

Brazil

Biology of a Lowland Tapir Population and Its Potential as a Community Involvement Agent in the Serra do Tabuleiro State Park, Santa Catarina State, Brazil

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Context

The biology and status of the lowland tapir (*Tapirus terrestris*) in the state of Santa Catarina – southern Brazil – remains unknown. The last published sighting of the species was in 1992. Added to this, only 20% (16,541.79 km²) of the native Atlantic Rainforest still remains in the state. This suffers from human pressures and accelerated fragmentation.

In this context, the Serra do Tabuleiro State Park (STSP) can be singled out as a priority area for conservation purposes, not only for its area (900 km²) – representing 1% of

the remaining forest area in the state – but also for harbouring a variety of endangered species plus other species whose conservation status is as yet unknown. Amongst these is the lowland tapir. These facts, added to the amount and variety of threats, which the STSP is exposed to, were the main reasons that led us to pursue this line of research in the field.

First Initiative – Fieldworker and Community Involvement

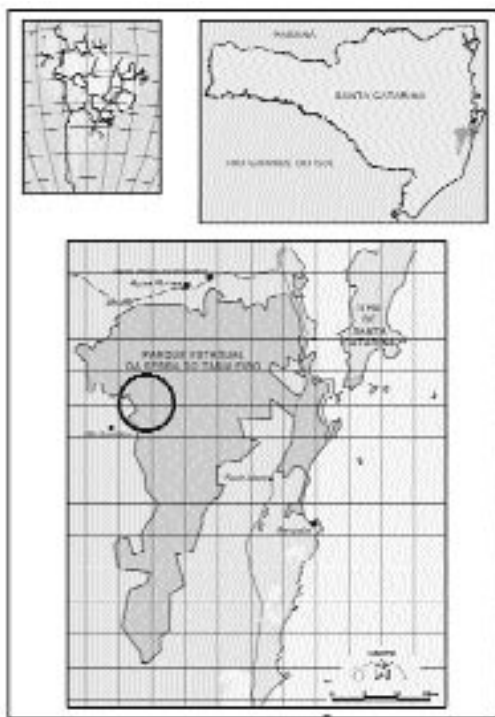
Besides biological research, the STSP lacks initiatives that focus on community involvement in conservation strategies. As such, the idea behind our first initiative regarding the STSP was to identify potential flagship species among the surrounding communities (there are 57 communities situated in the area and within the STSP). The singling out of a community plus ideas that arose in the field resulted in the structure of the first project. This project identifies the conflicts and potential affinities between local stakeholders and the STSP and, more importantly, the native fauna as indicated by them. This research consisted of collecting oral histories from local stakeholders between July and September 2001 and attempting to investigate and interpret not only the local situation but also the historical process by which this had evolved.

The results indicated that many of the conflicts originated from the threat that is posed by certain animal species to the agricultural processes undertaken by the local stakeholders. However, when there was no identifiable threat, there seemed to be potential affinities toward certain animal species, of an aesthetic and historical origin. The lowland tapir is among these potential representatives.

The conflicts and affinities were identified through the establishment of interpersonal ties, for which informality and compliance became the rule. This led to another important result: the recognition and respect of popular knowledge became fundamental in achieving compliance, as well as an invaluable tool in applying and planning for community involvement. The collection of oral history and the familiarity that developed during fieldwork with the local stakeholders constituted the first step in this direction.

Second Initiative – Field Research and Ethno-biology

Evidence of tapir footprints was found during field excursions directed towards zoning purposes in the years 2000 and 2001. They were located in the Conifer Tropical Forest nucleus of STSP at altitudes between 800 – 1,122 meters.



Serra do Tabuleiro State Park and the study site
(circled in black)

This ecosystem occurs in isolation from the Conifer Tropical Forest of Santa Catarina State Plateau (80 km western of STSP), and represents the closest isolated formation of its kind near the Atlantic Ocean.

Systematic data of occurrence, distribution and habitat use by the lowland tapir population has been evaluated since October 2001, through the analysis of indirect evidence along 60 km of trails. This information is being compared with the conservation status of the observed habitats, altitude gradient and presence of seasonal components (seasons; conifer seeds).

The casts of tapir tracks along with some other species are being used to promote environmental sensibility within the community. This is a second example of valuing popular knowledge in the community. In family homes, the stakeholders gather around the casts and various ethno-biological information on lowland tapir (and other species) is reported. This approach seems to indicate that the casts may represent some kind of material evidence of lowland tapir occurrence (and existence). Most of this information will be documented by conducting questionnaire surveys with local stakeholders, and then comparing the results with field observations and related literature.

Other environmental education actions are being planned in conjunction with the municipal education board for the recognition of local needs for such initiatives.

We would like to finally emphasize that all these actions are being continually developed with the ultimate goal of providing sufficient local information and motivation for the development of a conservation strategy with the lowland tapir as a potential flagship species.

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■ ASIA

Malaysia

We are very pleased to report on the commencement of this project on Malay tapir (*Tapirus indicus*) in Malaysia. The report was submitted by Bengt Holst on behalf of Carl Traeholt and relays the latest news on the project's progress and demonstrates extremely well the difficulties of tapir fieldwork.

Carl reports:

We completed four pitfall traps during the 14-16th of September. Since then we have had two near misses with tapir captures. In one case, a pitfall construction error was to blame since the tapir sunk into the ground 5 cm from the pitfall wall between the plywood wall and the soil. Obviously, he backed off again. This happened on the 27th September 2002, at the Bukit Renggit trap A.

In the second incident, a tapir partially fell into the pit. Its right legs broke through the trap doors whereas the left ones were still on solid ground. Somehow it managed to scramble out of this position, again without falling into the pit. This happened on the 28th September at the Bukit Renggit trap B and we repaired the trap the day after.

The last incident did not involve a tapir, but according to the two orang aslis that checked the pit, a tiger had voluntarily taken refuge in the pit at Jenut Baik (Baik Saltlick) during a rainstorm on the night of the 27th. It left the pit the next day whilst the aslis were observing it. They repaired the pit immediately.

According to the tracks around all four traps, it appears as if there is a waiting period of about 12-14 days for the trap to "settle" into the surroundings again. However, I have not been able to differentiate between the two sets of tracks that have been "near misses". The tracks from the incident of the 28th are not clear, as struggling and scraping is all that is evident, hence measurement is not possible. Therefore, I am not sure if the two incidents can be assigned to the same individual or to two different individuals. Since then, no new tracks have been observed near the pitfalls. I am positive that the individual(s) that had this bad "experience" at Bukit Renggit trap A and B have learnt a lesson and we cannot expect this/these individuals to make the same mistake again. There are signs that new paths are