Book Review

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Anne E. Russon, Janette Wallis (eds.)

Primate Tourism – A Tool for Conservation?

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2014
352 pp.; GBP 65.00
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Not many academic books have titles that end with a question mark. The question posed on the front cover of this excellent and very timely edited volume – and throughout its chapters – is an important and topical one. As the editors point out in their introduction, beginning to address this question requires a careful consideration of the relative costs and benefits of primate tourism. What becomes clear throughout the rest of the book is that not only are these costs and benefits poorly understood, they come in very different forms, vary hugely across tourism settings and taxa, and can be realised at very different time scales. These are the key reasons why there is no straightforward answer to the question of whether tourism is – or has the potential to be – an effective and long-term tool for primate conservation.

To deal with the nuts and bolts of this book first... After an introductory chapter by the editors, there follow 3 sections divided on the basis of geography – 5 chapters on Asian, 5 on African and 3 on Neotropical primates. Next come 3 chapters on broader issues, covering economics, disease risks and guidelines for best practice. In a concluding chapter, the editors draw together the different contributors' material, discuss key themes and propose recommendations.

In bringing together such a broad range of studies of primate tourism, there is necessarily some variation in the nature of the material and data presented. Some chapters cover very well-known and well-established primate tourism ventures, for example those related to mountain gorillas and Japanese macaques, while others focus on less well-known primate species and sites, such as tourism related to olive baboons in Kenya and white-faced capuchins in Costa Rica. A number of chapters synthesise previously published work, often derived from medium- and long-term studies; others report new findings, often resulting from shorter-term studies, including PhD or Master projects. The key focus of chapters also varies: some concentrate almost exclusively on the animals themselves, while others broaden the scope to look at the multiple stakeholders involved in this industry – local communities, tourists and tourist companies, among others.

The chapters reflect well the current state of knowledge in relation to the costs and benefits of primate tourism, and the variation among them is, in many ways, a strength – highlighting, for example, the value of both long- and short-term studies, and of drawing on lessons learned from well-established primate tourism set-ups to help in the development of nascent ones with perhaps less well-known taxa. Perhaps the strongest message that emerges from the book for us, as primatologists, is the key role we have to play in primate tourism – not just as researchers of its positive or negative impacts, but also as active participants in its design, its monitoring and its execution. A complementary point that comes through from the pages of this volume is the need to work beyond the boundaries of our own discipline and to collaborate with those who have expertise in areas such as the sociology, politics and economics of primate habitat countries.

The editors of this book have done an excellent job bringing together and synthesising a wide range of material. I highly recommend this volume for anyone interested in primate tourism and in primate conservation more generally.

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