

DO THE BENEFITS OF PRIMATE TOURISM OUTWEIGH THE COSTS OF POTENTIAL ANTHROPOZOONOSES AND STRESSED ANIMALS?

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Ecotourism accounts for a significant proportion of all international tourism and can contribute significantly to the conservation of biodiversity. However, unmonitored development of ecotourism projects can lead to deleterious effects on animal well-being, including the potential for anthroponozoonotic pathogen transmission. Exposure to tourists may also lead to alterations in animal endocrine stress responses. To more completely comprehend risks to primate populations, a novel set of methodologies has been employed in Sabah, Malaysia. Surveys of health and vaccination status have been conducted in over 1200 tourists visiting the Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre. 650 biological samples have been obtained from these visitors for actual diagnosis of active respiratory tract infection. In addition, in Sukau, Malaysia, several wild orangutans have now been monitored for years, with fecal samples obtained prior to, during and after visitation with tourist groups of varying sizes. Samples have been analyzed for parasite burden and cortisol levels. Combined results will be used to inform and improve any necessary protection measures, especially regarding tourism management, attitudes and practices of travelers, and general public education. Tourists must be educated on animal susceptibility to infections and be urged to evaluate their travel knowledge. Information must be more readily available on commercial travel websites and in the guidelines of various tourism and travel organizations. Travel medicine specialists and tourism personnel will play key roles in this process, but ultimately it is the responsibility of tourists to follow these regulations. This can only be achieved through proper education of the issues.

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