

# Sharing landscapes with wildlife may be unrealistic

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Chimpanzees in Uganda.

(Phys.org) -- Expecting wild animals to thrive in increasingly fragmented habitats alongside a growing human population may be unrealistic, say scientists.

But exactly how people and large mammals like chimpanzees should live together long-term in shared landscapes remains largely unresolved.

UK researchers surveyed 134 people in 12 villages across the Hoima District of Uganda to understand how they felt about sharing the region with [chimps](#). The landscape is a mosaic of farmland and unprotected [forest fragments](#).

'If we're going to peacefully co-exist with wildlife, we need to understand local perspectives and concerns about wildlife,' says Dr

Matthew McLennan from Oxford Brookes University, lead author of the study.

McLennan and his colleague Dr Catherine Hill, also from Oxford Brookes University, found that relations between farmers and chimpanzees have deteriorated in recent years. In particular, since farmers have burned, cleared and logged unprotected forests in Uganda, this has forced local chimpanzees into conflict with farmers and local residents.

Residents claim the [apes](#) have become much more brazen as a result. They say chimps are now threatening people of all ages, going into villages to look for food, and raiding so-called cash crops. These include crops like sugarcane, cocoa and banana, on which local livelihoods often depend.

A large majority of interviewees – 86 per cent – said they thought chimpanzee numbers have increased in recent years. But the authors point out that this belief could simply reflect their growing visibility in an increasingly fragmented and deforested landscape.

Nearly three-quarters of the residents interviewed said they think chimps are dangerous, and 73 per cent said they are afraid of them. Women were much more likely than men to say chimps are dangerous, which is reflected in their greater tendency to threaten women and children.

'Where potentially dangerous wildlife no longer have sufficient habitat, and are forced into close proximity and competition with people, we may ask whether it is appropriate to promote coexistence,' write the researchers in their report, published in *Journal for Nature Conservation*.

Yet inaction is likely to put even greater pressure on the endangered chimp. Scientists estimate there are just 170,000 to 300,000 individuals

left in the forests and savannahs of tropical Africa.

While chimpanzees aren't hunted for bushmeat in Uganda – as they are elsewhere in Africa – rapidly expanding human populations are fast converting prime chimp habitat to farmland.

'Most chimps outside protected areas will disappear in the next decade, which is mirrored across Africa. They won't survive unless urgent steps are taken to address the degradation and conversion of their habitats,' says McLennan. 'But the legislation to protect these forests just isn't there.'

'And if we want villagers to continue sharing their environment with [chimpanzees](#), the benefits have to considerably outweigh the risks.'

In Uganda, chimps aren't particularly valued. 'People don't think about the animals; inevitably they're much more concerned about their livelihoods,' explains McLennan.

## **Forest peppered with farmland**

From the villagers' perspective, if chimps are to co-exist peacefully with people in places where forest is peppered with farmland, three key conditions may have to be met: chimps shouldn't eat crops on which livelihoods depend, like maize and cassava; they must stay inside forests and not bother people; and people will need to make money from the apes through initiatives like ecotourism.

'There are real problems with all of these conditions,' says McLennan.

'Chimps raid maize and cassava in other areas of Africa, so those that don't eat these crops in Uganda could easily turn to them. Converting chimp habitat to farmland will inevitably cause chimps to look for food

in that farmland. And promoting eco-tourism where apes live close to people doesn't tend to work, because [wild animals](#) get habituated to people, which can exacerbate attacks on the local residents,' he adds.

Conservation organisations are exploring other ways to protect chimps while keeping the locals happy.

But conserving chimps in human-dominated landscapes increasingly demands that rural farmers tolerate a big, potentially dangerous mammal which may threaten their livelihoods, and which they may fear.

'In reality, if this was happening in England, there's no way we'd tolerate these animals walking into our houses. Why should we expect impoverished, rural farmers to put up with such troublesome neighbours?' says McLennan.

'Maybe the only solution is to catch the situation before it gets to that point,' he adds.

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