

Brief Communication:

Toward Taking the Front Seat in African Great Ape Conservation

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BACKGROUND

Africa is home to four of the six extant species of great apes: bonobo (*Pan paniscus*), chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes*), Western gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla*) and Eastern gorilla (*Gorilla beringei*). Across their range these animals, our closest relatives, are facing increasing threat of extinction (Kormos *et al.* 2003; Bakarr *et al.* 2004; Hicks *et al.* 2010; Plumptre *et al.* 2010; Morgan *et al.* 2011; ICCN & IUCN 2012; Mittermeier *et al.* 2012; Dunn *et al.* 2014), their fate highly depending on the anthropomorphic pressure. Many hold the view that the long term conservation of African great apes lies largely in the hands of Africans (Adams & McShane 1997; Nelson 2012). Fulfilling this obligation requires that Africans, especially upcoming researchers and conservationists, must become more actively involved and even lead efforts to protect what still remains of African great apes and their habitat.

While it is encouraging that an increasing number of young Africans are taking greater interest in great ape research and conservation, and making valuable contributions, a lack of information sharing and coordination limits effectiveness. In an effort to address this problem, a “Gorillas Across Africa” workshop was held in 2011 in Ruhija, Uganda, organized by Dr. Martha Robbins of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology and Dr. Richard Bergl of North Carolina Zoo (Imong *et al.* 2011). This workshop brought together early to mid-

career professional researchers and conservationists from gorilla range countries and provided a platform for them to share their work and develop professional relationships that would promote gorilla research and conservation. Building on the success of this first effort, a second workshop was held in Musanze, Rwanda, in 2012, with increased participation (Ndagijimana *et al.* 2013). With growing interest in the forum, the “Gorillas Across Africa” workshop evolved into “Apes Across Africa” workshop which was held from 26th to 30th of May 2014 at the Lesieux Hotel in Fort Portal, Uganda. This broader meeting, organized by Cleveland Metro-parks Zoo, Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International, Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology and North Carolina Zoo, and partially funded by Arcus Foundation, was attended by 48 African great ape researchers and conservationists from 14 range countries: Cameroon, Central Africa Republic (CAR), Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Gabon, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Nigeria, Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Tanzania and Uganda (Figure 1).

WORKSHOP

The workshop was opened by the Deputy Director of Conservation at the Uganda Wildlife Authority, Mr. Charles Tumwesigye (the 2013



Figure 1. Participants at the 2014 Apes Across Workshop, Fort Portal, Uganda. Photograph by O. Doumbé.

recipient of National Geographic Buffet Award for leadership in conservation) who gave an overview of wildlife conservation in Uganda with a focus on great apes. While acknowledging that many challenges remain, he also highlighted the success recorded in great ape conservation in Uganda in the past two decades, which saw an increase in the number of great apes. Other presentations highlighted conservation education projects targeting children, and ape-based tourism as areas where successes have been recorded (Figure 2). The

increasing habituation of chimpanzees and gorillas for tourism in the DRC, Republic of Congo, the CAR, Uganda and Tanzania was cited as indication of the success of great ape-based tourism in Africa. Revenues from great ape viewing and tracking have provided significant incomes for the management of protected areas, especially in East Africa, as well as the populations surrounding these protected areas. Bold law enforcement initiatives such as LAGA (Last Great Ape organization) were identified as holding promise for improving protection of African great



Figure 2. Mr. Charles Tumwesigye, Deputy Director of Conservation, Uganda Wildlife Authority gives the opening lecture of the meeting. Also note that some participants are wearing headphones as simultaneous French/English translation was provided to help bridge language boundaries among the participants from 14 countries. Photograph by O. Doumbé.

apes. In total, 38 presentations were made covering a wide range of topics, including:

- Research, surveys and monitoring
- Threats, disease, and health
- Tourism and community-based conservation
- Conservation education and capacity building
- Law enforcement and protected area management

From the presentations a number of challenges to great ape conservation in Africa were identified and discussed, affording participants the opportunity to learn about how shared challenges were addressed in other regions or sites. While a few of the challenges identified were region-specific, many were shared throughout the range of African great apes:

- Bushmeat hunting and trade, and associated disease risks
- Unfavorable political climate and unrest
- Corruption and poor governance
- Weak law enforcement
- Rapidly growing human population
- Poor infrastructure (e.g., poor state of roads limiting access to conservation sites)
- Oil exploration, logging and extraction of other natural resources
- Increasing habituation of great apes for tourism
- Lack of harmonized research methods
- Low capacity for great ape research and conservation
- Human-great ape conflict (crop raiding, attacks, and disease transmission between great apes and humans)
- Increasing isolation of protected areas (need for intervention in surrounding areas)
- Lack of opportunities for alternative livelihood activities for local communities and negative attitude to conservation

It was recommended for future meetings to focus on a specific identified challenge and conduct a more detailed analysis of it with a view to identifying practical solutions and making concrete recommendations to policy makers and conservation managers.

FIELD VISITS

A field trip to the Makerere University Biological Field Station (MUBFS) in Kanyawara was organized. This provided a great opportunity for participants to learn about the value of long-term research for conservation. The visit was especially useful for participants from countries or sites where long-

term research such as that conducted at MUBFS has yet to be established. The visit also provided the opportunity for participants to observe some diurnal primates of Kibale National Park including Western guereza (*Colobus guereza occidentalis*), olive baboons (*Papio anubis*), Schmidt's red-tailed monkey (*Cercopithecus ascanius schmidtii*) in their natural habitat. During another field trip, some participants tracked habituated chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes schweinfurthii*). The experience served as motivation for participants from regions where protected areas are less well managed and direct observations of wildlife are rare. Participants also visited the Bigodi community forest managed by the Kibale Association for Rural and Environment Development (KAFRED) for conservation and community development through tourism. At Bigodi village, participants visited three community projects implemented under the Uganda and North Carolina International Teaching for the Environment (UNITE) program. The first was a project testing different fuel-wood efficient cooking stoves for adoption by households (Figure 3). An encouraging number of households in Bigodi village have already adopted these improved cooking stoves, requiring less firewood. If widely adopted, these stoves could drastically reduce the fuel-wood needs of local communities and therefore ease pressure on the park. The second was a beekeeping project aimed at building the capacity of the local people to produce honey for both household consumption and income generation (Figure 4). The third, called "keyhole garden", was a backyard-gardening project aimed at reducing land requirements and improving crop yield (Figure 5).

At Bigodi Secondary School participants met a "Great Ape Super Hero", a highly motivated student of the school so recognized for his exemplary active participation and interest in great ape conservation education activities around Kibale National Park who is helping to inspire other students. With increasing human pressure on great ape habitat, it is critical to build the capacity of local people and to support them to engage in alternative livelihood activities. The knowledge gained from visiting these projects would help participants develop similar projects at their sites.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

Encouraging results of new surveys on poorly known ape populations [such as the critically endangered Cross River gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla*



Figure 3. A demonstration fuel-efficient stove in Bigodi village being promoted in communities around Kibale National Park to reduce to reduce pressure on the Park. Photograph by O. Doumbé



Figure 4. A beehive at the Bigodi Primary School bee-keeping project. Photograph by O. Doumbé.



Figure 5. “Keyhole Garden” at Bogodi village, Uganda. Photograph by O. Doumbé

diehli, Figure 6) and the Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes ellioti*) and other new findings of their ecology, behavior and health were presented by enthusiastic young African primatologists. Passionate presentations from representatives of community-based organizations, such as the young Mbou-Mon-Tour NGO in the DRC, also demonstrated the growing interest of Africa's new generation for the conservation of great apes.

Another positive outcome from this workshop was a proposal by participants to form a professional group or society to promote African great ape research and conservation. Such a group/society was described as necessary to provide a platform for building and strengthening professional relationships and collaborations to advance great ape research and conservation in Africa. A discussion about forming a continental primate society styled after the International Primatological Society (IPS) was also started at the IPS conference in Cancun, Mexico in 2012 in recognition of the poor representation of Africans at the conference and, therefore, a lack of a strong African voice. Perhaps these two proposed groups could be merged since they both would serve the same overall goal. The formation and establishment of such a group would greatly benefit great ape conservation in Africa.

If the passion, energy, interest and enthusiasm displayed at this Apes Across Africa Workshop is anything to go by, one could say Africans are hungry for a front seat in the efforts to save their heritage and some of the world's most magnificent creatures.

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Figure 6. A Cross River Gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla diehli*) in the Afi Mountain Wildlife Sanctuary in Nigeria. Photograph courtesy of WCS Nigeria Program (camera trap).

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