



COVID-19 and great apes

Advisory for extractive industry personnel, applicable to energy, extractives, transport infrastructure, agro-industry and other projects operating in great ape habitats

Section on Great Apes & ARRC Task Force

IUCN SSC Primate Specialist Group

Effective: until further notice

Because of the physiological, anatomical and genetic similarities between humans and non-human apes, great apes (chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas and orangutans) are susceptible to disease transfer from humans (and vice versa). Disease has been one of the greatest threats to great apes in the last 25 years. The Ebola virus for example, resulted in the deaths of an estimated one-third of the world's gorillas and chimpanzees. Other diseases, including polio-like viruses, monkey pox, anthrax, tuberculosis and respiratory illnesses have been transmitted from people to great apes and have also caused deaths in great apes. Although COVID-19 has not yet been observed in great apes, there is abundant scientific evidence that great apes are susceptible to infection with SARS-CoV-2, the virus responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, it is well known that great apes are susceptible to many other human respiratory viruses that cause only mild disease in people but can kill a great ape. For this reason, any human activity in great ape habitat can put the apes at risk. We therefore strongly recommend that all such activities be conducted in a way that minimizes disease transmission risks from humans to great apes.

Numerous projects and facilities in various sectors (including energy, extractives, transport infrastructure, agro-industry, and associated infrastructure) are planned or operating in great ape habitat across Africa and Asia (<https://www.stateoftheapes.com/>). We are reaching out to companies associated with such projects and operations to provide advice on minimizing the risks of spreading COVID-19 and other infectious diseases to great apes.

The most effective measure for preventing the introduction of infectious disease to great ape populations is to avoid any interaction between humans and the apes, even indirect interactions (e.g., simply entering ape habitats or interacting with local people who themselves enter ape habitat in search of natural resources).

It is crucial that everyone is aware that anyone can transmit viruses to other people or great apes before they even show signs of disease (incubation period, healthy carriers) and that the COVID-19 virus can remain active on some surfaces for several days. Saliva, sweat, nasal secretions, sputum, urine, faeces and objects that have been contaminated with these bodily fluids are important vectors of virus transmission. If they end up in the environment, great apes can become infected by walking on or touching them.

In general, exploration, construction and operations in great ape habitat should adhere to guidance detailed in the IUCN Best Practices for great ape conservation (<https://www.iucngreatapes.org/best-practice-guidelines>).

Every day before work, all personnel should be checked for symptoms, including fever by measuring body temperature, and reminded of applicable guidance to reduce risks of disease transmission to their fellow workers, local people and great apes (see below).

No person who is clinically ill, feels unwell, or who has been in contact with anybody ill in the preceding 14 days is allowed in great ape habitat.

COVID-19 vaccination will provide protection against COVID-19, while the protection measures described below remain critical for preventing transmission of other infectious diseases and should not be relaxed.

Install hand-washing facilities at sites and supply hand sanitizer – a disinfectant spray (such as chlorhexidine), gel or wipes – to all individuals entering great ape habitat.

Ensure that all individuals entering habitat of great apes are wearing clean clothing and disinfected footwear.

Reinforce instructions that people who need to sneeze or cough should cover their mouths and noses with the crook of their elbows rather than their hands; if they need to sneeze or cough they should immediately leave the area.

Forbid spitting and nose blowing/clearing on the ground.

Prohibit smoking in ape habitat due to the risk of disease transmission via contaminated cigarette butts.

Faeces should either be carried out of great ape habitat, or be buried in a minimum 30 cm-deep hole to minimize the potential for direct contact by great apes.

Do not discard any waste in the environment, but carry it out and dispose in specific bins provided.

Avoid great apes entirely – if seen, heard or smelled, do not approach.

If a great ape (or other wild animal) is found dead, even if it is at an advanced stage of decomposition, workers must follow these instructions:

- Never touch or handle the carcass
- Keep a minimum distance of 2 metres
- Immediately alert competent authorities

Companies are advised to enforce sanitation measures in camps and implement protocols for waste disposal, including food.

Watertight portable toilets or other appropriate facilities should be available on site for the use of all staff. No one should go to the toilet in the bush.

Site managers should ensure that employees are well-informed about emerging infectious diseases, ideally by implementing education and health programmes for staff who operate in great ape habitat.

For the full recommendations on disease prevention measures relating to great apes and their habitats (published in English, French and Bahasa Indonesia), please see:

- IUCN Best Practice Guidelines for Health Monitoring and Disease Control in Great Ape Populations <https://portals.iucn.org/library/node/45793>
- IUCN Best Practice Guidelines for Tourism with Great Apes <https://portals.iucn.org/library/node/9636>

See also: <https://www.arrctaskforce.org/informationaldocs>

For information about the ARRC (Avoidance, Reduction, Restoration and Compensation of negative impacts on apes from energy, extractive and associated infrastructure projects) Task Force, please contact us via: <https://www.arrctaskforce.org/>