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Why Feeding Monkeys is Bad for Forests

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"The next time you feel the urge to feed an animal, either to pay obeisance to a deity or to help a 'starving' animal, please ask yourself if your action could have unintended consequences, including negatively impacting ecosystems."

At the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, when people were confined to their houses and the streets emptied, photos and videos emerged of animals “reclaiming” outdoor spaces. Most of these images were shared with a feel-good sentiment of nature returning to its rightful place.

However, a video from Lopburi, in Thailand, depicted a more apocalyptic scene. It showed hundreds of long-tailed macaques roaming the streets and chasing down any hapless human they could find, hoping to scavenge scraps of food. These monkeys were used to being fed by tourists, and a thriving “animal feeding” industry had sprung up around the temple ruins. With the pandemic-induced lockdowns and travel bans, these easy sources of food vanished. The monkeys, completely dependent on humans, literally took to the streets.

World over, people take great pleasure in feeding animals — technically called ‘provisioning’ — whether they be birds in backyards or public squares, dogs and cats on the streets, or wild mammals such as monkeys at temples. In India, the Delhi High Court had ruled that dogs on the streets have a right to be fed, and people have a right to feed them ([the Supreme Court has recently stayed this order though](#)).

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Such provisioning of food by humans to animals, beyond the natural availability or quality of food within their environment, can come in many forms. It can be direct, such as when humans intentionally provide handouts to animals; or indirect, when animals make use of an abundant source like agricultural fields, orchards, gardens, or garbage deposition sites. Provisioning is sometimes used in species-specific conservation initiatives. It can be particularly beneficial to animals living in temperate regions marked by food scarcity in winters. Provisioning programmes in managed settings like zoos and parks have educational value. Further, studies note that provisioning wildlife may be the only strategy to increase wildlife populations in urban areas and increase the possibility of positive human-nature experiences.

But what are the implications of feeding animals in our localities?

Of animals, birds, and humans

Traumatized by the [sudden invasion of macaques into their daily lives](#), the people of Lopburi still live in fear of harassment. But what did they do to avoid a repetition of the problem? They gave the macaques more food. Provisioning thus forms a vicious cycle. People feed macaques; macaques get accustomed to being fed, lose their fear of humans, and actively seek anthropogenic food. If people refuse to feed them, the macaques can get aggressive. That, in turn, can force humans to feed them. And this goes on.

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Provisioned monkeys are known to create problems for people in many countries. Near the Buxa Tiger Reserve in West Bengal, residents have expressed their woes about macaques’ ‘looting’ shops and wreaking havoc in fields. These incidents started occurring mainly after the lockdown. Like in Lopburi, the [Buxa macaques](#) too were accustomed to being provisioned by tourists.

These issues are not in the least unique to monkeys. In many Western countries, colonies of free-ranging cats are maintained through provisioning, with devastating impacts on local biodiversity. In India, millions of free-ranging dogs in cities and villages thrive on provisioned food. Such dog populations display hyper-aggressive behaviour towards non-feeders.

In India, [rabies is prevalent in children](#) who play near free-ranging dogs and provision them and get bitten during these encounters. [Ninety-six percent of human rabies cases can be attributed to dog bites](#) and approximately 45% of rabies deaths globally occur in Asia. Free-ranging dogs are also a reservoir of the [Hepatitis E virus](#).

The risk of disease spillover also exists from monkeys. Researchers in Bangladesh found evidence that the [simian foamy virus](#), commonly found in the macaques in that region, also infects humans, although it does not cause any disease. However, there is always the danger that a mutant variant of this, or other viruses, can become dangerous to humans. Similarly, pigeon excreta and feathers can increase the probability of humans contracting fungal diseases such as histoplasmosis and candidiasis or bacterial ones like salmonellosis. Higher pigeon density is associated with increased incidence of provisioning, and with the rising number of cases of avian flu in Delhi, [municipal public health officials have urged people to stay away from places where pigeons are routinely fed](#).

|| Rhesus macaques dependent on provisioned food [...] become inefficient as agents of seed dispersal — a process crucial for forest regeneration and recruitment.

Perhaps people are selfless enough to look beyond the negative impacts of provisioning animals. But is this practice promoting the ‘greater good’ at all? The short answer is ‘no’.

The adverse effects of domestic dogs on native fauna are significant and are likely to heighten with continued access to anthropogenic food resources. For example, in Chile, [human-subsidised dogs kill or injure thousands of goats and sheep](#) in small-scale farms in a year. Closer to home, a study found that dogs were responsible for attacking more than 80 species of animals, including 30 species of endangered wildlife. A battle between pro-dog and pro-wildlife groups on the IIT-Madras campus reached the Madras High Court. The pro-wildlife group found that dogs had killed hundreds of spotted deer and blackbucks over the years in this once-wild campus. The dogs were kept in a shelter, but eventually were ordered to be released by the court after several died in captivity.

Finally, higher densities of free-ranging dogs can heighten the risk of transmitting diseases like canine distemper and rabies to other wildlife species. Recently, six endangered Indian wolves succumbed to canine distemper in the grasslands in Pune district. The same holds for provisioned birds. Pathogen transfer from pigeons to other avian species congregating at supplementary feeding sites has caused widespread declines in bird populations.

Provisioning macaques can also have adverse effects on the very forests that used to be their home. For example, compared with their more wild counterparts, the [rhesus macaques dependent on provisioned food in Buxa become inefficient as agents of seed dispersal](#) — a process crucial for forest regeneration and recruitment. Eventually, such loss of ecosystem services by provisioned animals may lead to deleterious consequences for tropical ecosystems.

|| Group-living animals such as monkeys and dogs also show higher intra-group aggression when provisioned.

Provisioning also has negative implications for the animals themselves. Animals fed on high calorie-low nutrient human food such as bread usually are obese, have alopecia, and have increased physiological stress and parasitic loads. Commercial bird feed could even expose birds to various mycotoxins. Animals provisioned on busy roads risk traffic accidents, many of which are fatal. Group-living animals such as monkeys and dogs also show higher intra-group aggression when provisioned, leading to severe injuries and even deaths.

The last word

We understand that people are motivated by the best of intentions to feed animals. However, the next time you feel the urge to feed an animal, either to pay obeisance to a deity, gain better karma or to help a ‘starving’ animal, please ask yourself if your action could have unintended consequences, negatively impacting residents or the ecosystems or the animals themselves. Remind yourself that pigeons are still abundant at the St. Mark’s Square, Venice, where bird-feeding has been illegal since 2008.

Adopting the dogs or cats you feed and giving them homes is always the best option. As for the macaques, they are far too ecologically resilient to need any help from us.

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