

Strike threat over jailed primatologist

Scientists in Brazil are considering strike action or “civil disobedience of another form” in protest over the imprisonment of a renowned primatologist. The case, they say, is a visible part of a wider government crackdown on scientists working in tropical areas around the world.

Dutch-born maverick Marc van Roosmalen has spent more than 20 years living and working in the Amazon, where he has discovered various new species of mammal, including several primates. A Brazilian national since 1997, much of his research career has been spent in a quest to save the rainforest, occasionally bending the rules to achieve this end.

But in 2002, van Roosmalen was charged with taking four monkeys from the forest northwest of Manaus without permits. The charges led to a federal congressional inquiry, a criminal case and, in June this year, a prison sentence of 15 years and 9 months. Van Roosmalen was convicted of keeping monkeys in a rehabilitation facility at his Manaus home without permits; auctioning names of new primate species to wealthy donors; and selling materials that had been donated to his former employer, the National Institute for Amazonian Research (INPA) in Manaus.

The sentence has other researchers in Brazil worried. “My main concern is the precedent,” says ecologist Regina Luizão of INPA in Manaus. “If this is happening to him now, how can we tell that we are not next?”

Ostensibly, the restrictions imposed on scientists are to limit biopiracy, whereby people profit from selling or patenting the properties of indigenous biomaterial without compensating the communities that they come from. The Brazilian authorities say the country has a serious problem with biopiracy and cannot afford to deal lightly with violations such as those committed by van Roosmalen. Vanessa Grazziotin, federal deputy for the State of Amazonas, who led the inquiry into van Roosmalen’s case, is reported as saying at the time: “There is a vast biopiracy network infiltrating the research institutes.” (Grazziotin was unavailable for comment



E. PERES/AP PHOTO

Marc van Roosmalen was charged with crimes including keeping primates at his rehabilitation centre without permits.

when approached by *Nature*.)

But researchers say the authorities are going too far and limiting the nation’s scientific potential. As a result, says INPA ecologist Philip Fearnside, Brazil and other nations will lose out. “Brazil has lost all kinds of money and intellectual importance because of its attempts to protect biodiversity from international interference,” he says.

In July, 287 researchers from 31 countries attending the annual meeting of the Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation in Morelia, Mexico, signed a petition protesting that van Roosmalen’s sentencing was “out of proportion with his alleged crimes” and is “indicative of governmental restrictions on scientists” in Brazil. And, on 2 August, a group of top researchers organized by the Brazilian Society

for the Advancement of Science (SBPC) met to discuss its strategy in response to the Roosmalen case and the larger issues it represents in relation to scientists’ ability to work in Brazil.

The group will meet again this week, says Leandro Salles of the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro. “Van Roosmalen is a specific case, within a broader context that is very sad

for the country,” Salles says. “Under the current laws, researchers are treated as potential criminals.”

Salles adds that researchers are fed up with increasing restrictions on their activities, including the jailing of scientists for minor infractions of permit laws, tougher biopiracy regulations that came into effect in 2001, and new rules that give the Brazilian military the authority to reject research project applications with foreign collaborators. Salles says the SBPC working group has been trying for several years to convince the government to change aspects of the laws with little success, and sees the van Roosmalen case as a last straw.

“One more letter of complaint, one more meeting in Brasilia isn’t going to change anything,” Salles says. “So there is now a group that is ready to propose more forceful political acts, which could include strikes or civil disobedience of another form.”

Scientists outside Brazil say they are also facing increasing difficulty when working in the tropics, where governments are cracking down on research in the name of combating biopiracy. In 2006, for instance, the Gandhi Agricultural University in Raipur, India, charged a former professor with illegally giving plants to a UK-based company.

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