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The numbers behind the Lost Apes

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Over the years, humans have developed a fascination with the great apes which has unfortunately resulted in the capturing, selling and killing of these beautiful creatures for use in circuses, zoos, medicine and even as pets or bushmeat.

In the September 2013 issue of Africa Geographic (page 46) **Dan Stiles** looks into the shocking situation behind Africa's lost apes. He shares the story of Karl Ammann and his years spent investigating the illegal ape trade through its corrupt and abusive journey. A little known or talked about trade, the stories and details behind its troubled history are almost akin to the slave trade of old and Dan gives

great insight into this human fascination with our closest animal cousins.

The great ape trade has seen a mass turnaround over the years, and although there is some light at the end of the tunnel, here are some of the shocking numbers that put it all into perspective:

More than **1 800** cases of trafficked chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas and orangutans were registered between **2005** and **2011**. A fraction of the real number, as a large amount go undetected.

It is possible that as many as **22 218** wild great apes were in fact lost to the illegal trade between **2005** and **2011** with chimpanzees forming **64%** of this number.

This means that about **3 000** apes are lost to trafficking each year; about **4.4 – 5.8%** of the total population.

During the **18th** and **19th** century great apes became increasingly popular as attractions in zoos and circuses. Come the **20th** century gorillas were so prized they could fetch up to **US\$100 000** each and gorillas illegally sold to a Malaysian zoo in **2002** reportedly went for **US\$400 000** each.

The **1930s** saw a boom of chimpanzees being used as test subjects and this trade grew so rapidly that between the **1950s** and the **1980s** Sierra Leone alone exported more than **2 000** chimpanzees.

Since **2007**, orders from zoos and private owners in Asia have spurred the export of apes. Over **130** chimpanzees and **10** gorillas have been trafficked under falsified permits from Guinea alone. **69** chimpanzees left Guinea in **2010** alone, all destined for Chinese zoos or safari parks.

Studies suggest that Africa's great ape habitat is currently being destroyed at a rapid rate of **2-5%** annually. Projections estimate that by **2030** less than **10%** of the apes' current territory will remain if the decline continues at this current rate.

A poacher could get **US\$50-100** for a live chimpanzee while a middleman often puts a mark-up of up to **400%** on that for resale.

In **1995** the Eastern Lowland gorilla or Grauer's gorilla had an estimated population of **17 000**. Due to forest loss, illegal mining, bushmeat hunting, and the capture and trade of infant apes these estimates suggest that now only between **2 000** and **10 000** individuals remain.

For every live captive infant chimpanzee rescued, **5 to 10** chimpanzees are killed.

Unfortunately law enforcement efforts are struggling to keep up with this illegal trade. Between **2005** and **2011** a meagre **27** arrests were made in Africa and Asia in connection with great ape trade and **1/4** of the arrests were never prosecuted.



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But there is light at the end of the tunnel. The good news is that since the 1970s there has been a significant halt in this exporting of great apes for entertainment and research and the last chimpanzee believed to have been imported from Africa to an American zoo arrived in 1976. Today, the legal great ape trade has virtually stopped with reputable zoos now exchanging apes as part of breeding programmes rather than selling and buying them. However the illegal trade remains, supplying a demand for apes in the medicine, curio and pet industries, particularly in the Middle East and Asia and posing imminent threats on the survival of these species.

- Source: [UN Report: "Stolen Apes"](#)

