



Natural History Snippets

Sri Lanka Natural History Society

'RACIAL AMITY' in the ANIMAL WORLD

Gray Langurs and Toque Macaques Living Together

Show unusual behaviour
by Hasula Wickremasinghe

Animal grooming is a critical, evolutionarily ancient behaviour encompassing body surface maintenance, including licking, scratching, preening, and dusting. It is categorized into **self-grooming** (autonomous cleaning) and **allogrooming** (social cleaning), serving essential functions like parasite removal, social bonding, stress regulation, and thermoregulation.

Social grooming (allogrooming) in primates is a vital behavioural mechanism for maintaining hygiene, building trust, and establishing social hierarchies. It acts as a behavioural currency that primates trade for alliances, protection, and grooming reciprocity, directly reducing stress and increasing overall group cohesion.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_grooming; AI Overview]

"... the main criticism regarding studies concerning social grooming is that almost all of them focus on primates, and a narrow range of species within primates themselves. As a result, the literature does not provide a well-rounded idea of what the cognitive or behavioural basis for social grooming is, nor does it completely outline all of its effects, positive or negative."

The Wikipedia article referenced above is extensive. Anyone interested in this topic should read it.

Why these quotes? Read Hasula's story

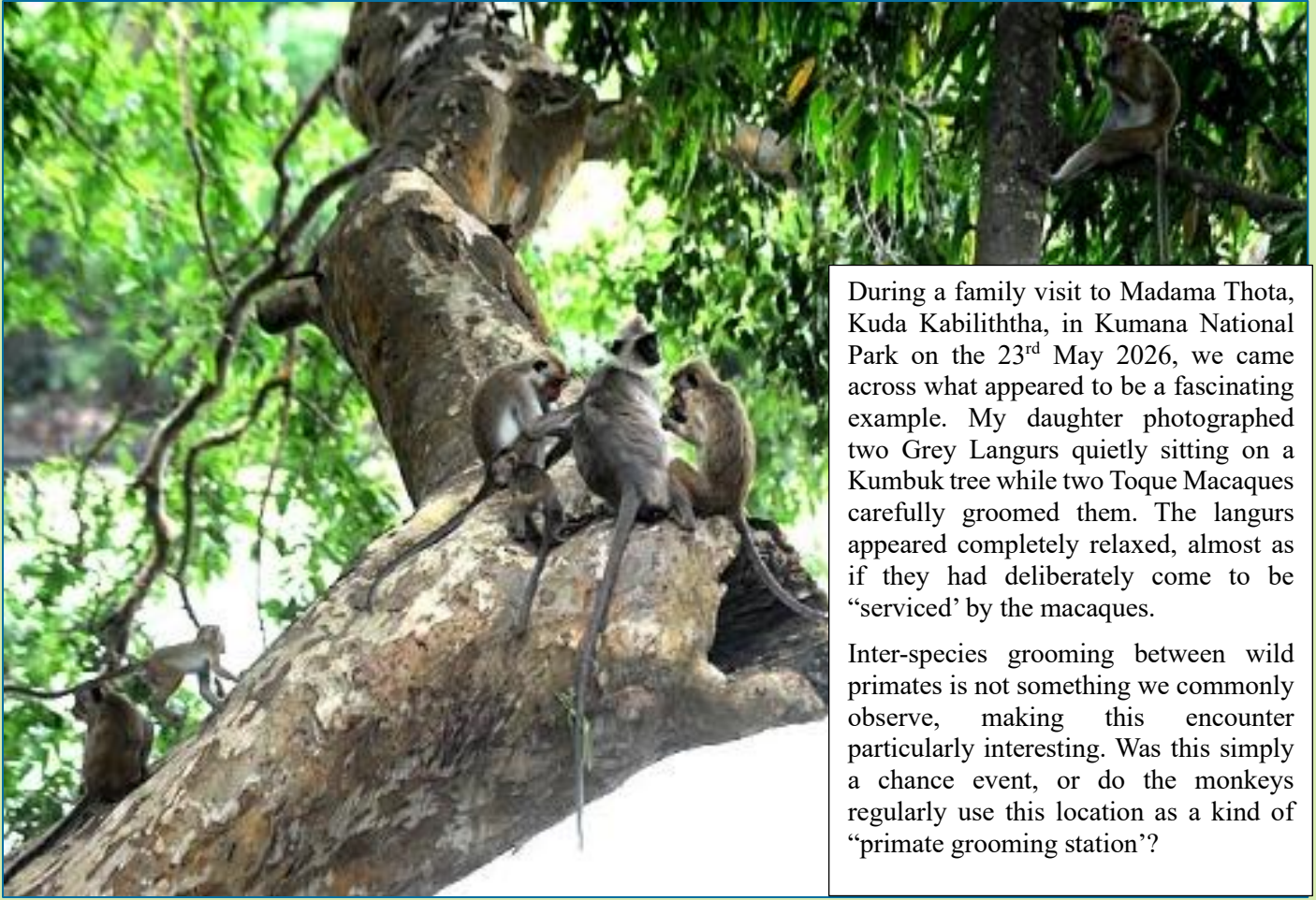
A Primate Grooming station?

Many of us have observed monkeys grooming each other. They carefully part the fur, pick out dirt and parasites, and spend long periods cleaning one another. While grooming helps keep them healthy, it is also an important way of strengthening friendships, reducing tension, and maintaining social bonds within a troop.

In the underwater world, there are well known 'cleaning stations' where larger fish, turtles, and other marine animals visit to be cleaned by smaller cleaner fish or shrimps. The clients often queue up, hold still, and even open their mouths while the cleaners remove parasites and dead skin. Both species benefit from the arrangement (a mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship).

Could something similar exist among primates?

A Sri Lanka Natural History Society publication



During a family visit to Madama Thota, Kuda Kabiliththa, in Kumana National Park on the 23rd May 2026, we came across what appeared to be a fascinating example. My daughter photographed two Grey Langurs quietly sitting on a Kumbuk tree while two Toque Macaques carefully groomed them. The langurs appeared completely relaxed, almost as if they had deliberately come to be “serviced” by the macaques.

Inter-species grooming between wild primates is not something we commonly observe, making this encounter particularly interesting. Was this simply a chance event, or do the monkeys regularly use this location as a kind of “primate grooming station”?

The photographs certainly raise that possibility.

If any member happens to visit Kuda Kabiliththa, it would be worthwhile spending some time watching the monkeys in the Kumbuk trees beside the river near the kovil. If you observe similar behaviour, please record the date, time, and take photographs.

With enough observations we may be able to name this place as a **primate grooming station!!**



Photography by Amandi Wickremasinghe
Text by Hasula Wickremasinghe

APPENDIX



Rhynchocinetes: Hinge beak shrimp

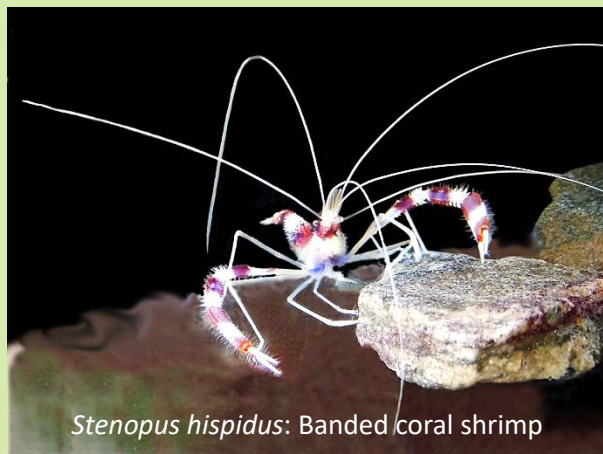
The principal article referred to 'cleaning stations' in the underwater world. This appendix illustrates some of the 'service providers' that can be seen by snorkellers and scuba divers.

The Hinge beak shrimp does not belong to the group of cleaner shrimps but is one of the commoner shrimps that can be seen even by snorkel divers. They live in social groups, usually inhabiting caves and grottoes. They do not shy away from divers but continue to skitter over the rock surfaces on which they happen to be, oblivious of the audience observing them.

4 – 5 cm in length, omnivorous feeders. Collected for the aquarium trade.

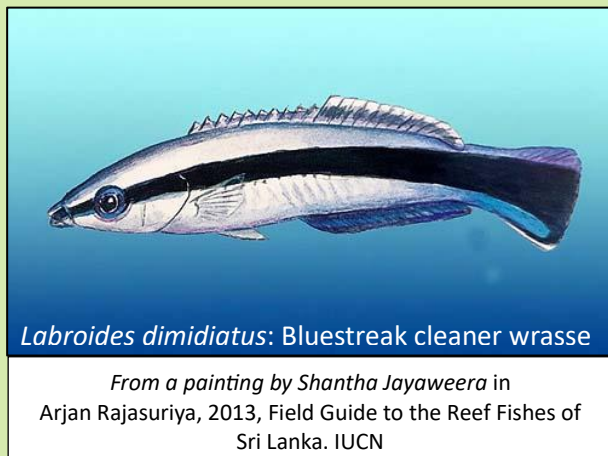
The Banded coral shrimp is a cleaner shrimp that is solitary. They are usually found under ledges or in crevices in rocky or coral reefs in shallow water.

They grow up to 6 cm in body length. Collected for the aquarium trade.



Stenopus hispidus: Banded coral shrimp

The shrimps are easy to observe as they stand their ground, weaving slowly from side to side, waving the antennae, looking at the diver. This is really their way of advertising their cleaning services to potential clients.



Labroides dimidiatus: Bluestreak cleaner wrasse

From a painting by Shantha Jayaweera in Arjan Rajasuriya, 2013, Field Guide to the Reef Fishes of Sri Lanka. IUCN

The Bluestreak cleaner wrasse is a ubiquitous inhabitant of shallow reefs, usually at defined cleaning stations. The wrasses greet visitors (clients) by performing a dance-like motion in which they move their rear up and down. Even divers are greeted in this fashion.

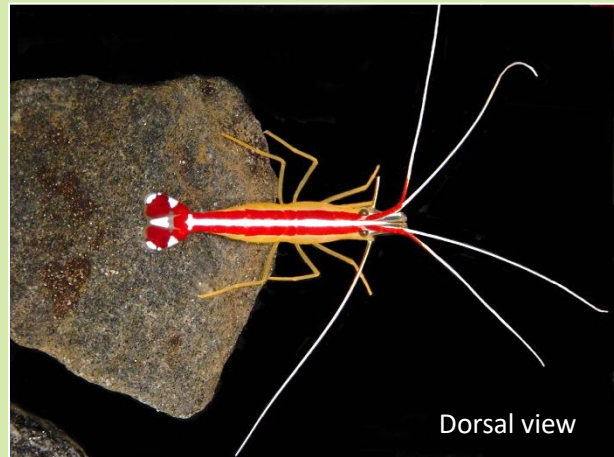
They feed on ectoparasites on various species of larger fish as well as bits of dead skin.

They can grow up to 14 cm.

Collected for the aquarium trade.



Lysmata amboinensis: Scarlet cleaner shrimp



Dorsal view



Lysmata debelius: Fire shrimp

These two beauties are found in deeper waters, often in association with large groupers and eels. They are much sought after in the aquarium trade for export. Both are 2 – 4 cm in length



Bonus

The Reef lobster *Enoplometopus* sp. at left is by no means a cleaner shrimp, but a bit of a curiosity. Found by me many years ago in the tank of an aquarium fish exporter—where the cleaner shrimps were also photographed—it is one of Sri Lanka's rarer animals. Being on the protected list of the DWC (*Fauna and Flora Protection (Amendment) Act, No.22 of 2009: SCHEDULE VII List of Protected Invertebrates*) it is usually not collected. The schedule does not assign a species epithet, so it appears that the local lobsters of this genus have not been studied.

They are small (10 – 15 cm), nocturnal and timid—which makes them elusive to the casual diver.

Article text and images by
Hasula and Amandi Wickremasinghe

Appendix text and images by
Malik Fernando

24 July 2026