

‘Monkey business’ in the Philippines

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A long-tailed macaque is a common site at the Raja Sikatuna Protected Landscape in Bohol province.

The coronavirus pandemic and the need for a vaccine against it have revived the interest in monkey farming because of the expected increase in demand for live monkeys for use in medical research.

The interest in the revival of monkey farms in the Philippines began as early as March last year when the Department of Environment and Natural Resources-Biodiversity Management Bureau (DENR-BMB) received an application appealing to renew a wildlife collector’s permit for the gathering or harvesting of monkeys in the wild.

Harvesting in the wild for parent-breeders is allowed by the DENR-BMB, although on a case-to-case basis, commonly for the purpose of commercial breeding and trading of progenies.

Data from the DENR-BMB further revealed that, guided by international wildlife treaties, the Philippines resumed trading monkeys with the export of a total of 700 captive-bred monkeys last year.

Being controversial, the plan to allow harvesting for breeding and, eventually, export of the primate for scientific research was strongly opposed by animal rights groups.

DENR Assistant Secretary Ricardo L. Calderon explained that monkeys are often used for scientific research, particularly in the production of life-saving drugs or vaccines, inevitably creating a market demand for live monkey specimens.

Monkeys are being used to test drugs or vaccines for clinical trials before they are tested in humans.

In defense of monkeys

Last April, the Action for Primates (AP), an international not-for-profit organization that has started a campaign on behalf of nonhuman primates, expressed concern that the DENR is considering allowing the capture of wild long-tailed macaques for research purposes as a way of addressing human-primate conflict.

The appeal was later echoed by the Philippine Animal Welfare Society.

Through veterinary doctor Nedim C. Buyukmihci, Emeritus professor of Veterinary Medicine at the School of Veterinary Medicine, University of California-Davis, AP appealed to the DENR to refuse any application to use macaques for research.

“The capture and removal of wild primates from their native habitats and social and family groups is, by its very nature, extremely cruel and inflicts great suffering and distress on the animals, as well as resulting in injuries and even death,” Buyukmihci said in his April 7 letter addressed to Calderon, who is also the concurrent director of DENR-BMB.

Buyukmihci argued that there is very little likelihood that free-living monkeys could transmit any disease to human beings.

On the contrary, he explained that monkeys would likely become ill from contact with human beings, rather than humans from the monkeys.

The group reiterated its appeal to the DENR in another letter on May 21.

In July, the group, in a statement, again urged the DENR to deny the application for harvesting of monkeys from the wild.

It cited the upgrading of the conservation status of the long-tailed macaque from “near threatened” to “vulnerable” on the Red List of threatened species of the International Union for Conservation of Nature due to the global decline of the primate in the wild.

Conservation strategy

The DENR-BMB considers wildlife farming as a conservation strategy. By allowing wildlife farms to operate, it believes it does not only save the species from extinction through captive-breeding, but it also reduces the demand for animals caught from the wild.

By allowing wildlife farms to operate, poaching of commercially viable species in the wild is hoped to be reduced because there will now be a legal source of wildlife products and byproducts.

Hence, buyers will no longer choose to buy from illegal sources to avoid trouble with the law.

Calderon is expecting that the business on farming of monkeys will thrive with the market created by the Covid-19 pandemic for their use in scientific research.

Among other animals, the Philippines has been allowing the operation of crocodile farms for their skin and meat and other byproducts.

Likewise, several ostrich farms currently exist in the country. Ostrich farming for meat, egg, oil and other products is starting to gain traction because of its profitability.

Suitable alternative

The DENR-BMB is not alone in justifying the harvesting of animals for captive-breeding although doubts are cast on how wildlife farming is being done or regulated to prevent “wildlife laundering.”

Sought for reaction, Juan Carlos T. Gonzalez, a member of the board of trustees of the Mindoro Biodiversity Conservation Foundation Inc., explained via Messenger on August 18 that with the various environmental laws in place in the country, such as Republic Act (RA) 9147, or the Wildlife Act, and RA 11038, or the Expanded National Integrated Protected Areas System (Enipas), came the increase in population of certain wildlife species.

He cited the case of monkeys, which he said come in harems or multi-male troops that cause human-wildlife conflict.

“To balance the population, wildlife services balance this through culls or harvest by legal hunting,” he explained. But because there’s the Wildlife Act, such practices are not allowed.

“So harvesting for farming would be a suitable alternative to reduce human-macaque conflict,” he said.

Wildlife ‘laundering’

Emerson Y. Sy, a consultant at the international nongovernment organization Traffic, said wildlife farming will only work if regulations are properly implemented.

He told the BusinessMirror on August 18 via Messenger that such is not the case in the Philippines.

“Many wildlife farms here are using their legal status to acquire additional smuggled wildlife and engage in wildlife laundering,” he said.

He cited a study he co-authored and was published in *Philippine Journal of Systematic Biology*. The report was titled “Endangered by Trade: Seizure analysis of the critically endangered Philippine Forest Turtle *Siebenrockiella leytensis* from 2004-2018.”

“Based on an online survey, we estimated that an additional 1,200 Philippine forest turtles were smuggled and illegally sold in China in 2015,” the report said.

“Majority of the 74 live individuals exported legally from the Philippines were likely sourced illegally from the wild and declared fraudulently as captive-bred by exporters to obtain CITES permits,” the report added. CITES stands for the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.

In response to this, the DENR-BMB is battling for continuous registration of threatened, non-threatened and exotic wildlife to prevent illegal wildlife trade, including wildlife laundering that makes use of dubious wildlife permits and other documents.

Non-threatened list

As far as the DENR is concerned, however, the population of the country’s native monkeys remain stable and the species is on the “non-threatened” list.

“Perhaps the population of macaque are on the decline in other parts of the world, but not here in the Philippines. You can even see them sometimes in troops on the roadside,” Calderon said.

He said harvesting in the wild is allowed as a way of addressing human-animal conflict, assuring that harvesting is done in the most humane manner possible.

Careful evaluation; breeding for trade

Nevertheless, Calderon said that applications for harvesting monkeys or any animal from the wild are “carefully evaluated and assessed.”

He said the application to harvest monkeys filed last year is still under evaluation with the DENR’s scientific body, the Ecosystems Research and Development Bureau, being consulted every step of the way.

It is now under evaluation by the National Wildlife Management Committee as required under RA 9147.

Harvesting is allowed only for the purpose of breeding. Only the offsprings of these wild-caught animals in the duly authorized breeding facilities are allowed to be traded under the Wildlife Act.

Monkey farming

According to Theresa Tenazas, OIC of the Wildlife Bureau at the DENR-BMB, two wildlife facilities are currently duly authorized to engage in the commercial breeding of long-tailed macaque.

The two monkey farms keep a little over 2,000 monkeys, with only the progenies allowed to be traded as mandated by law.

Wildlife farms in the Philippines are authorized to breed and sell progenies upon the issuance of a Wildlife Farm Permit by the concerned DENR Regional Office, in accordance with Section 5 of the DENR Administrative Order 2004-55, or Streamlining/Procedural Guidelines pursuant to the Joint DENR-DA-PCSD Implementing Rules and Regulations of RA 9147.

Export policy

On top of RA 9147, the Philippines applies strict domestic measures in the trade in specimens of CITES-listed species, such as monkeys.

As stated in the CITES Notification 2010/038, the export of wild-caught specimens for commercial purposes is prohibited, Tenazas said.

“Only the specimens bred in captivity by breeders authorized and registered by the DENR may be exported,” she pointed out.

She explained that this restriction has been in effect since February 15, 1994.

Tenazas provided the BusinessMirror with copies of the notification, including the RA 9147 and its implementing rules and regulations.

The Philippines used to export monkeys in the past, but due to the coronavirus scare and pressures from animal-rights groups, it stopped.

“In the past years, the exportation of live monkeys were stopped due to the clamor of animal groups against the use of laboratory specimens,” Tenazas told the BusinessMirror via e-mail on August 16.

Based on the CITES trade database, the first shipment of monkeys was in 1977. There was no clear record on when the export of monkeys by authorized farms has stopped.

It was only in 2019 that the monkey-breeding facility was able to export about 700 head of long-tailed macaque, she said.

Will the rush in research for vaccines and medicines against Covid-19 and other zoonotic diseases help revive the monkey business in the country? It remains to be seen.

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