



This orangutan contemplates his bleak future - or maybe is thinking of his forest home.



# THE GREAT APE SLAVE TRADE

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"When I google rhino or elephant poaching, I get hundreds of links. When I google chimpanzee or gorilla poaching, almost nothing comes up. This complete lack of news about ape conservation is deeply disturbing... The reality is that while the rhino population, despite the poaching, is still on the increase in South Africa and even in East Africa, the African great ape populations are declining daily, and at a faster rate than ever before." – **Karl Ammann**

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This gorilla is kept alone behind bars for a crime he did not commit.

**DAN STILES**



first came to Kenya in 1971 to assist on the Koobi Fora paleoanthropology project at Lake Turkana. He taught at the

University of Nairobi from 1977-1981 then worked for UNEP and other UN agencies for several years. He has researched extensively in Africa and Asia on forest and drylands natural resource utilisation. Since 1999, he has been carrying out ivory trade studies and he just completed an assignment with UNEP to help prepare the *Stolen Apes* report, along with another one on the elephant crisis, both launched at CITES 16 in Bangkok.

**W**hy is it that great apes – chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas and orangutans – seem to get lost in the commotion over elephants, rhinos and tigers? Even at the recent CITES conference in Bangkok, discussion of the UNEP Rapid Response Assessment report *Stolen Apes* ([www.grida.no/publications/rr/apes](http://www.grida.no/publications/rr/apes)) elicited little interest, while the usual hot rhetoric raged over issues of ivory, rhino horn and tiger product trafficking. Even sharks and rays eclipsed great apes at CITES 16!

We humans are classed in the family Hominidae along with great apes, so we are all hominids. If Jared Diamond is to be believed we are actually, in taxonomic terms, the 'Third Chimpanzee'. It is time we humans woke up to the plight of our cousins and started to take more serious action against what in reality could only be called slave trade.

Great apes are being torn from their forest homes in Africa and Asia at an alarming rate in order to be sent, against their will, to unpaid jobs as exhibits in zoos, or as pets of the rich, or as uncompensated labour in circuses, animal parks or in the movies. What else could that be called but slavery?

And with the high intelligence and emotional capacity of great apes, they suffer in similar fashion to the way in which people did during that dark period in human history.

Since 2005, over 1,800 cases of trafficked wild apes could be documented. This is only a small fraction of the real number, as documented cases are those involving seizures, and the vast majority of trafficking incidents go undetected. Even more tragic, for every live trafficked ape, up to a dozen are killed as collateral damage. Apes are very social creatures and, except for orangutans, live in fairly large groups. It is common for many to be killed when one is captured live. The UNEP report estimated that almost 3,000 wild great apes were lost every year in trafficking occurrences. This is 4.4 to 5.8 % of the estimated total population of great apes lost annually. The rate is not sustainable, and for some species such as the Cross River gorilla, the Eastern Lowland gorilla and the Sumatran orangutan, all of which have small and fragmented populations, the loss rate is hurtling them towards extinction.

Great apes have long been associated with status and wealth. Apes have been traded since ancient times and are mentioned in the Bible along with gold, ivory and frankincense among the precious things imported by Solomon in the Old Testament. Apes are also found in Egyptian hieroglyphics, being brought from the Land of Punt, and Roman emperors had them transported from exotic lands across great distances to provide entertainment and amusement for the masses.

Following the age of European exploration from the 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and as methods of transportation began to improve, Europe expanded its royal menageries into an ever-increasing number of

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PHOTO BY DAN STILES

zoological gardens – zoos – in the 18th and 19th centuries. Great apes became very popular with the public and circuses, travelling menageries, and entertainment parks sought to acquire great apes in order to draw crowds. In the 20th century, gorillas had become so prized that they could fetch USD 150,000 each.

The situation worsened from the 1930s onwards, particularly for the chimpanzee. The close genetic relationship between chimpanzees and humans resulted in the widespread use of the ape as test subjects for behavioural and biomedical research in universities and medical schools. Thousands of chimpanzees lost their freedom and lives through scientific research. Sierra Leone alone exported more than 2,000 chimpanzees for use in biomedical research, zoos, the

entertainment industry and pet trade between the 1950s and 1980s.

Largely as a result of field studies of great apes in the wild by pioneers such as Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey and Birute Galdikas, it became apparent that it was unethical to treat such intelligent, sensitive creatures in such a cruel fashion. Beginning in the 1970s, the wild capture and import of great apes into Europe, North America and other countries for zoos and research have progressively been halted. Legal great ape trade has virtually ceased for these purposes, and in the U.S. hundreds of chimpanzees are being freed to live out their lives in sanctuaries.

This has not spared our taxonomic cousins from illegal trafficking, however. With human population increase and infrastructure development in tropical forests, people

have increasingly been moving into ape habitats, destroying the ecosystems that apes depend on for food and living space. Largely as a by-product of deforestation and conflict with farmers, apes are being evicted from their homeland and used for food, traditional medicine, and curio and live trade. As a proportion of great ape populations, probably more are being lost annually today to these causes than to the zoos, circuses and research facilities of the past.

Although cloaked in secrecy, what is termed the 'pet' trade may be increasing. Karl Ammann, who has investigated great ape trafficking in depth, states that, '...the orphan trade seems to have become a driving motive for going out and hunting chimps and gorillas'. Entertainment parks, zoos that exploit apes commercially and wealthy



Chimpanzees are taken from wild and trafficked to zoos for commercial purposes.



PHOTOS BY DAN STILES

**Karl Ammann interviews a Chinese official at the CITES 16 conference in Bangkok, who refuses to answer questions about the gorillas illegally smuggled to China in 2010 from Guinea.**

private collectors, mainly in the Middle East and eastern Asia, are illegally buying great apes from traffickers, creating demand that incites poaching. This is becoming an intractable problem.

Various NGOs promoting wildlife law enforcement in Central Africa have demonstrated that the same individuals and poaching-trafficking networks are involved in both the live ape trade and killing of apes for meat and trophies. Another indicator of increasing great ape hunting and live trade is the upsurge in the number of ape sanctuaries since the 1980s, and the number of rescued apes that they hold. Most sanctuaries, unfortunately, are saturated now (see box).

Ofir Drori, the founder of the Last Great Ape Organization (LAGA), based in Cameroon, stated, 'Recent investigations reveal that major ape dealers have each exported hundreds of apes... Despite being known to local authorities and to international institutions, these criminals roam free, relying on a system of corruption and complicity that allows them to operate with relative impunity.'

One notorious example involves a woman with dual Egyptian and Nigerian citizenship. The saga begins in 1992 and 1993 when two air shipments of chimpanzees were flown from Conakry, Guinea to Kano, Nigeria with the intention of sending them on to Cairo, Egypt. Forged CITES documents were used and the importer in Cairo was the same person in both cases. In 1994, a chimpanzee on a flight from Kano was seized in Cairo, accompanied by this woman, described as a Nigerian. She attempted to use diplomatic influence to have the chimpanzee released, but failed.

In 1997 an investigation by the World Society for the Protection of Animals revealed a well-established smuggling route for CITES-listed species from West Africa (Cameroon and Kano, Nigeria) via Sudan and out of Africa through Egypt to the Middle East and Asia. The investigator was told that Kano traffickers were exporting about 40 chimpanzees and eight gorillas a year, and that this type of trade had been going on for a very long time.

Karl Ammann and Pax Animalis, a Swiss NGO, later discovered that

## SANCTUARIES

Sanctuaries and rehabilitation centres across Africa and Asia play a vital role in the battle against the illegal trade in great apes. These facilities work closely with law enforcement officials and provide permanent care to the apes that are confiscated from illegal traders.

In Africa, the Pan African Sanctuary Alliance (PASA) is comprised of 22 member facilities in 12 countries that collectively care for over 1,150 chimpanzees, gorillas, and bonobos rescued from illegal trade. Although some of the sanctuaries were established more than 40 years ago, most were created as a result of the bushmeat crisis and black market trade that flourished in the 1990s. The crisis has not abated.

PASA sanctuaries do not permit breeding and new apes are added primarily through confiscation of wild-born individuals. Approximately half of the PASA sanctuaries are committed to reintroduction programmes in accordance with IUCN guidelines. More than 100 chimpanzees, gorillas and bonobos have already been returned successfully to the wild. However, reintroduction is a complex, expensive and highly difficult process. No more than a fraction of the great apes in sanctuaries can ever return to the forests, and reintroduction is a complement to traditional conservation.

In South East Asia, five rehabilitation centres provide the primary captive care options and law enforcement support for confiscated orangutans. These centres collectively host more than 1,300 orangutans, led by the Nyaru Menteng Orangutan Centre in Borneo, which cares for over 600 orangutans on a daily basis.

These centres struggle to keep pace with the agro-industrial expansion and deforestation that fuels the illegal trade in wildlife. As in Africa, the rehabilitation centres in Borneo and Sumatra focus increasingly on reintroduction as a means of placing emphasis on forest protection. In 2007, the Government of Indonesia formulated a plan that called for the closure of all rehabilitation centres by 2015, thereby accelerating the pace of orangutan release and reintroduction. At present, an estimated 2,000 orangutans have been released back into the wild.



PHOTO BY: KARL AMMANN

The author having a tête-à-tête with a chimpanzee.

the woman trafficker, who had dual Nigerian and Egyptian nationalities, was the same person from the 1990s incidents and that she had continued to traffic in chimpanzees and gorillas. Hundreds of chimpanzees and dozens of gorillas had passed through Kano to Cairo over a 20-year period. The woman trafficker's husband owned a transport company with offices in Cairo, Nigeria and Cameroon, and the couple had good connections with powerful people in all of those countries. Cairo was found to be a hub of wildlife trafficking, with many endangered species, including great apes, being exploited in pet shops, zoos and for entertainment in hotels and roadside facilities. From Cairo, great apes had for many years been making their way to the Middle East and the Far East.

**USD 37,000 FOR A GORILLA, PLUS SHIPPING AND HANDLING FROM CONAKRY TO CAIRO (GUINEA DOES NOT HAVE A WILD GORILLA POPULATION). USD 20,500 FOR A CHIMPANZEE.**

In February 2005, customs officials at Nairobi airport seized a large crate labelled 'dogs' that had arrived from Egypt. Inside they found six chimpanzees and four monkeys stuffed into tiny compartments. The crate had been refused by Egyptian authorities at Cairo airport due to insufficient permits, and the same woman trafficker involved in the other cases accompanying the crate returned to Nigeria leaving

the primates. Although one of the chimpanzees died almost immediately from hunger and thirst, the rest were sent to Sweetwaters Chimpanzee Sanctuary in Ol Pejeta Conservancy, Kenya, where the survivors can be seen today.

During the same period Guinea continued as a source of chimpanzees, and from 2010 gorillas were included, but China had become the main



PHOTOS BY: DAN STILES

**Gorillas and other great apes should be left in peace in the wild where they belong.**

destination. Chinese mine workers Local traders in Guinea, in collusion with the Guinea CITES Management Authority and traffickers in Kinshasa, DR Congo, exported over 130 chimpanzees and 10 gorillas since 2007 to China. LAGA reported in 2012 the implication and arrest of Chinese involved in great ape trafficking in Guinea, and that CITES documents had been falsified to indicate that the chimpanzees were captive bred. The gorillas probably originated in eastern DRC, according to Ammann. Some chimpanzees apparently continue to go to Cairo, however, as a wildlife trafficker in Cairo recently quoted prices for chimpanzees and gorillas from Guinea that were offered for sale by an eastern Asian trading company. USD 37,000 for a gorilla, plus shipping and handling from Conakry to Cairo (Guinea

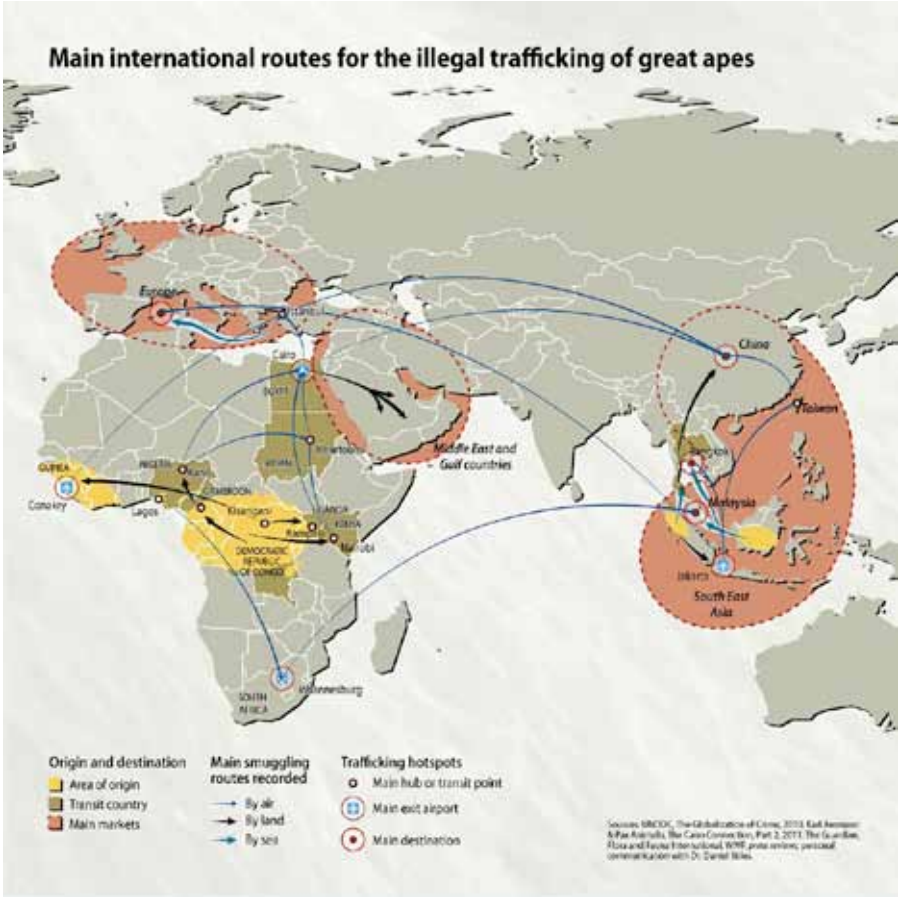
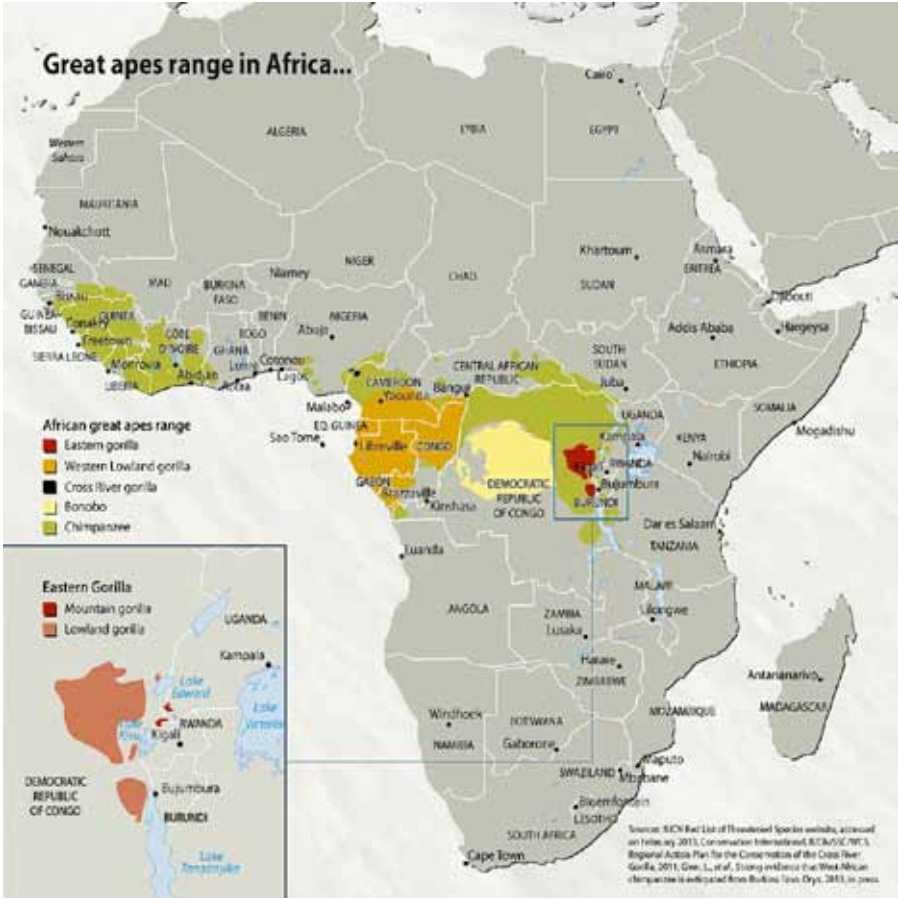






PHOTO BY DAN STILES

**Orangutan in a cage**

does not have a wild gorilla population). USD 20,500 for a chimpanzee. Ofir Drori tried to get a Guinean kingpin trafficker arrested this year, but the authorities failed to take action.

Karl Ammann questioned a senior Chinese CITES official in Bangkok in March at the CITES conference, but he refused to acknowledge that China had done anything illegal, nor would he say what had happened to the 10 gorillas. Ammann tracked down some of the chimpanzees to zoos in China, but the location of the gorillas remains a mystery. For further details see <http://www.pax-animalis.org/assets/files/cop16/apet.pdf>.) After many years of CITES warnings and visits to Guinea, with nothing but empty promises, CITES finally has sanctioned Guinea with a total suspension of trade in any CITES-listed species until they can demonstrate that they have cleaned house. The former head of the Guinea CITES Management Authority – who has been suspended over the affair – told Ammann that he expected to be back at his job when things cool off.

Several CITES Management Authority officials in Central Africa and the Middle East have been implicated recently in issuing false CITES permits so that illegal wildlife trafficking can be carried out. It is a lucrative post to have for corrupt officials, as the permits are exchanged with traffickers for cash.

So what can be done? Read **Stolen Apes** and find out. ●

