. 2006. Zammarano's monkey *Cercopithecus mitis zammaranoi* de Beaux 1923: the forgotten monkey of Somalia. *Afr. Primates*, 6: 26-32.

² Gippoliti S., Amori G. 2007. The problem of subspecies and biased taxonomy in conservation lists: the case of mammals. *Folia Zool.*, in press.