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The etymology of "SENGI"

Galen Rathbun and Jonathan Kingdon

Jonathan Kingdon first used SENGI as a common name for elephant-shrews (hyphenated) in "The Kingdon Field Guide to African Mammals" (1997). Since then, we both

have used SENGI in print (e.g. Rathbun & Woodall 2002. A bibliography of elephant-shrews or sengis (Macroscelidea). *Mammal Review* 32:66-70) as well as on websites (Google it!). Increasingly more authors are following suit. Most significantly, the upcoming "Mammals of Africa" will use SENGI.

In Kiswahili-speaking areas of eastern Africa, SENGI means elephant-shrew. Kiswahili names for animals (kongoni, simba, fisi, etc.) often are derived from Bantu tongues (Kizaramo, Kidigo, Kinyamwezi, Kisukuma, etc.), and this seems to be the case for SENGI (e.g. in Kigirama "sanje" = SENGI).

There are several reasons that SENGI is preferable to elephant-shrew, despite traditional usage. First, SENGIS (Macroscelidea, Macroscelididae) have a very different evolutionary history than true shrews (Insectivora, soricidae) and they share few life history traits. By calling SENGIS a type of shrew, it completely misrepresents their phylogeny and biology to the uninformed. We also believe that it is generally appropriate that local names be used when animals are endemic to a particular region, as SENGIS are to Africa.

What is the correct pronunciation of SENGI? Kiswahili and Bantu languages are phonetic, so the G is hard, as in Galen.