

# CONAKRY CONNECTION LESSONS NOT LEARNED

Part three by *Dan Stiles*

**DAN STILES**



Began in anthropology with a Ph.D. from UC Berkeley, Dan Stiles has studied natural resource management and wildlife trade from the level of hunter-gatherer up to senior government and international organization official. He has worked in academia, for the United Nations as staff and consultant and for various NGOs such as IUCN, TRAFFIC, Save the Elephants and many more. He has lived in Kenya almost continuously since 1977.

**“I firmly believe the fact that a determined and criminal attempt to supply animals illegally taken from the wild was foiled sends a very clear message to those who may wish to trade illicitly in wildlife that CITES is determined that they will not succeed... I hope...that the gorillas...can ... help graphically illustrate the risks posed to endangered species by illegal trade in wildlife... I believe that it has provided valuable lessons from which everyone involved in CITES must learn.” –**

Willem Wijnstekers, former CITES Secretary-General, July 2003

Wijnstekers made this statement in response to the infamous ‘Taiping Four’ gorilla smuggling case. In January 2002, four infant Western Lowland gorillas were shipped from Nigeria via South Africa to the Taiping Zoo in Malaysia. The Taiping Zoo claimed the gorillas were part of an animal exchange



PHOTO BY: DAN STILES

Ammann decries the fact that these supposed protectors of apes – Drori, Cress and Redmond – will not speak out to rescue the hundreds of great apes that have been illegally imported by China, and more are on the way.

programme with Nigeria’s Ibadan Zoo, and that the gorillas were captive-bred, even though the Ibadan Zoo’s only living gorilla was an elderly female and the last male had been stuffed after dying and was on public display. In reality, a wildlife dealer in Nigeria had trafficked the wild gorillas from Cameroon and reportedly received a combined price of USD 1.6 million for them. The gorillas were transported under valid CITES permits with the C Source Code. After a protracted effort, the four gorillas were returned to Cameroon in December 2007 to take up residence at the Limbe Wildlife Center.

Given the Conakry Connection case described in SWARA (Oct.-Dec. 2013 and Jan.-March 2014) in which over 130 wild chimpanzees and 10 gorillas

were shipped from Guinea to China with C Source codes – indicating they were bred in captivity – it would seem the lesson was not learned. Over 10 years after the Taiping Four, gorillas and other great apes are still being illegally trafficked out of Africa with fraudulent CITES C Source Codes. The major difference between the Taiping Four case and the Conakry Connection is that the recipient country, China, and the CITES Secretariat are obstructing repatriation of the trafficked apes back to Africa, insisting that China carried out the imports in accordance with CITES regulations. This is not the case, as Karl Ammann and Swiss NGO Pax Animalis demonstrated in detail in a published report (<http://www.pax-animalis.org/downloads>).

PHOTO BY: KARL AMMANN



**A baby chimpanzee whose mother was killed for bushmeat seeks affection from a villager who will sell him into slavery when a buyer can be found.**

After more than a year of trying to get the CITES Secretariat, the China CITES office and UN-GRASP (Great Apes Survival Partnership) to take action on those involved in the illegal ape trafficking and to repatriate the apes, the only thing that has been done is a CITES suspension of trade for Guinea – but no action against China.

Karl Ammann is losing patience: ‘All of the organizations that are supposed to be protecting great apes from trafficking – CITES, GRASP, LAGA (Last Great Ape), JGI (Jane Goodall Institute), Ape Alliance – none of them are speaking out! Why? Are they afraid of offending China?’

At the London Conference on the Illegal Wildlife Trade in February, sponsored by the UK Government and the British royals, Princes Charles,

William and Harry, all of the above-mentioned organizations were present, along with a Chinese delegation. Yet nothing was mentioned concerning the trafficking of the Guinea great apes. The final Declaration lists a number of commitments to stop illegal wildlife trade, but apparently none apply to great apes.

Worse, further investigations of ape trafficking from Guinea and elsewhere in Africa have turned up additional cases involving other networks and more species and countries, including more chimps to China in 2013!

Another major trafficking network involving Guinea was discovered by the seemingly innocuous mention in the CITES Secretariat analysis of Guinea export permits of two Appendix I bonobos (aka pygmy chimpanzee) being

exported from Guinea to Armenia in 2011. The CITES Secretariat did not follow up on it, but Karl Ammann did. Working with Armenian investigative journalist Kristine Aghalaryan, they tracked down one of the bonobos to a private safari park called Jambo Park, located in Dzoragbyur. The large exotic animal complex, open for visitors, is owned by wealthy businessman Artyom Vardanyan. In a local television show guiding viewers through his collection he held a bonobo in his arms the entire time (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dn9LzUA5tas>), boasting that he had paid a ‘large sum’ for the bonobo.

When Aghalaryan interviewed Vardanyan for the local newspaper Hetq, he told her that the bonobo had been imported legally with CITES permits using the now notorious C Source Code. He produced a permit copy showing West Africa Zoo in Conakry, Guinea, as the exporter and Zoo Fauna Art as the importer. After checking, there is no West Africa Zoo registered in Guinea. Zoo Fauna Art is owned by Artur Khachatryan, a wild animal trader who imports from Africa and Asia, often using the UAE as a transit country, then distributes to Russia and elsewhere.

Speaking in the third person, he told the journalist, ‘Mr. Khachatryan is building the biggest zoo in all of Eastern Europe.’ He is currently breeding exotic animals there and he stores imported animals for export later on. Khachatryan boasted that he could get any animal he wanted with little difficulty.

Through interviews and obtaining a list of animals imported to Armenia provided by the State Revenue Committee, Aghalaryan established that at least five Appendix I bonobos and seven chimpanzees were imported in 2011 and 2012. None of these are reported in the CITES Trade Database. Appendix I species cannot be traded commercially.

Since bonobos only live in the wild in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ammann informed the CITES office in Kinshasa about the illegal

exports. The DRC CITES office then contacted the CITES Secretariat about it and a representative at the Secretariat replied that ‘... there are no bonobos in Armenia and third parties should stop sensationalizing this issue’. This statement seems inexplicable given that the Secretariat’s own analysis listed two bonobos in Guinea export permits they had collected themselves in Conakry in 2011 (see SWARA Jan-March 2014).

Likewise, when the Armenia CITES office was contacted, the national head Siranush Muradyan replied, ‘You have incorrect information... CITES Armenia has never confirmed the import to Armenia of the species of primates included in Appendix I’.

Although CITES officials do not seem interested in stopping this trafficking network, or even of acknowledging its existence, INTERPOL has become involved and they have connected Khatchatryan with traffickers of African animals using the UAE and Armenia as transit sites for distribution in Russia and elsewhere. The Armenian police have indicted Khatchatryan with criminal contraband charges.

At the end of January this year three chimpanzees were rescued from the house of an animal trader near Kolkata, India. Papers indicated they came from Nigeria. The Times of India spoke with other wildlife traders who gave them information indicating that ape trafficking from Africa to India was more common than previously thought. Here is another smuggling network to investigate.

Jane Goodall, known for her studies of wild chimpanzees at the Gombe Stream National Park in Tanzania, reacted by stating in a communication to TRAFFIC India, ‘Horrible story. There are so many animals stolen from their mothers and sent to far away places. Imagine their fear... These images keep me awake. And they keep me fighting. Thank goodness for the individuals and organisations that are working to rescue chimpanzees and other innocent animals caught up in the cruel trafficking of wildlife.’

Karl Ammann reacted to her statement with, ‘What individuals and organizations are rescuing chimpanzees? No one I know of except Sean (Whyte) and I have lifted a finger to rescue the apes trafficked to China, including Jane Goodall.’ (Sean Whyte of Nature Alert is campaigning to shame CITES and GRASP into taking action.) In fact, it looks like the situation for apes could

**THE GREAT APE SLAVE TRADE FROM AFRICA TO CHINA –**



**From this**  
*Made possible by corrupt CITES officials in Africa.*



**to this**  
*(her mother having been murdered to order)*

**THIS ILLEGAL TRADE WAS CONDONED BY COMPLICIT CITES OFFICIALS IN CHINA**



**.... and eventually to this life in China, only once a lot of money has been paid to illegal wildlife traders.**

**AND NOW THE CITES SECRETARIAT ARE ALLEGED TO BE ATTEMPTING (UNSUCCESSFULLY) TO COVER UP THE LARGEST EVER ILLEGAL TRADE IN GREAT APES.**  
*Why would the secretariat protect illegal wildlife traders – criminals?*

**CITES ISN'T WORKING – IS IT?**

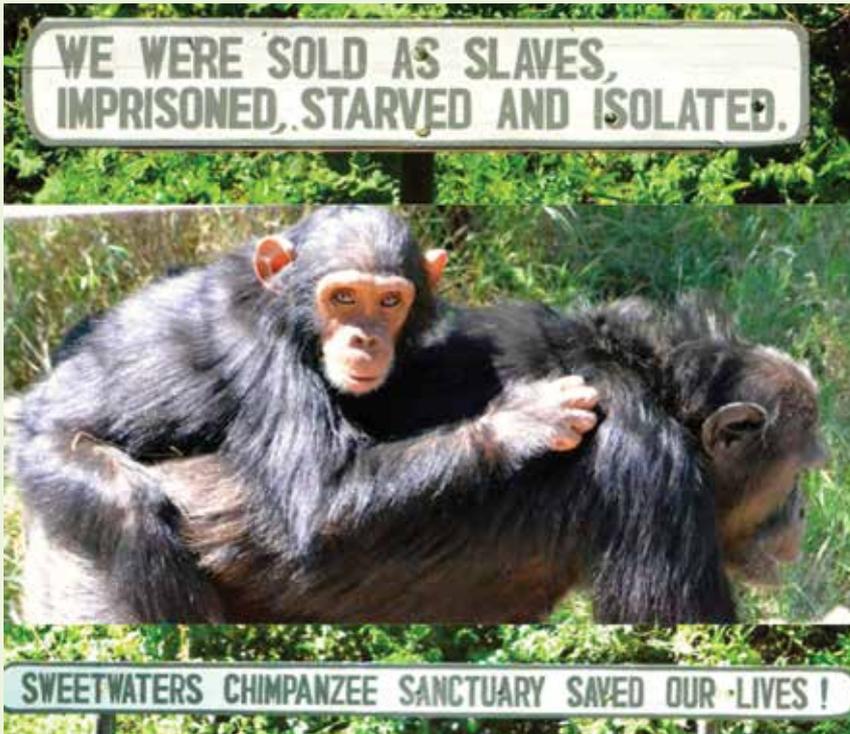
POSTER BY SEAN WHYTE

Sean Whyte of Nature Alert is campaigning to have the illegally trafficked apes repatriated from China to Africa.

get worse. Ammann interviewed Leonard Muamba-Kanda, head of the DRC CITES office, and Cosma Wilungula, director of the DRC national parks and the CITES Scientific Authority, on camera at the CITES conference in Bangkok last year. In the course of the interview the two senior wildlife protection officials showed themselves to be remarkably

familiar with the ape trafficking details and who was involved. Muamba-Kanda even named the trafficker who had smuggled apes out of the DRC to Guinea, and described the route all the way to China. When asked why he didn't arrest the man, both Muamba-Kanda and Wilungula sang in unison that they would lay a trap for him. The ape shipment in question occurred four years ago, and the trap has yet to be sprung.

PHOTO BY: DAN STILES



Sweetwaters Chimpanzee Sanctuary on OI Pejeta Conservancy is ready to take 30 of the China chimpanzees, if they can be repatriated.

Also during the interview the two Congolese officials revealed that they had been to China to discuss ‘scientific exchanges’ of chimpanzees, bonobos and gorillas with China. Apparently, a prominent zoo in southern China, that also has an amusement park featuring apes, has already arranged to exchange two white tigers for two gorillas from the DRC. Ammann sees this as a cover for shipping off apes to China under the guise of ‘scientific exchange’. Many more of all ape varieties could follow in their footsteps.

As Ammann puts it, ‘Replacing the C scam with the S scam.’ Chimpanzees are worth about US\$ 20,000 each and gorillas considerably more, so it could be quite a lucrative deal for whomever is involved in supplying the apes.

If the scheme goes ahead, it could make the Taiping Four look like child’s play. How about the Guangzhou Four Hundred? CITES, where are you? ●

## LOCAL LAW ENFORCEMENT

What are great ape range States in Africa doing to stop the illegal ape poaching and trafficking? Unfortunately, almost nothing. Local law enforcement – police services, wildlife protection agencies, Customs officers – rarely arrest offenders caught with ape bushmeat, trophies or live specimens. It is more common for agents of those services to take a bribe to allow the offender to go on his/her way, or to confiscate the specimens and consume or resell them. And, as this series has demonstrated, national CITES offices are more likely to facilitate rather than control illegal international trade.

The Last Great Ape organization (LAGA), based in Cameroon, started up a little over a decade ago under the leadership of Ofir Drori, an ex-military Israeli turned wildlife activist. His single-minded goal was to fight corruption and put wildlife traffickers behind bars. When I first met Ofir in a Yaoundé hotel in 2010, he was despairing of being able to continue his fight, as his funding had dried up. His staff were working on a

voluntary basis. His drive and persistence won out in the end, as eventually did he not only find funding for LAGA, but several clones grew up in Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon, Guinea and Togo. Today, they make up EAGLE (Eco Activism for Governance and Law Enforcement).

EAGLE does not focus on great apes, they have a wide net, but certainly great ape live and product trafficking turn up fairly often in their activity reports and press releases.

Unfortunately, none of the traffickers that smuggle apes and other protected species overseas have been arrested. A well-publicized case of a trafficker that supplies apes to the international traffickers, Ousmane Diallo in Guinea, has ended up with Diallo out of prison even though he was convicted.

The bottom line is that law enforcement in ape range States in Africa is not working, in spite of efforts by outsiders to prod correct action. EAGLE even pays ‘incentive bonuses’ to law enforcement personnel simply to carry out their duties, competing against the traffickers’ bribes, but after an arrest is made, rarely does any offender above the

destitute petty trader level ever go to prison.

The only hope is at the demand end of the commodity chain. Those paying the money to import apes must be driven out of the business. People such as Artur Khachatryan in Armenia and the Golden Land Animal Trade Company in China, the latter boasting they import most of the wild animals into China. And the public have to be made aware that paying money to watch a chimpanzee ride a bicycle dressed as a clown is subsidising ape killing and kidnap in African forests. People should boycott live performances of great apes (and other species caught in the wild) in amusement facilities.

It will not be an easy task, especially with the so-called protectors of apes and other wildlife species more concerned about the next conference presentation or fundraiser event. But if our closest biological relatives are to remain in forests rather than cages we have to try.