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CORRESPONDENCE

To conserve African tropical forests, invest in the protection of its most diverse wildlife communities

Linder et al. (2024) recently argued that protecting red colobus deserves priority attention, serving as flagships of African tropical forest conservation strategies. We appreciate and support the authors' efforts to build a plan to conserve red colobus and their habitats. In this correspondence, we provide a complementary perspective, arguing that conservation attention should be extended to diverse communities of various taxa rather than a single-species group.

Linder et al. (2024) consider red colobus as barometers of African tropical forest health and hunting pressure. This generalization should be limited to the geographical range of red colobus and not applied to all African tropical forests, which are more extensive. In addition, although red colobus are threatened by gun hunting—a method that is increasingly used and severely impacts arboreal species—they cannot be considered barometers of other hunting pressures, such as snaring. Snare hunters vastly outnumber gun hunters in some regions of West and Central Africa (Fa & Brown, 2009). They put considerable pressure on diverse wildlife communities across African tropical forests.

We advocate for a more equitable distribution of conservation attention across diverse taxa to develop conservation strategies that adequately represent the complexity of biodiversity and ecological functions. Diverse wildlife communities maintain the resilience of desirable ecosystem states (Elmqvist et al., 2003) and secure various ecosystem functions and services (Harrison et al., 2014). Thus, conservation strategies and priorities should be based on entire communities rather than focusing solely on individual species or genera. Focusing on a particular group of indicator species presenting specific ecological requirements oversimplifies complex ecosystems. This neglects the rich interactions among various wildlife species that must be preserved to maintain functioning ecosystems.

As an inspiration for mammals, Fonteyn et al. (2023) identified six zoogeographic districts (or species assemblages) across central African forests, separately for carnivores, primates, and artiodactyls. Within the primate communities, red colobus are part of the significant indicator species of several biogeographical districts but should not be considered alone. The compilation of species lists from wildlife and bushmeat-related surveys allows for the assessment of the conservation status of each district and its ongoing threats. Compiled species lists constitute a valuable tool for assessing the presence or loss of individual species, providing guidance for long-term conservation programs.

Verschueren et al. (2024) developed another general biodiversity analysis, expanding from the potential of the cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*) as a flagship species to its role as an umbrella species for designing area-based conservation strategies. Although these authors acknowledge the limitation of using flagship species to represent and protect biodiversity, they also recognize the importance of species-centric approaches to generate public attention. Therefore, they propose a middle ground integrating a species-centric approach with area-based conservation strategies to enhance progress toward biodiversity goals by considering overall amphibian, bird, and mammal species richness in different ecoregions.

While red colobus conservation is undoubtedly critical, adopting more integrative conservation priorities is imperative. We recommend addressing broader ecological assemblages and ensuring balanced attention among taxa to achieve effective and sustainable conservation outcomes.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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