

# Human-macaque conflict mitigation in Assam, India

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## Abstract

Human-macaque conflict is an issue that impacts upon both primate conservation and human wellbeing. In India, Rhesus macaques (*Macaca mullata*) cause considerable damage to crops, and to a lesser extent, injury to people. Finding solutions to the issue requires assessments of the extent and scale of conflict, as well as understanding how affected communities view macaques and protection strategies in place locally. Most work on human-macaque conflict in India has been ecological. Research on cultural perceptions and attitudes to macaques is lacking, although this is of vital importance for finding appropriate solutions to conflict. This study examined (1) the extent of damage caused by macaques in rural Assam, northeast India and peoples' perceptions of the severity of conflict. It then explored (2) what cultural perceptions of macaques people upheld and whether they were undermined by human-macaque conflict. Finally, the study sought to (3) look at protection measures in place and the solutions that people were willing to adopt. Both qualitative and quantitative interview based methods, as well as rapid appraisals of conflict were conducted in three affected villages between June and August 2009. Qualitative data was analysed thematically to unravel key themes and patterns. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics and non-parametric tests. The study found that the extent of crop damage in the focal villages was high and affected men and women differently. A majority of the respondents felt conflict was an issue of serious concern. Whilst people endowed religious attributes on macaques, such beliefs were undermined by conflict. People made distinctions between macaques in different spatial contexts, i.e. village, temple and forest macaques. Macaques in villages were the least liked, and those in temples were ascribed higher religious attributes. A range of protection measures were in place, but the perceived level of their effectiveness was low. People believed relocating macaques was an appropriate strategy for reducing conflict, but there was uncertainty as to how this should be done. These findings unravel several important dimensions of human-macaque conflict. First, a high amount of overlap between people and macaques is the reason for sustained conflict. Second, cultural values are problematic and cannot be the panacea for finding solutions to the issue. Third, mitigation strategies need careful planning and cooperation of the local community as well as collaborations between different government agencies. A multifaceted approach is needed to address the issue. An intervention-based project is needed to enhance understanding of the effectiveness of mitigation strategies.