

Brief Communication:

A Note on the Effective Use of Social Media to Raise Awareness Against the Illegal Trade in Barbary Macaques

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The Barbary macaque (*Macaca sylvanus*; Figure 1) is the only macaque species in Africa, occurring in Morocco and Algeria with an introduced population on Gibraltar. The wild populations in North Africa are separated by large distances and groups are sometimes fragmented and isolated due to habitat degradation and destruction (Fa *et al.* 1984; Waters *et al.* 2007; Menard *et al.* 2013). In the Middle Atlas, in particular, the population has been depleted by the capture of infants destined for the primate pet trade prevalent in Morocco and mainland Europe (Waters 2011; Menard *et al.* 2013). The sale of Barbary macaques is illegal in Morocco and punishable by a fine, the confiscation of the animal(s) and the closure of the vendor's business.

Barbary Macaque Conservation in the Rif (BMCRif), is a interdisciplinary Moroccan conservation NGO using social and natural science research methods to drive conservation action. Our mission is to monitor Barbary macaque populations, engage with forest users around their habitat, and raise awareness amongst both rural and urban populations in Morocco. Moroccans tend to lack awareness of conservation or animal welfare issues, and views of macaques differ between rural and urban populations necessitating different approaches for both. In the urban population, the lack of awareness and knowledge of Moroccan wildlife results in much of the illegal trade going unreported within the country.

The use of social media sites is common amongst conservation and other NGOs to effectively and quickly communicate with the public and, in some cases, to raise awareness against primate pet-keeping. However, social media and related sites can also encourage trade in endangered primates. Such an event occurred on online video sharing site Youtube where an individual posted a video of himself "tickling" his pet slow loris (*Nycticebus* spp.). The video went viral being re-posted many times on Facebook and other social media sites. The widespread exposure may have increased the public's desire to keep a loris as a pet which, in turn,

may have contributed substantially to an increase in the illegal trade in the species (Nekaris *et al.* 2013). Loris conservationists have fought back, however, using social media and Youtube to post information concentrating on the negative conservation and welfare aspects of loris pet keeping (Nekaris *et al.* 2013).

The above example demonstrates that care needs to be taken when using a social media site as a medium of communication to ensure that the awareness message is clear, and cannot be taken out of context easily. This is particularly important amongst a human population which does not have a high level of conservation awareness or understanding of conservation or animal welfare issues. BMCRif focuses on raising awareness regarding the illegal macaque trade amongst Morocco's urban middle class because they are the main purchasers of infant Barbary macaques usually while on holiday in cities where Barbary macaque infants are openly for sale. The urban middle class population is literate and has regular access to the internet.

The realization that conservation awareness regarding the macaque was low and that Facebook use is very high in Morocco stimulated us to form a group on Facebook to inform people about the issues facing the macaque in Morocco. On 14th July, 2012, we started a BMCRif page on which we present news about project activities, information about the Barbary macaque, new Barbary macaque research and information about the realities of the illegal trade in Barbary macaques (<https://www.facebook.com/BarbaryMacaqueConservationInTheRif>.) At the time of writing, the page has 1034 members, over a third of whom is Moroccan (375) with 46% of members aged between 25 - 44 years. These are the people most likely to buy a pet macaque under pressure from their children. The majority of Moroccan members are distributed between the cities and environs of Tetouan, Casablanca, Rabat and Marrakech.

Group members have the facility to interact directly with the group administrators with these communications



Figure 1. A Barbary macaque (*Macaca sylvanus*) in the Bouhachem Forest, in northern Morocco. (Photograph by BMCRif.)

invisible to group members. Since we began the group 12 months ago, six of the sixteen notifications we have received from Moroccans reporting a total of six illegally held Barbary macaques have been through the medium of our Facebook page. Four of these macaques were confiscated by the authorities when we reported them, one had already been sold and one was returned to its wild group. Thus, Facebook acts as an important medium for communication between the Moroccan public and the authorities, with BMCRif acting as an intermediary. Due to this collaboration, the practice of using Barbary

macaques as tourist photo props is no longer tolerated in the region of Tangier-Tetouan and the, formerly open, trade in the species in Tangier has been forced underground. Thus, we have found Facebook to be a very effective tool in engaging with the Moroccan public to raise awareness about an endangered primate whilst they in their turn engage with BMCRif to "anonymously" report the illegal wildlife trade.

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