Sightings of Capybara, *Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris* in the Caroni River System, Trinidad

The occasional presence of capybaras in Trinidad is well known (Kenny, 2008) but most reports suggest that they are found in the southwest peninsula of the island and have arrived there naturally after having swum or been washed across the Columbus Channel. However, over the last few years there have been anecdotal reports of capybaras being seen in the Caroni River basin (Mark Charran and Shawn Madoo, personal communication). A comprehensive review of the scientific literature found no record of capybaras at this location. Here I report on the results of a short term camera trapping project.

Following rumours of sightings of capybara near the Caroni Cremation Site (between the Caroni Savannah Road and the Caroni River) I visited the area and found evidence of their presence indicated by droppings and footprints in the thick vegetation next to the river and also on the grass lawn at the site. To get further confirmation I set up two Bushnell Trophy Cam camera traps with infrared sensor and invisible nighttime flash able to take colour pictures in the daytime and black and white pictures at night. They were set to take three photographs one second apart per triggering. The first was on a tree approximately 10m from the river bank at UTM 20P 673628, 1174102 and the second in a clump of bamboo at UTM 20P, 673654, 1174071 (Datum: WGS84).

The cameras ran from 11 -17 October 2015. At the first site near the river, capybara were recorded on 14 and 17 October. At the second site in the bamboo, capybara were recorded every day that the camera was operating. The vast majority of the sightings were nocturnal (2036 h; 2222 h; 0102 h; 0420 h; 0456 h; 0505 h; 0519 h) but one sighting was in daylight at 0659 h. Although capybara are generally diurnal in their activity, in areas where they are persecuted by hunting they can be more active at night (Emmons and Feer, 1997). The photos showed lone individuals most of the time but one set of photos showed a large group of at least six individuals (Fig. 1), which is a more typical capybara family group size (Emmons and Feer, 1997).

Fig. 1. Capybara, *Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris*. Caroni River, Trinidad. October 2015.

Several photos from the study were posted on the University of the West Indies Zoology Museum Facebook page (www.facebook.com/uwizoologymuseum) for the purpose of gathering information about other sightings and assessing current awareness of the presence of capybaras by members of the public. The post reached almost 27,000 people and many of the comments were reports of capybara sightings in and around the Caroni River basin some dating back several years. There were also several comments relating to hunting of capybara and anecdotal accounts suggest that the capybara in the Caroni area were originally brought over and released for the purpose of hunting.

It is also possible that the original source of this population was from an attempt around 1995 to farm capybara. A small colony of animals, which originated from the Emperor Valley Zoo, were farmed at Carapichaima but during a flood in 2000 four of the animals escaped. The project did not turn out to be financially viable on the scale it was being conducted and so closed down (Kamal Hakim, personal communication).

Further studies are needed to ascertain the range and abundance of capybara in Trinidad and to find out if they pose a threat as an invasive species or if they are merely a missing part of the original biota of Trinidad.

REFERENCES

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