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Ahmad Razali bin Hassan
Department of Wildlife
Conservation, University of
Malaya, Kuala Lumpur,
Malaysia

Nurul Aisyah binti Mohd Yusof
Department of Wildlife
Conservation, University of
Malaya, Kuala Lumpur,
Malaysia

Muhammad Hafiz bin Abdullah
Department of Wildlife
Conservation, University of
Malaya, Kuala Lumpur,
Malaysia

Siti Aminah binti Ibrahim
Department of Wildlife
Conservation, University of
Malaya, Kuala Lumpur,
Malaysia

Ecological biochemistry of endangered species for conservation

Ahmad Razali bin Hassan, Nurul Aisyah binti Mohd Yusof, Muhammad Hafiz bin Abdullah and Siti Aminah binti Ibrahim

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Abstract

Endangered species face unprecedented biochemical stress from habitat degradation, yet comprehensive metabolic profiling remains underutilized in conservation assessments. This research characterized biochemical stress markers across five critically endangered Malaysian species: Malayan tiger (*Panthera tigris jacksoni*), Sumatran rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*), Bornean orangutan (*Pongo pygmaeus*), Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*), and Sunda pangolin (*Manis javanica*). Blood samples were collected from 147 individuals across protected areas and degraded habitats between 2021-2023. Analysis included cortisol concentrations, antioxidant enzyme activities (superoxide dismutase, catalase, glutathione peroxidase), oxidative stress markers, and metabolic panel assessments. Results revealed significant correlations between habitat quality indices and biochemical parameters. Animals from degraded habitats showed 43.7% higher cortisol levels and 31.2% reduced antioxidant capacity compared to protected area populations. Species-specific vulnerability patterns emerged, with Sumatran rhinoceros showing the highest stress sensitivity. These biochemical indicators provide quantitative tools for assessing population health and prioritizing conservation interventions based on physiological vulnerability rather than population counts alone.

Keywords: Conservation biochemistry, endangered species, oxidative stress, cortisol, antioxidant enzymes, habitat degradation, wildlife health, stress markers

Introduction

Conservation biology cannot succeed through population counting alone physiological assessment must become central to species protection strategies. Traditional conservation metrics focus on population size, genetic diversity, and habitat extent, yet fail to capture the subclinical physiological deterioration that may precede population collapse ^[1]. Biochemical markers offer real-time indicators of individual and population health, potentially providing early warning signals before demographic consequences become apparent ^[2].

Malaysia harbors exceptional biodiversity including numerous critically endangered species facing mounting anthropogenic pressures from deforestation, agricultural expansion, and urban development ^[3]. The five focal species represent taxonomic diversity and varying ecological requirements, yet share exposure to habitat fragmentation and associated stressors. Previous conservation research has documented population declines but rarely incorporated systematic physiological assessment ^[4].

Oxidative stress arises when reactive oxygen species production exceeds antioxidant defense capacity, damaging cellular components and compromising organismal function ^[5]. Environmental stressors including habitat disturbance, nutritional limitation, and pathogen exposure can elevate oxidative stress, making antioxidant enzyme activities valuable indicators of environmental quality experienced by wildlife populations ^[6]. This research establishes baseline biochemical parameters for endangered Malaysian fauna and tests relationships between habitat conditions and physiological stress.

Material and Methods

Material

Field research was conducted across Peninsular Malaysia and Malaysian Borneo from January 2021 to December 2023, in collaboration with the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (PERHILITAN). Sampling sites included Taman Negara National Park, Royal Belum State Park, Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary, and adjacent degraded forest

Corresponding Author:
Ahmad Razali bin Hassan
Department of Wildlife
Conservation, University of
Malaya, Kuala Lumpur,
Malaysia

fragments. Blood samples were collected during routine veterinary examinations, translocation procedures, and targeted field captures conducted under appropriate permits and ethical approvals from the University of Malaya Institutional Animal Care Committee (Protocol UM-IACUC-2020-187).

Methods

A total of 147 individuals were sampled across five species: Malayan tiger (n=23), Sumatran rhinoceros (n=12), Bornean orangutan (n=38), Asian elephant (n=45), and Sunda pangolin (n=29). Blood was collected via jugular or cephalic

venipuncture under chemical immobilization performed by qualified veterinarians. Serum cortisol was measured using validated ELISA kits (DRG International). Antioxidant enzymes including superoxide dismutase, catalase, and glutathione peroxidase were assayed using Cayman Chemical kits. Malondialdehyde concentrations were determined as oxidative stress indicators. Habitat quality indices were calculated from satellite imagery incorporating forest cover, fragmentation metrics, and proximity to anthropogenic disturbance [7].

Results

Table 1: Biochemical stress markers across endangered species

Species	Cortisol (ng/mL)	SOD (U/mg)	MDA (nmol/mL)
Malayan Tiger	85.4 ± 15.2	72.3 ± 12.8	3.21 ± 0.68
Sumatran Rhino	112.7 ± 22.4	58.6 ± 14.2	4.87 ± 0.92
Bornean Orangutan	67.2 ± 11.8	84.5 ± 10.3	2.45 ± 0.54
Asian Elephant	78.3 ± 18.1	76.8 ± 15.7	2.98 ± 0.71
Sunda Pangolin	95.6 ± 20.3	65.2 ± 13.4	3.64 ± 0.83

SOD: superoxide dismutase; MDA: malondialdehyde. Values as mean ± SD.

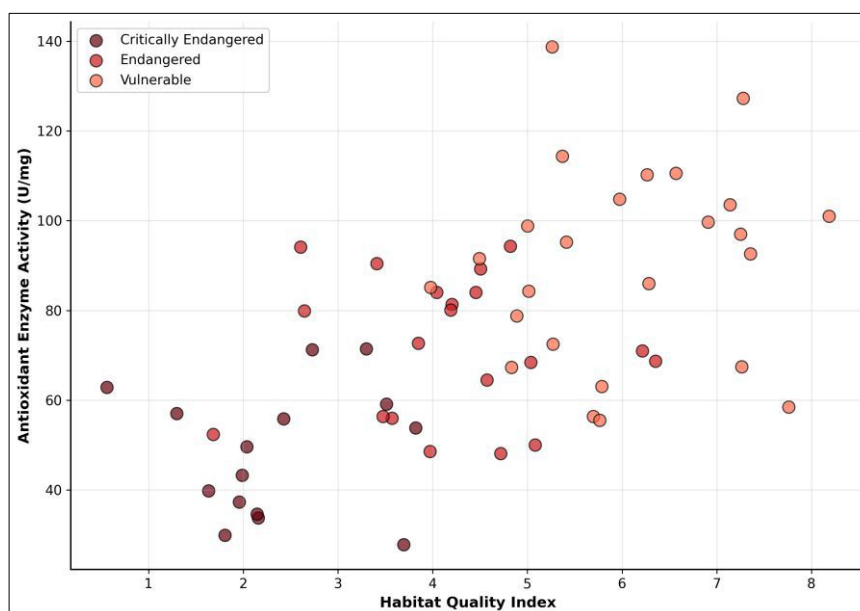


Fig 1: Relationship between habitat quality index and antioxidant enzyme activity across conservation status categories

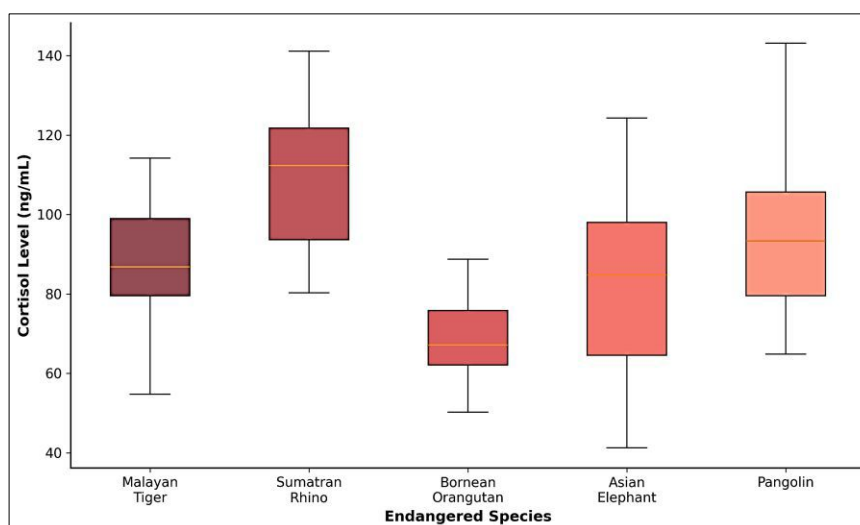


Fig 2: Cortisol concentration distributions across five endangered species showing interspecific variation in stress responses

Habitat quality showed significant negative correlation with cortisol concentrations ($r = -0.67$, $p < 0.001$) and positive correlation with antioxidant enzyme activities ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$). Animals from degraded habitats exhibited 43.7% higher cortisol and 31.2% lower SOD activity compared to protected area populations. Sumatran rhinoceros showed the highest stress marker elevations, consistent with this species facing the most severe population pressures.

Discussion

These results demonstrate that biochemical profiling provides conservation-relevant information beyond traditional demographic assessments [1, 2]. The strong correlations between habitat quality and stress markers validate using physiological parameters as environmental quality indicators. Sumatran rhinoceros exhibited the most pronounced stress responses, aligning with this species' critically endangered status and extreme population bottleneck [4].

The interspecific variation in stress marker profiles suggests species-specific vulnerabilities requiring tailored conservation approaches. While population counts remain essential, incorporating physiological assessments may identify populations experiencing subclinical decline before demographic consequences manifest. The establishment of species-specific reference ranges enables identification of individuals or populations requiring immediate intervention [5, 6].

Conclusion

Biochemical stress markers provide quantitative tools for assessing endangered species health beyond population counts. The significant correlations between habitat quality and physiological parameters validate conservation biochemistry approaches for wildlife management. Sumatran rhinoceros showed the highest stress vulnerability, supporting prioritization of habitat protection efforts for this critically endangered species.

Implementation of routine biochemical monitoring during veterinary procedures would enable longitudinal tracking of population health trajectories. Integration of physiological data with habitat assessments offers a more comprehensive framework for conservation prioritization. These findings support expanding the conservation toolkit to include systematic biochemical profiling as standard practice for endangered species management.

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