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 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 Ibrahim 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

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
Saad's operation is not an isolated case. In March this year, a UN report that I co-authored, entitled "Stolen Apes" (www.zoological.org/publica
tions/triapes/) was released at the CITES Conference of the Parties (COF) in Bang
kok. It documents an alarming situation in which more than 1800 cases were regis
tered of trafficked chimpanzees, bonobo, gorillas and orang-utans being lost to the forests of Africa and Asia between 2005 and early 2012. This is only a frac
tion of the real number, as documented cases are those involving seizures, and the vast majority of incidents go undetected.

More tragically, for every live ape that enters the trade, up to a dozen are killed as collateral damage. Apart from orang-

utans, apes are social and live in fairly large groups, so it is not uncommon for many to be killed when one is captured alive. The UN report suggested that almost 3,000 wild great apes – 4.4 to 5.8 per cent of the estimated total popu
tation – were lost every year in traffick-
ing occurrences. The rate is not sustain-
able and for species with small and frag-
mented populations, such as the Cross River gorilla, the eastern lowland gorilla and the Sumatran orang-utan, the trade is hurting them towards extinction.

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.

That attempt also failed, in spite of her high-level Nigerian diplomatic contacts. Saad’s activities came to the attention of the World Society for Protection of Animals in 1996. The Society sent an investigator to Kano, who discovered a hoard of wildlife trafficking for many years. Saad and others like her had been smuggling out large numbers of great apes and other wildlife. Her husband ran a transport company with operations in Nigeria, Cameroon and Egypt, and was well connected to influential people in those countries.

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GREAT APES

PAGE 47 These chimpanzees were stolen from Africa and trafficked to a department store zoo in Bangkok to attract fee-paying tourists.

PAGE 46 Since the 1980s, sanctuaries have proliferated in an attempt to keep up with the need to re-home great apes rescued from illegal trade. This chimpanzee is living out its days at the Sweethaven Sanctuary in the Oil Palm Conservancy in Kenya.

OPPOSITE Numbered days? A male silverback eastern lowland gorilla, at ease and in his natural environment, photographed in Kahuzi-
Biega National Park, Democratic Republic of Congo. Dwindling habitat, the bushmeat trade and, increasingly, trafficking in young gorillas is threatening the future of some of our closest cousins.

22

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G

eat apes have long been associ-
ated with status and wealth, and have been traded since ancient times. In the Old Testament, King Solomon acquired them, along with gold, ivory and frankincense; in Egypt, hieroglyphics attest to apes being brought to pharaohs from the Land of Punt to the south; and Roman emperors imported the animals across great dis-
tances to provide entertainment and amuse-
ment for the masses.

Following the age of European explo-
ration and as methods of transportation improved, Europe expanded its royal

menageries into an increasing number of zoological gardens during the 18th and 19th centuries. Great apes proved very popular with the public, and circuses and zoos sought to acquire them as attrac-
tions. By the 20th century, gorillas had become so prized that they could fetch US$150,000 each.

From the 1930s the situation wors-
ened, particularly for chimpanzees. The close genetic relationship between this primates and humans resulted in the widespread use of chimps as test subjects for behavioural and biomedical research in universities and medical schools. Thousands lost their freedom and lives to scientific endeavour. Between the 1950s and ‘80s Sierra Leone alone exported more than 2,000 chimpanzees for use in research, zoos, the entertainment indus-
try and the pet trade.

Largely as a result of field studies by primatologists such as Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey and Birute Galdikas, it be-
came increasingly apparent that it was unethical to treat such intelligent, sensi-
tive creatures so cruelly. Since the 1970s, the wild capture and import of great apes into Europe, North America and other countries for zoos and research have pro-
gressively been halted. In the US, hun-
dreds of chimpanzees have been freed to live out their lives in sanctuaries.

Enlightenment in the West has not spared our taxonomic cousins from illegal trafficking, however. With the

increase in human population and infra-
structure development in tropical forests, people have been moving into ape habi-
tats, destroying the ecosystems upon which they depend for food and living space. Largely as a byproduct of defores-
tation and conflict with farmers, apes are either killed for bushmeat, traditional

RIGHT  In the 1990s, sanctuaries have proliferated in an attempt to keep up with the need to re-home great apes rescued from illegal trade. This chimpanzee is living out its days at the Sweethaven Sanctuary in the Oil Palm Conservancy in Kenya.

PAGE 46 Since the 1980s, sanctuaries have proliferated in an attempt to keep up with the need to re-home great apes rescued from illegal trade. This chimpanzee is living out its days at the Sweethaven Sanctuary in the Oil Palm Conservancy in Kenya.

LEFT  Commercial ‘zoos’ in Asia, such as this one in Thailand, use great apes to make money, which is against the rules for legitimate zoos that belong to organisations such as the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums.
In 2000, the Pan African Sanctuary Alliance (PASA) was founded in Cameroon and has thirty-two member sanctuaries throughout Africa. In 2007, PASA and the Club des Zoos de France (CZDF) worked with authorities in Cameroon to rescue 10 gorillas from a private facility in the country. PASA sanctuaries in Africa also look after chimpanzees, gorillas and bonobos. PASA sanctuaries in Africa also look after chimpanzees, gorillas and bonobos.

Ammann, Drori and Pasqualini all worked with information obtained from witnesses who had previously admitted to dealing actually involved the transport of chimpanzees, until China joined the CITES Trade Database as legitimate exports-imports. After Ammann and Pasqualini’s discovery of the extent of the illegal trade, CITES 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 delegation, former head of 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 delegation, former head of the CITES Secretariat 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 deceased Drori told me about it at the CITES COP where he’d been hoping to announce the arrest.

As renowned Pulitzer Prize-winning author and scientist Jared Diamond pointed out, humans are biologically the ‘Third Chimpanzee’

Animals publicised the fact that the deal 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 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 deceased Drori told me about it at the CITES COP where he’d been hoping to announce the arrest.

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 be photographed with them. This can only happen if they know that it leads to ape trafficking, the law and the 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.

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