



Africa's LOST APES

Since ancient times humans have been fascinated by our closest cousins in the animal world. Through the centuries this fascination has exacted a terrible price on the great apes, which have been captured, sold, killed for bushmeat, used in medical research and kept as pets. Although we have managed to halt some of these practices, and attempted to control the legal trade through the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), an international trafficking network continues to operate with impunity. **Dan Stiles** reports on investigations that have revealed shocking collusion, corruption and abuse.

TEXT BY DAN STILES

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Early on the cool, clear morning of 31 January 2005, Kenya Airways flight 432 touched down at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi, Kenya. The plane had come from Cairo, Egypt. A large, wooden crate perforated with round air holes was offloaded and taken to a transit facility to await its onward flight to Lagos, Nigeria. The woman who accompanied the crate fumed as she waited impatiently in the crowded airport. She wasn't supposed to be there, nor were the contents of the crate.

A workman in the baggage facility was surprised to hear whimpering noises coming from the container. He thought that it may contain dogs and reported it to his supervisor, who investigated. The crate was listed as 'accompanied baggage', but when a black, wrinkled finger emerged from one of the air holes it was clear that this was not normal baggage. He enlarged one of the holes to peer inside and discovered six infant chimpanzees and four monkeys crammed into small compartments. He summoned a government veterinarian.

Dr Joash Kerosi arrived some time later to find that one chimp had died and the remaining five were suffering from dehydration and lack of food. He decided to confiscate the animals as there were no

transport documents or markings on the crate. Chimpanzees, moreover, are listed as CITES Appendix I, which means that trade in them is strictly prohibited. In the meantime, the agitated woman had abandoned her vigil and taken the flight to Lagos.

Two days later Karl Ammann, a noted Swiss wildlife photojournalist, sat on the terrace of his home, nestled on the forested slopes of Mt Kenya, sipping his morning coffee and paging through

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The Daily Nation newspaper. He came across the story of the seized chimpanzees, which piqued his interest as he had previously encountered great-ape trafficking while investigating bushmeat hunting in Central Africa. According to the report, the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) had relocated the chimps to the Sweetwaters Chimpanzee Sanctuary in the Ol Pejeta Wildlife Conservancy not far from where he lived. He decided to

find out whether this shipment was an isolated incident, or whether it was part of a more regular trafficking operation.

Ammann has spent the past eight years working in collaboration with Swiss NGO Pax Animalis and partner investigators to uncover a scandalous story of international great-ape trafficking by an Egyptian criminal network that, despite being known to the Secretariat of CITES, continues to operate with impunity. During this time, he and his associates have travelled to Egypt on several occasions and followed leads to Kano in northern Nigeria, Conakry, the capital of Guinea, and China and Thailand. They have also visited the CITES headquarters in Geneva in attempts to gather information and spur action to shut down the trade, with little success.

Their investigations revealed that a woman named Heba Abdul Moty Ahmad Saad, who has dual Egyptian and Nigerian nationalities, and Ahmad Ebrahim Abdul Shafy, an Egyptian doctor, had transported the six chimps and four monkeys from Kano to Cairo where, unusually, the primates were refused entry owing to lack of proper documentation. (Some sources have speculated that a rival trafficker had bribed ▶

medicine and curios, or sold into the live trade. As a proportion of great ape populations, probably more are being lost annually to these causes today than there were to the zoos, circuses and research facilities of the past.

Although cloaked in secrecy, what is termed the 'pet' trade may be increasing. According to Ammann, 'The orphan trade seems to have become a driving motive for hunting chimps and gorillas.' Entertainment parks, zoos that exploit apes commercially and wealthy private



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collectors, mainly in the Middle East and eastern Asia, are illegally buying great apes from traffickers, creating a demand that incites poaching.

Another indicator of the increase in great ape hunts and the live trade is the proliferation of ape sanctuaries since the 1980s, and the number of animals they hold. The Pan African Sanctuary Alliance (PASA) comprises 22 member facilities in 12 countries that collectively care for more than 1150 rescued chimpanzees, gorillas and bonobos. Non-PASA sanctuaries in Africa also look after a considerable proportion of confiscated great apes.

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

LAGA is the first wildlife law enforcement NGO in Africa and was created in 2002 to combat the illegal trade in great apes and ivory in Cameroon. Since then, it has expanded into a regional network that includes satellite programmes in Congo, DRC, Guinea and Gabon, which have worked with local authorities to arrest hundreds of wildlife traffickers. However, many well-connected accused continue to avoid jail time. A recent large-scale case involving Guinea is emblematic of the problem.

Guinea has long been a thorn in CITES's side, largely due to persistent political instability and a culture of lawlessness since the death of its first president Sékou Touré in 1984. The country's national CITES Management Authority (MA) is no exception and, since the early 1990s, has made good money issuing CITES export permits. These contained false source codes stating that specimens were bred in captivity in accordance with the convention's regulations and could therefore be sent abroad legally for non-commercial purposes. (There are no breeding facilities for any wild species in Guinea.) Initially, Kano and Cairo were the two main destinations for chimpanzees, until China joined the club in 2007.



KARL AMMANN

Between 2007 and 2011, 10 gorillas and more than 100 chimpanzees were exported from Guinea to China. Almost all these transactions were recorded in the CITES Trade Database as legitimate exports-imports. After Ammann and Pax

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Animalis publicised the fact that the deals actually involved the transport of Eastern lowland gorillas from a facility near Bukavu, DRC (and were not bred in captivity in Guinea, which has no indigenous gorillas), as well as the capture of wild chimpanzees in Guinea and surrounding countries, the CITES Secretariat finally sent a fact-finding mission to Conakry in 2011. The mission's full report has not been made public, but summaries of the findings indicate that the former head of the Guinea CITES MA, Ansoumane Doumbouya, in collusion with other government officials, had been running the Conakry CITES office as a massive illegal wildlife trade corporation.

At the 63rd Standing Committee meeting held immediately prior to the COP this year, the Secretariat recommended that all trade in wildlife species listed in CITES appendices (30 000-plus species of plants and animals) be suspended for Guinea until corrective measures are

taken. This is the only sanction tool available to CITES (it has no law enforcement arm), but it is an effective one – the country is now unable to legally export any CITES-listed timber, which is a serious economic blow.

Nonetheless primates and other wildlife are still being offered for international sale in Guinea. In March this year, working with information obtained from Ammann, Drori set up an arrest raid of one of the country's main great-ape traffickers, who had previously admitted to having exported more than 500 chimpanzees. Unfortunately, when Drori and Guinean police showed up at his Conakry home, where he kept the apes, the man had fled, taking his wares with him. Government informants had tipped him off. A dejected Drori told me about it at the CITES COP where he'd been hoping to announce the arrest.

Things are not looking good for the great apes. I find it astounding that so little attention is accorded to animals that share our taxonomic family, while elephants, rhinos and tigers receive so much consideration. As renowned Pulitzer Prize-winning author and scientist Jared Diamond pointed out, humans are biologically the 'Third Chimpanzee'. We stopped the human slave trade in the 19th century when morality won over economics. It is time that humans exerted the same moral standards in the 21st century for our other family members, which share many of our psychological and emotional characteristics. Let's stop the great ape slave trade!

What can be done?

There are three main areas to tackle: law enforcement, demand for apes and public awareness. It would be almost impossible to smuggle great apes if national CITES Management Authorities, Customs, the police and airlines followed the law and, if they did not, the CITES Secretariat took strong action to force their governments to act through threats of trade sanctions. Corruption has to be stamped out.

Demand is created by rich people desiring to own apes and by the public paying to watch them perform. If consumers refused to pay for great ape amusement, traffickers would be put out of business.

Public awareness and action are critical for both law enforcement and demand reduction. Those involved in ape trafficking should be named, shamed and prosecuted, which will spur more law enforcement, as LAGA has demonstrated. The public should refuse to pay to watch great ape performances or to be photographed with them. This can only happen if they know that it leads to ape trafficking, hence the feedback loop to more public awareness to build momentum. Individuals, rich and poor, can make personal choices to refuse to feed the great ape slave trade and to campaign against it via social media and community petition sites.

ABOVE Most great apes used in the trade are orphans, like these young chimpanzees, whose families were probably killed during their capture.

OPPOSITE, ABOVE Thanks to the discoveries of scientists like Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey and Birute Galdikas, we now appreciate that taking young apes away from their parents and family groups to transport and confine them for human amusement is unspeakably cruel. And yet the practice continues.

OPPOSITE, BELOW Karl Ammann (left) confronted a senior Chinese official at the CITES conference in Bangkok in March 2013. He demanded to know what had happened to 10 gorillas that had been trafficked from Guinea to China in 2010. The official denied that China had done anything illegal and refused to comment on the primates.