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Why Are Monkeys Raiding Nepal's Farms? The Science Behind the Conflict

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For farmers in parts of Nepal's middle hills, the working day can begin with a calculation that has little to do with weather or market prices: who will guard the field from monkeys?

Rhesus macaques can enter maize fields quickly, feed efficiently and retreat toward forest cover. Farmers respond with shouting, dogs, stones, slings, patrols and improvised noise-makers. Yet the animals often return. Recent reporting from rural Nepal shows communities devoting substantial labour to guarding crops, while researchers have spent years trying to understand why some farms are raided repeatedly and others are not.

The easy explanation is that Nepal simply has “too many monkeys.” The science does not justify such a simple national conclusion. Nepal lacks the kind of comprehensive population census that would allow a confident claim that macaque numbers everywhere are exploding. What research does show is a changing ecological relationship between highly adaptable rhesus macaques, attractive crops, fragmented forests, human settlements and changing patterns of rural labour.

Understanding that relationship matters because the wrong diagnosis produces the wrong solution.

The monkey at the centre of the conflict

Nepal has more than one primate species, and “monkey problem” can blur important biological differences. Much of the crop-conflict research discussed here concerns the rhesus macaque (*Macaca mulatta*), a remarkably adaptable primate capable of living across forests, agricultural mosaics, settlements, temple environments and other human-modified landscapes.

That adaptability is central to the conflict. Rhesus macaques do not require pristine wilderness to survive. They can exploit food created by people—crops, stored produce and garbage—as well as wild foods.

A 2022 nationwide modelling study estimated that almost 44 percent of Nepal’s land area contains suitable rhesus macaque

habitat. Less than 8 percent of that suitable habitat was inside protected national parks, while 88 percent occurred on community-owned and private lands. The same study estimated that nearly 15 percent of land where human settlement is permitted experienced moderate or high levels of reported human-rhesus macaque conflict.

Those figures help explain why this is not primarily a national-park problem. Much of the overlap occurs where people actually farm and live.

Why a maize field can be better than a forest

A forest contains food, but that does not mean every forest provides the same quantity, quality or seasonal availability of food. Agricultural fields can offer something unusually valuable to an opportunistic animal: dense concentrations of predictable, calorie-rich food.

Research in Kavrepalanchok found that crop type strongly influenced raiding. In a 2019 study of 172 agricultural plots, macaques overwhelmingly damaged maize rather than rice. Researchers also found that distance to forest edges and to the macaques' main travel route affected crop damage.

This is basic foraging economics. An animal has to balance calories gained against the energy and risk required to obtain

them. A ripe maize field can concentrate food far more efficiently than searching widely dispersed forest resources.

That does not mean macaques have abandoned wild foods. A more recent year-long study of one wild rhesus group in a central Nepal forest-farm mosaic recorded about 49 percent of annual feeding observations on cultivated crops, about 44 percent on wild foods and nearly 7 percent on human garbage. Maize, oranges and potatoes together accounted for roughly half of the group's crop-feeding time.

The monkeys were therefore not simply "forest animals forced to eat crops," nor had they become entirely dependent on agriculture. They were exploiting a mixed landscape containing several profitable food sources.

Timing matters as much as location

Macaques do not raid fields uniformly throughout the year. Crop availability changes the incentive.

The 2026 central Nepal study found a positive relationship between monthly crop productivity and the time macaques spent feeding on cultivated foods. About 91 percent of crop-feeding observations involved reproductive parts of plants—the fruits, seeds and other energy-rich components farmers themselves were trying to harvest.

This helps explain the intense pressure farmers experience during particular stages of cultivation. Months of agricultural work can become vulnerable during a relatively short window when a crop reaches the stage macaques prefer.

A farmer therefore experiences crop raiding not as an abstract annual percentage but as a concentrated threat at precisely the moment the field has become valuable.

Forest edges create opportunity

One of the clearest findings from Nepal's research is that landscape structure matters.

The 2021 Kavrepalanchok study found that proximity to the forest edge and to macaque travel routes affected the amount of crop damage. Forest cover can provide animals with refuge while nearby farmland provides concentrated food. A field positioned along a frequently used route may consequently face a different level of risk from an otherwise similar field farther away.

At national scale, researchers have also linked human-macaque conflict to altered and fragmented landscapes. Nepal's increase in forest cover does not automatically mean that every forest has returned to a biodiverse ecological condition capable of supplying the same wild foods as an older natural forest. Forest composition, connectivity and fragmentation matter alongside the simple number of hectares labelled forest.

This is why the apparent paradox—more forest in parts of Nepal but continuing wildlife conflict—is not necessarily a contradiction.

Does rural migration make the problem worse?

Migration deserves careful treatment because it is tempting to turn correlation into a simple causal story.

Nepal's rural labour force has changed substantially as people move to cities and abroad. Nepal Digest has previously examined how migration is reshaping rural households, agriculture and fallow land. Researchers studying macaque conflict have also noted that migration can increase abandoned farmland and reduce the number of people available to protect cultivated fields.

Recent reporting from Nepal illustrates the practical effect: communities with fewer working-age residents can find continuous crop guarding increasingly difficult.

But migration should not be presented as the single cause of monkey raids. Macaque behaviour, forest structure, crop selection, field location, food availability, settlement patterns and human responses interact. Rural depopulation can intensify some of those conditions without explaining the entire phenomenon.

Why chasing them away often fails

Farmers are not passive. They shout, patrol, use dogs, throw stones, deploy slings and create loud noises. The problem is that an intelligent, socially learning animal can adapt to repeated deterrents.

In the 2026 central Nepal study, farmers attempted to deter macaques during 83.1 percent of observed crop-feeding events. Those efforts did not significantly reduce either the duration of feeding events or measured crop damage.

That result does not prove that every traditional deterrent is useless everywhere. It shows that repeated human presence and harassment were insufficient to eliminate crop feeding in that particular landscape.

The earlier Kavrepalanchok study produced an interesting complementary result: fields situated where macaques had to cross multiple maize plots sometimes experienced less damage, apparently because the animals encountered several farmers guarding crops along their route. Collective monitoring may therefore work differently from isolated defence by one household.

The distinction matters. A solution requiring every farmer to guard every field individually may be unrealistic in communities already experiencing labour shortages.

How much crop is actually lost?

This is where responsible reporting needs restraint.

Farmers can experience macaque raids as devastating, but measured losses vary considerably by location, crop and methodology.

The 2021 Kavrepalanchok research estimated average household losses from macaque damage to maize and rice at about US\$14.90, equivalent to roughly 4.2 percent of annual household income from cultivating those two crops in the study community.

A later year-long study in central Nepal estimated macaque damage during the maize season at about 1,647 kilograms of dry kernels, or around 50 kilograms per hectare—approximately 1.5 percent of total maize yield per hectare in that study.

These findings are not contradictory. They concern different study designs and contexts. They demonstrate why one village's loss estimate should not be presented as the figure for Nepal.

There is also a difference between measured yield loss and the broader burden experienced by farmers. Hours spent guarding fields have an opportunity cost. Fear of future raids can influence which crops people plant or whether they cultivate marginal land at all. A relatively modest percentage of measured crop loss can therefore coexist with a serious labour and livelihood problem.

Are there really more monkeys?

Local residents may sincerely observe more macaques around their farms than they remember in the past. That observation is important evidence of changing encounters, but it is not the same as a national population census.

An increase in sightings can have several explanations: more animals, altered ranging behaviour, greater dependence on human foods, changes in forest structure, abandoned agricultural land, reduced human presence or macaques concentrating around productive fields.

Without systematic population data over time, Nepal should be cautious about turning increased conflict into a precise claim about nationwide macaque population growth.

The distinction is not academic. If the main problem in a particular area is landscape configuration and food access, simply reducing animal numbers may not remove the conditions attracting other macaques into farms.

What does the evidence suggest farmers can do?

There is no single intervention with strong evidence that it will solve human-macaque conflict across Nepal.

Research from Kavrepalanchok recommended combinations of measures rather than one dramatic fix: coordinated monitoring, careful placement of valuable crops, buffer crops less attractive to macaques, and restoration of more natural forest habitat.

National-scale researchers have similarly recommended restoring and reconnecting fragmented forests, alongside compensation and community-focused management.

The logic is to change the economics of raiding. Make high-value crops harder to access, improve early detection, reduce attractive food along forest boundaries where feasible, and improve natural habitat rather than relying exclusively on repeated chasing.

Any intervention also has to be tested locally. A technique that works beside one forest may fail in another landscape with different crops, macaque groups and settlement patterns.

The conflict is about people as well as wildlife

The phrase “human-wildlife conflict” can make the problem sound symmetrical. It rarely is.

A macaque is responding to food and risk. A farmer is protecting months of labour, household income and sometimes a crop needed for family consumption. Conservation policy has to recognise both realities.

Demonising monkeys does not solve the ecological conditions behind crop raiding. Dismissing farmers' experiences because measured yield loss appears modest in one study is equally inadequate.

The useful question is not whether farmers or monkeys are to blame. It is why the landscape increasingly places them in competition for the same food.

A landscape problem disguised as a monkey problem

Nepal's macaques have not suddenly learned that maize tastes good. They are doing what adaptable animals do: exploiting profitable resources in landscapes transformed by people.

The deeper story lies in the landscape around them. Farms sit beside fragmented forests. Highly attractive crops mature predictably. Garbage and human food create additional opportunities. Working-age people leave some rural communities. Fields become harder to guard. Macaques learn where food can be obtained and which deterrents can be tolerated.

Seen this way, Nepal's monkey problem is less a story about one troublesome species than about the rapidly changing boundary between rural society and wildlife.

That makes the solution harder than chasing animals back into the trees. The trees, farms, villages and people are already part of the same ecological system.

Verification note: This article primarily draws on peer-reviewed Nepal research published in the *Journal of Environmental Management* (2021 and 2022) and the *American Journal of Primatology* (2026), supplemented by recent field reporting. Local study findings are identified as such and are not presented as national loss or population estimates.

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