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EFFECTS OF VEGETATION AND PHENOLOGY ON CHIMPANZEE FORAGING IN THE MAHALE MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK, TANZANIA

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Chimpanzees are mainly fruit eaters and its fruiting phenology (or availability) is assumed to have influence on their food choice. Food choice during the fruit scarce periods has been well documented but little attention has been made for the fruit abundant periods. This study aims to look through the foraging behavior according to plant phenology in both periods for the chimpanzees of the Mahale Mountains National Park, Tanzania. Phenological data from May 1997 until July 2001 were analyzed. The data were collected at monthly base and fruiting, flowering, and flushing were monitored. Behavioral data were collected from August 1997 to July 1998. Mahale chimpanzees spent time on feeding fruits for more than 50% (mean 65%) of their feeding time for all the months although fruit phenology showed clear seasonality. Percentage of feeding time on fruits corresponded to the fruiting phenology in general. However, it did not correspond when each species was examined precisely indicating that chimpanzees are not selecting food items according just to the availability of the item. The reason will be discussed in relation to phenological and vegetational feature of Mahale and also the ranging feature of Mahale chimpanzees.

Keywords: chimpanzee, foraging, plant phenology, vegetation