

Chimps, gorillas, other apes being lost to trade

March 26 2013, by Pamela Sampson



In this Saturday, April. 30, 2005 file photo, an infant Bonobo looks on while the substitute mothers Marthe Mianda, left, and Michelline Mzozzi, right, spend time with baby Bonobos at the Lola Ya Bonobo Sanctuary around fifty kilometers outside of Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo. Endangered chimpanzees, orangutans, gorillas and bonobos are disappearing from the wild in frightening numbers, as private owners pay top dollar for exotic pets, while disreputable zoos, amusement parks and traveling circuses clamor for smuggled primates to entertain audiences. (AP Photo/Schalk van Zuydam)

The multibillion-dollar trade in illegal wildlife—clandestine trafficking that has driven iconic creatures like the tiger to near-extinction—is also threatening the survival of great apes, a new U.N. report says.

Endangered chimpanzees, orangutans, gorillas and [bonobos](#) are disappearing from the wild in frightening numbers, as private owners pay top dollar for exotic pets, while disreputable zoos, amusement parks and traveling circuses clamor for smuggled primates to entertain audiences.

More than 22,000 great apes are estimated to have been traded illegally over a seven-year period ending in 2011. That's about 3,000 a year; more than half are chimpanzees, the U.N. report said.

"These great apes make up an important part of our [natural heritage](#). But as with all things of value, great apes are used by man for commercial profit and the illegal trafficking of the species constitutes a serious threat to their existence," Henri Djombo, a government minister from the Republic of Congo, was quoted as saying.

The U.N. report paints a dire picture of the fight to protect vulnerable and dwindling flora and fauna from organized criminal networks that often have the upper hand.



In this July 18, 2012 file photo provided by the Chicago Zoological Society shows Maggie, a Bornean orangutan who lives in Brookfield Zoo's Tropic World exhibit, relaxing on her 51st birthday in Brookfield, Ill. Endangered chimpanzees, orangutans, gorillas and bonobos are disappearing from the wild in frightening numbers, as private owners pay top dollar for exotic pets, while disreputable zoos, amusement parks and traveling circuses clamor for smuggled primates to entertain audiences. (AP Photo/Chicago Zoological Society, Jim Schulz, File)

Apes are hunted in their own habitats, which are concentrated in central and western Africa, by sophisticated smugglers who transport them on private cargo planes using small airstrips in the African bush. Their destination is usually the Middle East and Asia.

In countries like Saudi Arabia, [United Arab Emirates](#) and Lebanon, great apes are purchased to display as show pieces in private gardens and

menageries.

In Asia, the animals are typically destined for public zoos and amusement parks. China is a main destination for gorillas and chimpanzees. Thailand and Cambodia have recorded cases of [orangutans](#) being used for entertainment in "clumsy boxing matches," the report said.

Lax enforcement and corruption make it easy to smuggle the animals through African cities like Nairobi, Kenya, and Khartoum, Sudan, which are trafficking hubs. Bangkok, the Thai capital, is a major hub for the orangutan trade.



In this photo taken Feb. 19, 2013, a baby chimp lounges with its mother at Chimp Haven in Keithville, La. One hundred and eleven chimpanzees will be coming from a south Louisiana laboratory to Chimp Haven, the national sanctuary for chimpanzees retired from federal research. More than 22,000 great apes are estimated to have been traded illegally over a seven-year period ending

in 2011. That's about 3,000 a year; more than half are chimpanzees, the U.N. report said. (AP Photo/Janet McConnaughey)

Conditions are usually brutal. In February 2005, customs officials at the Nairobi airport seized a large crate that had arrived from Egypt. The crate held six chimpanzees and four monkeys, stuffed into tiny compartments. The crate had been refused at the airport in Cairo, a well-known trafficking hub for shipment to the Middle East, and returned to Kenya. One chimp died of hunger and thirst.

The proliferation of logging and mining camps throughout Africa has also increased the demand for primate meat. Adults and juveniles are killed for consumption, and their orphans are captured to sell into the live trade. Villagers also pluck primates out of rural areas to sell in the cities.



In this Feb. 1, 2011 file photo, chimpanzees sit in an enclosure at the Chimp Eden rehabilitation center, near Nelspruit, South Africa. A paramedic official says chimpanzees at a sanctuary for the animals in eastern South Africa bit and dragged a man at the reserve, badly injuring him. More than 22,000 great apes are estimated to have been traded illegally over a seven-year period ending in 2011. That's about 3,000 a year; more than half are chimpanzees, the U.N. report said. (AP Photo/Erin Conway-Smith, File)

Humans also have been encroaching upon and destroying the primates' natural habitats, destroying their forest homes to build infrastructure and for other purposes. That forces the animals to move into greater proximity and conflict with people.

Sometimes animals are even the victims of war.

Arrests are rare largely because authorities in Africa, where most great apes originate, do not have the policing resources to cope with the criminal poaching networks. Corruption is rampant and those in authority sometimes are among those dealing in the illegal trade. Between 2005 and 2011, only 27 arrests were made in Africa and Asia.



In this May 2, 2012 file photo, Moka, an endangered western lowland Gorilla, carries her unnamed 3-month-old baby on her back at the Pittsburgh Zoo and Aquarium in Pittsburgh. Endangered chimpanzees, orangutans, gorillas and bonobos are disappearing from the wild in frightening numbers, as private owners pay top dollar for exotic pets, while disreputable zoos, amusement parks and traveling circuses clamor for smuggled primates to entertain audiences. (AP Photo/Gene J. Puskar, File)

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) regulates the trade of animals and plants to ensure their survival. Under the agreement, trade in great apes caught in the wild is illegal. But traffickers often get around that by falsely declaring animals as bred in captivity.

The orangutan is the only [great ape](#) found in Asia. One species, the Sumatran orangutan, is critically endangered, with its population having dropped by 80 percent over the last 75 years. Their numbers are in great

peril due to the pace of land clearance and forest destruction for industrial or agricultural use.



In this Oct. 15, 2012 file photo provided by the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago, a newborn western lowland gorilla, born on Oct. 11, cuddles with its mother Bana, 17, at the zoo. Endangered chimpanzees, orangutans, gorillas and bonobos are disappearing from the wild in frightening numbers, as private owners pay top dollar for exotic pets, while disreputable zoos, amusement parks and traveling circuses clamor for smuggled primates to entertain audiences. (AP Photo/Courtesy of the Lincoln Park Zoo, Tony Gnau, File)

The report estimates that nearly all of the orangutan's natural habitat will be disturbed or destroyed by the year 2030.

"There are no wild spaces left for them," said Douglas Cress, a co-author of the report and head of a U.N. sponsored program that works for the

survival of great apes. "There'll be nothing left at this rate. It's down to the bone. If it disappears, they go, too."

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