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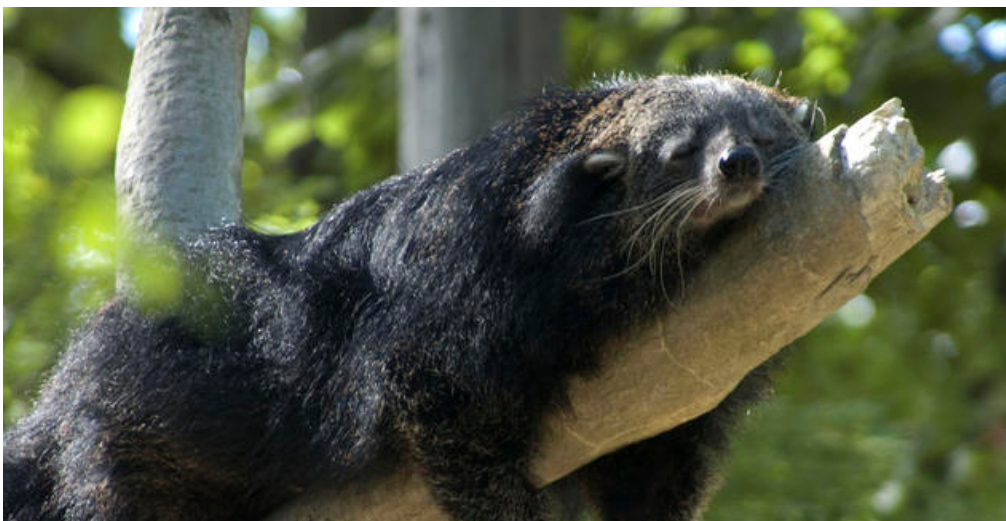
› SPECIES WATCH

# Save the Binturong! Wait—What’s a Binturong?

The Philippines just set aside more than 100,000 acres for pangolins, hornbills, forest turtles, and the mysterious, mustachioed “bearcat.”

December 14, 2016

[Jason Bittel](#)



Jennifer Pack

Deep in the few remaining mature forests of the Philippines dwells an animal that defies easy explanation. It’s a fuzzy creature, with the squat body of a wolverine and the smirk of a raccoon. A prehensile tail with a bald patch helps the mammal lift its 50-pound body high into the tree canopy, and long, white whiskers give the furball the countenance of a woods wizard. Perhaps most intriguing of all, its anal gland secretions are said to smell like buttered popcorn. Mmmm.

What is this aromatic chimera? Why, it’s a binturong. A binturong? Yes, also called a bearcat. A bearcat? Let me explain.

[The binturong](#)—a word nobody knows the meaning of, likely taken from a local language that has gone extinct—is a civet relative that used to be relatively common in forests all over Southeast Asia, from Nepal to Indonesia. Due to habitat destruction and the pet and wildlife trade, wild populations have plummeted, and sightings of the animal are exceedingly rare. It has a [vulnerable](#) designation from the International Union for Conservation of Nature, and there’s concern the binturong might someday disappear for good.

The people of the Philippine island of Palawan, however, are doing something about it. Just last month, Palawan set aside more than 100,000 acres of lush, pristine forest in the newly christened [Cleopatra’s Needle Critical Habitat](#)—the largest such designation in the



Philippines. The news comes after three years of work by various local and international organizations, including the

**Batak children on the island of Palawan**

**Robin Moore**

Palawan Council for Sustainable Development, the Centre for Sustainability, Global Wildlife Conservation, the Rainforest Trust, and the Amphibian Survival Alliance. Importantly, the refuge isn’t just a boon for wildlife. All seven local communities of the Batak tribe, a small population of hunter-gathers who rely on this forest for nearly all of their needs, have signed on in support of the refuge.

“These are the stewards of the forest,” Robin Moore, communications director for Global Wildlife Conservation, says of the Batak people, “and it would be wrong to create a protected area without full engagement from them.”

The Bataks are still allowed to hunt for subsistence in Cleopatra’s Needle, but that privilege is theirs and theirs only. The refuge will not permit other local, nonindigenous people to extract resources from the forest. Additionally, the arrangement includes eco-tourism training for some of the Bataks.



Helping a struggling species by preserving its habitat is always a good idea, but in the case of the bearcats, it's downright crucial. Binturongs cannot survive without primary forests, says Pauline Kayser, president of [Arctictis Binturong Conservation](#), the only organization dedicated solely to these nocturnal tree-dwellers.

Binturongs feel safest when they're traipsing 50 feet or more off the ground. That's also where most of their food is. Fruit, shoots, insects, eggs—the canopy is a bearcat smorgasbord. This is why it's rare, Kayser says, to catch a glimpse of one in a secondary forest—that is, a forest that's grown up after a disturbance like logging or farming. Such terrain just doesn't support the same kind of canopy biodiversity and structure necessary for binturong success.

This is a particular problem for the binturong subspecies on Palawan, *A. b. whitei*, which has lost half its forest cover. Island-dwelling populations, including Palawan's

and one called *A. b. kerkhoveni* on the Indonesian island of Bangka, could even be in danger, simply because they have nowhere else to go.

Kayser says that binturongs have also become popular in the Asian pet trade over the past five years. Their fur, meat, and even [penis bones](#) can fetch high prices in countries [like Laos](#), where such things are considered delicacies or ingredients in crackpot medicine. In some areas binturongs are captured alongside their civet cousins in order to produce *kopi luwak*, a gourmet coffee produced from the coffee bush that has been eaten (along with the bean) and pooped out by the animals. (Appetizing, right? Don’t scoff; [it sells for \\$227 a pound](#).)



Old-growth forest in Cleopatra’s Needle

Robin Moore

Moore, who is also a conservation biologist, [author](#), and [ace photographer](#), first visited the Cleopatra’s Needle area in 2014. While he regrets never seeing a binturong or sniffing that popcorn scent, he beautifully describes the soundscape



that has been saved:

*We camped overnight inside the forest beside a cool stream. As the light was sucked from the forest it was as if the volume was turned up to 11, as the occasional bird call was replaced by the whir of insects and the calls of frogs, drowning out the gurgle of running water.*

The only thing missing from that reverie is a [binturong's beautiful, ill-tempered hiss](#). A bearcat, indeed.

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