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MAMMALS

(THE PROBOSCIS MONKEY)

The proboscis monkey is one of the largest primates species in Southeast Asia. They are endemic to Borneo, mostly living in the mangrove forests and on the coastal areas of the island. In Malaysia, they coexist with a few other primates like the Bornean orangutan, long-tailed macaque, silver langur and maroon langur. They are social animals that live in groups of 10 to 30 individuals. A harem consists of single males and up to a dozen females, while males who live and move in their own group are known as bachelors.



Proboscis monkeys are sexually dimorphic, which can be seen in the body size of the male that is larger than the female. Adult males have a head to body length of 66 cm – 76.2 cm and generally weigh between 16 kg and 22.5 kg. A fully grown male can reach up to 30 kg. In comparison, adult females' head and body length are between 53.3 cm to 62 cm, with a body weight of 7 kg – 15 kg. Another prominent example of sexual dimorphism is seen in the enlarged nose of an adult male. Adult males have a

large nose size that can exceed 10.2 cm in length, and can be seen hanging lower than the mouth. Although scientists still do not have the answer as to why the nose of the male proboscis monkeys grows so big, it is believed that a larger nose attracts female proboscis monkeys. Larger noses also create louder vocalisations to attract females' attention. Both males and females of proboscis monkeys have a tail that is the same length as their body. This helps the proboscis monkey to balance themselves when leaping through the trees. Adult proboscis monkeys look like they are wearing a long coat with bright orange and yellowish-brown colours. Their arms, legs and tails are grey. Males have a distinct red reproductive organ. Both males and female proboscis monkeys have bulging stomachs because of their specific diet.



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Proboscis monkeys are leaf-eating primates. They have complex chambered stomachs containing special cellulose digesting bacteria that helps to break down the leaves. Even though they survive mainly on leaves, proboscis monkeys also consume fruits, flowers, seeds and insects. They are considered a seasonal eater, eating mostly fruits from January to May and mostly leaves from June to December. Caterpillars and larvae are examples of insects in their diet.

Proboscis monkeys are active during the day. They prefer moving around from late afternoon until late evening. They are arboreal, meaning they spend most of their time up on the trees. Proboscis monkeys tend to stay within 600 metres from the river. They have webbing between their digits that allows them to swim and are considered good swimmers as they are capable of diving to a depth of 20 metres. They are also agile and can leap into the water from a height of 50 feet. This is used as a defence mechanism when they sleep. Should they sense a predator nearby, they are able to jump into the water to escape.



A group of proboscis monkeys consists of a single adult male with about 2 to 7 adult females, sometimes more. The breeding season for proboscis monkeys starts from February until November. A female monkey gives birth to only one offspring after a gestation period of 166 days which is about five and a half months. Females will give birth to their infant while sitting on a tree branch. This is usually done in the cover of darkness, either at night or very early in the morning. The female will then remove the placenta by consuming it. Infants are born with a blue coloured face which changes to grey when they reach about 2.5 months old. This will then change to cream colour when they get to about 8.5 months of age. Females will nurse their infants for about

7 to 12 months. In this social group, the other females care for the young. The role of the male is to provide protection to the females and their young. Young females will follow their mother for up to one year, staying in the same group, and will reach maturity at five years. In contrast, the young males will leave their group and join a group of bachelors and reach maturity stage at seven years. There are no specific studies or evidence on the life span of proboscis monkeys in the wild but they can live up to 20 to 23 years in captivity.



Proboscis monkeys make various sounds for communication. Usually, males will growl to calm the group members. When the males make honks, it warns the infants that there might be a predator or threat nearby them. Immature females shriek when they are angry or excited. Males display nonvocal reactions towards threats by showing their bare teeth and opening their mouths while shaking tree branches and leaping through the trees.



Proboscis monkeys are protected by law in Malaysia. The protection means there can be no hunting, poaching or keeping them as pets. This is crucial as it is to stop their population decline which has decreased to more than 50 percent in the past 40 years. They are now declared as endangered in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. This decline is due to habitat loss and hunting for consumption and use in Chinese traditional medicine. Some references show that there are only around 7,000 individuals left in the wild. We can help to save this unique species by protecting their natural habitat, helping to restore fragmented forests and reporting to the authorities should we witness any illegal wildlife issues.