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## New Tapir Species Discovered in the Amazon

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**BELO HORIZONTE, Minas Gerais, Brazil**, December 24, 2013 (ENS) – A new species of tapir, a mammal considered to be endangered or vulnerable, has been identified by scientists in the Amazon rainforest in parts of Brazil and Colombia. It is the smallest of the five known species of living tapirs.

It is the first tapir discovery since 1865 and the first time in 100 years that a new species has been found in the order Perissodactyla, which includes tapirs, rhinos, and horses.

An article in the current issue of the “Journal of Mammalogy” reports on this discovery. Using the largest geographic sample to date of a related species, the authors provide physical and DNA evidence to support their proposal that the tapirs be classified as a new species, *Tapirus kabomani*.



**Camera trap photo of a pair of Kobomani tapirs. The animal on the left is a female and on the right is a male. (Photo by study co-author Fabrício R. Santos)**

To determine the uniqueness of *T. kabomani*, the authors examined skull, tissue, and DNA samples and measurements. Its skull differs in shape and features from those of all other living tapirs. *T. kabomani* differs from the other tapir species found in its range, having darker hair, a lower mane, and a broader forehead than *Tapirus terrestris*.

It weighs about 240 pounds, measures just over four feet in length and three feet high at the shoulder, and it has shorter limbs than all other living, and several extinct, tapir species. Genetic studies also showed distinct results for *T. kabomani*.

The first known specimen collected for this species of tapir remained unidentified for almost 100 years. The collector was Theodore Roosevelt, who was President of the United States from 1901–1909.

Roosevelt remarked in 1914 that this specimen "...was a bull, full grown but very much smaller than the animal I had killed. The hunters said that this was a distinct kind."

Roosevelt sent the specimen to the American Museum of Natural History in New York City for analysis, but it was considered just a variation of *T. terrestris* (Allen 1914).

Tapirs currently live in Southeast Asia and Central and South America. Historically, these mammals roamed a wide geographic range, but today's tapir species are isolated from one another and are suffering from overhunting and habitat destruction.

The discovery of *T. kabomani* means that there are now five known living species of tapirs. Although this is the first time *T. kabomani* has been named scientifically, local people have long known of the species' existence. They rely on the animals for food and give them a place in their cultural traditions.

The authors report that they and locals have seen significant evidence of this species in grassland and forest habitats, but few tapirs have been seen in areas of pure forest or open ground.

They warn that increasing human population, decreasing forested land, and widespread development in the Amazon could affect the new species.

"It is thus urgent," the authors write, "to determine the conservation status, geographic range, and environmental requirements of this species, to understand how it is affected by human activities."



**The new tapir species has darker fur than other tapirs. (Photo by Fabrício R. Santos)**

American tapir specialist Craig Downer, a member of the IUCN Species Survival Commission's Tapir Specialist Group, and a member of the American Society of Mammalogists who publish the "Journal of Mammalogy," had heard of the new species from local guides during his studies in the Andes.

"In my extensive study of the endangered Mountain Tapir, *Tapirus pinchaque*, from time to time I frequented the eastern foothills regions of the Andes bordering on the Amazonian region over a period of years dating from 1978 to 2003. I found evidence of the Mountain Tapir descending to as low as 1,300 meters elevation above sea level, particularly to visit favored mineral springs, but also to obtain needed forage," Downer told ENS in an email interview.

"In several of these areas, my local guides, including tribal members, would inform me that they knew of another type of tapir that was neither the Lowland Tapir, *Tapirus terrestris*, nor the Mountain Tapir," he said.

"I thought that this might be a hybrid between the two species and included their observations in some of my reports. One such area was the Rio Cofanes in northern Ecuador and bordering on Colombia, where I made several expeditions during my mountain tapir studies in the late 1990s," said Downer.

"Another such area was on the eastern side of Sangay National Park in Shuar Indian territory south of Puyo, capital of Pastaza province, on an affluent of Rio Pastaza. This area is in the heart of the Eastern Andean Biodiversity Hotspot," Downer said. "Several other Native American tribes inhabit in their traditional manner, in this area, which is known to possess the greatest bat diversity and the greatest diversity of many other taxonomic categories of plants and animals, in the world."

Downer urges that conservation measures to protect the new species be taken at once because it is probably in danger of extinction.

"It is thrilling to realize that this may be a new species of tapir," he said. "I recommend that immediate conservation measures be taken to protect this species and its habitat, starting with assessing its current population status, geographical distribution, habitat requirements, and threats to both population and habitat, while increasing on-the-ground protection and public education in order to secure a future for this important species."

"It is very probable that it is in critical danger of extinction and needs to be so classified by the IUCN Species Survival Commission's Tapir Specialist Group as well as the national governments where it occurs: Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Brazil, and possibly others such as Venezuela and Bolivia," he said.

Tapirs play a vital role in the ecosystems they inhabit, including intact seed dispersal of many species and building of healthy, humus-rich soils, wrote Downer in a 2001 article in the "Journal of Zoology."

The authors of the original article in the "Journal of Mammalogy" also urge immediate conservation of the newly discovered tapir's habitat.

"Southwestern Amazonia is currently undergoing intense landscape modification by deforestation and increasing human population," they write. "The region is likely threatened more by global warming than are other South American regions, and it is considered a biodiversity hot spot with undocumented species richness. Particularly, the state of Rondônia has been the focus of recent human incursion, with high deforestation rates."

The authors warn, "Large development projects are currently underway, such as the construction of 2 large hydroelectric complexes along the upper Madeira River and the reactivation of the Porto Velho–Manaus highway, BR 319, which will facilitate land occupation in the area where the known specimens were collected."

The full text of the article in the "Journal of Mammology" is online at: <http://www.asnjournals.org/doi/full/10.1644/12-MAMM-A-169.1>

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