

# Fed bread and biscuits, monkeys are eating less fruit, says study

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**BENGALURU:** Like to feed monkeys while you're exploring forests or visiting places of worship? Your act of kindness towards a primate can cause major changes in the forest food web and the ecosystem.

A recent study by Asmita Sengupta from the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) and her team has found that the human act has reduced the fruit intake of monkeys (which they get from trees) by half. Tourists usually feed biscuits, bread and other eatables to the animals.

The study was conducted to understand the effects of provisioning - providing of extra food - by humans on the rhesus macaque, a species of monkey .

Researchers say these monkeys are an important seed disperser for many fruit varieties in forests and feeding by humans is proving to be dangerous to such natural processes. This study, conducted at the Buxa Tiger Reserve in West Bengal, has found that provisioning has an adverse effect on seed dispersal and frugivory (fruit-eating) behaviour of rhesus macaques. "Due to the smaller daily ranges of macaques during the provisioned period, seeds didn't get dispersed (through their faeces) as far as they would have if there had been no provisioning. Moreover, a large number of seeds was deposited on motorable roads, not conducive for germination. This can bring about changes in plant dynamics as well as gene flow in forests," said Sengupta.

Researchers found that the macaques' daily range of dispersal during provisioning was only half of what it was during the non-provisioning period. Accordingly , 67% of faecal seeds were deposited on roads in January , making them unviable for germination.

The results of the study showed that the macaques had a high (94%) frugivory index during September, the peak of the non-provisioning period. This was in sharp contrast to the 0% frugivory index in April. They examined faecal samples to find that no seeds were found during the months of the highest provisioning.

The researchers suggest a complete ban on all provisioning activities as well as afforestation programmes to prevent further damage to the ecosystem.

## **Researchers spent 12 hours a day**

Researchers carried out observations arduously, following the animals from their waking site to the tree they slept on for 10 days each month. This amounted to about 12 hours a day. "I admit that I found it tough for the first couple of days but then of course, I got used to it," said Sengupta. The group of monkeys studied was provisioned with human food for some part of the year and dependant on natural resources for the rest. This group, consisting of 64 monkeys, was studied from October 2013 to September 2014.