

Plight of the bush-meat babies

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Orphaned primates have become part of an illegal and lucrative trade, which has recently come under the spotlight. Whilst the problem is not unusual in other African countries, it seems particularly acute in Cameroon, a country which still harbours a viable population of wild chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*) and contains about 80% of the remaining habitat of the endangered drill (*Mandrillus leucohaeus*). Financial support has recently enabled the first primate sanctuary in Cameroon to be established.

Peter Jenkins and Liza Gadsby, co-founders of the non-profit making conservation organisation Pandrillus, have worked for 9 years in Nigeria, developing a rescue, rehabilitation and breeding centre for drills in Calabar. This endangered species has received the World Conservation Union's highest priority for African primates in the *Red Data Book*, because of their low numbers and habitat loss. During their survey of drills, Peter and Liza frequently crossed the border into Cameroon and came to realise the plight of many other species of primates there, in particular the chimpanzee. Peter persuaded the Cameroon Ministry of Environment and Forests to let him develop the first primate sanctuary in Cameroon, at an impoverished zoo in Limbe in the South-West Province of the country. Living conditions for primates at the Sanctuary have greatly improved over the last 2 years, thanks to direct financial donations from Pandrillus and support from Monkeyworld (England), the International Primate Protection League (UK), the International Zoo Veterinary Group (UK) and Chessington Zoo, together with local contributions of cash, animal food and building materials. It is the Sanctuary's policy to employ members of the local population as staff, and two British volunteers are training the Cameroonian keepers, in order to improve their caretaking skills (Figure 1).

The Limbe Sanctuary now houses 40 endemic primates. These include all diurnal primate species found on Mount Cameroon and five endangered species: the lowland gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*), drill, red-eared guenon (*Ceropithorus erythrous*), Preuss' guenon (*C. preussi*), and the chimpanzee. There are now over 20 chimpanzees at the Sanctuary, with at least one new arrival every month (Figure 2).

Not all survive, because of the treatment they have previously endured; many have been chained or caged in hotels and bars as sideshows, where patrons fed them beer and cigarettes. Others have been kept as pets by private owners, who are often unwilling or unable to care for them after infancy. Some of the owners are persuaded, and some forced by Ministry officials, to part with their 'attractions'.

Chimpanzees

The situation of the Limbe chimpanzee is only the tip of the iceberg; at least another 60 chimpanzees are *known* to be held illegally in Cameroon. Many conservation agencies choose to ignore this captive primate population and argue that the resources needed to deal with the situation would be better spent on protecting the natural habitat of their wild counterparts. The problems are inextricably linked however, and these captive animals represent a resource and an opportunity which could be used for conservation education and awareness. In fact, of the 25 African countries in which chimpanzees were endemic, they are thought to be extinct in at least four. Of the remaining habitat countries, Cameroon is among the most important in terms of viable population and long-term conservation potential. There is no current estimate of the Cameroon chimpanzee population, but numbers could be well over 10 000. Chimpanzees are found in all provinces of the country except the North and the extreme North. They have been eliminated from fringe habitats and those remaining are becoming increasingly fragmented by agriculture, rural development and logging. Timber extraction is both reducing the intact habitat still available to wildlife and making accessible to the hunter those areas of forest that were previously free from human exploitation.



Figure 1. Christopher Nji Tem, a local Cameroonian, was employed solely to care for this female lowland gorilla, Nyango. Nyango was taken from her mother when very young, and so requires constant human companionship, until she adjusts to being with other gorillas.

Today, hunting is mostly commercial and chimpanzee meat ('bush-meat') is sold for cash. The hunter no longer relies on his catch to feed his family, but kills as much as possible for the market. Chimpanzees are legally protected by some hunting and firearm restrictions, but the Cameroon Government lacks sufficient staff, transport and equipment to enforce the hunting laws and there is little incentive for those responsible for enforcing this protection to carry out their duties. As a result, chimpanzees and other endangered species receive little or no effective protection, even within the national parks and fauna reserves. This enormous pressure from hunting is reflected in the declining chimpanzee population in all known habitat areas.

As in their other major habitat countries, the combination of a substantial wild population and uncontrolled hunting has led to an abundance of orphaned, wild-born, captive chimpanzees. Live infant chimpanzees are not normally the hunters' objective, but are the inevitable by-products of hunting for bush-meat, and are captured when nursing females are killed. A system of fees and permits to keep protected species in captivity is supposed to regulate conditions, but it is rarely adhered to. Instead there is an illegal trade in orphan chimpanzees, gorillas and many other primate and non-primate species, involving both Cameroon nationals and foreigners.

New premises

The scale of the problem means that the Limbe Sanctuary can offer only an interim solution. Phase Two of the project is to find a permanent sanctuary site, for which several locations have already been investigated. The most viable one consists of a pair of forested islands in the Sanaga River, which are already part of the Sanaga Faunal Reserve. These islands are ideal, since chimpanzees cannot swim and so no method of restraint is necessary. There are no wild chimpanzees there, and the depleted native fauna will represent negligible competition for existing food supplies, although further botanical surveys are required to assess the availability and diversity of food.

Although the provision of a sanctuary for chimpanzees was the basic aim of the Limbe project, it gradually became



Figure 2. This young chimpanzee, Seko, arrived at the Sanctuary severely traumatised and suffering from gunshot wounds, having been confiscated from a hunter's camp. He is now fully recovered and has become a very social individual within the chimpanzee nursery.

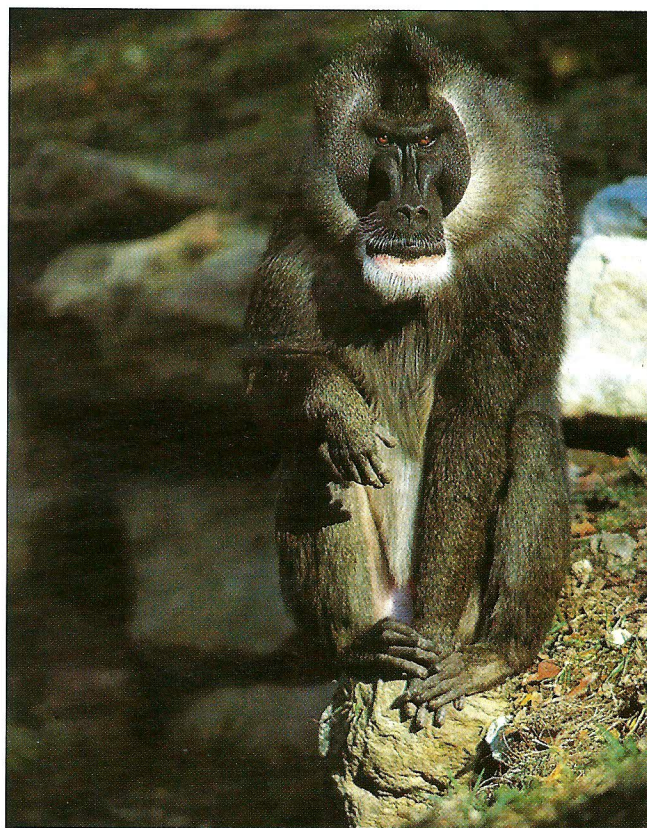


Figure 3. West African drill (*Papio leucophaeus*). (Photo: Z. Leszczynski/Oxford Scientific Films.)

apparent that the same problems were facing both the drill (Figure 3) and the lowland gorilla. The low numbers of these species in captivity in the past has hidden the true situation; the results of Peter and Liza's survey of drills in Nigeria, which is currently continuing in Cameroon, shows that this species may not survive into the next century without special attention. As mentioned earlier, as yet only drills are listed in the 'endangered' primate special category in the World Conservation Union's *Red Data Book*. Cameroon, which contains about 80% of remaining drill habitats, obviously has a crucial role to play.

The Limbe Zoo was seen as an ideal place to establish a refuge, because the Zoo and Limbe itself receive thousands of visitors each year and so is well suited to promote both the Sanctuary and wildlife conservation in general. The Sanctuary also serves as a conservation education facility, complementary to the adjacent Limbe Botanic Garden. Nevertheless, only when the Cameroonians themselves begin to see the value of their native wildlife and its habitat will a glimmer of hope emerge for those fortunate individuals that still roam free.

If you would like more information about this project or would like to support the work of Pandrillus, please contact The International Primate Protection League (UK), 116 Judd Street, London WC1H 9BR, England. Tel 0171 833 7227. Fax 0171 278 3317.

Further reading

- Gadsby E. (1994) Meet the drill. *International Primate Protection League News*, 21 (3), 3-6.
 Jenkins P. D. and Wanzie C. S. (1994) Plans for a new chimpanzee sanctuary. *International Primate Protection League 'Monkey Guardian'*, 1, 2.

Kay Farmer is a post-graduate in Animal Behaviour and Animal Welfare. In 1994 she initiated the establishment of the Limbe Sanctuary, supported by Pandrillus and the International Primate Protection League (UK).