

YES! Intern Talk: 'Mapping Primates'

[00:00.27] (upbeat music)

[00:06] When I initially saw the Excel spreadsheet with all 750 specimens, and I was told that for my project, I would be plotting them all with a partner. My first reaction was, "Oh gosh, this is gonna be a long six weeks." My second reaction was, "What exactly is the point?" I quickly realized that my first impressions were completely off base, and that I'd be learning more, and having a more enriching experience than I could have possibly anticipated.

[00:31.19] This summer, I worked in the Department of Physical Anthropology, aiding a project called EMPHASIS, which compares behavioral and physical differences between primates in captivity and primates in the wild. My job, along with my partner, was to create an interactive map displaying the localities of death, the years acquired, and the full taxonomies of all the labeled primates in the Museum of Natural History's collections.]

[00:59.20] I spent my days doing detective work to find exact localities, typing endlessly until my fingers grew numb, and looking up the very specimens that we were representing through tiny colored dots across a miniature globe. With plenty of laughter and fun interspersed throughout our days, I also learned invaluable lessons from my mentor about how bones of primates, who had at one point in their lives lived in the zoo, were often discarded or regarded as unimportant by the research community, and how misleading this sentiment is.

[01:36.12] I took behind-the-scenes tours, and had the opportunity to assign faces to the points that I was plotting. And within the aisles and aisles of bones and skins, I learned about the rich history surrounding these primates that I was working with, and I began to really care for them. On the last day, I was not only proud of the finished product, but by the fact that I had helped aid a really important project. The map, a smattering of points, colored differently based on the general time period in which the specimens were acquired, revealed a grave trajectory. The blue points, which represent the specimens that were acquired from 1900-1949, were mainly situated in the areas the primates are native to, Central Africa and Southeast Asia.

[02:25.28] The purple points, however, which represent the specimens that were acquired between 1950 and present day, were mainly situated in the United States, an area which they're clearly not endemic to. In areas like zoos and museums and primate research centers, also known as areas of captivity. According to the most recent data from Global Wildlife Conservation, 62% of all primate species and sub-species are considered threatened, and over half of those are considered endangered or critically endangered.

[02:55.00] Our map that we had worked tirelessly on, corroborated this alarming story in the most comprehensive manner. Why does this matter to me, you might be asking, as I probably would've before this internship. Primates, the order of mammals characterized by distinguishable traits like nail beds and opposable thumbs, are human's closest relatives as we are part of the great ape family ourselves. To really understand ourselves and how we function, we must also know about our biological cousins. The map also revealed why it's important to study primates that at one point lived in the zoo. Because if we follow along the same course that was presented in the map, then we'll reach a point in

which all these primates are forced out of their natural habitats, and forced to reside in zoos for survival purposes.

[03:46.88] Primates, and specifically apes, tell us a fascinating story about our biological evolution, and as I personally grew to understand, it's a story that deserves to be told, and seen by the public, especially as they swiftly approach the brink of extinction. I learned to not take anything at face value, even massive Excel spreadsheets, because there's always a deeper story and a beauty in the seemingly mundane. Truly anything is possible if you maintain an open mind, even bones can come alive.

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