

Kidnaps and adoptions

Joseph Kirathi and Luke Parry on lessons the Colobus Trust has learned from recent cases of foster parenting by Diani's Sykes and vervet monkeys.

A female Sykes monkey with a six-week-old infant is struck by a car while trying to cross the road. Mum is badly injured, but her tiny baby is unharmed. Both are rushed to our veterinary clinic at Colobus Cottage near Diani on Kenya's South Coast, where we treat and rehabilitate injured monkeys.

This is just one of hundreds of accident victims that the Wakuluzu Colobus Trust, a registered charity dedicated to primate research and rescue and local environmental awareness programmes, has attended to in recent years. The patient is duly anaesthetised and patched up. Then something unusual happens.

The Cottage's home Sykes troop kidnap the infant from the recovering mother while she is still tranquilised and powerless to prevent them. To our amazement, the females in this Sykes troop proceed over the weeks that follow to raise the kidnapped infant successfully.

Soon afterwards, an orphaned vervet not even a month old is brought to the Trust after the mother has been killed in a road accident. This infant is adopted by another vervet female with a baby of her own of the same age (*pictured*). Both the infants suckle together, and after a while we can no longer distinguish the adopted orphan from the biological baby. Anyone unaware of the case history would assume



Photo: Courtesy COLOBUS TRUST

the mother had given birth to twins.

Twin births are not common in African monkeys. But we do have two records of twin births among Angolan colobus monkeys on the Kenya south coast. In both cases, both sets of twins died after a month.

Yet the two recent cases – of the wild Sykes females' kidnapping and caring for an infant not their own, and the vervet's fostering an infant alongside her own – show that monkeys may adopt orphans and can take care of twins.

In conventional rehabilitation, much of what limited funding becomes available is spent on caring for orphaned infants. Our two recent cases raise the intriguing possibility that promoting adoption by lactating females of the same species may be an easier, quicker way of preparing infants for the wild. Any feedback on this idea will be most welcome.

The Colobus Trust works in close association with organisations such as the Born Free Foundation (BFF), the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) and the Coastal Forest Conservation Unit. It is funded by BFF, as well as through self-generated eco-tourism revenues, fund-raising activities, and private donations. It runs eco-tourism tours for visitors, and environmental workshops for schools, hotel staff and local people.

Diani is a densely populated area developed for tourism. As a result, monkeys are often injured on the roads, or by electrocution, dog bites or acts of human cruelty. The Trust seeks to reduce such deaths, while also conserving the monkeys' coral rag forest habitat.

With our well-established and thriving education and eco-tourism base, SWARA readers are welcome to visit us at any time, and to share our passion for conserving the forest and the monkeys of Diani. We can be reached at < wakuluzu@colobustrust.org >.

Did China first put Africa on the map?

Did the Chinese explore Africa a century before the coming of the first Europeans? This is one of many historical questions revived in the wake of last year's first ever public display of a replica (*pictured*) of the oldest known map of the African continent.

Produced on silk in 1389, China's original *Da Ming Hun Yi Tu* (Amalgamated Map of the Great Ming Empire) is more than 17 metres-square. On it, Africa's outline is clearly shown, along with features such as the Nile, the Rift Valley, various hills and mountain ranges – and an immense 'inland sea'.

Place names on the beautifully crafted map are written mostly in Manchu, now a virtually extinct language, and many have yet to be translated.

The original map is in Beijing, sealed in protective wrapping and locked in the same vault where it has been stowed since the death of China's last Emperor, Pu Yi, in 1924. Fewer than 20 scholars are believed to have seen the original map, which itself may be a copy of another map sculpted in rock some 20-30 years earlier.

The replica, a digitised reproduction on silk almost four metres high and more than four metres across, was unveiled in Cape Town, South Africa, on 12 November last year, as the centrepiece of an exhibition called *Perspectives on and of Africa*.

– TS / GK

