

Why Sea Lions don't catch Zebras – Thoughts about common names of Indochinese primates

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Summary

There are several common English names for Indochinese primate species in use. A consensus of names and usage will benefit conservation activities and protection work of policy makers and forest protection authorities by reducing confusion and enhancing understand in legal proceedings and in the public.

Tại sao Sư tử biển không bắt Ngựa vằn - Suy nghĩ về tên gọi thông thường của các loài thú linh trưởng vùng Đông Dương

Tóm tắt

Hiện nay, có nhiều tên gọi thông thường (tên tiếng Anh) đối với các loài thú linh trưởng vùng Đông Dương. Tuy nhiên vẫn chưa có sự thống nhất trong việc gọi tên ở một số loài. Sự thống nhất về tên gọi của một loài và việc sử dụng tên gọi hợp lý sẽ có lợi cho các hoạt động bảo tồn loài đó. Mặt khác, việc thống nhất tên gọi của một loài cũng giúp các nhà quản lý, các chính trị gia trong lĩnh vực bảo vệ rừng hiểu rõ hơn về đối tượng cũng như tăng cường hiệu quả của công tác quản lý bảo vệ.

Why sea lions don't catch zebras? Even in kindergarden you would likely have provided a plausible answer to this question. Explaining the reasoning in terms of morphology, ecology, phylogeny and geography for a flying fox, guinea pig, mouse deer or sea cow (not to mention a Tasmanian devil) is probably more difficult.

To reach a consensus about the common name for a primate species is sometimes a long process. For the species belonging to the Indochinese genera *Nomascus* and *Pygathrix* it is a Gordian knot and unresolved.

For the three recognized species of the genus *Pygathrix* the discussion involves the use of douc, douc langur or douc monkey. Unanimity exists in usage of the term "douc" for these primates with red (*P. nemaus*), grey (*P. cinerea*) or black legs (*P. nigripes*). The etymology of the term remains unclear. It has been suggested the name derived from Vietnamese origin and was translated to French. However, this name even with an amended offbeat pronunciation is unknown in Vietnam. From the vocalization of the animals, which is sometimes suggested as a source, this animal must have been making uncharacteristic sounds when discovered.

Easier to trace is the origin of "langur". There exists a source in three languages with similar pronunciation: Hindi लंगूर, Urdu لنگور (lagur or langur) and Sanskrit लाङ्गूलिन् (langulin). The

original use characterized the sacred Hanuman langur (*Semnopithecus entellus*) as a monkey with a long tail. In the 19th century this name was used for all long-tailed Colobinae in the region, including the genera *Semnopithecus*, *Trachypithecus*, *Presbytis*, *Pygathrix*, and mostly also for the two odd-nosed taxa *Rhinopithecus* and *Simias*. The use of “douc langur” for the three taxa which belonging to the genus *Pygathrix* should also convey the scientific placement of the genera to South-east Asian Colobinae. These are in general leaf-eating primates with a long tail. The term “douc langur” both recognizes the similarity and distinction with the other south and South-east Asian genera *Semnopithecus*, *Trachypithecus*, *Presbytis*, which are named as langurs. The three *Pygathrix*-species are not red-, grey-, or black-shanked langurs: they should be named as red-, grey- and black-shanked douc langurs.

The term “langur” should also be considered for the four South-east Asian *Rhinopithecus* species and for *Simias concolor* on the Mentawai Islands. Furthermore, “snub-nosed langur” and “douc langur” which is already a widely used term for these groups, is more accurate than “snub-nosed monkey” or “douc monkey” because of the biogeographical and phylogenetic significance of the term “langur”.

South and South-east Asian “monkeys” in principal represent both Colobinae and Cercopithecinae (i.e. the genus *Macaca*). Macaques differ considerably in morphology, ecology and behavior from the Colobinae which should be referred to as langurs. The common term “monkey” is insufficient for use among Colobinae taxa.

Why do we need to discuss splitting hairs? Why can't scientists and authors use a name which satisfies their own view?

Conservation activities and conservationists have an increasing responsibility to preserve our natural environment. Many wild animal and plant species are highly threatened and need all efforts for their preservation. The goal should be to involve a maximum number of our human population to take part in conservation. Education and awareness is important but due to multifarious and increasing problems with the flood of information, we can not expect a broader public understanding in our field. To make matters more difficult there is the issue of creating several names for one animal. Few will realistically understand or know that the “douc”, the “douc langur” and the “douc monkey” or the “yellow-cheeked gibbon”, the “southern yellow-cheeked gibbon”, the “yellow-cheeked crested gibbon”, the “golden-cheeked gibbon”, the “buff-cheeked gibbon”, and the “Gabriella's gibbon” represent only two species. Occasionally decision makers are also confused and irritated with the use of names which hinder understanding and necessary conservation activities.

Even a use of scientific names, normally not in public use, does not simplify the issue. The system of biological systematics is not stable and changes depending on current knowledge and research. We are still far from a final definition and a general agreement of what a species actually is. Despite all the new genetic, cytogenetic, behavioural and additional findings, the wise words are still relevant: “a species is a group of individuals which a competent taxonomist identifies as such”.

A consensus and use of common names would benefit the understanding and practice of protection and conservation of our field which has a high number endangered primate species (Table 1).

Table 1. Recommended names for Vietnamese primate species.

Common name	Scientific name
Lorises	
Pygmy loris	<i>Nycticebus pygmaeus</i>
Northern slow loris	<i>Nycticebus bengalensis</i>
Macaques	
Long-tailed macaque	<i>Macaca fascicularis</i>
Stump-tailed macaque	<i>Macaca arctoides</i>
Rhesus macaque	<i>Macaca mulatta</i>
Assamese macaque	<i>Macaca assamensis</i>
Northern pig-tailed macaque	<i>Macaca leonina</i>
Langurs	
Annamese silvered langur	<i>Trachypithecus margarita</i>
Indochinese silvered langur	<i>Trachypithecus germaini</i>
Grey langur	<i>Trachypithecus crepusculus</i>
Francois' langur	<i>Trachypithecus francoisi</i>
Hatinh langur	<i>Trachypithecus hatinhensis</i>
Black langur	<i>Trachypithecus ebonus</i>
Cat Ba langur	<i>Trachypithecus poliocephalus</i>
Delacour's langur	<i>Trachypithecus delacouri</i>
Douc langurs	
Red-shanked douc langur	<i>Pygathrix nemaesus</i>
Grey-shanked douc langur	<i>Pygathrix cinerea</i>
Black-shanked douc langur	<i>Pygathrix nigripes</i>
Snub-nosed langurs	
Tonkin snub-nosed langur	<i>Rhinopithecus avunculus</i>
Gibbons	
Western black gibbon	<i>Nomascus concolor</i>
Eastern black gibbon	<i>Nomascus nasutus</i>
Northern white-cheeked gibbon	<i>Nomascus leucogenys</i>
Southern white-cheeked gibbon	<i>Nomascus siki</i>
Northern yellow-cheeked gibbon	<i>Nomascus annamensis</i>
Southern yellow-cheeked gibbon	<i>Nomascus gabriellae</i>